

NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHORS

Judith  
McNaught

*Simple Gifts*

Jude  
Deveraux

A COLLECTION OF  
THEIR FOUR MOST  
BELOVED STORIES

v1.0

July 2006

Miracles

Judith McNaught

# **contents**

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Copyright 1994 by Eagle Syndication, Inc.

# One

[^ »](#)

**The roar of music** and voices began to recede as Julianna Skeffington fled down the terraced steps of a brightly lit country house in which 600

members of Polite Society were attending a masquerade ball. Ahead of her, the formal gardens were aglow with flaring torches and swarming with costumed guests and liveried servants. Beyond the gardens, a large hedge maze loomed in the shadows, offering far better places to hide, and it was there that Julianna headed.

Pressing the hooped skirts of her Marie Antoinette costume closer to her sides, she plunged into the crowd, wending her way as swiftly as possible past knights in armor, court jesters, highwaymen, and an assortment of kings, queens, and Shakespearean characters, as well as a profusion of domestic and jungle creatures.

She saw a path open through the crowd and headed for it, then had to step aside to avoid colliding with a large leafy "tree" with red silk apples dangling from its branches. The tree bowed politely to Julianna as it paraded past her, one of its branches curved around the waist of a lady decked out as a milkmaid complete with bucket.

She did not have to show her pace again until she neared the center of the garden, where a group of musicians was stationed between a pair of Roman fountains, providing music for dancing couples. Excusing herself, she stepped around a tall man disguised as a black tomcat who was whispering in the pink ear of a petite gray mouse. He stopped long enough to cast an appreciative eye over the low bodice of Julianna's white ruffled gown, then he smiled boldly into her eyes and winked before returning his attention to the adorable little mouse with the absurdly long whiskers. Staggered by

the abandoned behavior she was witnessing tonight, particularly out here in the gardens, Julianna stole a quick glance over her shoulder and saw that her mother had emerged from the ballroom. She stood on the terraced steps, holding an unknown male by the arm, and slowly scanned the gardens. She was looking for Julianna. With the instincts of a bloodhound, her mother turned and looked straight in Julianna's direction.

That familiar sight was enough to make Julianna break into a near run, until she came to the last obstacle in her route to the maze: a large group of particularly boisterous men who were standing beneath a canopy of trees, laughing uproariously at a mock jester who was trying unsuccessfully to juggle apples. Rather than walk in front of their line of vision, thus putting herself in plain view of her mother, she decided it was wiser to go around behind them.

"If you please, sirs," she said, trying to sidle between the trees and a row of masculine backs. "I must pass." Instead of moving quickly out of her way, which common courtesy dictated they should, two of them glanced over their shoulders at her, then they turned fully around without giving her any extra space.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" said one of them in a very young and very inebriated voice as he braced his hand on the tree near her shoulder. He shifted his gaze to a servant, who was handing him a glass brimming with some sort of liquor, then he took it and thrust it toward her.

"Some 'freshment for you, ma'am?"

At the moment Julianna was more worried about escaping her mother's notice than being accosted by a drunken young lord who could barely stand up and whose companions would surely prevent him from behaving more abominably than he was now. She accepted the glass rather than make a scene, then she ducked under his arm, walked quickly past the others, and hurried toward her destination, the drink forgotten in her hand.

"Forget about her, Dickie," she heard his companion say. "Half the opera dancers and the demimonde are here tonight. You can have most any female who takes your eye. That one didn't want to play." Julianna remembered hearing that some of the Ton's high sticklers disapproved of masquerades—particularly for gently bred young ladies— and after what she'd seen and heard tonight she certainly understood why. With their identities safely concealed behind costumes and masks, members of Polite Society behaved like... like common rabble!

## Two



**Inside the maze**, Julianna took the path to the right, darted around the first corner, which happened to turn right, then she pressed her back into the shrubbery's prickly branches. With her free hand, she tried to flatten the layers of white lace flounces that adorned the hem of her skirts and the low bodice of her gown, but they stood out like quivering beacons in the breezy night.

Her heart racing from emotion, not exertion, she stood perfectly still and listened, separated from the garden by a single tall hedge but out of sight of the entrance. She stared blindly at the glass in her hand and felt angry futility at her inability to prevent her mother from disgracing herself or ruining Julianna's life.

Trying to divert herself, Juliana lifted the glass to her nose and sniffed, then she shuddered a little at the strong aroma. It smelled like the stuff her papa drank. Not the Madeira he enjoyed from morning until supper, but the golden liquid he drank after supper—for medicinal purposes, to calm his nerves, he said.

Julianna's nerves were raw. A moment later she heard her mother's voice come from the opposite side of the leafy barrier, making her heart hammer with foreboding.

"Juliana, are you out here, dear?" her mother called.

"Lord Makepeace is with me, and he is most eager for an introduction..." Julianna had the mortifying vision of a reluctant Lord Makepeace— whoever he was—being dragged mercilessly by the arm through every twist and turn, every corner and cranny, of the twisting maze and torchlit gardens by her determined mother. Unable to endure the awkwardness and embarrassment of one more introduction to some unfortunate, and undoubtedly *unwilling*, potential suitor whom her mother had commandeered, Julianna backed so far into the scratchy branches that they poked into the pale blond curls of the elaborate coiffure that had taken a maid hours to create.

Overhead, the moon obligingly glided behind a thick bank of clouds, plunging the maze into inky darkness, while her mother continued her shamelessly dishonest monologue—a few feet away on the other side of the hedge.

"Julianna is such a delightfully adventurous girl," Lady Skeffington exclaimed, sounding frustrated, not proud. "It is just like her to wander into the gardens to do a bit of exploring."

Julianna mentally translated her mother's falsehoods into reality: *Julianna is an annoying recluse who has to be dragged from her books and her scribbling. It is just like her to hide in the bushes at a time like this.*

"She was so very popular this Season, I cannot think how you haven't encountered her at some tonnish function or another. In fact, I actually had to insist she restrict her social engagements to no more than ten each week so that she could have enough rest!"

*Julianna hasn't received ten invitations to social events in the past year, let alone in a single week, but I need an excuse for why you haven't met her before. With a little luck, you'll believe that rapper.*

Lord Makepeace wasn't that gullible. "Really?" he murmured, in the noncommittal voice of one who is struggling between courtesy, annoyance, and disbelief. "She sounds an odd—er... unusual female if she doesn't enjoy social engagements."

"I never meant to imply such a thing!" Lady Skeffington hastened to say.

"Julianna enjoys balls and soirees above all things!" *Julianna would rather have a tooth extracted.*

"I truly believe the two of you would deal famously together." *I intend to get her off our hands and well wed, my good man, and you have the prerequisites for a husband: You are male, of respectable birth, and adequate fortune.*

"She is not at all the sort of pushing female one encounters too often these days."

*She won't do a thing to show herself off to advantage.*

"On the other hand, she has definite attributes that no male could miss." *To make certain of it tonight, I insisted she wear a costume so revealing that it is better suited to a married flirt than to a girl of eighteen.*

"But she is not at all fast."

*Despite the low décolletage on her gown, you must not even try to touch her without asking for her hand first.*

Lord Makepeace's desire for freedom finally overcame the dictates of civility. "I really must return to the ballroom, Lady Skeffington. I—I believe I have the next dance with Miss Topham."

The realization that her prey was about to escape— and into the clutches of the Season's most popular debutante—drove Julianna's mama to retaliate by telling the greatest lie of her matchmaking life.

Shamelessly inventing a nonexistent relationship between Julianna and the most eligible bachelor in England, she announced, "It's just as well we return to the ball! I believe Nicholas DuVille himself has claimed Julianna's next waltz!" Lady Skeffington must have hurried after the retreating lord because their voices became more distant. "Mr. DuVille has repeatedly singled our dear Julianna out for particular attention. In fact, I have reason to believe his sole reason for coming here this evening was so that he could spend a few moments with her! No, really, sir, it is the truth, though I shouldn't like for anyone but you to know it..."

Further down the maze, the Baron of Penwarren's ravishing young widow stood with her arms wrapped around Nicholas DuVille's neck, her eyes laughing into his as she whispered, "Please don't tell me Lady Skeffington actually coerced *you* into dancing with her daughter, Nicki. Not *you*, of all people. If she has, and you do it, you won't be able to walk into a drawing room in England without sending everyone into whoops. If you hadn't been in Italy all summer, you'd know it's become a game of wits among the bachelors to thwart that odious creature. I'm perfectly serious," Valerie warned as his only reaction was one of mild amusement, "that woman would resort to anything to get a rich husband for her daughter and secure her own position in Society! Absolutely anything!"

"Thank you for the warning, *chérie*," Nicki said dryly. "As it happens, I had a brief introduction to Lady Skeffington's husband shortly before I left for Italy. I have not, however, set eyes on the mother *or* the daughter, let alone promised to dance with either of them."

She sighed with relief. "I couldn't imagine how you could have been that foolish. Juliana is a remarkably pretty thing, actually, but she's not at all in your usual style. She's very young, very virginal, and I understand she has an odd habit of hiding behind draperies—or some such."

"She sounds delightful," Nicki lied with a chuckle.

"She is nothing like her mama, in any case." She paused for an eloquent little shudder to illustrate what she was about to say next. "Lady Skeffington is so eager to be a part of Society that she positively grovels. If she weren't so encroaching and ambitious, she'd be completely pathetic."

"At the risk of appearing hopelessly obtuse," Nicki said, losing patience with the entire discussion, "why in hell did you invite them to your masquerade?"

"Because, darling," Valerie said with a sigh, smoothing her fingers over his jaw with the familiarity of shared intimacies, "this past summer, little Julianna somehow became acquainted with the new Countess of Langford, as well as her sister-in-law, the Duchess of Claymore. At the beginning of the Season, the countess and the duchess made it known they desire little Juliana to be welcome amongst the Ton, then they both left for Devon with their husbands. Since no one wants to offend the Westmorelands, and since Lady Skeffington offends all of us, we all waited until the very last week of the Season to do our duty and invite them to something. Unluckily, of the dozens of invitations Lady Skeffington received for tonight, mine was the one she accepted—probably because she heard *you* were going to be here." She stopped suddenly, as if struck by a delightful possibility. "Everyone has been longing to discover how Julianna and her obnoxious mama happened to become acquainted with the countess and the duchess, and I would wager *you* know the answer, don't you! Gossip has it that you were *extremely* well acquainted with both ladies before they were married." To Valerie's astonishment, his entire expression became distant, shuttered, and his words conveyed a chilly warning. "Define what you mean by 'extremely well acquainted,' Valerie."

Belatedly realizing that she had somehow blundered into dangerous territory, Valerie made a hasty strategic retreat to safer ground. "I meant only that you are known to be a close friend of both ladies." Nicki accepted her peace offering with a slight nod and allowed her

to retreat in dignity, but he did not let the matter drop completely. "Their husbands are *also* close friends of mine," he said pointedly, though that was rather an exaggeration. He was on friendly terms with Stephen and Clayton Westmoreland, but neither man was particularly ecstatic about their wife's friendship with Nicki—a situation that both ladies had laughingly confided would undoubtedly continue "until you are safely wed, Nicki, and as besotted with your own wife as Clayton and Stephen are with us."

