

# SECRETS TO A GENTLEMAN'S HEART

## *One*

*From the diary of Isabelle Darlington*

*November 1797*

It is with great joy my dear Matthew and I have welcomed our first child. She is the most beautiful creature I have ever beheld. Matthew says it is impossible to determine a child's redeeming qualities when she is only days old, but it should be obvious to anyone with eyes that our daughter is meant to lead, not follow. Therefore, with my loving husband's blessing, I have bestowed upon her the name Regina, in honor of the Queen of Angels.



*April 1820*

In Regina Darlington's third and final Season on the marriage mart, she'd discovered a most unfortunate fact. When Uncle Charles was away, the rakehells came out to play.

Her guardian often traveled in his quest for antiquities, leaving Regina and her two younger sisters under their elderly great-aunt's care, but Uncle Charles hadn't met them in London as planned, and he hadn't missed a Season since before Regina's debut.

Despite Aunt Beatrice's reassurances that her nephew had likely forgotten to consult the calendar to insure his timely arrival, Regina was worried. Or she would be if the scoundrels sniffing around her skirts would allow her a moment of quiet to work herself into a proper dither. They were sorely trying her patience, none more so than the deplorable rake leering at her from Uncle Charles's favorite wingback chair.

Lord Geoffrey sprawled on the furniture with the insolence born of a duke's second son, stroking the ivory damask upholstery with his long tapered fingers. His eyes narrowed at the corners and glinted with amusement when she sat up taller on the settee beside her aunt and squared her shoulders.

Only the clicking of Aunt Beatrice's knitting needles disrupted the tense silence. The cur hadn't spoken beyond the obligatory exchanging of pleasantries upon his arrival, not that he needed to utter a word. Regina knew the reason he'd called, and he wasn't searching for a wife.

Last night during the waltz, he'd tried to shock her by whispering the vilest words into her ear. A lady with less fortitude might have required smelling salts. Regina simply had abandoned him mid-dance and given him the cut direct in the park this morning. Nevertheless, here he was, imposing his unwelcome company on her and her aunt.

Untroubled by Aunt Beatrice's presence beside her on the settee or Regina's glowers, Lord Geoffrey leisurely swept his gaze over Regina's body. He paused on her bust line and squeezed the arm of the chair a few times.

She cleared her throat in censorship, and a cunning grin spread across his face. He was proving to be wretchedly hard to discourage—at least by the usual means available to a lady. She would love catching him by surprise with one of the ancient warrior moves she'd learned from Uncle Charles. Perhaps then Lord Lewd would think twice about attempting to shock young ladies at the assemblies or fondling unsuspecting furniture.

"I detect a rare smile from you," he said, victory lighting his pale blue eyes. "I will accept it as evidence of your pleasure to see me."

"I would expect nothing less of you, my lord." Regina remained stiff-backed on the edge of the settee and schooled her expression. Her smile had not been intended for him, but for all the innocents she would save from his loathsome company if she were allowed to humble him with a well-placed kick to his person.

Just as he'd ignored her previous rejections, he glossed over the pointed reminder she found him insufferably arrogant. "I expect I could win more smiles on a stroll through the park."

"I expect you could *not*, my lord."

His blond brows arched in challenge. "It sounds as if we are on the verge of a wager."

Regina notched her chin, ignoring the whispers of her competitive nature to prove him wrong. She had no desire to engage with him in whatever game he seemed to be playing.

"What is your answer, dearest?" Lord Geoffrey leaned forward as if anticipating her acceptance of his proposition. "Will you allow my escort through the park?"

Aunt Beatrice looked up from her knitting as if just now hearing any part of the conversation. She blinked in Lord Geoffrey's direction, her gaze settling on the marble bust displayed on the pedestal to his left. "A breath of fresh air would do you good, young man," she said. "I've never seen such a pasty face in all my life. Allow me to retrieve my walking stick and bonnet, and we may be on our way."

Regina swallowed the half-laugh, half-groan rising at the back of her throat. Aunt Beatrice had her heart set on finding Regina a husband, and a duke's son, no matter how boorish he was, would be considered a good catch by many. She refused to accept Regina would be happiest following her example. Aunt Beatrice had never married, but she seemed perfectly content with her life. And so was Regina. She saw no reason to make a change, especially when her great-aunt and Uncle Charles would both need someone to care for them eventually.

"Regina?" Aunt Beatrice smiled fondly at her and reached to pat her knee, underestimating the distance. At the slight widening of her aunt's eyes, Regina captured her hand where it landed on the velvet pillow and pressed it reassuringly between her own palms.

"I am here, Auntie."

"Yes, here you are, my darling." She raised Regina's hands to place a kiss on her glove. "You should run along to engage in your exercises while Lord Geoffrey and I take a turn around the park."

