

A LADY TO REMEMBER

One

August 1819, Paris

Marcus Fletcher's downfall looked like an angel and tempted him to be unforgivably wicked. He led her deeper into the gardens, out of sight of the other party guests who were catching a breath of fresh air on the veranda. His little English rose gasped softly when he pulled her behind a tree and into his embrace. The glow of a thousand candles, which their host and hostess were boasting lit the chandeliers in the ballroom tonight, paled in comparison to Lady Adele Sinclair's smile.

"My brother will come searching for me soon." Despite the warning, she twined her arms around Marcus's neck and pressed her body against his.

God, save me. He loved this woman who fit him so perfectly—her easy temperament, her intelligence, her playfulness. Not even his sire could find fault with his marriage to a duke's daughter, which shouldn't concern him in the least. Sampson Fletcher's approval had never been his to win, and Marcus no longer chased after it. For Adele's sake, however, he was pleased that her acceptance into his family would be uncomplicated.

He slowly backed her against the tree and removed his glove to cradle her soft cheek. A lock of hair fell forward to cover her eye. He brushed the mahogany strand behind her ear, allowing his finger to trace the delicate curve to her velvety earlobe.

"Marcus."

Her breezy voice caused his heart to pump harder. They were in little danger of being found since her brother was likely engaged in his own assignation with their hostess. Marcus had spotted Adele's brother Harry whispering with Madame le Shavell moments before the two vanished from the ballroom, abandoning Adele in a

houseful of foreigners.

“Let your brother find us together. In a few days, you will be mine.” And she would never suffer neglect as his wife.

She tipped her face up, her plump lips inviting him to kiss her. “I was yours the moment I saw you by the Seine.”

Marcus had always believed love-struck gents were weak willed and ripe for becoming hen-pecked husbands. Now he understood the desperate longing that drew a man to a woman. The brush of her lips against his sealed his fate. Adele was his moon, and he was the tide that did her bidding.

Her palm rested over his heart as she leaned into his kiss. Her sweet mouth was no longer tentative beneath his as it had been the first time he had kissed her in the small sitting room of her brother’s rented rooms. She responded with increasing boldness and passion, allowing his tongue to sweep into her mouth and moaning softly.

Her pliant body pressed tightly against his. The fresh scent of her soap. Her taste. Everything about her left him lightheaded and desiring more. He gripped her skirts, fighting against the urge to explore the gentle slopes of her body. Their wedding night would arrive soon, and he could love her at his leisure. For now, he must find contentment in nothing more than her kiss.

When she drew back, the lock of hair slipped down on her forehead again. Tiny strands churned as she exhaled. “Marcus, I do not know...”

The uncertainty in her voice plucked at his heart. He covered her hand where it lay against his chest. “We should return to the ball. I promised you a waltz, did I not?”

Her shoulders sank as she exhaled; she smiled. “Yes, I believe you did.”

He raised her hand to his lips to place a kiss on her gloved fingers. “I am a man of my word, darling. Shall we?”

After he pulled on his glove, he threaded her hand through the crook of his arm. She laid her head against his shoulder. “I love you,” she murmured.

He urged her to look at him with a gentle touch of his fingertips to her chin. “I love you, Adele. We will be very happy together, I promise.”

“I know.” Her brown eyes glittered in the moonlight.

Their simple exchange might seem trite to an eavesdropper, but few were privy to Adele’s upbringing. After her father married a much younger woman and started a new family, he had sent Adele away to live with strangers. She rarely spoke about that time in her life, but the hurt rippled through her too bright smiles and nonchalant manner when she did. She had lost her mother and been tossed away by her father. Marcus would make it his mission to ensure Adele felt wanted for the rest of her life.

They re-entered the house through a set of glass doors that led to a vacant sitting room and made their way back to the ballroom. The string quartet was between sets. Guests milled around the dance floor, chatting with one another as they waited for the quartet to return.

“It appears we have time to take refreshment,” he said. “Would you like a glass of lemonade?”

“Please.”

They were halfway to the refreshment room when Adele’s brother bolted into their path. His hair stood up on one side and his cheeks bore a ruddy stain. “There you are,” he said to Adele. “We must go.”

“But I promised a waltz to Mr. Fletcher.”

“This is no time to argue.”

