

CHAPTER ONE

Abby Forester ducked and squeezed through the loud and intoxicated crowd, balancing a tray of empty Weaver's Beer bottles and blowing a wisp of blonde hair from her eyelashes. If only she didn't need the extra money to pay off her endless college loans or the mortgage on her father's record shop. Soon, she'd graduate and things would turn around for her. They had to.

"Hey, babe, is it true what they say about Weaver's Beer?"

For the eleventh time that night, Abby ignored the question, wishing the person who had started the sexual

rumor about the cheapest selling beer in Portland would go hang himself. God help the next Neanderthal who asked her about the damn beer.

With her arms shaking and her throat burning from a mushroom cloud of celebrity perfume, she zigzagged her way to the bar.

"Next time you think about asking me to waitress for you," she said toward her long-time friend and bartender, Tommy Reid. "Don't."

He gazed up through short black lashes. Handsome with a narrow nose and a tanned complexion, he'd broken his fair share of hearts since they left each other at the altar.

"Thanks for coming in. I had four people call in sick. Weird, huh?"

Abby shrugged. "I don't mind. Raify's watching the store for me."

"Yeah, speaking of weird."

Abby sent him a warning glance. "Raify's been a godsend since Dad died, and I couldn't ask for a better friend."

"She's more like a batty great aunt," Tommy said, with one dark eyebrow raised.

Although Raify had her eccentric ways and her style of dress was odd, Abby loved her, although she couldn't remember how they had met and why.

"Judy went on break, so I need you to wait on table eighteen."

Without bothering to glance back, Abby shook her head, having avoided the table for the last three minutes on purpose. Of the two men who sat there, she recognized one of them from Genealogy 101. Will Simpson was an egotistical jackass who'd almost sabotaged her college project a few semesters ago. Not that Abby held grudges; she just didn't like men who had only one goal in mind—to be successful at the expense of everyone else.

"Please give me table ten," Abby said, hands clasped in prayer under her chin. "It's full of women who don't try to grab my ass when I'm asking them what they want." She hesitated to add, "Well, at least, not all of them."

"Go," Tommy said, stretching out his muscular arm. Like an obedient soldier, Abby twisted in their direction, drawing deeper into the muted light and reaching up to pull her bangs low over her face.

She would have been much better off staying home and re-writing her nineteenth-century Women's Lit paper. She had learned the hard way that the scene of Mr. Darcy emerging from a pond, his damp shirt pressed to his sexy chest, was not in Jane Austen's book and not open to interpretation.

To postpone her reunion with Will, she turned to the other man, who, in a span of two and half minutes, had flirted, charmed, and even rescued a table full of giggling bridesmaids from a clumsy drunk carrying two pitchers of beer.

"Hell, Edmund. I say, screw them all," Will said, and then snorted.

Mortified over their private chat, she started to twist away until a haughty British accent stopped her.

"There's no need to run off."

Called out, Abby sighed and turned back to Will's friend, Edmund. She expected him to be handsome. After all, she'd watched dozens of women drop their phone numbers into his lap on the way to the ladies' room.

"I...I wasn't running," she said, her middle-school reaction to his good looks and regal demeanor, causing heat to spread from head to toe.

"You came to give me your number, then?" The Englishman smiled, his dusty eyebrows

rising over hypnotic ocean-green eyes with Caribbean blue flecks. His gaze was so alluring that she thought if she stared too long, she might drown. She blinked to save herself, her attention lifting to his hair. It was longer and ruffled on top, but short in the back and tapered on the sides. She knew right away he was rich.

“What? No. I came to—” *Damn*. His perfect posture and arrogant smile had her so flustered, she’d forgotten why she was there. She knew after meeting him she’d imagine him as either Mr. Rochester—or worse, Mr. Darcy—while reading her English Lit assignment.

“It doesn’t matter. I only called you back to ask if it’s true—”

Her somewhat reserved and relaxed nature snapped. “No, Weaver’s Beer does not have the same effect as erectile dysfunction meds, but if you’re looking for something that does, I would suggest talking to a doctor about a prescription.”

