

Tessa Dare

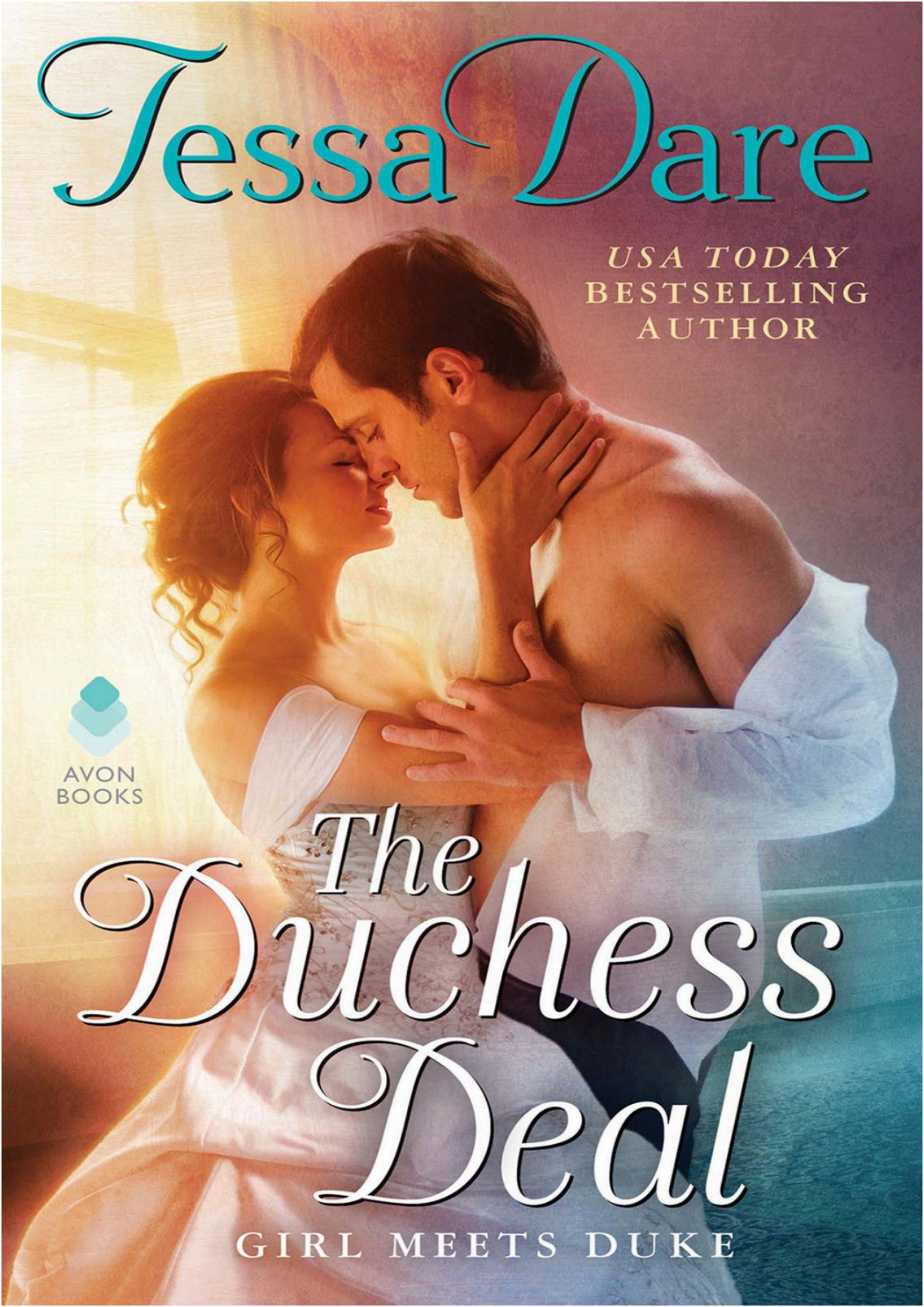
USA TODAY
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR



AVON
BOOKS

The Duchess Deal

GIRL MEETS DUKE



Tessa Dare

USA TODAY
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR



The Duchess Deal

GIRL MEETS DUKE

Tessa Dare

*The
Duchess
Deal*

GIRL MEETS DUKE



AVONBOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

I grew up a PK (“preacher’s kid”). Emma, the heroine of this book, is a vicar’s daughter. I want to make clear that Emma’s father is nothing like my own. My father was—and is—loving, patient, supportive, and understanding.