He snatched Adele’s arm. She winced, twisting out of his hold. When her brother grabbed for her a second time, Marcus caught his wrist, gripping it firmly.

“Your sister is not an animal to be dragged wherever you like,” he said through gritted teeth.

Sinclair held Marcus’s gaze. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and his eyes gleamed feverishly. When he next spoke to his sister, however, he gentled his tone. “Forgive me, Adele. I meant no disrespect.”

She shook her head slightly. “There is nothing to forgive.”

Marcus released her brother, inhaling deeply to calm his temper. For the past year, the man had been hauling Adele all over the Continent as they travelled with his lover and lived extravagantly. When the lady had tired of him, she had

abandoned the siblings in Paris, but instead of returning home as any man of good sense would do, Sinclair had decided to remain abroad. This was no life for a young lady of genteel breeding, and Marcus saw no evidence Adele's brother was trying to rectify the situation.

A ruckus began outside the ballroom. Adele's brother threw a harried glance over his shoulder. "We need to go."

The high-pitched wail of a woman drowned out the conversation in the room, causing several guests to cease talking mid-sentence and look toward the doorway.

"What the devil is going on?" someone close by asked.

A man bellowed for someone to summon the *Sûreté* as the woman's keening grew louder.

"The *police*?" Adele turned wide eyes on her brother. "Harry, what have you done?"

Before he could answer, their host stormed into the ballroom brandishing a pistol. "Which one of you bastards is sleeping with my wife?"

Laughter erupted. To the guests, the jealous ranting of a cuckold was part of the evening's entertainment—nothing out of the ordinary for Monsieur le Shavell, but enjoyable nonetheless.

The marquis did not share in his guests' amusement. He raised the pistol overhead and fired into the ceiling. Screams echoed in the room as plaster rained down on the guests. The crowd surged toward the back of the house to escape through the glass doors, but they had been locked.

Bodies rammed into one another, jostling Marcus away from Adele. He spun around to find her and spotted her a couple feet away. She tripped, disappearing beneath the sea of bodies.

"Adele!" Marcus shoved men and women aside to reach her. Adele's brother was there a beat before him. Together, they hauled her from the floor.

"No one is leaving," Monsieur le Shavell shouted, "until the man who was in my wife's bed comes forward."

"You bloody fool," Marcus growled at Adele's brother then lifted her into his own arms, cradling her around her waist and beneath her knees. His heart slammed

against his ribs. He hugged her tightly. Her brother stumbled into them, then grabbed Marcus's jacket to help him regain his balance. When Marcus was sure he had his feet beneath him, he nodded his begrudging thanks. Despite the other man's poor judgment and inadequacy as a protector for Adele, his love for her seemed sincere.

No more shots were fired, and the crowd's panic began to ebb. The pushing stopped. Monsieur le Shavell's younger brother had pulled him aside during the commotion and seemed to be reasoning with him—or at least making the effort. Monsieur le Shavell continued to rant about his wife's infidelity for all to hear. When he relinquished the firearm to his brother, several men heckled him.

They were an interesting lot, these Frenchmen. Nevertheless, Marcus was ready to return to his homeland where gentlemen behaved like sane men, and no one, to his knowledge, had ever been shot in the middle of a ballroom.

Marcus cautiously lowered Adele to her feet but held her around the waist. Her cheeks lacked any hint of color and tremors raced through her still. He kissed her forehead, heedless of her brother's presence and unconcerned what these preposterous people thought.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." Her voice was surprisingly strong.

"Splendid." He clasped her hand in his. "Let's find a way out."

Elbowing through the other guests, he led them toward the corridor he and Adele had taken when they had re-entered the house. Two footmen standing side-by-side blocked the doorway.

"Monsieur le Shavell wishes everyone to stay," the taller one said.

"We politely decline." Marcus tried to pass between them, but they formed a wall with their bodies. He gave up without a fight since he had Adele to consider and began searching for another exit.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Monsieur le Shavell's brother raised his voice to be heard over the din. "May I have your attention? Everyone will be allowed to leave in a moment, but a matter of great importance requires your cooperation. A family heirloom is missing from Madame le Shavell's collection."

“Did you *steal* from her?” Adele hissed to her brother.