His sensual mouth twisted into an amused smile. The subtle, yet dangerous gesture caused a fiery blush to rise from Abby’s belly to her cheeks. She had jumped to the wrong and worst conclusion. She wanted to pull the tray in front of her face, slide out the side door and back to her father’s record shop. Entranced, she remained standing before the man.

“I have learned American women are forward, however—”

“I wasn’t trying to be forward. I was trying to save you a headache.”

Their gazes locked for a long moment until she thought if she didn’t say something, he might think her too enthralled to form a coherent thought. “You started to ask me if something was true—”

“Ah, yes.” He cleared his throat and nodded. “Besides the quicker-picker-upper label you enthusiastically informed me about earlier, I wanted to know if, among the one hundred imported beers, if Fuller’s London Porter would be among them?”

He blinked and crossed his arms, leaning back to wait for her answer.

“Well, I don’t have any idea,” she said. Since she was only waitressing to help her friend out, she knew nothing of what he had, imported or otherwise. “I’ll have to go ask.” She started to step away, but Edmund’s hand reached out and clasped her wrist in a gentle hold. Pulled back in front of him, a tiny sliver of exhilaration raced up her spine.

“Over my right shoulder is a list of beers, written in neon pink, white, and green chalk. I would like, very much, for you to read me what’s written there.”

Oh, God. He was insane. He was gorgeous, but insane. “Wouldn’t it be faster for you to

turn and read the list yourself?”

His head canted, his fingers continuing to hold her captive. Forced into action, she inhaled and obliged him with an exaggerated smile. “I work for tips, and unless you plan on paying for the time it takes to go over the entire list, I suggest you allow me to go ask.”

He didn’t move. He didn’t even blink. She supposed he employed servants and butlers to cater to his every whim. Even his clothes smelled of expensive starch.

Under his dispassionate gaze, she started to fidget. After several moments, he let go and leaned forward, reaching back for his wallet. He pulled out a crisp fifty-dollar bill and placed it between his index and middle finger. “Why would I do that when I have you?”

Abby stared at the money before reaching out to take what he offered. Only, before she had a firm grasp, his well-manicured fingers snatched it back toward his chest.

“Ah, I’ve tempted you,” he said in a voice so full of sensual promise, she wanted to melt on the sticky floor beside him.

She recovered to give him a haughty reply. “It’s your money that has tempted me.”

“Well, of course.”

His retort left her stunned and insulted. She brought in a calming breath, believing that two days of yoga she’d tried a year ago had not done her any good.

Resigned to do what he wanted, she read to him, from most expensive to least, the list of beers. His conceited gaze never left her face, even as a pair of bar beauties shuffled by, both giggling to gain his attention. “Last and most certainly least, Weaver’s Beer.”

He bent closer, his warm breath tickling her neck. “Are you saying you would not recommend the Weaver’s label?”

She returned his egotistical smirk. “If the rumors are true, I would not. It’s best drunk under promising circumstances.”

His smile widened, the hum of two dozen conversations spinning around her at the same time. His intense stare held her hostage until she let out a long, silent sigh. “Do you have any idea what you want?”

His eyes flashed a dangerous answer, his gaze shifting from her eyes to her hips. The wordless gesture sent her heart smacking hard against her ribcage.

“You know, I’m not all that...thirsty at the moment.”

Her mouth dropped open. Too stunned to scoff or scream, she just stood there, blinking at

him. When he offered up the money again, she yanked herself from her stupor and plucked it out of his hand. When she stepped away, he called out.

“Wait.”

She made an unladylike growl before twisting back toward him. “Yes...sir,” she ground out.

He reached in his wallet and presented her a twenty. “The first beer you named, I’d like for you send it to those ladies over there.” He pointed to the two giggling women. “And keep the change.”

Abby imagined lobbing the handful of pennies at his obnoxious head. When she stepped closer to pull the bill from his hand, his reluctance to let go catapulted her full force into his chest.

The warm and sensual scent of him made her dizzy. She tried to get her feet to move away from him, but they refused to budge. Her hesitation proved to be a most unfortunate mistake.

“Abs? Abby Forester?”

Oh, hell. She’d forgotten about Will. Damn the Englishman. After a few cleansing breaths, she painted on a fake smile and turned in Will’s direction. He hadn’t changed since Mr. Thurmond’s class last spring. Maybe his hair was a little longer.