*Thanks, Dad. This book’s for you.
Please don’t read chapters 7, 9, 11, 17, 19, 21, or 28.*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Epilogue

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Tessa Dare

Copyright

About the Publisher

Chapter One

Emma Gladstone had learned a few hard lessons by the age of two-and-twenty.

Charming princes weren't always what they seemed. Shining armor went out of fashion with the Crusades. And if fairy godmothers existed, hers was running several years late.

Most of the time, a girl needed to rescue herself.

This afternoon was one of those times.

Ashbury House loomed before her, taking up one full side of the fashionable Mayfair square. Elegant. Enormous.

Terrifying.

She swallowed hard. She could do this. Once, she'd walked to London alone in the bitter heart of winter. She'd refused to succumb to despair or starvation. She'd found work and made a new life for herself in Town. Now, six years later, she'd swallow every needle in Madame Bissette's dressmaking shop before she'd go crawling back to her father.

Compared to all that, what was knocking on the door of a duke?

Why, nothing. Nothing at all. All she had to do was square her shoulders, charge through the wrought-iron gates, march up those granite steps—really, there were only a hundred or so—and ring the bell on that immense, richly carved door.

Good afternoon. I'm Miss Emma Gladstone. I'm here to see the mysterious, reclusive Duke of Ashbury. No, we aren't acquainted. No, I don't have a calling card. I don't have anything, really. I may not even have a home tomorrow if you don't let me in.

Oh, good heavens. This would never work.

With a whimper, she turned away from the gate and circled the square for the tenth time, shaking out her bare arms under her cloak.

She had to try.

Emma stopped her pacing, faced the gate, and drew a deep breath. She closed her ears to the frantic pounding of her heart.

The hour was growing late. No one was coming to her aid. There could be no further hesitation, no turning back.

Ready. Steady.

Go.

From his library desk, Ashbury heard an unfamiliar ringing sound. Could it be a doorbell?

There it came again.

It *was* a doorbell.

Worse, it was *his* doorbell.

Damned gossips. He hadn't even been in Town but a few weeks. He'd forgotten how London rumors traveled faster than bullets. He didn't have the time or patience for busybodies. Whoever it was, Khan would send them away.

He dipped his quill and continued the letter to his feckless solicitors.

I don't know what the devil you've been doing for the past year, but the state of my affairs is deplorable. Sack the Yorkshire land steward directly. Tell the architect I wish to see the plans for the new mill, and I wish to see them yesterday. And there's one other thing that requires immediate attention.

Ash hesitated, quill poised in midair. He couldn't believe he was actually going to commit the words to paper. But much as he dreaded it, it must be done. He wrote:

I need a wife.

He supposed he ought to state his requirements: a woman of childbearing age and respectable lineage, in urgent need of money, willing to share a bed with a scarred horror of a man.

In short, someone desperate.

God, how depressing. Better to leave it at that one line.

I need a wife.

Khan appeared in the doorway. “Your Grace, I regret the interruption, but there’s a young woman to see you. She’s wearing a wedding gown.”

Ash looked at the butler. He looked down at the words he’d just written. Then he looked at the butler again.

“Well, that’s uncanny.” Perhaps his solicitors weren’t as useless as he thought. He dropped his pen and propped one boot on the desk, reclining into the shadows. “By all means, show her in.”

A young woman in white strode into the room.

His boot slipped from the desk. He reeled backward and collided with the wall, nearly falling off his chair. A folio of papers tumbled from a nearby shelf, drifting to the floor like snowflakes.

He was blinded.

Not by her beauty—though he supposed she might be beautiful. It wasn’t possible to judge. Her gown was an eye-stabbing monstrosity of pearls, lace, brilliants, and beads.

Good Lord. He wasn’t accustomed to being in the same room with something even more repulsive than his own appearance.

