



How to Capture a Countess (The Duchess Diaries)

By Karen Hawkins

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At seventeen, Rose fell wildly in love with Lord Alton Sinclair, known as Lord Sin for his wicked ways. Stung by his indifference, the starry-eyed girl tried to win an illicit kiss, but then panicked and pushed the notorious rakehell into a fountain. Leaving Lord Sin floating among the lily pads to the mocking laughter of his peers, Rose escaped back to the obscurity of the Scottish countryside.

Six years later, Sin convinces his aunt, the Duchess of Roxburghe, to invite Rose to her annual house party, where he plans to get revenge by making Rose the laughingstock of polite society. To his astonishment, he finds she has become an alluring woman who threatens to turn the tables on his nefarious plans. Thus Sin and Rose begin an epic battle of the sexes that becomes more passionate at every turn. Eventually, one will have to surrender...but to vengeance? Or to love's deepest passion?

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Editorial Review

Review

"A delightful, sprightly romp is what Hawkins does best, and when she sets her witty tale in Scotland and adds a charming castle and an engaging cast of characters, [listeners] have the beginning of an appealing new series." ---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

Karen Hawkins is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of many wickedly funny historical romane novels set in Regency Scotland, including the wildly popular MacLean Curse series, the enchanting Hurst Amulet series, the funny and charming Duchess Diaries series, and now the romantic Oxenburg Princes series. Karen is also the author of two sassy contemporary romances set in the little town of Glory, North Carolina. Find out more at [Facebook.com/AuthorKarenHawkins](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorKarenHawkins) and KarenHawkins.com.

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How to Capture a Countess

One

Floors Castle

September 12, 1812

From the Diary of the Duchess of Roxburghe

For the last six years, my great-nephew, the Earl of Sinclair, has done naught but drive his grandmother to distraction with his antics. Oh, we thought him a wild one before The Incident, but we were wrong. Since then, he has shown us what “wild” truly means, and it seems that every day brings a new report of his lascivious lifestyle.

The fault, of course, is with my sister. At the tender age of seventeen, after his parents were killed in a carriage accident, Sin was left with titles and estates and the care of his younger brothers. Though several of us advised otherwise, my sister pushed to give the boy all of the weight of those responsibilities instead of appointing an executor until he was of a more appropriate age. My sister meant no harm, and thought that the boy would mature as he assumed the mantle of responsibility. He did so, of course, but at a very high cost.

Without parents to guide him, or a partner to share his burdens, and left solely responsible for the care of his younger brothers, he became arrogantly conceited with his own independence. Though he now possesses what all women desire in a husband—excellent birth, a handsome visage, a charming manner (when he wishes), a respected title, and a growing fortune—he torments my adored sister by refusing to fix his attentions upon a woman of genteel breeding and instead openly cavorts with Notorious Undesirables.

The time has come for me to take matters into my own hands; my poor sister now regrets her lack of trust in my earlier judgment, and has made a desperate plea for help.

And desperate times call for desperate measures . . .

The butler's sedate knock was met by a cacophony of barking. Over the yips and yaps, a feminine voice called for him to enter. MacDougal sighed regretfully for his polished shoes and well-ironed breeches, then opened the large oak doors to the sitting room.

A small herd of yapping pugs met him, a mixture of brown and silver fur, flat wet noses, and curly pig tails. The dogs jumped upon him, their little nails ruining his careful creases and marring his well-tended shoe leathers.

Even so, he couldn't resist the charms of the large brown eyes now fixed upon him. "There, there, ye wee bairns. Stop yer yappin'; 'tis naught but me. Did I no' feed ye bacon jus' this mornin'? 'Tis fine treatment ye're givin' me now."

Six curly tails wagged in unison. The Roxburghe pugs were as famous throughout Edinburgh and the surrounding countryside as their mistress, the notorious Duchess of Roxburghe, a woman well into her sixtieth year (though none were certain how far) and the icy-eyed mistress of Floors Castle for the past ten years.

The dogs sniffed MacDougal's breeches and shoes as he edged through the pack and then crossed the many rugs to the two women seated before the fireplace at the far end of the cavernous room. Unable to maul his legs while he walked, the pugs had to be content with trotting and tumbling after him, puffing and wheezing as they pretended to herd him along.