“Will Simpson, wow, what a pleasant surprise.”

“So, you do remember me?” Abby started to say something when he smirked, his wide lips spreading from one side of his smug face to the other. “Or did you come to get my autograph?”

She shook her head, confused. “Your autograph? For what?”

He laughed until he realized she was serious. “I’m the host of *Love Match*, the popular dating game show on Channel 13. Every weekday? In the afternoon? We replaced one of the long-running soap operas, for God’s sake.”

When she continued to give him a blank stare, he drew back. “Oh, come on, Abby. I know you’ve heard of it. It’s for lonely, desperate women in the Portland area who want to find their own Prince Charming.”

Fed up with his talking, she exhaled. “What do you want, Will?”

“Oh, just get me a Weaver’s.”

She opened her mouth to make a comment and then relented, shaking her head and

walking away. When she twisted back to Edmund, he'd dismissed her with as much indifference as someone who had encountered a fruit fly.

Lord Edmund Rushwood tried not to glance back at the American's delightful retreating form. Despite his attempt, his gaze followed her, enjoying every twist and sensual move she made around tall, rounded tables and giggling bridesmaids.

Her natural honey-blond hair was pulled back, exposing her rounded cheeks and slender neck. He liked this, enabling him to catch the dusty pink blush rising in her face every time he tried to bait her. While her powder-blue eyes sparkled with ire, her smiling lips promised sensual delight.

All of a sudden, she sensed his attention on her and glanced toward him, her adorable nose wrinkling from annoyance. She showed him her elegant back, picked up the bar tray, and delivered the beers he'd purchased to the loud women six tables away.

Abby pointed in his direction, a wide smile on her rapturous face. He wondered what she'd done until the tallest of the women scrunched up her painted features and then graced him with a one-finger wave. It didn't take him long to realize that Abby had brought them over two bottles of Weaver's label.

He had to chuckle as she waved her change in the air, mouthed the words *thank you*, and then tucked the bills into the front pocket of her jeans.

Surprised his interest in her had been so obvious, Edmund nodded and forced himself to think of a way out of his current predicament. So far, Will's advice to *screw them all* did not rank high on his list of suggestions.

He sat thinking up another solution when the man behind the bar pointed to Abby and then toward a group of young drunk American men. She rolled her eyes and puffed out her cheeks before ambling toward the half-pissed table on the other side.

Her shoulders stiff, she wedged herself between two muscular patrons. They smiled and winked at one another, one going so far as to place his hand on her lower back. Edmund watched as she tried to shift away, her head shaking, her face flushed. He wanted not to care. He tried until one of the men leaned in to whisper something in her ear. In a blink, she had a beer bottle clutched upside down in her small hand.

"Oh, bloody hell," Edmund cursed under his breath, shooting up and stalking straight

LORD BACHELOR

BY

TAMMY L. BAILEY

toward her.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Edmund arrived at the scene, Abby had attempted breaking the dark bottle over the man's head. Adrenaline poured through Edmund's veins as the goon's eyes grew large and murderous. In a thundering heartbeat, Edmund reached up and caught the man's wrist in midair.

"Think very hard about your next move," Edmund warned as two rugby-sized bouncers in black T-shirts flanked Edmund on both sides.

The larger of the two clutched the man by the collar, hauled him up, and pushed him toward the exit.

"Take care of her," the other said in Edmund's direction. Edmund, unsure what *take care of her* even meant, reached out to pry the bottle from her with one hand while enfolding her palm in the other. Warm and tender, her hand shook inside his.

Carrying through with the rescue, he pulled her along, her body light and willing to follow. At a tall cushioned bar stool beside an empty pool table, he stopped and sat down, pulling her between his legs. The atmosphere was quieter, darker, and much more intimate. There were so many reasons for him not to care, so many wealthy, legitimate reasons to get up and leave her there.

"You're not a waitress, are you?" he asked.

She blanched, and then reached up to grasp a locket that lay at the base of her throat. "I—" He waited for an answer, his gaze roaming over her exquisite face and glittering blue eyes.