He propped his right elbow on the arm of his chair and raised his fingertips to his brow, concealing the scars on his face. For once, he wasn’t protecting a servant’s sensibilities or even his own pride. He was shielding himself from . . . from *that*.

“I’m sorry to impose on you this way, Your Grace,” the young woman said, keeping her gaze fixed on some chevron of the Persian carpet.

“I should hope you are.”

“But you see, I am quite desperate.”

“So I gather.”

“I need to be paid for my labor, and I need to be paid at once.”

Ash paused. “Your . . . your labor.”

“I’m a seamstress. I stitched this”—she swept her hands down the silk eyesore—“for Miss Worthing.”

For Miss Worthing.

Ah, this began to make sense. The white satin atrocity had been meant for Ash’s formerly intended bride. That, he could believe. Annabelle Worthing had always had dreadful taste—both in gowns and in prospective husbands.

“When your engagement ended, she never sent for the gown. She’d purchased the silk and lace and such, but she never paid for the labor. And that meant I went unpaid. I tried calling at her home, with no success. My letters to you both went unanswered. I thought that if I appeared like this”—she spread the skirts of the white gown—“I would be impossible to ignore.”

“You were correct on that score.” Even the good side of his face twisted. “Good Lord, it’s as though a draper’s shop exploded and you were the first casualty.”

“Miss Worthing wanted something fit for a duchess.”

“That gown,” he said, “is fit for a bawdy-house chandelier.”

“Well, your intended had . . . extravagant preferences.”

He leaned forward in his chair. “I can’t even take the whole thing in. It looks like unicorn vomit. Or the pelt of some snow beast rumored to menace the Himalayas.”

She tilted her gaze to the ceiling and gave a despairing sigh.

“What?” he said. “Don’t tell me *you* like it.”

“It doesn’t matter whether it suits my tastes, Your Grace. I take pride in my handiwork regardless, and this gown occupied months of it.”

Now that the shock of her revolting attire had worn off, Ash turned his attention to the young woman who’d been devoured by it.

She was a great improvement on the gown.

Complexion: cream. Lips: rose petals. Lashes: sable.

Backbone: steel.

“This embroidery alone . . . I worked for a week to make it perfect.” She skimmed a touch along the gown’s neckline.

Ash followed the path her fingertips traced. He couldn’t see embroidery. He was a man; he saw breasts. Slight, enticing breasts squeezed by that tortured bodice. He enjoyed them almost as much as he enjoyed the air of determination pushing them high.

He pulled his gaze upward, taking in her slender neck and upswept bounty of chestnut-brown hair. She wore it in the sort of prim, restrained coiffure that made a man’s fingers itch to pull the pins loose, one by one.

Take hold of yourself, Ashbury.

She couldn’t possibly be as pretty as she seemed. No doubt she benefited by contrast with the revolting gown. And he’d been living in solitude for some time. There was that, as well.

“Your Grace,” she said, “my coal bin is empty, the larder’s down to a few moldy potatoes, and my quarterly rent comes due today. The landlord has threatened to turn me out if I don’t pay the full amount. I need to collect my wages. Most urgently.” She held out her hand. “Two pounds, three shillings, if you please.”

Ash crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her. “Miss . . . ?”

“Gladstone. Emma Gladstone.”

“Miss Gladstone, you don’t seem to understand how this whole intruding-on-a-duke’s-solitude business works. You should be intimidated, if not

terrified. Yet there's an appalling lack of hand-wringing in your demeanor, and no trembling whatsoever. Are you certain you're merely a seamstress?"

She lifted her hands, palms facing out for his view. Healed cuts and calluses showed on her fingertips. Persuasive evidence, Ash had to admit. Yet he remained unconvinced.

"Well, you can't have been born to poverty. You're far too self-possessed, and you appear to have all your teeth. I suppose you were orphaned at a tender age, in some particularly gruesome way."

"No, Your Grace."

"Are you being blackmailed?"

"No." She drew out the word.

"Supporting a passel of abandoned children, *whilst* being blackmailed?"

"No."

He snapped his fingers. "I have it. Your father is a scapegrace. In debtor's prison. Or spending the rent money on gin and whores."