As he reached the small circle of settees, Lady Charlotte looked up from her knitting. After a quick motion for silence, she pointed to the duchess, who was reclining upon the settee opposite, a kerchief soaked in lavender water covering her eyes.

Ah, yes. Her grace had played whist last night and, as usually happened when the vicar came to visit, she'd enjoyed her evening libations a wee bit too much. It showed not only in the fact that the duchess was hiding her eyes from the sunlight, but also in the way her fashionable gown of blue muslin was crinkled and her red wig was slightly askew.

Lady Charlotte leaned forward to whisper, "Her grace isn't feeling well this morning."

"Aye, me lady," he whispered back with a kind smile. The youngest daughter of the late Earl of Argyll and a distant cousin of the duke's, Lady Charlotte Montrose was a short, rather mousy woman sadly given to wearing lace mobcaps in the French manner, a fashion that did not suit her plump face. MacDougal had been made aware of this fact only this morning by that secret fashionmonger Mrs. Cairness, the housekeeper, who—when not wearing the starched black gowns as befitted her station—often dressed better than the duchess herself.

"Perhaps you should return in an hour," Lady Charlotte whispered. "Once her grace is through with her nap."

MacDougal nodded. Lady Charlotte knew her grace better than most, as she'd made her home at Floors Castle for the last eight years. It was widely held that she'd come to stay with her cousin Roxburghe after an arranged marriage to some wild hobnob of society had fallen through. Whatever the reason, she'd never left and was now as much a part of Floors Castle as the duchess herself.

MacDougal bent closer to Lady Charlotte. "Perhaps 'twould be best if I left the post fer her grace to read when she awakens? There's a missive I think she moight wish to—"

“Oh, for the love of—” The duchess moaned as if her own words caused her pain. She pressed a hand to her covered eyes, an assortment of rings flashing with the movement. “Pray stop your infernal whispering. You sound like a pack of nuns planning a murder.”

MacDougal hid a smile. “I’m sorry, yer grace, but I thought ye might wish to see a certain missive tha’ just arrived.”

The duchess peeked out from under a corner of the lavender-water-soaked kerchief, revealing a large hooked nose and one brilliant blue eye. “He answered?”

“Aye, yer grace, much to the surprise of us all.” If there was one benefit to serving as part of the duchess’s household since one was a mere lad (well before she’d married Roxburghe and become a duchess), it was the privilege of occasionally speaking one’s mind. MacDougal was careful not to overuse the privilege, though. He was far too fond of both the duchess and his position to do so.

The duchess tossed off the cloth and sat up gingerly, pushing her wig back in place with a well-practiced shove.

MacDougal held out the silver salver, where a small note had been set aside from the stack of cards and letters. “From Lord Sinclair, yer grace.”

“Thank you.” She opened the note.

Lady Charlotte watched with a bright gaze, distracted only when a small silver pug attacked a skein of yarn in her basket. “Stop that, Meenie,” Lady Charlotte admonished. “Don’t touch my yar—”

“Demme!” The duchess crumpled the note into a ball.

Lady Charlotte looked up, disappointment on her round face. “He’s not coming.”

“No, blast it all.” The duchess tossed the note into the fire. “My great-nephew will attend neither my house party nor my Winter Ball. As a sop to his weak conscience—if one can call it that—he’s offered to visit me on his return from his sojourn, almost a month after the scheduled festivities.”

“How disappointing.”

“How rude! To offer to visit on his way back from some low amusement, I have no doubt. Balderdash!” She threw herself back onto the settee, her eyes ablaze. “I won’t receive him. That will teach him to refuse my invitations.”

Knowing a little something about the Earl of Sinclair, MacDougal rather doubted that.

Apparently Lady Charlotte felt the same, for she said in her soft voice, “Chances are, he will merely shrug and go on his way. I don’t mean to say anything ill about Lord Sinclair, but he’s not the sort of male one would call accommodating.”

“No, he’s not. He’s a fool is what he is, demme him.” The duchess tossed her kerchief back over her face and slumped down like a limp rag doll.