"I was handling them. I didn't need you jumping in like a refined superhero."

Her anger baffled him, his ego used to women thanking his gallantry with unbridled kisses, not narrowed eyebrows and pursed lips.

“I saw with my own eyes who was *handling* whom, Abby,” he said, unable to hold back the raw tone of his emotions.

Her lips parted in a rush of breath, her small hands lifting to press through his thin gray button-up shirt, her timid touch causing his body to respond with a surprising jolt.

“Well, in my defense, I expected the bottle to break when it connected with his thick skull.”

“Of course you did.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He released a loud sigh, refusing to answer. She was working at a job she didn’t belong in and making rash decisions based on Hollywood special effects. She was the most lost person he’d ever met.

“I guess I owe you now?”

He shook his head. He had enough women problems without tangling with another female, especially someone like Abby Forester.

“No, but next time, before smashing a bottle over a bloke’s head, have every intention of rendering him unconscious first.”

Her head canted at an adorable angle. “Who...are you?”

“No one you should care to know,” he said, low and honest. She was everything he stayed away from in his promiscuous life. He gravitated toward the rich and the seductive, not the needy and innocent.

Resigned to let go, he watched her graceful steps weave through the loud and expressive crowd. Across the room, the bartender glared at Edmund with a menacing and jealous scowl. Not looking for a fight, Edmund nodded toward the man and then returned to Will on the other side of the cramped bar.

“So chivalry still lives?”

“No, not exactly,” Edmund said, every nerve in his body longing to experience one small physical appreciation from the young American.

“So,” Will said, sending Edmund a lopsided grin. “Tell me again why you’re here.”

Edmund leaned back in the tall chair and shook his head. God, he didn’t want to relive

every moment until now. It had been devastating to learn the lifestyle he'd come to enjoy and know was about to be pulled right out from underneath him. Born rich and privileged, he had no idea what it was like not to drink champagne every night or have a butler wait on his every whim.

"I must marry."

Will, who'd just chomped down on a pretzel, began coughing it up. "Wha...What?"

Edmund shrugged, his stomach tightening from the thought of losing his bachelor lifestyle just to keep hold of his expensive lifestyle. What did *he* know about sacrifice?

"In summary," Edmund began, trying not to clench his teeth, "before my father's death, he put in place a proclamation. I shall choose a rich and sociably acceptable bride by my twenty-sixth birthday or I will lose my entire inheritance."

Will's eyes widened. "That's a new one." Edmund agreed. "Yes, and damned inconvenient."

Despite the headache it caused, Edmund reflected over the last forty-eight hours. It had started out well. He had awakened beside a half-naked woman whose name still eluded him and indulged himself in warm champagne and caviar. His life disintegrated soon after the woman's departure. In what appeared to be an intervention, his mother, his mother's friend, Dowager Hemsley, and his father's cousin, Sir Richard Mosley, gathered at Edmund's ancestral home of Danwick Manor to relay the dire news.

Edmund's mother's words still echoed deep in his mind.

It is in your father's will, Edmund, that you must marry both wealthy and well, or, at least provide the name of the affluent bride before your twenty-sixth birthday, or everything you are determined to squander on women will be lost.

Not lost entirely, Edmund thought, as Sir Richard lingered in the background waiting for him to fall on his father's sword. Edmund fared no better, as far as lectures went, with Dowager Hemsley. Sixty-five, thin, and eloquent with quick and philosophical advice, she scolded him daily, and gave guidance on where to find one of these so-called brides. "America," she'd said, although Edmund scoffed at the simplicity of such a notion.

Sir Richard didn't like the idea either, since he'd hinted at having his cousin Blaire marry Edmund in the hopes of acquiring some of the Rushwood wealth that had, so far, eluded him.

Thus counseled, Edmund left Danwick, his butler, and countless bottles of champagne to

come here, to Portland, Oregon, to visit his friend, and escape.

Edmund still remembered the day they met at the airport in Heathrow. Will stood speaking to a tall woman in black stilettos until he said something that caused a slap loud enough to echo between terminals one and two.