"Since you aren't yet betrothed to Miss Skeffington," Valerie teased softly, pulling his attention back to her as she slid her fingers around his nape, "there is nothing to prevent us from leaving by the side of this maze and going to your bedchamber."

From the moment she'd greeted him in the house, Nicki had known that suggestion was going to come, and he considered it now in noncommittal silence. There was nothing stopping him from doing that. Nothing whatsoever, except an inexplicable lack of interest in what he knew from past trysts with Valerie would be almost exactly one hour and thirty minutes of uninhibited sexual intercourse with a highly skilled and eager partner. That exercise would be preceded by a glass and a half of excellent champagne, and followed by half a glass of even better brandy. Afterward, he would pretend to be disappointed when she felt obliged to return to her own bed "to keep the servants from gossiping." Very civilized, very considerate, very *predictable*.

Lately, the sheer predictability of his life—and everyone in it, including himself—was beginning to grate on him. Whether he was in bed with a woman or gambling with friends, he automatically did and said all the proper—and improper—things at the appropriate time. He associated with men and women of his own class who were all as bland and socially adept as he was.

He was beginning to feel as if he were a damned marionette, performing on a stage with other marionettes, all of whom danced to the same tune, written by the same composer.

Even when it came to illicit liaisons such as the one Valerie was suggesting, there was a prescribed ritual to be followed that varied only according to whether the lady was wed or not, and whether he was playing the role of seducer or seduced. Since Valerie was widowed and had assumed the role of seducer tonight, he knew exactly how she would react if he declined her suggestion. First she would pout—but very prettily; then she would cajole; and then she would offer enticements. He, being the "seduced," would hesitate, then evade, and then postpone until she gave up, but he would never actually refuse. To do so would be unforgivably rude—a clumsy misstep in the intricate social dance they all performed to perfection.

Despite all that, Nicki waited before answering, half expecting his body to respond favorably to her suggestion, even though his mind was not. When that didn't happen, he shook his head and took the first step in the dance: hesitation. "I should probably sleep first, chérie. I had a trying week, and I've been up for the last two days."

"Surely you aren't refusing me, are you, darling?" she asked. Pouting prettily.

Nicki switched smoothly to evasion. "What about your party?"

"I'd rather be with you. I haven't seen you in months, and besides, the party will go on without me. My servants are trained to perfection."

"Your guests are not," Nicki pointed out, still evading since she was still cajoling.

"They'll never know we've left."

"The bedchamber you gave me is next to your mother's."

"She won't hear us even if you break the bed as you did the last time we used that chamber. She's deaf as a stone." Nicki was about to proceed to the postponement stage, but Valerie surprised him by

accelerating the procedure and going straight to enticements before he could utter his lines in this trite little play that had become his real life. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed him thoroughly, her hands sliding up and down his chest, her parted lips inviting his tongue.

Nicki automatically put his arm around her waist and complied, but it was an empty gesture born of courtesy, not reciprocity. When her hands slid lower, toward the waistband of his trousers, he dropped his arm and stepped back, suddenly revolted as well as bored with the entire damned charade. "Not tonight," he said firmly.

Her eyes silently accused him of an unforgivable breach of the rules. Softening his voice, he took her by the shoulders, turned her around, and gave her an affectionate pat on the backside to send her on her way. "Go back to your guests, chérie." Already reaching into his pocket for a thin cheroot, he added with a polite finality, "I'll follow you after a discreet time." **Three** « ^ »

**Unaware that she** was not alone in the cavernous maze, Julianna waited in tense silence to be absolutely certain her mother wasn't going to return. After a moment she gave a ragged sigh and dislodged herself from her hiding place.

Since the maze seemed like the best place to hide for the next few hours, she turned left and wandered down a path that opened into a square grassy area with an ornate stone bench in the center.

Morosely, she contemplated her situation, looking for a way out of the humiliating and untenable trap she was in, but she knew there was no escape from her mother's blind obsession with seeing Julianna wed to someone of "real consequence"—now, while the opportunity existed. Thus far all that had prevented her mother from accomplishing this goal was the fact that no "eligible" suitor "of real consequence" had declared himself during the few weeks Julianna had been in London.

Unfortunately, just before they'd left London to come here, her mother had succeeded in wringing an offer of marriage from Sir

Francis Bellhaven, a repulsive, elderly, pompous knight with pallid skin, protruding hazel eyes that seemed to delve down Julianna's bodice, and thick pale lips that never failed to remind her of a dead goldfish. The thought of being bound for an entire evening, let alone the rest of her life, to Sir Francis was unendurable. Obscene. Terrifying.

Not that she was going to have any choice in the matter. If she wanted a real choice, then hiding in here from other potential suitors her mother commandeered was the last thing she ought to be doing. She knew it, but she couldn't make herself go back to that ball. She didn't even *want* a husband. She was already eighteen years old, and she had other plans, other dreams, for her life, but they didn't coincide with her mother's and so they weren't going to matter. Ever. What made it all so much more frustrating was that her mother actually *believed* she was acting in Julianna's best interests and that she knew what was ultimately best for her. The moon slid out from behind the clouds, and Julianna stared at the pale liquid in her glass. Her father said a bit of brandy never hurt anyone, that it eased all manner of ailments, improved digestion, and cured low spirits. Julianna hesitated, and then in a burst of rebellion and desperation, she decided to test the latter theory. Lifting the glass, she pinched her nostrils closed, tipped her head back, and took three large swallows. She lowered the glass, shuddering and gasping. And waited. For an explosion of bliss. Seconds passed, then one minute. Nothing. All she felt was a slight weakness in her knees and a weakening of her defenses against the tears of futility brimming in her eyes.

In deference to her shaky limbs, Julianna stepped over to the stone bench and sat down. The bench had obviously been occupied earlier that evening, because there was a half-empty glass of spirits on the end of it and several empty glasses beneath it. After a moment she took another sip of brandy and gazed into the glass, swirling the golden liquid so that it gleamed in the moonlight as she considered her plight.

How she wished her grandmother were still alive! Grandmama would have put a stop to Julianna's mother's mad obsession with arranging a "splendid marriage." She'd have understood Julianna's aversion to being forced into marriage with anyone. In all the world, her father's dignified mother was the only person who had ever seemed to understand Julianna. Her grandmother had been her friend, her teacher, her mentor. At her knee Julianna had learned about the world, about people; there and there alone she was encouraged to think for herself and to say whatever she thought, no matter how absurd or outrageous it might seem. In return, her grandmother had always treated her as an equal, sharing her own unique philosophies about anything and everything, from God's purpose for creating the earth to myths about men and women.

Grandmother Skeffington did not believe marriage was the answer to a woman's dreams, or even that males were more noble or more intelligent than females! "Consider for a moment my own husband as an example," she said with a gruff smile one wintry afternoon just before the Christmas when Julianna was fifteen. "You did not know your grandfather, God rest his soul, but if he had a brain with which to think, I never saw the evidence of it. Like all his forebears, he couldn't tally two figures in his head or write an intelligent sentence, and he had less sense than a suckling babe."

"Really?" Julianna said, amazed and a little appalled by this disrespectful assessment of a deceased man who had been her grandmother's husband and Julianna's grandsire.

Her grandmother nodded emphatically. "The Skeffington men have all been like that—unimaginative, slothful clods, the entire lot of them."

"But surely you aren't saying Papa is like that," Julianna argued out of loyalty. "He's your only living child."

"I would never describe your papa as a clod," she said without hesitation.

"I would describe him as a muttonhead!"

Julianna bit back a horrified giggle at such heresy, but before she could summon an appropriate defense, her grandmother continued: "The Skeffington women, on the other hand, have often displayed streaks of rare intelligence and resourcefulness. Look closely and you will discover that it is generally females who survive on their wits and determination, not males. Men are not superior to women except in brute strength." When Julianna looked uncertain, her grandmother added smugly, "If you will read that book I gave you last week, you will soon discover that women were not always subservient to men. Why, in ancient times, we had the power and the reverence. We were goddesses and soothsayers and healers, with the secrets of the universe in our minds and the gift of life in our bodies. We chose our mates, not the other way around. Men sought our counsel and worshiped at our feet and envied our powers. Why, we were superior to them in every way. We knew it, and so did they."

"If we were truly the more clever and the more gifted," Julianna said when her grandmother lifted her brows, looking for a reaction to that staggering information, "then how did we lose all that power and respect and let ourselves become subservient to men?"

"They *convinced* us we needed *their* brute strength for *our* protection," she said with a mixture of resentment and disdain. "Then they 'protected' us right out of all our privileges and rights. They *tricked* us." Julianna found an error in that logic, and her brow furrowed in thought.

"If that is so," she said after a moment, "then they couldn't have been quite so dull-witted as you think. They had to be very clever, did they not?" For a spilt second her grandmother glowered at her, then she cackled with approving laughter. "A good point, my dear, and one that bears considering. I suggest you write that thought down so that you may examine it further. Perhaps you will write a book of your own on how males have perpetrated that fiendish deception upon females over the centuries. I only hope you will not decide to waste your mind and your talents on some ignorant fellow who wants you

for that face of yours and tries to convince you that your only value is in breeding his children and looking after his wants. You could make a difference, Julianna. I know you could."

She hesitated, as if deciding something, then said, "That brings us to another matter I have been wishing to discuss with you. This seems like as good a time as will come along."

Grandmother Skeffington got up and walked over to the fireplace on the opposite wall of the cozy little room, her movements slowed by advancing age, her silver hair twisted into a severe coil at her neck. Bracing one hand on the evergreen boughs she'd arranged on the mantel, she bent to stir the coals. "As you know, I have already outlived a husband and one son. I have lived long, and I am fully prepared to end my days on this earth whenever my time arrives. Although I shall not always be here for you, I hope to compensate for that by leaving something behind for you... an inheritance that is for you to spend. It isn't much."

The subject of her grandmother's death had never come up before, and the mere thought of losing her made Julianna's chest tighten with dread.

"As I said, it isn't much, but if you are extremely thrifty, it could allow you to live very modestly in London for quite a few years while you experience more of life and hone your writing skills." In her heart Julianna argued frantically that life without her grandmother was unthinkable, that she had no wish to live in London, and that their shared dream that she might actually become a noteworthy writer was only an impossible fantasy. Afraid that such an emotional outburst would offend the woman, Julianna remained seated upon the footstool in front of her grandmother's favorite overstuffed chair, inwardly a mass of raw emotions, outwardly controlled, calmly perusing a book. "Have you nothing to say to my plans for you, child? I rather expected to see you leap with joy. Some small display of enthusiasm would be appropriate here in return for the economies I've practiced in order to leave you this tiny legacy." She was prodding, Julianna knew, trying to provoke her into either a witty

rejoinder or an unemotional discussion. Julianna was very good at both after years of practice, but she was as incapable of discussing her grandmother's death with humor as she was with impersonal calm. Moreover, she was vaguely wounded that her grandmother could talk of leaving her forever without any indication of regret.