"My father is a vicar. In Hertfordshire."

Ash frowned. That was nonsensical. Vicars were gentlemen. "How does a gentleman's daughter find herself working her fingers to nubs as a seamstress?"

At last, he saw a flash of uncertainty in her demeanor. She touched the spot behind her earlobe. "Sometimes life takes an unexpected turn."

"Now *that* is a grave understatement."

Fortune was a heartless witch in perpetual anticipation of her monthly courses. And didn't Ash know it.

He swiveled in his chair and reached for a lockbox behind the desk.

"I am sorry." Her voice softened. "The broken engagement must have been a blow. Miss Worthing seemed a lovely young woman."

He counted money into his hand. "If you spent any time with her, you know that isn't the case."

"Perhaps it's for the best that you didn't marry her, then."

"Yes, it was excellent foresight that I destroyed my face before the wedding. What bad luck it would have been if I'd waited until afterward."

"Destroyed? If Your Grace will forgive me saying it, it can't be *that* bad."

He snapped the lockbox closed. "Annabelle Worthing was desperate to marry a man with a title and a fortune. I am a duke and ungodly wealthy. She still left me. It's that bad."

He stood and turned his ruined side to her, offering her a full, unobstructed view. His desk was in the most shadowy corner of the room—and purposely so. The room's heavy velvet drapes kept out much of the sunlight. But scars as dramatic as the ones he wore? Nothing but complete darkness could obscure them. What bits of flesh had escaped the flames had

only been ravaged further—first, by the surgeon’s knife and then, for hellish weeks afterward, by fever and suppuration. From his temple to his hip, the right side of his body was a raging battle of cicatrices and powder burns.

Miss Gladstone went quiet. To her credit, she didn’t swoon or vomit or run screaming from the room—a pleasant change from his usual reception.

“How did it happen?” she asked.

“War. Next question.”

After a moment, she said quietly, “May I have my money, please?”

He extended a hand, offering her the money.

She reached for it.

He closed his hand around the coins. “Once you give me the gown.”

“What?”

“If I pay you for your work, it’s only fair that I get the gown.”

“For what purpose?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t decided. I could donate it to a home for pensioned opera dancers. Sink it to the bottom of the Thames for the eels to enjoy. Hang it over the front door to ward off evil spirits. There are so many choices.”

“I . . . Your Grace, I can have it delivered tomorrow. But I must have the money today.”

He tsked. “That would be a loan, Miss Gladstone. I’m not in the money-lending business.”

“You want the gown *now*?”

“Only if you want the money now.”

Her dark eyes fixed on him, accusing him of sheer villainy.

He shrugged. Guilty as charged.

This was the peculiar hell of being disfigured by sheer chance on the battlefield. There was no one to blame, no revenge to be taken. Only a lingering bitterness that tempted him to lash out at anything near. Oh, he wasn’t violent—not unless someone really, truly deserved it. With most, he merely took perverse pleasure in being a pain in the arse.

If he was going to *look* like a monster, he might as well enjoy the role.

Unfortunately, this seamstress refused to play the trembling mouse. Nothing he said rattled her in the least, and if she hadn’t fled in terror yet, she likely never would.

Good for her.

He prepared to hand over the money, bidding her—and that gown—a grateful *adieu*.

Before he could do so, she exhaled decisively. “Fine.”

Her hands went to the side of the gown. She began to release a row of hooks hidden in the bodice seam. One by one by one. As the bodice went

slack, her squeezed breasts relaxed to their natural fullness. The sleeve fell off her shoulder, revealing the tissue-thin fabric of her shift.

A wisp of dark hair tumbled free, kissing her collarbone.

Jesu Maria.

“Stop.”

She froze and looked up. “Stop?”

He cursed silently. *Don’t ask me twice.* “Stop.”

Ash could scarcely believe he’d managed the decency to say it once. He’d been on the verge of a private show for the price of two pounds, three. Significantly higher than the going rate, but a bargain when the girl was this pretty.

Not to mention, she was a vicar’s daughter. He’d *always* dreamed of debauching a vicar’s daughter. Really, what man hadn’t? However, he was not quite so diabolical as to accomplish it through extortion.