As fate would have it, Edmund and Will ended up sitting at gate B28 for an hour. Amused by the man, Edmund upgraded Will's seat to first class, and invited him to Stonebridge Mansion in the Cascade Mountains. Since then, they had shared enough women, champagne, and caviar to make Leonardo DiCaprio jealous.

"So, let me get this straight," said Will, the white scar on his left eyebrow showing under his long bangs. "You have to find a woman to marry, who is rich and high class, from America or wherever, or you lose everything? What century are you from?"

Edmund felt his gut twist. "My father was extremely old-fashioned, to say the least."

Will cursed under his breath. "This sucks." On cue, two young women in black pumps and thigh-high skirts sauntered close to their table. Edmund glanced at his friend, more conceited than he was good-looking, and then to the tallest girl with sultry eyes and pouty lips.

"What are the chances either of them has ties to good blood?" Edmund said, jerking his head in their direction.

"As opposed to bad blood?" Will laughed. "You British folks are so Downton Abbey...and strange."

Edmund twisted to his right, letting out a relieved breath at finding Abby back at the bar. He tried to glance away, but her pert and animated form kept him engaged longer than he cared to admit.

"How well do you know her?" Edmund asked, still fascinated. Despite his better judgment, he'd enjoyed meeting her, talking to her, inciting her...saving her.

"Trust me, she's not worth the headache," his friend said, reaching up to rub at his scar.

Edmund took one last glance at Abby before turning back to concentrate on rescuing his own arse. "So, can you help me?"

"Oh, sure," Will nodded, and then hesitated. "Help you with what?"

Edmund closed his eyes and exhaled. "I was hoping you might know an American debutante viable enough to become my bride, or pretend to become one," he added under his breath.

“Viable? Now’s that a word you don’t hear in a sentence when discussing a future wife.”

Disgust welled up inside Edmund, but he said nothing. He was glad he didn’t as Abby returned, placing two green bottles of Weaver’s between them.

“Compliments of the house,” she said, unable to hide a sarcastic smile.

He stole a glance toward her beguiling face. She didn’t have the perfected or injected features he’d kissed in the dead of night. Instead, she wore only a tiny amount of makeup, showing off a creamed honey complexion and rising blushes, the first he longed to touch, the second he dared to elicit.

“My shift’s over in fifteen minutes,” she said toward him.

He dropped his gaze, her outward invitation disappointing. He at least expected her to play harder to get. Regardless, he needed a distraction. “Is that so?”

She nodded and sent him an enchanting smile, her round cheeks lifting and tinted, as if another blush lay under the surface, just ready to burst forth if he dared to say something inappropriate or daring. “Judy will be your server for any further reading of the menu.”

Then Abby smiled, turned and walked away. He shook his head, her departure leaving him both speechless and intrigued.

“Do you want to get married?”

Will’s words yanked Edmund back around to face him. “I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

“But your birthday’s in three months,” Will said, taking a long swig of his skunk-fragrant beer. “Do you even know who you want to spend the rest of your life with?”

Edmund drew back, taking the beer with him. His gut sank even lower. “I haven’t quite thought that far.”

On the television above them, there stood a normal enough man surrounded by twelve gorgeous women. Edmund glanced from Will to the screen and back again, watching a slow smile stretch across his friend’s face.

Edmund shook his head. “I recognize that look, and, it’s terrifying.”

Will eased away, his gray eyes growing larger by the second. “You can come on *Love Match*. We’ll bring on six or seven contestants, with a few of them influential enough for you to marry. Although the audience participates on you choosing who you should end up with, you have the ultimate say in the matter.”

Edmund sat staring at his friend. “Absolutely not.”

“Hear me out, Edmund. The producer is getting bored with the premise of the show. Since the stakes are higher in your case, and you’re not only looking to date them, but marry one of them, we advertise you as a titled British bloke, searching for his one true love. We’ll call you Lord Bachelor. Women will eat that stuff up.”

Edmund sat in stunned silence as his friend rubbed his hands like a black-caped 1920s villain.

In a psychotic rush, Will explained his plans. “This city has a few bluebloods, and I happen to know where a list exists where we can find at least two or three more of them.”

“Will, I don’t think—”

“Do you want to be poor, Edmund? Don’t you see? This is a win-win where everyone lives happily-ever-after.”