"I must say you don't seem very grateful."

Julianna's head snapped up, her violet eyes sparkling with angry tears. "I am not at all grateful, Grandmama, nor do I wish to discuss this now. It is nearly Christmas, a time for joyous—"

"Death is a fact of life," her grandmother stated flatly. "It is pointless to cower from it."

"But you are *my* whole life," Julianna burst out because she couldn't stop herself. "And—and I don't like it in the least that you—you can speak to me of money as if it's a recompense for your death."

"You think me cold and callous?"

"Yes, I do!"

It was their first harsh argument, and Julianna hated it.

Her grandmother regarded her in serene silence before asking, "Do you know what I shall miss when I leave this earth?"

"Nothing, evidently."

"I shall miss one thing and one thing alone." When Julianna didn't ask for an explanation, her grandmother provided it: "I shall miss you." The answer was in such opposition to her unemotional voice and bland features that Julianna stared dubiously at her.

"I shall miss your humor and your confidences and your amazing gift for seeing the logic behind both sides of any issue. I shall particularly miss reading what you've written each day. You have been the only bright spot in my existence."

As she finished, she walked forward and laid her cool hand on Julianna's cheek, brushing away the tears trickling from the corner of her eye. "We are kindred spirits, you and I. If you had been born much sooner, we would have been bosom friends."

"We *are* friends," Julianna whispered fiercely as she placed her own hand over her grandmother's and rubbed her cheek against it. "We will be friends forever and always! When you are... gone, I shall still confide in you and write for you—shall write letters to you as if you had merely moved away!"

"What a diverting idea," her grandmother teased. "And will you also post them to me?"

"Of course not, but you'll know what I have written nonetheless."

"What makes you think that?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Because I heard you tell the vicar very bluntly that it is illogical to assume that the Almighty intends to let us lie around dozing until Judgment Day. You said that, having repeatedly warned us that we shall reap what we sow, God is *more* likely to insist we observe what we have sown from a much *wider* viewpoint."

"I do not think it wise, my dear, for you to put more credence in my theological notions than in those of the good vicar. I shouldn't like for you to waste your talent writing to me after I'm gone, instead of writing something for the living to read."

"I shan't be wasting my time," Julianna said with a confident smile, one of their familiar debates over nonsense lifting her spirits. "If I write you letters, I have every faith you will contrive a way to read them wherever you may be."

"Because you credit me with mystical powers?"

"No," Julianna teased, "because you cannot resist correcting my *spelling!*"

"Impertinent baggage," her grandmother huffed, but she smiled widely and her fingers spread, linking with Julianna's for a tight, affectionate squeeze.

The following year, on the eve of Christmas, her grandmother died, holding Julianna's hand one last time. "I'll write to you, Grandmama." Julianna wept as her grandmother's eyes closed forever. "Don't forget to watch for my letters. Don't *forget*."

## Four

« ^ »

**In the days** that followed, Julianna wrote her dozens of letters, but as one lonely month drifted into another, the empty monotony of her life provided little worth writing about. The sleepy little village of Blintonfield remained the boundary of her world, and so she filled her time with reading and secret dreams of going off to London when she received her inheritance at eighteen. There she would meet interesting people and visit museums while she worked diligently on her writing. When she sold some of her work, she would bring her two little brothers to London often, so they could broaden their knowledge and share the wonders of the world beyond their little village.

After a few attempts to share this dream with her mama, Julianna realized it was wiser to say nothing because her mother was horrified and annoyed by the whole idea. "It's beyond considering, dear. Respectable, unmarried young ladies do *not* live alone, particularly in London. Your reputation would be ruined, completely ruined!" She was no more enthusiastic about any mention of books or writing. Lady Skeffington's interest in reading material was limited exclusively to the Society pages of the daily papers, where she religiously followed the doings of the Ton. She considered Julianna's fascination with history and philosophy and her desire to become an author almost as appalling as Julianna's wish to live on her own in

London. "Gentlemen do not like a female who is too clever, dear," she warned repeatedly. "You're entirely too bookish. If you don't learn to keep all this fustian about philosophy to yourself, your chances of receiving a marriage offer from any truly eligible gentlemen will be ruined!" Until a few months before the masquerade ball, the subject of a London Season for Julianna had never been discussed as a possibility. Although Julianna's father was a baronet, his ancestors had long before squandered whatever modest fortune and lands that went with the title. His only legacy from his forebears was a thoroughly amiable and placid disposition that enabled him to ignore all of life's difficulties and a great fondness for wine and spirits. He had no desire to leave his favorite chair, let alone the secluded little village that was his birthplace. He was, however, not proof against his wife's determination, nor her ambitions for their little family.

In the end, neither was Juliana.

Three weeks after Julianna received her inheritance, as she was writing more letters of inquiry to the London papers about lodgings, her mother excitedly summoned the entire family to the salon for an unprecedented family council. "Julianna," she exclaimed, "your father and I have something thrilling to tell you!" She paused to beam at Julianna's father, who was still reading the newspaper. "Don't we, John?"

"Yes, my dove," he murmured without looking up.

After an admonishing look at Julianna's two young brothers, who were arguing over the last biscuit, she clasped her hands in delight and transferred her gaze to Julianna. "It is all arranged!" she exclaimed. "I have just received a letter from the owner of a little house in London in respectable neighborhood. He has agreed to let us have it for the rest of the Season for the paltry amount I was able to offer! Everything else has been arranged and deposits paid in advance. I have hired a Miss Sheridan Bromleigh, who will be your lady's maid and occasional chaperone, and who will help look after the boys. She is an American, but then one must make do when one cannot afford to pay decent wages.

"Dear heaven, your gowns were expensive, but the vicar's wife assures me the modiste I hired is quite competent, though not capable of the sort of intricate designs you will see worn by the young ladies of the Ton. On the other hand, I daresay few of them have your beauty, so it all works out quite evenly. Someday soon you will have gowns to go with your looks, and you will be the envy of all! You'll have jewels and furs, coaches, servants at your beck and call..."

Julianna had felt a momentary burst of elation at the mention of inexpensive lodgings in London, but new gowns and a lady's maid had never been in the family budget, nor were they in her budget. "I don't understand, Mama. What has happened?" she asked, wondering if some unknown relative had died and left them a fortune.

"What has happened is that I have managed to put your small inheritance to grand use—and in a manner that will pay excellent returns, I am sure." Julianna's mouth opened in a silent cry of furious protest, but she was incapable of speech for the moment—which Lady Skeffington evidently mistook for shared ecstasy.

"Yes, it is all true! You are going to London for the Season, where we will contrive a way for you to mingle with all the right people! While we are there, I have every confidence you will captivate some eligible gentleman who will make you a splendid offer. Perhaps even the Earl of Langford, whose estates are said to be beyond compare. Or Nicholas DuVille, who is one of the richest men in England *and* France and is about to inherit a Scottish title from a relative of his mama. I have it from several unimpeachable sources that the Earl of Langford and the Earl of Glenmore — which is what DuVille will be called—are considered to be the two most desirable bachelors in Europe! Just imagine how envious the Ton will be when little Julianna Skeffington captures one of those men for a husband." Julianna could almost hear the sound of her dreams splintering and crashing at her feet. "I don't *want* a husband!" she cried. "I want to travel, and learn, and write, Mama. I do. I think I could write a novel

someday— Grandmama said I am truly talented with a pen. No, don't laugh, please. You must get the money back, you must!"

"My dear, foolish girl, I wouldn't even if I could, which I cannot. Marriage is the only future for a female. Once you see how Fashionable Society lives, you'll forget all that silliness your grandmother Skeffington stuffed into your head. Now," she continued blithely, "when we are in London, I will contrive to put you in the way of eligible gentlemen, you may depend on it. We are not common merchants, you know—your papa is a baronet, after all. Once the Ton realizes we have come to London for the Season, we will be included in all their splendid affairs. Gentlemen will see you and admire you, and we will soon have eligible suitors lined up at our door, you'll see." There was little point in refusing to go there, and no way to avoid it, so Juliana went.

In London, her mother insisted they browse daily in the same exclusive shops in which the Ton shopped, and each afternoon they strolled through the same London parks where the Ton was always to be seen. But nothing went as Lady Skeffington had planned. Contrary to all her hopes and expectations, the aristocracy did not welcome her with open arms upon discovering her husband was a baronet, not did they respond at all well to her eager efforts to engage them in conversations in Bond Street or accost them in Hyde Park. Instead of being given an invitation or invited to pay a morning call, the elegant matrons with whom she tried to converse gave her the cut-direct.

Though her mama seemed not to notice that she was being treated with icy disdain, Julianna felt every insult and rebuff enough for both of them, and every one of them savaged her pride and cut her to the heart. Even though she realized her mother brought much of the contempt on herself, the entire situation made her so miserable and self-conscious that she could scarcely look anyone in the eye from the moment they left their little house until they returned.

Despite all that, Julianna did not regard her trip to London as a total loss. Sheridan Bromleigh, the paid companion whom her mother had

employed for the Season, proved to be a lovely and lively young American with whom Julianna could talk and laugh and exchange confidences. For the first time in her eighteen years, Julianna had a friend close to her own age, one who shared her sense of humor and many of her interests as well. The Earl of Langford, whom Lady Skeffington had coveted for her daughter, threw a final rub into her plans by getting married at the end of the Season. In a quick wedding that shocked London and antagonized Lady Skeffington, the handsome earl married Miss Bromleigh.

When Julianna's mother heard the news, she went to bed with her hartshorn and stayed there for a full day. By the evening, however, she had come to see the tremendous social advantage of being very personally acquainted with a countess who had married into one of the most influential families in England.

With renewed confidence and vigor, she focused all her hopes on Nicholas DuVille.

Normally Julianna could not think about her disastrous encounter with him that spring without shuddering, but as she sat in the maze, staring at the glass in her hand, the whole thing suddenly seemed more amusing than humiliating.

Obviously, she decided, the horrid-tasting stuff she'd drank actually did make things seem a little brighter. And if three swallows could accomplish that, then it seemed logical that a bit more of the magical elixir could only be of more benefit. It was in the spirit of scientific experimentation, therefore, that she lifted the glass and took three more swallows. After what seemed like only a few moments, she felt even better!

"Much better," she informed the moon aloud, stifling a giggle as she thought about her brief but hilarious encounter with the legendary Nicholas DuVille. Her mama had spied him in Hyde Park just as his curricle was about to slowly pass within arm's reach of the path they were on. In her eager desperation to point him out and effect a meeting, Julianna's mama gave her a light shove that put her directly

into the path of his horse and curricle. Off-balance, Julianna grabbed at the horse's reins for balance, yanking the irate horse and its irate owner to a stop.