While it was very poor of Lord Sinclair not to accept his great-aunt's invitation, MacDougal felt that someone had to make the peace. He cleared his throat. "Yer grace, I'm sorry about the inconvenience of Lord Sinclair's answer, but perhaps he is busy. He must have a mountain of dooties takin' care o' his estates and such—"

"Ha!" her grace said, the puff of air sending the corner of her kerchief aflutter before she snatched it off and threw it to the floor, where four of her pugs pounced upon it and began a mad tussle. Ignoring their growls, the duchess said, "My great-nephew is very busy indeed—busy trying to sleep with every married woman in England. I daresay he'd attend my party if I invited some scantily clad opera singers, or a house full of painted harlo—"

"Margaret, my dear," Lady Charlotte said in a breathless tone, sending a quick glance at MacDougal, which he wisely pretended not to notice. "Perhaps our passions would be better served if, rather than lamenting Lord Sinclair's failings, vast though they are—"

"Like the bloody ocean," the duchess muttered.

"Like the vast ocean," Lady Charlotte agreed. "But perhaps rather than focusing on Sinclair's shortcomings, we would be better served by finding a way to get him to attend your ball, especially as you've invited every eligible woman of standing within miles."

"He's so stubborn." The duchess tapped her fingers on the arm of the settee, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I wish I could believe that Sin was merely too busy to attend my ball, but he's been in sole charge of his estates for over fifteen years now and he finds the daily administration no more taxing than selecting a waistcoat, especially now that his brothers are grown and married. Sadly, he values his freedom far too much."

"Too many cares as a youth, perhaps?"

"And so I warned my sister, when she decided to place the full weight of— But I'm not going to rehash old decisions; it will serve no purpose. The truth is that Sin's not coming to my ball because he's realized my purpose in bringing him here: to encourage him to find a suitable wife and settle down."

Lady Charlotte tsked. "It is a dreadful coil. Perhaps a little afternoon tea would help us think our way through this situation to a solution."

"Perhaps," the duchess said absently, reaching down to scoop up a very roly-poly pug and plop it into her lap, where it snuggled into a ball. "MacDougal, please bring a tea tray."

"Aye, yer grace. I shall place the rest of the post upon yer secretary." MacDougal crossed to the small rosewood desk and placed the letters in a neat stack on one corner. He paused to straighten them, taking his time in doing so.

The duchess leaned back, patting the pug with one hand while she absently tapped her long fingers on the arm of the settee. "Maybe I should hire some men to abduct him and have him shackled in the pantry until my ball?"

MacDougal wondered if there was anything strong enough in the pantry that the earl could not overturn. The man was several inches over six feet tall and was a fine physical specimen, made so by his many sporting

pursuits.

“Yes,” Lady Charlotte agreed blithely. “That would be so much easier than trying to reason with him, though I fear someone could get hurt.”

“He wouldn’t come quietly, would he?” The duchess’s voice was heavy with regret. “And Sinclair is the devil of a good boxer.”

“He’s good with his pistols, too. He’s never lost a duel.”

“Very true, demme it.” The duchess’s fingers never stopped tapping as the two subsided into silence.

Lady Charlotte, her knitting needles clicking softly, said, “A pity he’s not a woman. If he were, one could just invite him over for tea and have a nice cozy talk and resolve everything.”

“Well, he’s not a woman, so that thinking is of no use. The boy is as stubborn as his father, who was a fool.” Her grace scratched the ear of the fortunate pug that occupied her lap. It stretched under her ministrations before curling into a ball again for a snooze. “The late earl was a pompous ass and a rakehell, and he passed those unholy traits to his son.”

“But Lord Sin hasn’t always been such a ne’er-do-weel.”

Her grace’s expression darkened, a flicker of sadness on her expressive face. “No, he hasn’t been the same since The Incident, which—”

Lady Charlotte cleared her throat and flicked a glance at MacDougal, who hurried to knock the stack of letters off the secretary so that he had to bend down to collect them once again. Lady Charlotte lowered her voice, though MacDougal heard her plainly enough when she said, “Sinclair has changed.”

“Yes, six years ago . . .” The duchess’s voice trailed off, an intent expression coming into her eyes as she slowly sat up in her seat, her eyes fastened on some vision mortal eyes could not see.

MacDougal held his breath and leaned forward. He knew that look. Poor Lord Sinclair.

Lady Charlotte stopped knitting, her eyes widening. “You’ve thought of something!” Her voice was almost breathless.