Edmund sent his friend a questioning glance before shaking his head. “First, no such thing exists, and second, despite my family’s advice, I didn’t come to America to search for a future wife. I came to have a two-week debauchery fest at Stonebridge.”

Will ignored him. ‘Hey, you’re in a desperate situation. You can speed up the process by dating six or seven women at the same time, or you can end up a pathetic bastard, living in a one-room flat in London, internet dating in your robe and a pair of boxer shorts adorned with little green alligators.’”

Edmund swiped a hand down his face and tried not to resent his father as much as he did at this moment. The late Lord Rushwood, when alive, didn’t take much time for Edmund. He’d existed as a person who provided a home for his family, and that was it. If love lived inside the large stone walls of his ancestral home, Edmund didn’t remember it, or he’d somehow blocked it out.

No matter which way he looked at this, he realized he had few choices. Still struggling with saying yes, he sat silent and sick as Will came to life, his hands in constant motion, and his smile growing more sinister by the moment.

“We can make this work. Most of the show will be scripted, and since the audience chooses for you, you don’t do anything but sit back and enjoy the view. If you want, you can contest the choice. And the best part, I’m sure to get a promotion.” Then Will shrugged. “Who knows, Edmund? You might just uncover enough lust to marry one of those women. In the

end, everyone lives happily ever after.”

“I wish you’d stop saying that,” Edmund said with a deep exhale. In between conversations with Will, Edmund glanced around, realizing with great disappointment that Abby had turned in her apron and left.

It didn’t surprise him to find the American fascinating. She was vulnerable and misplaced and precisely what he *didn’t* need in his life right now. Besides, there were at least half a dozen women who’d dropped their numbers in his lap on their way by him.

“This can’t possibly work,” he mumbled, loud enough for Will to hear.

“Do you have another plan, bro?”

Edmund inhaled a plume of department store perfume and stale beer before giving in to his friend’s insanity. “No. If you can find a way to put it together, I’ll surrender to this maddening scheme.”

Will nodded. “Good.” He paused, chugging the rest of the detestable beer and then beating his chest a few times to make it go down easier. “Now, for the hard part.”

Edmund’s optimism sank, if he even had any at all. “There’s a hard part?”

Will shrugged and wobbled his head like a bobblehead doll. “I don’t have the list with the names of the few bluebloods.”

Edmund nodded. “Well, who does?”

Will dipped his head. “Oh, that little fire flower, Abby Forester. So, let’s go. We’ll take your car. I’ll drive.”

CHAPTER THREE

Abby shook the spring rain from her jean jacket and sank on the love seat inside her father's record shop, What Goes Around. She loved spring in Portland, Oregon. The dogwood trees were in full bloom, and the breeze showered cherry blossoms onto the concrete sidewalks outside the door.

"What a wondrous night," Raify D'Gothomer said, lifting a dainty teacup toward Abby. Although she guessed the woman to be in her early seventies, she had a youthful gleam in her eyes and a zest in her movements.

"If you say so," Abby said, and filled the cup with fragrant bergamot tea.

"Thanks for covering for me." Abby smiled at her friend and then hesitated to ask, afraid of the answer. "Did Kendra drop by?"

Raify's ornamented hat waggled with her answer. "No. The vulture must have thought it wise to stay away."

Abby sighed, wishing her father had not been so hasty to attach himself to such a horrible woman after her mother died. Abby also wished he'd thought twice about making Kendra part owner of his shop before he passed away.

As loneliness wrapped around her, Abby grabbed at the locket around her neck. She would be graduating from college soon. Even with a business degree, she was afraid to look too far into the future. Would she still want to live her father's dreams for the rest of her life? Or did she dare create dreams of her own? Until she figured everything out, Abby settled on letting Kendra take money from her cash register whenever she wanted.

“It’s still early,” Abby said, her mood thoughtful and turning to someone else. By now, she had no doubt Will’s friend was still at Tommy’s, a giggling bridesmaid perched upon his lap.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Raify asked, too observant and curious.