Shaken and frightened by the animal's nervous sidestepping, Julianna clung to its reins, trying to quiet it. Intending to either apologize or chastise the driver of the curricle for not trying to quiet his own horse, Julianna looked up and beheld Nicholas DuVille. Despite the frigid look in his narrowed, assessing eyes, Julianna felt as if her bones were melting and her legs were turning to water.

Dark-haired, broad-shouldered, with piercing metallic-blue eyes and finely chiseled lips, he had the sardonic look of a man who had sampled all the delights the world had to offer. With that fallen angel's face and knowing blue eyes, Nicholas DuVille was as wickedly attractive and forbidden as sin. Julianna felt an instantaneous, insane compulsion to do something that would impress him.

"If you wish a mount, mademoiselle," he said, in a voice that rang with curt impatience, "may I suggest you try a more conventional means of obtaining one."

Julianna was spared the immediate need to react or reply by her mother, who was so desperate to accomplish an introduction that she violated every known rule of etiquette and common sense. "This is such an unexpected pleasure and privilege, my lord," exclaimed Lady Skeffington, oblivious to the ominous narrowing of his eyes and the avidly curious glances being cast their way by the occupants of the other carriages who had drawn to a stop, their way blocked. "I have been longing to introduce you to my daughter—"

"Am I to assume," he interrupted, "that this has something to do with your daughter stepping in front of me and waylaying my horse?" Julianna decided that the man was rude and arrogant.

"That had nothing to do with it," she burst out, mortified by the undeniable accuracy of his assessment and by the belated

realization that she was still holding on to the rein. She dropped it like it was a snake, stepped back, and resorted to flippancy because she had no other way to salvage her pride. "I was practicing," she informed him primly. Her answer startled him enough to stay his hand as he started to flick the reins. "Practicing?" he repeated, studying her expression with a glimmer of amused interest. "Practicing for what?"

Julianna lifted her chin, raised her brows, and said in an offhand voice what she hoped would pass for droll wit rather than stupidity, "I'm practicing to become a highwayman, obviously. By way of an apprenticeship, I jump in front of innocent travelers in the park and waylay their horses."

Turning her back on him, she took her mother firmly by the arm and steered her away. Over her shoulder, Julianna added a dismissive and deliberately incorrect, "Good afternoon, Mr... er... Deveraux." Her mother's exclamation of indignant horror at these outrageous remarks muffled a sound from the man in the carriage that sounded almost like laughter.

Lady Skeffington was still furious with Julianna later that night.

"How could you be so impertinent!" she cried, wringing her hands.

"Nicholas DuVille has so much influence with Society that if he utters one derogatory word about you, no one of any consequence will associate with you. You'll be ruined! Ruined, do you hear me?" Despite Julianna's repeated apologies, albeit insincere, her mother was beyond consolation. She paced back and forth, her hartshorn in one hand and a handkerchief in the other.

"Had Nicholas DuVille paid you just a few minutes of attention in the park today, where others could see it, you'd have been an instant success! By tonight we would have had invitations to every important social function of the Season, and by the day after, eligible suitors would have been at our door. Instead, you had to be insolent to the one man in all London who could put an end to my hopes and

dreams with a single word." She dabbed at the tears trembling on her lashes. "This is all your grandmother's fault!

She taught you to be just like her. Oh, I should be *horsewhipped* for allowing you to spend so much time with that dreadful old harpy, but no one could oppose her will, least of all your father."

She stopped pacing and rounded on Julianna. "Well, I know more of the *real* world than your grandmother ever did, and I am about to tell you something she never did—a simple truth that is worth more than all her fantastical notions, and that truth is this—" And clenching her hands into fists at her sides, she said in a voice shaking with purpose, " *A man does not wish to associate with any female who knows more than he does!* If the Ton's gossip mill finds out how bookish you are, you'll be ruined! No gentleman of consequence will want you! You... will... be... ruined!" **Five** [«](#) [^](#) [»](#)

A **trill of feminine** laughter pulled Julianna's thoughts back to the masquerade, and she listened to the sounds of adults behaving like naughty children, wondering how many feminine reputations were being "totally ruined" out there tonight. Based on what Julianna had gathered from her mother's frequent lectures, it seemed there were countless ways to be ruined, but there were two different and distinct kinds of ruination. Mistakes made by the female alone, such as appearing too intelligent, too clever, too bookish, or too glib, could "ruin" her chances of making a splendid match. But any mistake she made that involved the honor of a gentleman resulted in " *total* ruin," because it eliminated her chances of making any kind of match at all.

It was very silly, Julianna decided gaily as she reflected upon the myriad ways of blundering into " *total* ruin."

A female could be " *totally* ruined" by allowing any gentleman to be alone with her in a room, or allowing him to show a partiality for her, or even allowing him a third dance with her.

As Julianna contemplated all this, she realized she would have been far, far better off if she had done only one of the countless things that

could "totally ruin" a female's chances of making any match. If she *had* been totally ruined, she realized with a sudden flash of new insight, she would not now be facing a repulsive marriage to Sir Francis Bellhaven!

The thought of him banished her momentary mirth and made the moon waver as her eyes filled with tears. She reached for her handkerchief, realized she didn't have one, and sniffled. Then she had another sip of her drink, trying unsuccessfully to buoy her plummeting spirits.

For several minutes after he had finished his cigar, Nicki remained where Valerie had left him, deliberating about turning to his right and returning to the garden or turning left and walking deeper into the maze until he came to a path that, he knew, led around to the side of the house and ultimately to his bedchamber.

He was tired, and his bedchamber had an enormous and very comfortable bed. If his mother hadn't specifically asked him to stop here on his way from London and to give her regards to Valerie's mother, he wouldn't have come. According to his father's note, his mother's health had taken a sudden and precarious turn for the worse, and Nicki did not want to do anything, no matter how minor, to disappoint or distress her. Turning, Nicki walked along the convoluted path that led out of the maze and into the garden, ready to fulfill his social obligation this night and his filial obligation on the morrow.

## Six

« ^ »

**Julianna was quite** convinced that total ruination would cause Sir Francis to withdraw his offer, though she had no idea how she would survive if her parents disowned her for ruining herself. Sniffing

again, she bent her head, closed her eyes tightly, and decided to resort to prayer. She asked her grandmother to help her find a way to ruin herself. Deciding that it might be wise to appeal to an even higher authority, Julianna took her problem directly to God. It occurred to her, however, that God might not approve of such a request, let alone consider granting it, unless He was fully apprised of her dire plight. She sniffled again, closed her eyes even tighter, and began explaining to God the reasons she wished to be ruined. She was just to the part about having to marry Sir Francis Bellhaven, and crying in heartbroken little gulps, when A Voice spoke to her out of the darkness—a deep, rich, male voice filled with quiet authority and tinged with sympathy: "May I be of assistance?"

Shock sent Julianna surging to her feet, her heart thundering, then leaping into her throat as her widened eyes riveted on a shadowy cloaked figure that materialized from the inky darkness and began moving forward. The apparition stopped just beyond reach of a pale moonbeam, his face in shadow, his features indistinguishable. He raised his arm slowly, and something white seemed to float and flutter from his fingertips even though there was no breeze.

Her senses reeling from shock and brandy, Julianna realized he was holding the white billowing thing out toward her. She stepped forward hesitantly and reached for his extended arm. The object that came away in her hand turned out to be an earthly, though still very soft and fine, handkerchief. "Thank you," she whispered reverently, giving him a teary smile as she dabbed at her eyes and nose.

Not certain what she was now expected to do with it, she held it out to him.

"You may keep it."

Julianna snatched it back, clutching it safely to her heart. "Thank you."

"Is there anything I can do before I leave you?"

"Don't have! Please! Yes, there is something I need, but I should like to explain." Julianna opened her mouth to finish explaining to God why she was praying to be ruined when two things struck her as a little odd. First, this celestial being who had evidently appeared in answer to her prayers seemed to have a slight accent— a French one. Second, now that her eyes had adjusted to the pool of darkness that concealed him, she noticed a small detail that struck her as more sinister than heavenly. Since she had been praying to be ruined, it seemed not only prudent but imperative to make certain the *wrong* sort of mystical being hadn't decided to pay her a visit in answer to that prayer.

Fighting against the dulling effects of the brandy, Julianna fixed him with a cautious stare. "Please do not think I am questioning your... your authenticity... or your taste in fashions," she began, carefully injecting as much respect into her voice as she possibly could, "but shouldn't you be wearing *white* rather than *black*?"

His eyes, visible through the slits of his half mask, narrowed at such an impertinent suggestion, and Julianna braced herself to be struck down by a bolt of lightning, but his tone was mild. "Black is customary for a man. Were I to appear here in white, I would draw too much attention to myself. People would begin trying to guess my identity. They would note my height first, then my other features, and begin trying to guess my identity. If they did, I would forfeit my anonymity and then my freedom to do the sort of things one expects to do on nights like tonight."

"Yes, I see," Julianna said politely, but she wasn't completely convinced.

"I *suppose* that's not as extraordinary as I thought." Nicki thought their entire meeting thus far had been a little "extraordinary." When he first saw her, she had been weeping. In a matter of moments, that expressive face of hers had already exhibited shock, embarrassment, awe, fear, suspicions, and now uncertainty... even apprehension. As he waited for her to screw up the courage to explain whatever it was she wanted of him, Nicki realized there was

nothing ordinary about her. Her pale blond hair seemed to glisten with silver in the moonlight when she moved her head, and her large eyes actually appeared to be a lavender blue. They dominated a delicately molded face with smooth milky skin, winged brows, and a lovely mouth. Hers was a subtle beauty, easily overlooked at first glance. It came from a purity of features and a candor in those large eyes, rather than from vibrant coloring or exotic looks. He couldn't assess her age, but she looked quite young, and there were certain things about her that did not quite fit.

She drew in a deep breath, pulling his thoughts back to the matter at hand, and he quirked a brow at her in silent inquiry.

"Would you mind," she said, very, very politely, "taking off your mask and letting me see your face?"

"Was that the favor you wanted to ask of me?" he asked, wondering if she were addled.

"No, but I cannot ask it until I see your face." When he showed no inclination to move, Julianna implored in a shaky, desperate voice, "It's *terribly* important!"

Nicki hesitated, and then sheer curiosity made him decide to comply. He pulled off the mask and even walked out of the shadows to give her a good look at his face, then he waited for a reaction.

He got one.