“Of course not. Why would I—”

Marcus stopped pushing through the crowd to narrow his eyes on her brother. He didn’t believe the scoundrel for a moment.

Sinclair held up his hands in surrender. “I’ve done nothing wrong, I swear.”

Monsieur le Shavell’s brother stepped onto the dais, allowing for a better inspection of his person. He was young and handsome, unlike the marquis, and he appeared to have expensive tastes, his clothing being of the best quality and his fingers boasting large gold rings. It would require sufficient funds to maintain the lifestyle the marquis’s brother seemed to enjoy. Perhaps Sinclair was telling the truth, and he was merely guilty of shagging the marquis’s wife and making himself into a convenient scapegoat.

“Fortunately,” Monsieur le Shavell’s brother said, “the police have arrived to help settle the matter. If the gentlemen will please come forward to be searched, you will be free to leave once your innocence has been determined.”

“What rubbish,” Marcus muttered and stepped forward to join the other men lining up to be searched in order to get out of the madhouse. Adele’s brother stayed at her side.

“Are you coming?” Marcus asked.

“We should stay with my sister until the crowd calms.” Her brother glanced over his shoulder toward the back doors. “Perhaps the servants have left their posts now, and we can avoid the hassle.”

Marcus frowned, his doubts about the other man’s innocence returning. “An escape through the back door could appear suspicious, could it not?” He was challenging Sinclair to confess to what he had done and ask for assistance, but the other man held his tongue.

Marcus sighed and joined the other men in line. If Adele’s brother was taken into custody, she would need someone to watch over her tonight until his release could be secured. He began formulating a plan while he waited for his turn to be searched.

Three men in uniform were working their way through the line. Each pocket

checked was empty, and the guests were granted permission to leave.

“Mr. Fletcher.” Adele’s panicked voice carried across the room as one of the policemen approached him. Her brother held her as she struggled to break free. “Mr. Fletcher, I must speak with you.”

What the devil was Sinclair doing to her? Marcus had already warned the scoundrel about manhandling his fiancée.

“Lift your arms,” the policeman ordered.

“Pardon me for one moment.” He walked toward Adele.

The man yelled for him to stop. Before Marcus could register the command, he was tackled to the marble floor. His breath rushed from his lungs and a burning pain invaded his gut. He was still gasping when he was jerked to his feet with his arms trapped behind him while another policeman tugged at his clothing.

The rapidly spoken French ceased to make sense as he tried to regain his bearings. Something was swinging in front of his face. It glinted in the candlelight—a gold necklace with a small diamond pendant.

“The thief is here.”

Marcus understood the accusation well enough. “I am no thief,” he said but no one seemed to hear him.

The policeman called for Monsieur le Shavell.

“I am not your thief,” Marcus repeated. “I have never seen that necklace.”

One of the policemen must have slipped it into his pocket during the search.

The marquis marched toward him, his face scrunched up and red. “You thought you had escaped, no? You thought you could take what is *mine*?”

The necklace was a trinket. This search had nothing to do with a missing family heirloom. Marcus was certain from the tales he’d heard about the man’s jealous rages and the fury burning in his eyes. Monsieur le Shavell wanted his pound of flesh for bedding his wife.

“I did not sleep with Madame le Shavell.” Marcus spoke quietly. He was cognizant that having an audience made it less likely the marquis would admit this was a mistake. “I was with a lady, but it was not your wife.”

“Liar!” The marquis slapped him.

Adele cried out, but she was no longer trying to break free of her brother's hold.

The sting to his cheek paled in comparison to the realization that she had been trying to warn him. Her brother had taken the necklace and put it in his pocket when the threat of being caught had arisen. It hadn't been the *Sûreté* .

"Lady Adele," he appealed to her. She could clear his name and prove his innocence by admitting they had been together, but his honor as a gentleman wouldn't allow him to make the claim publicly.

She glanced at her brother then met Marcus's gaze again. Her chin quivered. The silence dragged on, and Marcus broke into a sweat.

The marquis sneered. "You dare to besmirch a lady's reputation with your lies? I should have you torn apart and fed to the dogs."

Monsieur le Shavell nodded to one of the policemen as he walked away. The man raised his club and slammed it against Marcus's head. His world as he knew it ceased to exist. Everything turned black.

End of Chapter

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