"Oh?" Either Aunt Beatrice was up to no good, or she was losing her mind as well as her eyesight. "You and Lord Geoffrey alone?"

"Of course, dear. I hardly require an escort at my age." She pulled her hand free

and made a shooing motion. “Now, do run along. I am anxious to see how many smiles the young man can win from me.”

Lord Geoffrey sputtered. “I believe there has been a misunderstanding, Mrs. Allred.”

“Miss Allred. I never married, but I promised myself long ago if the right man came along...” Aunt Beatrice waggled her eyebrows in his direction—or perhaps she was flirting with the sculpture at Lord Geoffrey’s shoulder.

Lord Geoffrey shifted on the seat, tossing a wide-eyed look at Regina as if begging for assistance as she fought to control the laughter bubbling up inside her. When he found no help forthcoming, he surged to his feet. “Miss Allred, please forgive my sudden change of plans. I’ve only now recalled an appointment with my solicitor.”

As he dashed for the door, he collided with the housekeeper coming through the threshold. Mrs. Cox, red-faced and glistening with sweat, spared a brief scowl for Lord Geoffrey before appealing to Aunt Beatrice. “Ma’am, you must come quickly. Cupid is loose in the square, and Mr. Burgess has twisted his ankle giving chase.”

“Oh, dear. Not again.”

Regina popped up from the settee. “I will retrieve him.”

“No, he will think having you chase him around the mulberry bush is a grand amusement.” Aunt Beatrice wiggled to the edge of the settee and rose with an exasperated huff. “He will come to me if I call for him.”

Cupid, Aunt Beatrice’s incorrigible black toy poodle, had the run of the house. And the neighborhood. He was quick to come to Aunt Beatrice because she always rewarded his naughtiness with a piece of fatty ham. Not that Regina and her sisters spoiled him any less. It was impossible to resist his adorable black eyes and heart melting whimpers.

Aunt Beatrice bustled from the drawing room with Mrs. Cox leading the way. Regina hurried to the open window behind the settee to see if her help was really needed and discovered their butler seated on the grass, inspecting his ankle. Cupid zipped from under the bush, bit Burgess’s pants leg, and shook it. Burgess yelped and flailed his arm side to side, trying to catch the fur ball, but Cupid ran in a fast

circle out of his reach.

Burgess bared his teeth. "You blasted hound of hell!"

Cupid followed suit, baring his own teeth before launching into a high-pitched bark.

Regina sighed over the antics outside. With the racket the butler and dog were making, every neighbor on the street soon would be peeping through the curtains. "Just another day at Wedmore House," she muttered.

"It's a damned madhouse, darling."

Regina startled at the sound of Lord Geoffrey's honeyed voice at her ear. She spun toward him. His nearness caused a sick tumbling in her stomach. She took a step back. "My lord, I thought you were leaving."

"So did I, but *Cupid* saw fit for us to be alone." He leaned closer, a lascivious grin easing across his face. "*At last.*" His breath smelled strongly of spirits and made her nose wrinkle.

"I have no desire to be alone with you." She backed away to put more distance between them. "You should go."

"I haven't time for missishness, Miss Darlington, and I can assure you that I am twice the man Neil Lawrence is."

Regina blinked. His insinuation was lost on her. She had danced with Mr. Lawrence twice last Season on two separate occasions, and she failed to see the connection between the bashful young man and the rake prowling toward her. "You are making no sense, and I have asked you to leave."

"Did you believe Lawrence was capable of keeping a secret?" The feverish gleam in Lord Geoffrey's eyes caused an icy shudder to pass through her. Her muscles tensed in anticipation of a fight as she eased away a little more.

"I do not share any secrets with Mr. Lawrence. I barely know the man."

"Don't be coy, dearest. Word has spread about your kiss, and Lawrence assured the gents you approached the endeavor with great enthusiasm."

Anger flared inside her, searing her skin. "If Mr. Lawrence said we shared a kiss, he is a liar. You and your cohorts are fools to listen to him."

"I always sensed you possessed hidden passion waiting to be discovered."

She rolled her eyes, not caring that her behavior was rude. Lord Geoffrey had crossed the line of propriety the moment he walked into Wedmore House with the intention of seducing her. When he took another step in her direction, she held up a finger in warning.

“You have overstayed your welcome, my lord.” He halted his pursuit, as any well-bred gentleman should. “Allow me to show you to the door.”

Lord Geoffrey offered no argument. With a relieved sigh, she turned her back to lead him from the room.

“I decide when I go,” he growled and threw his arm around her neck.

Regina’s instincts leapt into action. Grasping his forearm before he could get a good hold, she ducked low and threw her shoulder forward, knocking him off balance. He tripped over her leg and landed on his side with an astonished grunt. His arm was trapped beneath him, and Regina twisted his other into an awkward position to discourage movement. Failing to realize the futility of struggling, he flopped like a fish to break free and wrenched his arm. A strangled cry ripped from his throat.