Instead of telling the woman of a man she’d most likely never see again, Abby responded with the next available grievance. “Nineteenth-century Women’s Literature. Since I chose to watch—as opposed to read—my assignment, Fairchild is giving me until next month to find a parallel to my life as it compares to either Jane Eyre or Elizabeth Bennett.”

The older woman lifted her teacup and sipped in a graceful manner. With eyes the color of emeralds, and hair the color of platinum, Raify reached over and gave Abby’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Whether fictional or real, most women have one thing in common.”

As usual, Raify didn’t explain her meaning, forcing Abby to jab her with a question. “And this one thing is?”

“To be rescued.”

Abby scoffed. “Then I’m not like most women. I don’t need anyone to ride into my life and save me.”

“Oh, child,” Raify said with true exasperation. “Just keep in mind that love is a rescue in one form or another. As long as we’re willing to reach out our hands, we’ll find it when we need it most.”

Abby harrumphed. “The last time I reached out, I got burned.”

She received a questioning smile, a teacup raised as a toast or challenge. “Not all men are like Derek Crumwell, Abby. You must keep this in mind.”

The conversation on heroes, heroines, and poor attempts at boyfriends reminded Abby of the Englishman again. *No*. They had nothing in common, except Will, a thought too depressing to contemplate.

Exhausted, she stood and reached for the light switch. When the door to her shop clanked open, she whipped around to see Edmund, the very one who who’d teased, scolded, and rescued her, ambling into her shop behind Will.

“But...but how did...you get in?”

Will winked. “The sign says Closed, but the door was open.”

Damn. She must have been daydreaming when she thought she closed the place, daydreaming about a man whose personality oscillated between hero and arrogant jerk so

often, it made her dizzy.

Her heart knocked at his presence. She attempted to hide her sudden nervousness by bustling around the shop and putting away several displaced items. Will followed at a nonchalant pace behind her as his friend rifled through a display of used Beatles albums.

One fell to the floor, and as he dipped to pick it up, another dropped, causing him to spew a colorful stream of British expletives, few of which Abby understood. Out of the corner of her eye, Raify nodded her head, the gesture seeming to cause the last of the collection to descend to a neat pile at his feet “Don’t mind him, Abs.”

“Don’t call me Abs. Only people I loathe call me that. On second thought, have at it.”

Will smirked and looped a hand through her arm. “Look, I’m sorry about leaving you to do the report alone. I wanted to call, but my girlfriend dropped my phone in the toilet.”

Abby scoffed, unsure if he was being serious or making a joke. She, unfortunately, allowed him to dive into the real reason for the impromptu visit.

“Do you still have that genealogy paper with the list of names we worked on?”

“*We?*”

Will shrugged and she tried not to roll her eyes. “Yes. Why?”

“I’m helping a friend find...someone.”

Abby blew out a long breath, deciding to leave Will and help Edmund pick up the rest of the records. The last thing she needed now was to discount them due to careless scratches in the vinyl.

She sank to her knees, the warm and masculine scent of him filling her senses. She made the mistake of gazing into his eyes, his intense stare holding her prisoner until she forgot how to breathe.

Across the store, an obnoxious ringtone blared, yanking Abby from her trance.

“I’ll be right back,” Will called, dashing toward the door.

“What?” Abby and Edmund said, rising in unison in front of one another.

“Abby Forester, meet Lord Edmund Rushwood. Lord Edmund Rushwood, meet Abby Forester. I’ll be back with your car.”

“Wait! What am I supposed to do until then?” Abby blanched from Lord Edmund What’s-his-

name’s tone, trying not to care if he stayed or went. “If you don’t intend on buying

anything, you'll have to go with him."

"Don't worry, Abs...I mean Abby," Will added over his shoulder. "He's perfectly harmless." The man's words echoed, the door clicking shut behind him. Abby let her gaze roam over Edmund, from his attractive features to his starched navy-blue jacket to his expensive black shoes.

"That's one opinion," she mumbled, slicing a glance toward a too-silent Raify, who in the past had chased out more innocent-looking men with her little pinky. With a slight, majestic nod, the woman showed her approval.

Great. Now even Raify was mesmerized by him, or, at least, curious about him.