She clamped her hand over her mouth, her eyes as round as saucers. Nicki stepped forward, thinking she was going to swoon, but her sudden shriek of laughter checked him in midstride. That was followed by great gales of mirth as she sank onto the stone bench and covered her face with her hands, her entire body shaking with hilarity. Twice she peeked out at him from between her fingers, as if to ascertain that she had seen correctly, and both times the sight of his face made her laugh even harder. With a supreme effort, Julianna finally managed to compose herself. She lifted her face to

his, her eyes still sparkling with mirth as she stared in disbelief at the one face in all England that had made her heart pound. And now, as her shock subsided, that face was beginning to have the same effect on her that it had had on her last spring. Only this time there was a difference. This time there was a slight smile touching that chiseled mouth, and his eyes weren't cold and hard, they were merely... speculative. All in all, his expression was noncommittal but definitely interested. That was flattering and encouraging enough to raise her spirits, bolster her confidence, and make her certain that she had made the right decision a few minutes before. She had prayed to be totally ruined, and it was going to happen at the hands of the most sought-after bachelor in Europe, Nicholas DuVille himself! That made it so much better—it gave it a certain flair, a style. In return for sacrificing herself to total ruin to avoid Sir Francis, she was going to have sweet memories to treasure. "I'm not demented, though it must look it," she began, "and I do have a favor to ask of you." Nicki knew he ought to walk away, but he was as strangely captivated by her infectious laughter, her entrancing face, and her astonishing reactions as he was completely bored with the prospect of returning to the ball. "Exactly what is this favor you're hoping I'll grant you?"

"It's a little difficult to discuss," she said. He watched her reach for whatever it was she'd been drinking. She took a sip of it as if she needed it for courage, and then she raised those large candid eyes to his. "Actually it's *quite* difficult," she amended, wrinkling her pert nose.

"As you can see," Nicki responded, suppressing a smile and giving her a gallant little bow, "I am completely at your service."

"I hope you still feel that way, after you hear what I would ask of you," she murmured uneasily. "What may I do?"

"I would like you to ruin me."

## **Seven**

« ^ »

**Until that moment**, Nicki would have wagered a fortune that nothing a woman said could truly surprise him anymore, let alone reduce him to his current state of speechlessness. "I beg your pardon?" he finally managed. Julianna saw him struggle to hide his shock, and she suppressed another siege of unacceptable giggles. She wasn't certain whether her urge to laugh came from nervousness or the wondrous, evil-tasting potion that men imbibed to make them feel so much more optimistic. "I asked if you would be willing to ruin me."

Stalling for time, Nicki studied her from the corner of his eye while he reached into his pocket and took out the last of the two cheroots he'd brought with him. "What... specifically..." he queried cautiously as he bent his head and lit the cheroot, "do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I wish to be ruined," Julianna repeated, watching him cup his hands around the flame, trying to get a better look at his features. "I mean, I wish to be made undesirable to any and all men," she clarified. "Rendered unmarriageable. Left on the shelf."

Instead of reacting, he propped a booted foot on the stone bench beside her hip and eyed her in thoughtful silence, the thin cigar clamped between even white teeth.

"I—I really don't think I could possibly make it any clearer than that," she said anxiously.

"No, I don't think you could."

She leaned a little closer to his leg and tipped her head back, peering up at his unreadable face as he gazed off into the distance. "You do understand what I meant?"

"It would be difficult not to."

He did not sound very enthusiastic, so she blurted the first inducement that came to mind: "I would be willing to pay you!" This

time Nicki was able to suppress his shock through not his smile at her ability to cause the reaction. "That makes twice," he murmured aloud.

"And in one night." Realizing that she was waiting for a reply, he lowered his gaze to her upturned face, bit back a wayward grin, and said gravely, "That's a very tempting offer."

"I would cooperate completely," she promised, leaning forward and looking at him with earnest, hopeful eyes.

"The incentives are becoming more irresistible by the moment." Nicki let her wait for his decision while he gazed into the distance, analyzing the situation and the intriguing young woman seated on the bench beside his leg. He still wasn't certain how old she was, but he had known she was no gently bred debutante long before she'd asked him for a "favor." The clues had all been there from the first, beginning with the fact that she was alone in a dark, secluded area with a man to whom she'd never been properly introduced, and she'd made no effort to correct either situation.

Furthermore, the gown she was wearing was enticing in the extreme, seductively low cut to show off her swelling breasts and tightly fitted to emphasize her narrow waist. No respectable Society matron alive would have permitted her innocent daughter to appear in such a gown. It was a gown for a daring married woman—or a courtesan. She was not wearing a marriage ring, which left only the latter possibility. That conclusion was reinforced by the fact that it had become quite the thing, especially among the wealthy young bucks, to escort their lightskirts to masquerades as sort of a joke. Some of London's most beautiful and sought-after courtesans were in evidence at this masquerade, and Nicki assumed the angelic-looking one beside him had quarreled with whomever had brought her here. After crying her heart out, she was now looking for a replacement. He knew damned well she'd been "ruined" long before and often since, just as he knew she had absolutely no intention of paying him, but the latter approach was so marvelously creative that he was impressed. She was not only entrancingly lovely, she was unique.

And extremely entertaining. With her looks and imagination, her soft, cultured voice, she was not going to have to look very far or very long for a new protector. In fact, if she proved to be half as entertaining in his bed tonight as she'd been thus far, he'd be sorely tempted to volunteer for the role.

In an agony of suspense, Julianna stared at his firm jaw and unreadable expression as he gazed off into the distance, his hands thrust into his pockets, his cloak thrown back over his shoulders. His eyes were creased at the corners, and it seemed almost as if he was smiling a little bit, but that may have been caused only by the way he was holding the cheroot clamped between his white teeth.

Unable to endure the wait any longer, Julianna said shakily, "Have you decided yet?"

He shifted his gaze to her face, and Julianna felt the full impact of the lazy, devastating smile that swept across his face. "I would not come cheaply," Nicki joked.

"I haven't a great deal of money," she warned, and Nicki bit back a chuckle that erupted into a shout of laughter when she actually started digging into her little reticule, searching for money.

Extending his arm to her, he said, "Shall we find a place more conducive to... ah..."

"My ruin?" she provided helpfully, and he sensed a slight hesitation that was gone before it materialized. Standing up, she squared her shoulders, put up her chin, and, looking like a queen going bravely and determinedly, announced, "Let's be at it, then."

He led her deeper into the maze, guided by a long-ago memory of the time when Valerie and he had been lost inside it for hours because they'd missed the secret path. It occurred to him as they walked along at a leisurely pace that introductions were in order, but when he mentioned this, she told him that she already knew who he was. "And you are?" Nicki prompted when she showed no inclination

to volunteer him the information. Somewhere in Julianna's hazy mind, tangled up in the dreamy unreality of the night and the moon and the handsome, desirable man at her side, caution finally asserted itself. Trying to think of a false name to give him, she glanced down at her gown. " 'Marie,' " she provided after a momentary pause. "You may call me 'Marie,' "

"As in 'Antoinette'?" Nicki mocked, wondering why she was lying. In answer, she threw up her left arm in exuberation and called cheerfully, "Let them eat cake!" A split second later she stopped dead. "Where are we going?"

"To my bedchamber."

Julianna mentally recounted the possibilities for ruination. Three dances with the same man. Allowing a man to show partiality. And being alone in a room with a man. Room. Bedchamber. She nodded agreeably. "Very well, I suppose you know more about it than I."

*I doubt it*, Nicki thought dryly.

They strolled along in companionable silence, and Nicki liked that about her too. She did not feel a need to talk incessantly. When she finally broke the silence, even her timing was right, although her topic was another stunning first in his vast experience with females. She'd been looking down at the ground when she lifted her head and said very solemnly, "I often find myself wondering about worms. Do you?"

"Not as much," Nicki lied drolly, swallowing back a laugh, "as I used to do." He couldn't remember laughing this much in an entire week.

"Then consider this and see if you can think of an answer," she suggested in the grave tones of a puzzled scientist. "If God meant for them to crawl about on the ground as they do, why don't they have knees?" Nicki stopped dead, his shoulders shaking with helpless mirth as he turned fully toward her. "What did you just say?" A heavenly face lifted to his, eyes shining, breasts swelling invitingly

above her bodice, generous lips forming words: "I asked why worms don't have knees."

"That's what I *thought* you said." Grabbing her shoulders, he hauled her abruptly into his arms and surrendered to the uncontrollable impulse to smother his laughter against the soft lips that had caused it. He let her go as quickly as he'd grabbed her, uncertain whether her expression was one of shock or reproof. Deciding it was unnecessary and undesirable to discuss either one with someone who was going to share his bed in return for payment, he stepped back and turned away.

Despite that, he couldn't stop himself from glancing at her several times in the dark to assess her reaction, and he relaxed when he saw the bemused smile touching her lips.

He was not completely certain he'd made all the right turns until they rounded the last corner and he found the secret exit that led around to the side of the house. Knowing in advance that they were going to be in plain view of the revelers for a few paces—albeit at a reasonably safe distance— Nicki carefully stationed himself on her left, between the house and her.

"Why are we walking faster?" she asked.

"Because we happen to be in view of the gardens from here," he cautioned.

She peered around him to see for herself. "Let them eat cake too!" she announced cheerfully with another wave of her arm. Raising her voice, she called out, "All of you have my permission to eat cake!" Nicki felt his shoulders shake with silent, horrified, helpless laughter, but he said nothing to encourage another outburst.

## **Eight**

**In his bedchamber**, Julianna sat upon a small sofa upholstered in rich gold brocade, feeling as if she were in a dream, as she watched him slowly strip off his coat and loosen his snowy-white neckcloth. A thousand warning bells were clanging madly in her head, making her feel extremely dizzy. Or perhaps it was the memory of his mouth crushed to hers that made her head swim.

She lowered her gaze, because that seemed like the right thing to do, and then became preoccupied with what she saw.

Divested of his coat and neckcloth, Nicki loosened the top of his shirt and walked over to the polished table where a tray of glasses and decanters had been left. Pulling the stopper out of the brandy decanter, he glanced over his shoulder to ask if she wanted anything, but what he saw made him frown with concern and turn fully around. She was seated on the sofa, but bending as far forward at the waist as she could, looking at something on the floor.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She answered without looking up. "I don't have any toes."

"What do you mean?" Nicki demanded irritably as it began to occur to him that nearly everything she'd done and said in the maze that had seemed shocking or hilarious at the time, including her request to be ruined, could very likely be the result of intoxication or an unbalanced mind. His voice was intentionally sharp. "Can you stand up?" he snapped. Julianna stiffened at his tone and slowly straightened. Transfixed by the change in him, she stood up as commanded, scarcely able to believe the forbidding man standing there was the same one who had joked with her and... and kissed her.

She looked completely dazed, Nicki realized. Dazed and disoriented. With an anger that was heightened by disappointment and self-disgust for his own naïveté, he said scathingly, "Are you capable of uttering anything at all that could convince me you are capable of intelligent thought at this moment?"

Julianna flinched from that all-too-familiar voice. It had the same clipped, authoritative tones, the same contemptuous superiority that had humiliated and antagonized her in the park. Tonight her reaction was slowed by brandy and shock, but when she did react it was just as instinctive and just as effective, although more restrained. She wanted this to be a night to remember, to cherish. "I think I am," she said softly, lifting her chin, her voice trembling only slightly.