A thought occurred to him. Maybe—just maybe—he could still manage that fantasy, through different, somewhat less fiendish, means. He regarded Emma Gladstone from a fresh angle, thinking of that list of requirements in his interrupted letter.

She was young and healthy. She was educated. She came from gentry, and she was willing to disrobe in front of him.

Most importantly, she was desperate.

She’d do.

In fact, she’d do very well indeed.

“Here is your choice, Miss Gladstone. I can pay you the two pounds, three shillings.”

He placed the stack of coins on the desk. She stared at them hungrily.

“Or,” he said, “I can make you a duchess.”

Chapter Two

A duchess?

Well. Emma was grateful for one thing. At least now she had an excuse to stare at him.

Ever since the duke had revealed the extent of his scars, she'd been trying *not* to stare at him. Then she'd started worrying that it would be even more rude to *avoid* looking at him. As a result, her gaze had been volleying from his face, to the carpet, to the coins on the desk. It was all a bit dizzying.

Now she had an unassailable excuse to openly gawk.

The contrast was extreme. The injured side of his face drew her attention first, of course. Its appearance was tortured and angry, with webs of scar tissue twisting past his ear and above his natural hairline. What was more cruel—his scarred flesh stood in unavoidable contrast with his untouched profile. There, he was handsome in the brash, uncompromising way of gentlemen who believed themselves invincible.

Emma didn't find his appearance frightful, though she could not deny it was startling. No, she decided, "startling" wasn't the right word.

Striking.

He was striking.

As though a bolt of lightning had split through his body, dividing him in two, and the energy still crackled around him. Emma sensed it from across the room. Gooseflesh rippled up her arms.

"I beg your pardon, Your Grace. I must have misheard."

"I said I will make you a duchess."

"Surely . . . surely you don't mean through marriage."

"No, I intend to use my vast influence in the House of Lords to overturn the laws of primogeniture, then persuade the Prince Regent to create a new title and duchy. That accomplished, I will convince him to name a vicar's

daughter from Hertfordshire a duchess in her own right. Of course I mean through marriage, Miss Gladstone.”

She gave a strained laugh. Laughter seemed the only possible response. He had to be joking. “You can’t be asking me to marry you.”

He sighed with annoyance. “I am a duke. I’m not *asking* you to marry *me*. I am *offering* to marry *you*. It’s a different thing entirely.”

She opened her mouth, only to close it again.

“I need an heir,” he said. “That is the thrust of the matter.”

Her concentration snagged on that word, and the blunt, forceful way he said it.

Thrust.

“If I died tomorrow, everything would go to my cousin. He is an irredeemable prat. I didn’t go to the Continent, fight to preserve England from tyranny, and survive this”—he gestured at his face—“only to come home and watch my tenants’ lives crumble to ruins. And that means those laws of primogeniture—since I don’t intend to overturn them—require me to marry and sire a son.”

He crossed the room, advancing toward her in unhurried strides. She stood in place, unwilling to shrink from him. The more nonchalant his demeanor, the more her pulse pounded.

His face might be striking, but the rest of him . . . ?

Rather splendid.

To distract herself, Emma focused on her own realm of expertise: attire. The tailoring of his coat was immaculate, skimming the breadth of his shoulders and hugging the contours of his arms. The wool was of the finest quality, tightly woven and richly dyed. However, the style was two years behind the current fashion, and the cuffs were a touch frayed at the—

“I know what you’re thinking, Miss Gladstone.”

She doubted it.

“You’re incredulous. How could a woman of your standing possibly ascend to such a rank? I can’t deny you’ll find yourself outclassed and un-befriended among the ladies of the peerage, but you will no doubt be consoled with the material advantages. A lavish home, generous lines of credit at all the best shops, a large settlement in the event of my death. You may pay calls, go shopping. Engage in some charitable work, if you must. Your days will be yours to do whatever you wish.” His voice darkened. “Your nights, however, will belong to me.”

Any response to *that* was beyond her. An indignant warmth hummed over every surface of her body, seeping into the spaces between her toes.