“I might know a way to get Sinclair to attend my Winter Ball and the house party for the preceding three weeks.”

“To both?”

“Yes, and if we do this right, he’ll think it was all his own idea, too.” The duchess rubbed her hands together in apparent glee. “Charlotte, this might just do the trick!”

MacDougal wondered if there was Borgia blood somewhere in her grace’s family. He’d wager an entire month’s wages that there was.

“I’m all ears,” Lady Charlotte said, leaning forward.

The duchess smiled as she patted the pug sleeping in her lap. “Sin changed six years ago. Before that he was a known Corinthian, a sporting man. He had already made it clear to the family that he would not accept a tame marriage, but he was not a scoundrel.”

“Until The Incident.”

“Since then, he’s been rakehelling his way across England, as if bound and determined to prove the naysayers right.”

“People did talk.”

“And why wouldn’t they? He’d been lording it over everyone, the most eligible bachelor in all of England, too busy with his races and prizefights to exchange pleasantries or attend social events. When he did bother to come to someone’s ball, he barely danced, spoke only to a few people, and usually left long before anyone else.”

“Insufferable.”

“Yes. So when he was made to look a fool by a mere nobody, people were pleased. So they talked more than they might have had it been someone else. It changed Sin in some ways. I thought it was because of the gossip, but now I wonder . . . ”

The duchess looked at MacDougal, who quickly whipped out his kerchief and pretended he’d found some dust on the desk.

Her grace leaned toward Charlotte. “After The Incident, Sin moved heaven and earth trying to find that gel who embarrassed him. I suspect he wished for vengeance, but he never managed to find her. Her family had tucked her away somewhere and after a while, he stopped trying.” The duchess pursed her lips and then said in a thoughtful tone, “She’s the only woman who’s ever eluded Sin. And for a sporting man . . . ”

Lady Charlotte’s eyes widened with a dawning respect. “Margaret, you may be on to something with that.”

“If Sin thought she’d be at my house party, he’d reconsider coming. I’m sure of it. All we have to do is find out who she is and invite her here.” The duchess’s smile faded. “If she’s respectable.”

“She is,” Lady Charlotte said. “Quite respectable, in fact.”

The duchess sent an irritated glance at her companion. “Have you become a seer?”

“Of course not. But I—that is—you have been in correspondence with her for years. Since the year she was born, in fact.”

The duchess blinked. “I have?”

“Of course. You send her a present every Michaelmas, and a nice letter on her birthday.” Charlotte’s knitting needles ticked on. “Her name is Rose Balfour and she lives with her father at Caith Manor, outside Aberdeenshire.”

The duchess looked as astounded as MacDougal felt. “How do you know that?”

“Because you’re her godmother.”

MacDougal almost gasped, but managed to swallow it.

The duchess stared at Lady Charlotte. “Am I?”

Lady Charlotte nodded, her lace cap flapping over her ears. “Oh yes, though I suppose it’s not surprising that you don’t know it. You and Roxburghe were out of the country when The Incident occurred, and by the time you returned home, no one would speak of it in front of you.”

“But they spoke of it to you.”

“Frequently. At the time, I thought the name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. Months afterward, I was writing the Michaelmas letters and there she was on your godchild list: Miss Rose Balfour.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lady Charlotte blinked owlshly. “Because you said you didn’t want to hear her name—ever.”

MacDougal couldn’t smother his chuckle this time, which earned him a sharp glance from her grace. He quickly pretended to cough.

She turned back to Charlotte. “You should have told me anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” Lady Charlotte said meekly.

“Still, this is to our advantage.” The duchess tapped her fingers on her knee, her gaze narrowed. “So I’m Miss Rose Balfour’s godmother.”

“You’re the godmother of all three Balfour sisters.”

“All three? Lud, I’m the godmother to far too many people.”

MacDougal almost nodded. Every year, he assisted Lady Charlotte in sending out the numerous requisite packages and letters to her grace’s many godchildren, and every year it seemed that the number doubled or trebled.

“So I’ve said for ages,” Charlotte said with some asperity. “You’ve so many godchildren now that— Here, I’ll show you the list.” Lady Charlotte put her knitting aside and rose, moving between the dozing pugs to the secretary.