"Shall we begin with Greek philosophy?" Claspng her hands behind her back, she turned sideways, pretending to study the painting above the fireplace, as she continued: "Socrates had some interesting observations about knowledge and ethics. Plato was more profound..." Julianna paused, trying desperately to clear her head and remember what else she knew of philosophers, ancient or otherwise. "In modern times..." she tried again, "Voltaire is a particular favorite of mine. I enjoy his wit. But of all the modern..." Her voice trailed off as Julianna heard him coming up behind her, then she made herself go on: "Of all the modern philosophers, the one I am best acquainted with was a woman. Her name was Sarah." He stopped so near to her that she could actually feel him standing at her back. Shaking with uncertainty, Julianna said, "Shall I share Sarah's favorite theory with you?"

"By all means," he whispered contritely, his warm breath stirring the hair at her temple.

"Sarah's theory was that females were once considered superior to males, but that males, in their deceitful arrogance, found a way to—" Julianna's entire body tensed as his hands curved around her shoulders, drawing her back against his full length. "Males found a way to convince us, and themselves, that women are actually birdwits and—" His warm lips touched a sensitive place behind her ear, sending shivers racing down her entire body. "Go on," he urged, his voice like velvet, his mouth against her ear. Julianna tried, but her breath came out in a shuddering sigh. She was losing control again, letting the brandy soothe her and convince her this was right. It was either this or Sir Francis Bellhaven: sweet, forbidding torture with

memories to cherish... or life with a man who sickened her. Surely she was entitled to a few more moments, she decided. Nicki felt her heart racing beneath his hand as he slid it over her midriff, taking his time before he let himself touch the full, tantalizing breasts that were within his reach. He slid a kiss over her smooth temple and trailed another down the silken skin of her cheek. She smelted like fresh air and flowers, and in his arms she felt like...

Wood.

She was breathing as if she were running, her heart was thundering from...

Fright.

Nicki lifted his head and wordlessly turned her around. In disbelief, he stared down at the hectic color on her cheeks and eyes, eyes that had darkened to violet pools, eyes that watched him in uncertainty. The color in her cheeks deepened with embarrassment as he inspected every feature of that elegant face, looking for something, anything, to indicate that this wasn't new and terrifying for her. He wanted to discover one thing that indicated experience.

And all he could find was innocence.

This was her first time.

She had *not* done any of this before.

He wanted her despite that. No, he realized with disbelief, he wanted her three times more *because* of that. She was there for the taking, she had asked him to do this, had even volunteered to pay him to do this. And still he hesitated. Taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, he forced her to meet his gaze. In a voice that was devoid of anything except reassuring neutrality, Nicki asked, "Are you absolutely certain you want to be here... to do this?"

Julianna swallowed audibly and nodded slightly. "It's something I have to do—to get it over and done with."

"You're completely certain?"

She nodded, and Nicki did what he'd been longing to do all along. Except that as he bent his head, he had the disquieting thought that he wasn't merely despoiling a virgin, he was destroying an angel. He seized her mouth with violent tenderness, forcing her to respond and then pushing her harder until she was moaning in his arms and his hands were clamping her to him, then moving forward, sliding up to cup her trembling breasts.

"No!" She broke free with such suddenness that she caught Nicki off guard. "I can't! I can't! Not that!"

She shook her head wildly, and Nicki stared at her in frowning disbelief. One moment she'd been kissing him back, her arms twined sweetly behind his neck, her body molding instinctively to his. The next, she was running across the room, leaving him there, jerking the door open and leaving...

Straight into Valerie, and another woman who was raving about her daughter being abducted and demanding a search of the house for her. As if in a dream, a nightmare, he saw the woman who had accosted him in the park wrap her arms protectively around the girl who had been his a moment before.

Only the older woman was different now. She wasn't groveling about what a pleasure it was to meet him, she was looking at him with triumphant hostility all over her face, saying, "After I have put my daughter to bed and summoned my husband, we will discuss this privately!" **Nine** [«](#) [^](#) [»](#)

"**JULIANNA?**" Her mother's normal speaking voice sounded like a screech. Julianna's head hurt so terribly that even her teeth seemed to ache in their sockets. In all the world, the only thing that wasn't awful this morning was her mother. Her mother, who should have

been livid, who Julianna had thought would disown her for less than what she'd done last night, was the soul of gentle understanding.

No questions, no recriminations.

Curled up in a tight ball of misery against the door of the coach, Julianna watched the house where it had all happened sway and pitch and lunge from view. "I'm going to be sick," she whispered.

"No dear, that wouldn't be at all pleasant."

Julianna swallowed and swallowed again. "Are we almost home?"

"We aren't going home."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going right... here," her mother said, leaning to the side and searching for something with narrowed eyes that widened suddenly with delight.

Julianna made an effort to see where "here" was and saw only a pleasant little cottage with her papa's carriage in front of it, and another carriage with a crest painted on its side. And then she saw the chapel. And in the yard of that chapel, ignoring her father and watching their coach draw up, was Nicholas DuVille.

And the expression on his dark, saturnine face was a thousand times more glacial, more contemptuous, than any she had seen in the park.

"Why are we here?" Julianna cried, feeling faint from shock and nausea and headache.

"To attend your wedding to Nicholas DuVille."

"My what?! But why?"

"Why is he marrying you?" her mama said dryly as she opened the door.

"Because he has no choice. He is a gentleman, after all. He knew the rules, and he broke them. Our hostess and two servants saw you running out of his bedchamber. He ruined the reputation of an innocent, well-bred young lady. If he didn't marry you now, you would be ruined, but he could never again call himself a gentleman. He would lose face among his peers. His own code of honor requires this."

"I don't want this!" Julianna cried. "I'll make him understand!"

"I didn't want this!" Julianna was babbling a quarter of an hour later as she was shoved roughly into her new husband's coach. He had not spoken a word except in answer to his vows. He spoke now: "Shut up and get in!"

"Where are we going?" she cried.

"To your new home," he said with scathing sarcasm. " *Your* new home," he clarified.

## Ten

« ^ »

**Humming a Yuletide** melody as she sat before the dressing table in her bedchamber, Julianna tucked tiny sprigs of red holly berries into the dark green ribbon that bound her heavy blond hair into curls at the crown. Satisfied, she stood up and shook the wrinkles from her soft green wool gown, straightened the wide cuffs at her wrists, then she headed for the salon where she intended to work on her new manuscript in front of a cheery fire.

In the three months since her husband had unceremoniously deposited her in front of this picturesque little country house a few hours after her wedding, and then driven off, she had not seen or heard from Nicholas DuVille. Even so, every detail of that hideous day was burned into her mind with such vivid clarity that it could still make her stomach knot with shame. It had been an obscene parody of a real wedding, an eminently suitable ending for something that had begun at a masquerade. Far from condemning Julianna's breach of conduct the night before, her mother actually regarded it as a practical and ingenious method of snaring the Ton's most desirable bachelor. Instead of offering maternal advice about marriage and children before her daughter walked down a short aisle to become a wife, Julianna's mother was advising her on the sorts of *furs* Julianna ought to insist upon having.

Julianna's father, on the other hand, obviously had a clearer grasp of the real situation, which was that his daughter had disgraced herself, and her groom had participated in it. He had dealt with that by anesthetizing himself with at least a full bottle of Madeira before he walked her unsteadily, but cheerfully, down the aisle. To complete the gruesome picture, the bride was clearly suffering from the aftereffects of extreme inebriation, and the groom...

Julianna shuddered with the recollection of the loathing in his eyes when he was forced to turn to her and pledge his life to her. Even the image of the vicar who had performed the ceremony was branded into her brain. She could still see him standing there, his kindly face a mirror of shocked horror when, at the end of the ceremony, the groom responded to his suggestion that he kiss the bride by raking Julianna with a look of undiluted contempt, then turning on his heel and walking out.

In the coach, on the way here, Julianna had tried to talk to him, to explain, to apologize. After listening to her pleading in glacial silence, he had finally spoken to her. "If I hear just one more word from you, you will find yourself standing on the side of the road before your sentence is finished!" In the months since she had been dumped

here like a piece of unwanted baggage, Julianna had learned more about the agony of loneliness—not the kind that comes after losing someone to death, but the kind that comes from being rejected and despised and defiled. She had learned all that and more as the gossip about Nicki's flagrant affair with a beautiful opera dancer raged through London before the firestorm of gossip about his abrupt wedding had even gathered real force.

He was punishing her, Julianna knew. Publicly humiliating her in retaliation for what he believed—and would always believe—had been a trap set by Julianna and her mother. And the worst part of it was that when Julianna put herself in his place, and looked at things from his point his place, and looked at things from his point of view, she could understand exactly how he felt and why.

Until last week, his revenge had been completely devastating. She had wept an ocean of tears into her pillow, tormented herself with the recollection of the hatred in his eyes on their wedding day, and written him a dozen letters trying to explain. His only response had been a short, scathing message delivered to her by his secretary, which warned that if she made one more attempt to contact him, she would be evicted from the home she now occupied, and cut off without a shilling.

Julianna DuVille was expected to live out the rest of her days, in solitude, doing penance for a sin that had been almost as much his as hers. Nicholas DuVille had five other residences, all very grand and far more accessible to company. According to the gossip she read in the papers and what she gathered from the bits of information she pried out of Sheridan Westmoreland, he gave lavish parties at those houses for his friends, and intimate ones for two, Julianna was certain, in his bedchamber. Until last week, her days had dragged by in an agony of emptiness and self-loathing, with nothing to give her relief except what little she found by pouring out her heart in letters to her grandmother. But all that had changed now, and it was going to improve more every day.

Last week, she had received a letter from a London publisher who wished to buy her new novel. In his letter, Mr. Framingham had compared Julianna in glowing terms to Jane Austen, he had commented on her humor and remarkable subtlety in dealing with the arrogance of Society and the futility of trying to belong where one can never truly belong.

He had also enclosed a bank draft with the prediction of many more to come, once her first novel was published. A bank draft was independence, it was validation, it was release from the bondage her wedding to Nicholas DuVille had placed her in. It was... Everything!

She was already daydreaming of a place to live in London, something cheerful and tiny, in a respectable area... just the way she and her grandmother had always planned she would live when she received her inheritance. By the end of the coming year, she would have enough money to leave this silken prison to which she had been banished. Her dreams at night were not so comforting. In the defenselessness of sleep, Nicki was there, exactly as he had been in the maze. With a booted foot propped on the bench beside her, he gazed into the distance, a thin cheroot clamped between his teeth, smiling a little as he listened to her outrageous request that he ruin her. He teased her in those dreams about expecting to be paid. And then he kissed her, and she would wake up with her heart racing and the touch of his mouth lingering on hers. But in the morning, with sunlight streaming in the windows, the future was hers again and the past... She left the past in her bedchamber on the pillows. Now more than ever, her refuge was her writing.

Downstairs in the salon, Larkin, the butler, was already placing a breakfast tray containing a pot of chocolate and buttered toast on a table beside her desk. "Thank you, Larkin," she said with a smile as she slid into her chair.