Edmund didn't know how to explain Abby Forester. From the very beginning, he found her extremely pretty but unrefined. Her silky hair and clean complexion reminded him of purity and quicksand at the same time. He thought he'd spent too much time observing her when she folded her arms across her chest and inhaled.

"If you're expecting me to curtsy or something, it's not going to happen."

Amused and enlightened, he stretched out his arm. "A handshake will suffice for now."

He waited with unwavering patience as she unraveled herself and slipped a hesitant palm inside his. Soft and warm, he regretted the moment she pulled away to retreat back to her defensive pose.

"So, Abby, this is what you do when you're not pounding men senseless with a beer bottle?"

She didn't bite. "Why do you need the research paper?"

He answered in a detached tone. "To find a wife." Her jaw dropped and her jewel-blue eyes widened.

He drew closer, drawn in by her rhythmic breathing and blinking stare. She was shorter than most women he dated, the top of her head only clearing the bottom of his chin.

"I guess I'm a little confused."

He nodded, unsure how much to tell her. "As you know, Will is the host of a dating game show. Since I refuse to bore you with the details, let's just say that I've been...persuaded to go on *Love Match* and find the woman I will," he said, pausing at having to say the word aloud, "...marry."

“Oh.”

Edmund wanted to hear disappointment in that one quiet word. When all he heard was curiosity, he moved on. “Will believes your genealogy project will help provide the names of a few contestants he needs.”

The fake smile she’d presented him...fell. “Wealthy contestants?”

He didn’t lie. “Preferably.”

She clicked her tongue, and then rolled her lucid blue eyes at him. “So, you’re going to rifle through my list, pluck out a few beautifully rich women, place them in a line-up, and then choose which one to marry?”

He smiled. “Something like that.”

He waited as suspicion played across her enchanting face. “Are you having a hard time finding someone to marry you in England?”

He bent his head and chuckled, surprised by her forthrightness. Despite the dangers, he found her engaging, so much so that he made himself comfortable in a high-backed chair near the register and stretched one leg in front of him. He liked everything about her, including her changeable facial expressions and the way she’d nibble on only one side of her lip. “On the contrary, Miss Forester, the proposals have been plenty.”

“Then why are you here? I mean, if you proposed at least once, shouldn’t you have a wife right now?”

He quirked a slender finger into the air. “Ah, I didn’t say I was the one proposing.”

She blinked, unimpressed. “So, how many offers have you rejected?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you ask too many questions?”

Without missing a beat, she shook her head and answered him directly. “No.” Then she mocked his pose and brought up a finger to tap gently against her chin. “How much?”

Her inquiry shift almost knocked him off his seat. “Pardon me?”

She stepped closer, and he breathed in her lightly lavender-scented skin, never wanting to sample something so bad in his life.

“How much is a paper with the names of eligible and notable women you may or may not be willing to spend the rest of your life with worth to you, Lord Edward Rushwood?”

“Edmund,” he said, almost whispering.

She blushed and cleared her throat. “Okay, Edmund.”

His heart gave a strange, solid whack at the sound of his name on her lips. Now she was near enough for him to reach out and touch her face, to graze a knuckle across her rounded cheek and cause a swallowed breath or forceful slap. He kept his hands to himself. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“If I can find an eligible bride out of that bloody list you and Will put together,” he said, his voice raised and tight with impatience.

Hell. He didn’t want the list. He *needed* the list, and he needed Abby to give it to him without questions or reminders on why he was here.

“I’ll have you know that *bloody* list took me three weeks, two of those weeks without any assistance at all, thanks to your detestable friend.”

“I’m truly sorry about him.” Edmund had not meant to lose his temper. He had a way of saying things to push people away, a defense mechanism he’d inherited from his father. So far, the last few days had been trying, and he never imagined having to marry anyone in this manner, or any manner at all.

At his silence, her hands dropped to her outer thighs, his gaze lingering there. His eyes closed, his body constricting at the insane thought of making love to her. He’d spent less than an hour in her company, and yet, a jolt of desire pounded in his veins. How could he want her? She was nothing like the women he dated or lusted after. Yet, he wanted to kiss the base of her smooth throat and skim his fingers along the delicate line of her jaw.

“Oh, shoot. Not now,” she whispered.

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