MacDougal began dusting a nearby side table. Fortunately, a small amount of dust puffed up as Lady Charlotte passed him, so she merely gave him a sharp look before she opened the secretary and pulled out a lengthy list that contained well over fifty names. She carried it to the duchess and pointed to a line halfway down the second page. “There.”

The duchess held the list at arm’s length, and looked down her nose at the slanted writing. “Ah. Rose, Lily, and Dahlia Balfour.” She lowered the list. “Good God, are they flowers or women?”

“Sir Balfour is a noted horticulturalist, so perhaps he is the one who gifted his daughters with such nicknames.”

“Nicknames? What are their real names, then?”

“I don’t recall, but they are quite overpowering.”

“Remind me again—how did I become their godmother?”

“That information is under their names on the list.”

The duchess held the letter back at arm’s length. “Their grandmother was—” She squinted. “Miss Moira MacDonald. Ah, Moira! I haven’t thought of her in years. We went to boarding school together and I always liked her.” The duchess handed the list back to Lady Charlotte and looked a little guilty. “I hope I’ve been a good godmother?”

“Oh yes. As I said, you’ve sent them a small gift every Michaelmas, as well as on every major birthday.”

“Charlotte, I’d be lost without you.”

Lady Charlotte smiled serenely and carried the list back to the secretary, where she tucked it back in his pocket before she returned to her seat and collected her knitting once again. “So you think to use Miss Balfour as bait to entrap Lord Sin into coming to your house party and Winter Ball?”

“Entrap? There’s no need to put it in such bald terms. I prefer to think of it as ‘assisting.’” The duchess tilted her head to one side as she leaned back. “Now, all I have to do is find a subtle way to let Sin know that this girl is my goddaughter.”

“And then what?”

“And then he will do the rest.”

Lady Charlotte didn’t look convinced. “How can you be certain?”

“Because I know enough about my great-nephew to know he cannot refuse a challenge. And this girl, whoever she is, has challenged him.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Her grace’s brows lowered. “He must. He is the earl. It is his responsibility to marry well and have an heir.”

MacDougal tried to keep his attention on his dusting, but it was difficult. Even though he understood the importance of a man of wealth and title marrying to carry on the family name, he almost felt sorry for Lord Sinclair.

“I do hope Lord Sinclair will be amenable.” Lady Charlotte’s tone said she thought he would be anything but.

“For the love of Zeus, Charlotte! What is all of this nay-saying?”

“I’m sorry,” Charlotte said. “I was just thinking that Lord Sinclair and Miss Balfour might hate each other and—”

“Lud, pray stop thinking, for it’s giving me a headache! I don’t care if Sin and Miss Balfour deal well with each other or not. All I want is to get my nephew to attend my ball. Once he’s here, hopefully one of the eligible chits I’ve invited will appeal to him and thus my sister’s problems will be solved.”

“Oh. I thought you meant to attempt a match between Miss Balfour and Lord Sinclair.”

“No, although if they ever chanced to meet under better circumstances, one never knows what might . . .” Her grace’s gaze unfocused and once again she seemed to be staring at something no one else could see.

“Margaret?” Lady Charlotte asked.

“Yes, dear. I was just thinking. Perhaps I will amend my guest list for the house party a bit.”

“But why? You said you’d invited the liveliest young men and women you could think of.”

“So I did.” The duchess leaned back in her chair. “But we must do what we can.” Her gaze landed on MacDougal. “MacDougal, forget the demmed tea. Bring a decanter of port.”

“But yer grace, ’tis only eleven in the morning and the doctor says ye should not—”

“I know what Doctor MacCreedy says, but I need port. Lady Charlotte and I have some very important letters to write and a new guest list to draw up, and we’ll need inspiration.”

“Yes, we will.” Lady Charlotte smoothed a knot from a strand of yarn. “A lot of inspiration.”

MacDougal bowed and returned to the door, the pugs trotting behind him. He had to gently shove several of the more determined mutts out of the way before he could close the door.

In the vestibule, he shook his head. “She’ll ne’er quit scheming until they put her in the ground. And mayhap no’ even then.”

“I beg yer pardon, sir?” asked one of the footmen who’d sprung to attention when MacDougal had appeared. “Was her grace in a mood this morning?”