It was late afternoon, and Julianna was completely engrossed in her manuscript when Larkin interrupted her, his voice taut. "My lady?" Julianna held up her pen in a gesture that asked him to wait until she finished what she needed to write down. "But—"

Julianna shook her head very firmly, telling him to wait. Nothing of urgency ever occurred here, and she knew it. No unexpected callers arrived for cozy chats in this remote countryside, no household matter arose that couldn't wait. The small estate ran like a well-oiled machine, according to its owner's demands, and the staff only consulted her out of courtesy. She was merely a houseguest, though she sometimes had the feeling the servants sympathized with her plight, particularly the butler. Satisfied, Julianna put her pen aside and turned around. "I'm sorry, Larkin," she said, noting that he looked ready to burst from the strain of waiting for her attention, "but if I don't write down the thought while have it, I often forget it. What did you wish to say?"

"His lordship has just arrived, my lady! He wishes to see you at once in his study." Shock and impossible hope had already sent Julianna to her feet before Larkin added, "And he has brought his valet." Unfamiliar with the travelling habits of the wealthy, Julianna looked at him in confusion. "That means," Larkin confided happily, "he will be staying overnight."

Standing at the window of the study, Nicki stared impatiently at the same view of the winter landscape that used to seem so pleasing from here, while he waited for the scheming little slut he had been forced to wed to answer his summons. The night of the masquerade was no longer fresh in his mind, but his wedding day was. It had begun with a breakfast tray delivered personally by Valerie, along with several pointed and sarcastic references to his having been the only "fish" in London who'd been stupid enough to take the bait provided by Julianna and land in her mother's net. Before he ejected her from his bedchamber, she had done a good job of adding to his doubts about Julianna's innocence in the whole thing, and *still* he had refused to believe that Julianna had intended to entrap him. He had clung to the comforting delusion that it had been an accident of timing and circumstances.

With a streak of naïveté and self-delusion he didn't know he possessed, he had actually managed to concentrate only on how adorable she'd been, and how perfectly she'd fit in his arms. He had even gone so far as to convince himself that she would suit him perfectly as a wife, and he had clung to that conviction while he waited for her at the chapel. If he hadn't been so infuriated with his nauseating future mother-in-law, he'd have chuckled at the way Julianna looked when she alighted from the coach. His little bride had been positively gray from the effects of the night before, but not so ill she couldn't chat about furs with her mother, not so ill that they couldn't stand in the back of the chapel and gloat about snaring themselves a rich husband. He had heard it all while he waited outside. She would try some sort of play while he was here, Nicki knew. She was not only clever, she was intelligent—intelligent enough to know she could never convince him of her innocence. Based on that, he rather expected a confession, a claim that she had been coerced by her mother. He turned away at the sound of the door opening, fully expecting to see her looking only slightly better than the last time he had seen her, and every bit as forlorn, perhaps more contrite. In that, he instantly realized, he was wrong.

"I understand you want to talk with me?" she said with remarkable poise. He nodded curtly toward the chair in front of his desk, a silent command to sit down.

The brief flare of hope that had ignited in Julianna a minute ago when she learned he was here had already died the instant he turned and looked at her in that insolent, appraising fashion. He hadn't softened, she realized with a sinking heart.

"I'll come directly to the point," he said without preamble as he sat down behind his desk. "The physicians tell us my mother's heart is weakening and that she is dying." His face and voice were carefully blank, Julianna noted, completely devoid of all emotion, so much so that she instantly concluded the feelings he did have were extremely painful. "She will not see another Christmas."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Julianna said softly. Instead of replying he stared at her as if he thought she were the most repugnant form of human life he'd ever beheld. Unable to resist the need to try to convince him she was at least capable of compassion, Julianna said, "I was closer to my grandmother than anyone in the world, and when she died, I was desolate. I still confide things to her and think of her. I —I even write her letters, though I know it's odd..."

He interrupted her as if she hadn't spoken, "My father also informed me that she is deeply troubled by the state of our so-called marriage. Because of all that, it is my father's wish and my decision that her last Christmas is going to be a happy one. And you are going to help insure that it is, Julianna."

Julianna swallowed and nodded. Driven by the same desperate eagerness she'd felt the day she encountered him in the park to say or do something to please him, she added softly, "I'll do whatever I can." Instead of being pleased or even satisfied with her, he looked completely revolted. "You won't need to exert yourself in the least. It will be very easy for you. All you need do is pretend you're at another masquerade. When my parents arrive tomorrow, you are going to 'masquerade' as my tender and devoted wife. I," he finished icily, "have the more difficult task. I have to pretend I can stomach being in the same house with you!" He stood up. "My valet and I will remain here until my parents leave in a sennight. Unless we are in their presence, I expect you to stay out of my sight."

He got up and walked out, his strides long and swift, as if he couldn't stand to stay in the same room with her another moment.

## Eleven

« ^ »

With the ease of long practice, Nicki stood at the mirror, tying a series of intricate knots in his neckcloth, bracing himself to go

downstairs. He had expected to dislike the time he spent here with Julianna, he had not expected it to be a week straight out of hell.

Thankfully, the ordeal was almost over; all he had to endure was the opening of Christmas presents tonight. Tomorrow his parents were leaving and he intended to be no more than a quarter of an hour behind them. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he had made his mother happy. There was no mistaking the fact that her eyes lit up whenever she saw evidence of affection between himself and Julianna, which had left him no choice except to make certain they gave her plenty of evidence. To give Julianna credit, she cooperated. She looked at him with soft eyes, smiled back at him, laughed at his jokes, and flirted openly with him. She took his arm when they went in to supper, and walked close to his side; she sat at the foot of the table, glowing with candlelight and wit. She dressed as if pleasing her husband were her first concern, and she could fill out a gown as well as any woman he'd ever known.

She graced his table as well as any properly trained socialite could have done, but more naturally, and with more wit. Christ, she was witty! The dining room rang with laughter when she was present. She was also a wonderful conversationalist, attentive and willing to contribute. She talked of her writing when asked, and even of her grandmother, who'd evidently been closer to her than her mother.

If he didn't know what a fraud she was, if he didn't despise her, Nicki would have been incredibly proud of her. There were times—too many times—that he forgot what she really was. Times when all he could remember was the enchantment of her smile, the kindness she showed his parents, and the way she made him laugh. Twice, he had actually walked past her and started to bend down and press a kiss on her temple because it seemed so natural and so right.

All that, of course, owed itself to the unnatural situation he was in right now, with his mother bringing up names for grandchildren that were never going to exist. The Ton's efficient gossip mill had provided her with most of the information that led up to his marriage to Julianna, but despite that, his mother had insisted on drawing her

own conclusions. She liked Julianna tremendously, and she made it abundantly clear. She'd actually brought little paintings of Nicki when he was young to show her. She knew she had little time left to spend with her new daughter-in-law and she was evidently determined to make the most of every moment, because she wanted Julianna there—and, of course, Nicki—with her whenever she was downstairs, which seemed to be nearly all the time.

Last night, Julianna had been sitting with her hip on the arm of his chair, her trim derriere practically on his arm. His mother was describing some childhood antic of Nicki's and the whole family was laughing. Julianna laughed so hard she slid sideways into his lap, which made her blush gorgeously. She got up quickly enough, but Nicki's traitorous body had been reacting to the temptation of her before that, and there was little chance she hadn't noticed his erection when she squirmed off his lap. He hated himself for his body's reaction to her. If he'd been able to keep his hands off her in the first place, he wouldn't be in this untenable situation. Finished with the neckcloth, Nicki turned as his valet held up his wine-colored velvet evening jacket. He shrugged into the sleeves, bracing himself for the last—and hopefully easiest—of the nightly ordeals as a "family."

It hit him then, that there would never be another family Christmas, not for him, and he stiffened his shoulders against the hurt of that knowledge. At least by putting on this act with Julianna, he had made his mother feel reassured. She completely believed that he was happily married, sleeping with his wife, and diligently attempting to get heirs.

By this time tomorrow, he would be on his way to his house in Devon.

"Nicki will be on his way somewhere else as soon as our coach is clear of the drive," Nicki's mother told his father, as they dressed to go downstairs for supper.

In answer he pressed a kiss atop her head as he fastened a diamond necklace around her throat. "You cannot do more than you have, my dear. Don't vex yourself, it isn't good for your heart."

"It isn't good for my heart to know that, after years of associations with an endless string of unsuitable females, Nicki has managed to marry a female who is perfect for him, and for me, I might add—and he won't share a bed with her!"

"Please," he teased, sounding scandalized, "do not tell me you've stooped to asking the servants."

"I don't have to ask," she said sadly. "I have eyes. If he were sleeping with Julianna, she would not be watching him with that look of helpless longing in her eyes. That young woman is in love with him."

"You cannot make Nicholas feel something for her."

"Oh, he feels something alright. When he forgets he hates her, he is thoroughly delighted with her, you can see that. She's beautiful and enchanting," she added as she slowly stood up, "and I would make you a wager that he found her to be all those things, and more, the night of that dreadful masquerade."

"Perhaps," he said noncommittally.

"You know he had to have done! Nicholas may have a long history of defying propriety in his personal life, but there has never been a breath of scandal that involves anyone else. He would never have taken Julianna to his bedchamber when he was a guest in someone's house unless he were thoroughly besotted with her."

Since he couldn't argue that logic, her husband smiled reassuringly.

"Perhaps everything will work out, then."

His wife's shoulders sagged. "I've thought of saying something to Julianna to encourage her efforts, but if she knew I was aware of her situation, she'd be mortified." She placed a hand upon his arm. "It would take a miracle to bring them together."

## Twelve



**Alone in her bedchamber**, Julianna stood at her dressing table, the box of letters she'd written to her grandmother in her shaking hands, the Christmas presents she'd received that night on the bed. Nicki intended to leave tomorrow, he'd told her that the day he arrived, and the butler had inadvertently confirmed it yesterday.

Nicki and his parents had been very generous to her, though Nicki's gifts were completely impersonal and only for appearances. He had given his parents their presents as if they came from Julianna as well, but it wasn't the same. And when the moment came for Nicki to open his gifts, there had been nothing there from Julianna—a fact which he'd explained away by saying she wanted to give it to him later. He'd even managed to imply with a smile that she wanted to be private with him when she gave it to him. But the truth was, Julianna had given no gifts to any of them, because she had nothing to give... nothing except the contents of the box she was holding. She had that to give to Nicki. In the last week, she'd heard him called "Nicki" so much that she'd even started to think of him in that way. She'd also done everything she could think of to make him notice her, to make him see her in a different light. She'd flirted outrageously, spent ages on her hair and deliberated for an hour over what she ought to wear. And there had been a few times, when she thought she caught him watching her... times when he looked at her in the same way he'd done when he took her to his bedchamber that long ago night... as if he wanted to kiss her. She was in love with him, she'd learned that during this wonderful, agonizing week with him. She'd learned other things, too, that made it seem essential to make

one more attempt to heal the breach between them. First and foremost, according to Nicki's mother, Nicki loved children and doted on his nieces. He wanted children, she said, while Nicki's mother was hoping specifically for a grandson to carry on the family name. As things stood now, all that was impossible. Because of Julianna. She had caused this nightmare, and if there was any way to repair the damage she would do it. The scandal of a divorce would taint the whole family, not merely Julianna. Besides, there had only been a handful granted in the last fifty years anyway, so they were married for life.