She tightened her grip around his wrist. “Be still before you hurt yourself.”

“Go to the devil!”

She frowned down at his red face. In some circles, she supposed he was considered handsome. His soft features were too boyish for her tastes, however, not to mention his morals were on par with an earthworm’s.

Once more, he tried to flip to his back and yelped in pain.

“I warned you to hold still, sir.”

He hurled epithets at her, cursing like a sailor.

“Language, my lord. A lady is present.”

“I see no lady,” he said with a snarl. “Do you know what I see?” A fount of nasty insults followed—each one more vulgar than the last. The tips of her ears began to burn.

“Regina, darling,” Aunt Beatrice called from the foyer.

“Quiet,” Regina said. When a litany of curses continued to pour from Lord Geoffrey, she placed her foot against his neck, effectively convincing him to fall

silent. "Behave and I will release you in a moment."

Aunt Beatrice entered the drawing room with Cupid cradled against her chest and bumped her shoulder into the doorjamb.

Regina hissed in sympathy. "Are you all right, Auntie?"

Her aunt flicked her hand dismissively and didn't acknowledge that she had misjudged the location of the doorway. "The good boy came to me just as I predicted."

Regina flashed a smile from her place behind the settee and held tightly to Lord Geoffrey. Wisely, he remained silent. "And Burgess?"

"He threatened to resign again, but I expect he will come around in a day or two." Aunt Beatrice frowned and looked around the drawing room. "What happened to Lord Geoffrey? Did he take his leave?"

The settee blocked Aunt Beatrice's view of him, although Regina's aunt might not see him even if he were laid out at her feet. "I am afraid so. I don't expect he will be returning either."

Aunt Beatrice's grin was positively wicked. "Excellent news. We have no use for his kind at Wedmore House. Was it a trick of my eyes, or was he the palest lecher you have ever seen?"

Regina glanced at Lord Geoffrey's crimson face. "I didn't notice."

Cupid's curly ears flattened on his head, and a guttural growl rumbled in his small chest. Clearly, he hadn't missed the strange man lying on the carpet. The little dog scrambled to break free of Aunt Beatrice's hold.

"No, no." Aunt Beatrice shook her finger in his face. "You have been a naughty boy today. Let's see if there is a piece of ham in the kitchen."

Cupid perked up at the mention of his favorite treat, and Aunt Beatrice carried him from the room without incident.

Regina looked down at Lord Geoffrey with no hint of mirth. "I am going to release you in a moment, but allow me to reassure you, it is no accident that you are in this position. If you attempt to accost me again, I'm afraid I will be unable to practice the same level of restraint."

She removed her foot from his neck, released his wrist, and moved to a safe

distance. Lord Geoffrey winced as he unwound his body and pushed to his feet. He glowered once more. "If anyone hears about this..."

No doubt, he meant to sound threatening to ensure she kept quiet about their encounter, but his bark lacked bite at this point.

"I will not utter a word." She smiled pleasantly. "As long as you keep your distance from my family and me."

"I want nothing to do with you or your family. Every one of you is insane. And *you*," he spat, jabbing a finger in her direction. "Keep your mouth shut about today, or I will ruin you all."

Lord Geoffrey's threat diminished the satisfaction associated with bringing him down a peg or two. His father, the Duke of Stanhurst, was an influential man. She might not care about making a marriage match for herself, but her youngest sister had dreamed of her wedding day since she was a girl.

Regina swallowed hard. "I promise to tell no one, my lord."

He hurled another insult at her and stomped from the drawing room. Regina's stomach twisted in knots. She hadn't meant to jeopardize Sophia's future, but she'd needed to defend herself.

"Ludwig!" Regina collapsed on the settee and sank into the plush cushions. Now that she knew the reason for the rakes dogging her heels, the Season had gone from merely a bother to a nightmare.

She'd done nothing wrong, and yet the thought of confiding in her sisters or Aunt Beatrice caused her cheeks to burn with shame.

Her fingers curled into fists. How dare Mr. Lawrence tell false tales about her? If she crossed paths with the blackguard any time soon, she would be sorely tempted to throttle him in full view of the *ton* at large. If someone was going to ruin her reputation, she preferred to do it herself.

Unfortunately, she wouldn't be the only one to suffer, which left her in a bit of a bind. Not only must she contend with Mr. Lawrence's lies and the rumors surrounding her, she had to figure out how to avoid Lord Geoffrey.

It was fortuitous she and her family were planning an evening at home. The quiet would allow her time to think of an acceptable excuse to bow out of Lady

Eldridge's annual ball tomorrow night. It remained to be seen if she was creative enough to fabricate an excuse to miss every other event of the Season.

*End of Chapter*

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