“Aye, a scheming one. God help those as come into her path, fer she willna show them any mercy.” Shaking his head, he left to fetch the port.

• • •

The sixth Earl of Sinclair glanced in the mirror and gave his cravat a few deft touches. After a silent study, he nodded. “That will do.”

His valet, a small man named Dunn with silver hair and a dapper air, gave a sigh of relief. Dunn never allowed anyone but himself to touch his lordship’s clothing, preferring to press and mend it himself. He was especially vigilant with his lordship’s boot blacking, using a special mixture known only to him that included such mystical ingredients as champagne and beeswax. Belowstairs, he was known in respectful tones as “Mr.

Timothy Dunn, a true stickler for fashion.”

He placed upon the bed the two freshly starched cravats that he'd been holding at the ready and turned to regard the earl's efforts. “A brilliant knot, my lord. The gentleman with whom you'll be playing faro tonight will be blinded by your efforts.”

“I wilt beneath your approval,” Sin said drily.

“You've earned that approval, my lord,” Dunn said, not acknowledging Sin's sarcasm. “That's the most beautiful cravat knot you've accomplished yet. It's a pity no one of worth will see it.”

“What's wrong?” Sin asked, amused at his nattily dressed valet. “Is the company too low for you?”

Dunn sniffed.

Sin grinned. “There will be one or two people ‘of worth’ at Lord Dalton's.” Especially fair Lady Jameston. Her husband was in London dealing with the weighty question of the Regency, as were many other lords. Their absences had opened many opportunities.

“My lord, pardon me for saying so, but I find both Lord Dalton and his company rather low.”

Sin shrugged. “He's a bit common, but he welcomes any and all to his house. He's a generous host.”

“Generous hosts do not try and strip all of the coins from their guests' pockets at games of chance.”

Sin smiled in acknowledgment. He turned to the silver tray on the dresser and selected a cravat pin. As he did so, two letters that had been placed to one side fell to the floor.

Dunn instantly retrieved them. “I'm sorry, my lord, but I almost forgot to tell you; these came this afternoon while you were hunting. One is from Lady Ross, and the other from your great-aunt, the Duchess of Roxburghe.”

“Thank you.” Sin turned his attention to the placement of his cravat pin. “Put them on the dresser.”

“My lord, aren't you going to read them?”

“Why? I already know what they say. Lady Ross wishes me to attend her in Edinburgh, as Lord Ross has been called out of the country on a diplomatic mission.”

“Ah. I take it that we've tired of Lady Ross.”

Sin shrugged. He and Sarah had enjoyed a mutually beneficial arrangement for the past two years, but lately she, and everything else about his life, seemed boring.

It was petty to be bored when one had so much, but he somehow couldn't dislodge the feeling. Even being away from the bustle of Edinburgh for the last two weeks to enjoy some hunting and to view a prizefight had left him feeling listless. Sin raked a hand through his hair, ignoring the valet's look of disapproval. Damn it, he had no right to feel anything other than pleased with life; he had so much—excellent brothers with whom he was close, a grandmother who, for all of her faults, had never ceased to offer her love and support, an

estate that was more profitable every year, a time-honored title, manors filled with treasures of every conceivable kind, an assortment of friends and acquaintances, so many in fact that he was rarely alone—he had everything he could possibly want, and yet . . . and yet something was missing.

He met his gaze in the mirror. Something has always been missing. But what?

As usual, no answer came. He scowled at himself, unhappy with the maudlin turn of his thoughts. “Yes, Dunn, we’re tired of Lady Ross. Very tired.”

Nodding, Dunn placed the letter from Lady Ross upon the dresser, but held on to the other missive. “And your great-aunt? What do you suppose she wishes? Or should I ask?”

“What do you think?”

Dunn sighed. “She wishes for you to attend her ball and house party, fall in love with one of the hundred of young ladies she’s invited for that purpose—as she does every year—and get married.”

“So now you know why I’m not going to bother reading her missive.”

The valet pursed his lips. “The duchess has been quite kind to you, my lord.”

Sin didn’t answer.

“It wouldn’t hurt to at least read it.” Dunn paused. “Shall I do so while you’re getting ready?”

Sin met the valet’s gaze in the mirror. “If I say no, you’re going to continue to torment me about it, aren’t you?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then read the damn thing and be done with it.”