An *empty childless* life, unless she did something, and there was only one thing left that she hadn't already done. She had not shown him the letters. They were the only "evidence" she could offer Nicki that she hadn't planned their meeting at the masquerade, nor schemed to trap him into marriage. The problem was that she could not let him see the evidence without simultaneously letting him see all of herself... Everything she had been and wasn't and wanted to be. It was all in there, and once he read it, she would be more nakedly vulnerable than she had ever been in her life. It was still fairly early, and she could hear Nicki moving about. Uttering a fervent prayer that this would work, Juliana walked over to the adjoining door that connected both suites and knocked.

Nicki got up and opened the door, took one look at what she was wearing and nearly slammed it shut in self-defense. Clad in a cherry velvet dressing robe with a deep oval neck and her hair tumbling about her shoulders like molten gold, Julianna Skeffington DuVille was almost irresistible. "What is it?" he snapped, backing up.

"I—I have something to give you," she said, moving toward him in a halo of shimmering hair, alluring skin, and rich velvet. "Here, take it." Nicki glanced at her and then at it. "What is it?"

"Take it, please. Just take it."

"Why in hell should I?"

"Because it's—it's a present—a Christmas present from me to you."

"I don't want anything from you, Julianna."

"But you do want children!" she said, looking almost as stunned by that announcement as he felt.

"I don't need you in order to sire children," he said contemptuously. She paled at that, but persevered. "Any others wouldn't be legitimate."

"I can legitimize them later. Now get out of here!"

"Damn you," Julianna choked out, tossing the box that contained her heart and soul onto the table in front of the sofa. "I did not set out to trap you at the masquerade. When I asked you to ruin me, I thought you were someone else!"

A slow, sarcastic smile crossed his saturnine face. "Really," he drawled in a scathing voice, "who did you think I was."

"God!" Julianna burst out tearily, so miserable and so insane about him that she almost stamped her foot. "I thought you were God! The proof is in that box, in the letters I wrote to my grandmother. My mother had them sent to me here."

She whirled on her heel and fled. Ignoring the box, Nicki fixed himself a drink, carried it over to the sofa, and picked up the book he'd left lying there when he answered her knock. He opened it to the first page, then glanced at the box of letters. Out of sheer curiosity to see what ploy his clever and imaginative young wife had concocted this time, he decided to read one of the letters instead.

The one on top was dated last spring, and he presumed he was supposed to start there, though he'd never set eyes on Julianna Skeffington as long ago as that.

Dear Grandmother,

I met someone in the park today and made such a cake of myself, I can hardly bear to think of it. There's always so much gossip about gentlemen in London—about how handsome one of them is supposed to be, and it's always such a disappointment when you see them. And then I saw Nicholas DuVille... He was beautiful, Grandmama... so beautiful. Hard, too, and cold, at least on the surface, but I think he laughed at what I said when I walked away. If he did, then he can't be hard at all, merely cautious.

Two hours later a log fell from the grate and crashed in an explosion of orange sparks as Nicki laid the last letter aside, then he picked up the one that he had already read twice, and he read the same lines that had filled him with self-loathing.

I know how ashamed you are of me, Grandmother. I only meant to dance those three dances with him, so that Sir Francis would withdraw his offer... I knew I shouldn't let him kiss me, I knew it, but if you'd ever been kissed by Nicholas DuVille, you'd understand. If you'd ever seen his smile or heard him laugh, you'd understand. How I yearn to see his smile and hear his laughter again. I long to make things right somehow. I yearn and I yearn and I yearn. And then I cry...

With her hip perched on the window seat, Julianna stared into the frosty night, her arms wrapped around her midriff as if she could keep out the chill that spread deeper and deeper as each moment passed and he didn't appear. Lifting her finger to the cold pane, she drew a circle, and another inside that one. As she began the third one, an image moved slowly into the center of it—a man in shirtsleeves, his hands shoved into his trousers pockets, coming

toward her, and Julianna's heart began to pound in deep, painful beats. He stopped close behind her and Julianna waited, searching his face in the window because she was afraid of what she'd see—or not see—if she turned and saw it clearly.

"Julianna." His deep voice was rough with emotion. Julianna drew a shaking breath and slowly turned her head, watching a somber smile twist his lips as his gaze met hers and held it.

"When you were thinking I was God, and then the devil, would you like to know what I was thinking about you?"

Julianna swallowed over a knot of unbearable tension and nodded.

"I thought you were an angel."

Unable to move or breathe, she waited for him to indicate how he felt about her *now*.

Nicki told her. Holding her gaze, he said solemnly, "I yearn, too, Julianna."

Julianna stood up, took one step forward, and found herself crushed against him, his arms like iron bands around her. His mouth seized hers with gentle violence, his hands shifting over her back and sides in a possessive caress, pressing her ever tighter to his chest and hips and legs. Slowly, tantalizingly, he coaxed her lips to part, and when they did, he deepened the kiss. He kissed her until Julianna was breathless and leaning into him, fitting her body to his rigid length, her arms wrapped around his neck to hold him closer. When he finally broke the contact, he kissed her cheek and the corner of her eye and her temple, then he laid his jaw against her hair. "I yearn," he whispered tenderly. "I yearn." Against her cheek, his chest felt warm and hard. Julianna waited for him to kiss her again. Shy and uncertain, she set about to make it happen again by sliding her own hands along his spine, and when that only made him hold her closer, she took a more direct means.

Tipping her head back, she gazed into his heavy-lidded, smoldering eyes and slowly slid her hands up his chest in an open invitation, watching the banked fires in his eyes begin to burn.

Nicki accepted the invitation by sliding his fingers into the hair at her nape, holding her mouth within his reach as he lowered his head and whispered gruffly, "God, how I yearn..."

# Epilogue

[« ^](#)

The **silk-upholstered** walls of the grand salon at Nicholas DuVille's stately country house near London were lined with priceless paintings by the great masters and furnished with treasures that had graced palaces. It was occupied at the moment by its owner and his four closest friends—Whitney and Clayton Westmoreland and Stephen and Sheridan Westmoreland. Also present on this momentous occasion were the owner's parents—Eugenia and Henri DuVille. The seventh guest was the Dowager Duchess of Claymore who, in addition to being a particular friend of the senior DuVilles, had the honor of being the mother of both Clayton and Stephen. On this particular day, the guests themselves were seated in two distinct groups in the vast room. One group was comprised of the older parents, namely Eugenia, Henri, and the Dowager Duchess. The other group was comprised of Nicholas DuVille's four friends, who were also parents, but, of course, younger ones.

The seventh occupant of the room, Nicholas DuVille, was not seated with a group, because he was not a parent.

He was waiting to become one, momentarily.

His two male friends, who had endured and survived this nerve-racking wait were rather enjoying watching him suffer. They were enjoying it, because Nicholas DuVille was famous among the members of the elite aristocracy for his incomparable ability to remain supremely unruffled, and even amused, in situations that made equally sophisticated gentlemen sweat and swear.

Today, however, that legendary self-control was not in evidence. He was standing at the window, his right hand absently rubbing the tense muscles at the back of his neck. He was standing there

because he had already paced across the carpet often enough to make his own mother laughingly tell him that she was becoming exhausted just watching him do that. Since her heart had been so weak a year ago that she could not walk up a few stairs, and since no one understood how that same heart was now strong enough to allow her to do that and much more, her restless son ceased his pacing at once. But not his worrying.

His two friends eyed his taut back with amusement and sympathy—more of the first and less of the latter, actually—because Nicholas DuVille had once been vastly admired by their own wives for his supreme nonchalance. "As I recall," Stephen Westmoreland lied with a wink, "Clay had a meeting with some business associates while Whitney was in childbed. Afterward, I think we went over to White's for a few hands of high-stakes whist."

Clayton Westmoreland looked over his shoulder at the silent-father-to-be.

"Nick, would you like to run over to White's? We could be back by late tonight or early tomorrow."

"Don't be absurd," came the short reply.

"If I were you, I'd go," Stephen Westmoreland advised with a grin. "Once I spread the word that you paced like a caged lion and behaved like an ordinary lunatic, you won't be able to show your face in White's. The management will pull your membership. A pity, too, because you used to add a certain style to the place. Shall I use my influence and see if they'll let you sit in the window now and then, just for old times sake?"

"Stephen?"

"Yes, Nick?"

"Go to hell."

Clayton interceded, his tone deceptively solemn. "How about a chess game? It will help pass the time."

No reply.

"We could play for stakes that would keep your mind on the game. That Rembrandt over there against my son's most recent drawing of Whitney wearing a bucket on her head?"

Whitney and Sheridan, having failed to silence their husbands, got up in unison and walked toward the father-to-be. "Nicki," Whitney said, "it takes time."

"Not this long, it doesn't!" he said shortly. "Whitticomb said it would be over two hours ago."

"I know," Sheridan put in. "And if it's any consolation, Stephen was so upset when our son was born three months ago, that he called poor Dr. Whitticomb an 'incompetent antique' for not being able to do something to help me get it over with sooner."

That information caused Clayton to give his brother a look of amused censure. "Poor Whitticomb," he said. "I'm surprised at you, Stephen. He's an excellent physician, but you can't predict childbirth to the moment. He was with Whitney for nearly twelve hours."

"Really?" Stephen mocked. "And I suppose *you* thanked him very much for not rushing things along, and letting you wait downstairs hoping to God you still had a wife."

"I said something like that to him, yes," Clayton said, looking at the glass in his hand to hide his smile.

"You certainly did," Dr. Whitticomb agreed, startling everyone as he walked into the room, smiling and drying his hands on a white cloth. "But several hours before you said that, you threatened to throw me out on my— er—nether region and do the midwifing yourself."

He sent a reassuring smile at Nicki who was searching his face with narrowed eyes. "There are some very tired people upstairs who had a bit of a difficult time of it, but they would very much like to see you —" He stopped talking and grinned as the new father strode past him without a word and bounded up the stairs, then he turned toward the new grandparents who were waiting to discover whether the new arrival was boy or girl.

Somewhere far above and beyond the world where all this had taken place, Sarah Skeffington smiled down upon the proceedings, pleased with the way she had used the three small miracles each new arrival in her world was granted. There were limits and parameters on the use of these miracles, which were set by the true Maker of Miracles, but He had approved each one, including the restoration of Madame DuVille's health so that she could see her grandson.

Unaware of all that, Julianna sat propped upon her pillows, writing a letter to her grandmother.

My dearest Grandmother, Five days ago, our son was born and we have named him John. Nicki is so proud of him, and he is utterly besotted with John's twin sister.

We have named her Sarah, after you.

You are always in my thoughts and in my heart...

^