“You should expect me to visit your bed every evening, unless you are ill or having your courses, until conception is confirmed.”

Emma tried, one more time, to understand this conversation. After running through all the possibilities, one alternative seemed the most likely.

The duke was not merely scarred on his face. He was sick in the head.

"Your Grace, do you feel feverish?"

"Not at all."

"Perhaps you ought to have a lie-down. I could send your butler for a physician."

He gave her a quizzical look. "Do *you* need a doctor?"

"Maybe I do." Emma touched one hand to her brow. Her brain was spinning.

If he wasn't ill . . . Could this be some sort of ploy to make her his mistress? Oh, Lord. Perhaps she'd given him the wrong impression with her willingness to disrobe.

"Are you—" There seemed no way to say it but to say it. "Your Grace, are you trying to get me into your bed?"

"Yes. Nightly. I said as much, not a minute ago. Are you listening at all?"

"Listening, yes," she muttered to herself. "Comprehending, no."

"I'll have my solicitor draw up the papers." He returned to his place behind the desk. "We can do it on Monday."

"Your Grace, I don't—"

"Tuesday, then."

"Your Grace, I cannot—"

"Well, I'm afraid my schedule is quite booked for the rest of the week." He flipped through the pages of an agenda. "Brooding, drinking, indoor badminton tournament . . ."

"No."

"No," he echoed.

"Yes."

"Yes, no. Make up your mind, Miss Gladstone."

She turned in a slow circle, looking about the room. What on earth was happening here? She felt like a Bow Street runner trying to solve a mystery: *Emma Gladstone and the Case of the Missing Dignity*.

Her gaze fell on the clock. Already past four. After leaving here, she must return the gown, pay her landlord, and then visit the market.

Having come this far, there was no way she could back down now.

She stiffened her posture. "Your Grace, you called my work 'unicorn vomit.' You asked me to disrobe for money. Then you made the absurd declaration that you would make me a duchess, and that I should visit your bed on Monday. This entire interview is nonsensical and humiliating. I can only conclude that you are making sport of me."

He lifted one shoulder in an unapologetic shrug. “A scarred recluse must have *some* amusement.”

“What about your full schedule of drinking and indoor badminton? Isn’t that enough?” She had lost all patience now. She enjoyed a bit of teasing, and she could laugh at herself—but she had no desire to be the object of cruel jokes. “I’m beginning to suspect Miss Worthing’s reason for jilting you. You are exceedingly—”

“Hideous,” he supplied. “Repulsive. Monstrous.”

“Exasperating.”

He made a sound of bemusement. “So I’m being reviled for my personality? How refreshing.”

Emma lifted her hands in a nonthreatening gesture. “Your Grace, I shall impose on you no further. I am going to approach the desk, pick up the coins, and then back away. Slowly.”

In a series of cautious steps, she approached the desk and stopped within a yard of where he stood on the opposite side. Without breaking eye contact, she gathered the two pounds, three shillings from the desktop. Then, with the briefest of curtsies, she turned to leave.

He caught her by the wrist. “Don’t go.”

She turned and looked up at him, astonished.

The contact was electric. Like the jolt one received when grabbing a doorknob on a dry, cold day. Clashing and sparking with a force that belonged to neither of them, but existed only in the space between. The shock buzzed up the bones in her arm. Her breathing and pulse were suspended. She felt stripped down—not to her skin, but to the raw elements that composed her being.

The duke seemed stunned by it, too. His piercing blue eyes interrogated hers. Then he cast a confused look at his hand, as though he weren’t certain how it had come to be gripping her arm.

For a moment, Emma’s heart invented the wildest fancies. That he was someone other than the cynical, embittered man he seemed. That beneath the Before and After sketched on his face, there was a man—a hurting and lonely man—who remained unchanged in essentials.

Don’t believe it, Emma. You know your heart is a fool.

He released her, and the side of his mouth pulled into a wry smile. “You can’t leave now, Miss Gladstone. We’re just starting to have fun.”

“I don’t care to play this game.”

She gathered as much composure as she could locate. Clutching the coins in one hand, she picked up her skirts with the other and made haste in the direction of the door.

“Don’t trouble to bid me farewell,” he called.