“Very good, my lord.” Dunn opened the letter. “Your great-aunt writes, ‘Sinclair, I hope this missive finds you—’ ”

“Dunn, I said that you could read the missive, not that you could read it aloud to me.”

The valet’s thin lips folded in disapproval. “Shall I at least summarize what the letter says?”

“Providing it doesn’t mention marriage or her confounded Winter Ball and house party, yes, although I’d be surprised if Aunt Margaret talks of anything else.”

The valet sighed and returned his attention to the missive, his lips moving silently a few moments. Finally he said, “The duchess is sorry that you didn’t accept her invitations, but she’s resigned herself to your stubborn refusal to enjoy civilized company.”

“Good for her. Of all my relatives, Aunt Margaret is the easiest to stomach.”

“She’s refreshingly honest.”

“Annoyingly so.”

“She says that it’s quite fine with her that you won’t be coming to her events, but not to expect to use her lands for hunting before you return to Edinburgh as you’d requested, for she’s had a change in her schedule and is planning some amusements for various goddaughters.”

“Goddaughters? I didn’t know she had any.”

“She must have quite a few, for she names seven and says they are the first batch she will be inviting to Floors Castle.”

“Batch? Bloody hell.”

“Just so, my lord.” Dunn tilted the letter toward the window to catch more light. “The duchess says she’s forced to entertain her goddaughters because of you.”

“What?”

“Yes. She says that as it seems unlikely that you will ever marry and produce an issue for her to dandle upon her knee, she will have to rely upon the kindness of her godchildren to do what her own blood family will not.”

“Dandle upon her knee? Does she really say that?”

“Yes, my lord. Dandle.”

“Ridiculous. What about my brothers? They’re both recently wed, thanks to her meddling, and either could be in the family way any day now.”

“It appears she’s forgotten your brothers, my lord.”

“That’s because she’s too busy trying to leg-shackle me to some empty-headed chit.”

“The duchess can be determined.”

“This time she’s bound to face disappointment. Let her invite her hundreds of goddaughters; I can always hunt at my brother’s new estate outside Stirling. Stormont’s asked me to visit for months now.” Sin picked up his coat and prepared to put it on.

“My lord!” Dunn dropped the letter upon the bed. “Please, allow me. You’ll crease it if you shrug into it.” He came to help Sin into his well-fitted coat.

After the coat had settled on Sin’s shoulders, Dunn took up a bristle brush to capture any infinitesimal bits of lint. With nothing to do, Sin absently looked down, his gaze drifting over his great-aunt’s letter. His eyes locked upon a name that was scrawled in the middle of a sentence, a name he’d thought to never see or hear again—Rose Balfour.

Instantly, his jaw clenched. “Damn it!”

Dunn turned a surprised gaze Sin's way. "My lord? What's wrong?"

Sin unclenched his hands and picked up the letter.

Since you will not oblige the family with an heir, I must assuage my desire to dandle children upon my knee by cultivating my godchildren. It pains me to take this step, but you've left me with no choice and your annual hunting party will have to be postponed. During that week, I plan on inviting my seven favorite goddaughters: Lady Margaret Stewart of Edinburgh, Miss Juliet MacLean of Mull, Miss Rose Balfour of Caith Manor in Aberdeenshire . . .

He turned to Dunn. "Pack our bags."

The valet blinked. "Now?"

"Yes. We're leaving immediately."

"May I ask why?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"To Floors Castle."

"To visit the duchess? But you said you'd never attend her house party or ball."

"I've changed my mind. I will attend them both if she'll amend her invitation list." Sin looked at the letter now partially crumpled in his hand.

Dunn looked even more bewildered. "My lord, I don't understand."

"You don't need to understand. I'll go down now and make my apologies to Lord Dalton. I'll use Aunt Margaret's letter as an excuse to tell him a family issue has arisen, and we'll leave as soon as the phaeton is brought around."

"Very well, my lord. I can have your portmanteaus and trunk ready within thirty minutes."

"Good." Sin tucked his aunt's missive into his pocket and left, hurrying down the hallway. Blood thundered through his veins. Thanks to this new development, his earlier ennui was not only gone, but forgotten. Finally, after six years, I've found you. Rose Balfour, your day of reckoning is at hand.

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