

"FUNNY, SEXY, AND TENDER." —MANDA COLLINS

*a
novel*

TO
MARRY
AND TO
MEDDLE

MARTHA WATERS

AUTHOR OF TO LOVE AND TO LOATHE

EXCLUSIVE

CONTENT

Elderwild, Wiltshire, September 1817

“What I would like to know,” Violet said, “is what we’re going to do about Emily.”

James paused in the act of buttoning his waistcoat, an expression of deepest foreboding upon his handsome face. “What do you mean?” he asked slowly. Warily.

“Emily!” Violet repeated impatiently, trying to pin her hair back into some semblance of order—really, mid-afternoon trysts with one’s husband were nice in theory, but then it was a matter of trying to make one’s hair look acceptable for polite company without the assistance of one’s maid, and ensuring that one’s dress wasn’t too terribly wrinkled. Being unhappily married had involved considerably less time spent fixing her appearance. “You know, my dearest friend? Blond of hair? Innocent of demeanor?”

“I’m familiar,” James said. “Is she in trouble?”

Violet sighed; really, why were men like this? “Of course she’s in trouble, James!” she said, resisting the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. “She’s unmarried, her parents are dreadful, she has the worst suitor known to mankind—”

“I thought you liked Belfry,” James said mildly. He reached for his jacket, pausing when he saw Violet gaping at him. “What?” he asked a bit defensively.

“I am not talking about Belfry,” she said. “I am *talking* about Cartham!”

“Oh.” James frowned as he shrugged his jacket on; he made the gesture look elegant, somehow, and Violet was momentarily distracted by the strength of his arms and the broadness of his shoulders—all qualities that she had had cause to greatly appreciate in the past hour—before giving herself a stern mental shake. She needed to focus. She had no time to be distracted by husbandly displays of masculine grace. “I rather thought Belfry might be of more immediate concern,” James continued. “Seeing as he is here, and Cartham is not, which means that *he* is the one who’s been stalking Emily around like she’s a sheep and he’s a sheepdog.”

Violet blinked. “Don’t sheepdogs protect the sheep, though?”

James waved a dismissive hand. “That’s not the point.”

“Well,” Violet said thoughtfully, “it actually is the point, since it makes your analogy mean something else entirely.”

“Violet.” James gave her a long-suffering look, which perversely had the effect of being rather thrilling to Violet.

“In any case,” she said, biting her lip to keep a reluctant smile from spreading across her face, “Belfry following Emily around is a *good* thing—this might be our chance! She’s free from her mother’s hovering, Cartham is in London, Belfry is here, we’re in a romantic pastoral

setting . . .” She trailed off dreamily.

James cast a wry glance at the priceless works of art hanging in gilt frames upon the walls of their room—one of literally dozens at Elderwild, Jeremy’s country estate. “Yes,” he agreed. “We’re truly rustivating here. Nothing but fresh air and simple country living.”

“Quiet, you,” Violet said good-naturedly.

“No, no,” James said, seeming to have taken to his subject. “It’s wonderful, all the fresh air . . . sleeping under the stars amongst the cows, even.”

“James—”

“It must be doing *wonders* for your lungs!” he said cheerfully. “Why, that persistent cough of yours seems to have all but vanish—”

He broke off at this juncture because Violet had seized the nearest weapon to hand—one of the pillows that had been scattered at the foot of the bed during the previous hour’s recreational activities—and hurled it at his head.

James ducked, then straightened, plucking a feather out of his hair. “If it wasn’t for the fact that Emily doesn’t seem like the sort to resort to violence, I’d be thinking I should warn Belfry right about now,” he said, advancing slowly on Violet. “Marriage is dangerous.”

Violet reached down and seized another pillow, clutching it to her chest like some sort of absurd, feather-stuffed shield.

“You are not to say anything to Belfry about this,” she warned him, her words not slowing his steady progress towards her. “We mustn’t scare him off.”

James halted with only a few inches between them, gazing down at her. His dark hair was still a bit ruffled from their earlier activities, and his green eyes were warm as they locked with hers. “Then why,” he asked, “did you ask me not three minutes ago what we’re going to do about Emily?”

“*Emily*,” Violet repeated in significant tones. “Not Belfry. I can say something to her, of course—I may have done so already, in fact—”

“Consider me shocked,” James murmured. He didn’t move quickly enough this time, and took the full impact of the pillow on the side of his head. He blinked at her through a cloud of feathers.

“But,” Violet continued innocently, as though the pillow had launched itself at her husband of its own accord and she were merely an innocent observer, “you are *not to say anything to Belfry*.”

James coughed out a feather. “Noted,” he said darkly. “What, then, do you plan to say to Emily?”

Violet, pleased that he was expressing an interest in her matchmaking scheme, failed to

notice his slow advance—or the fact that he was still clutching the pillow that had so recently been used as a weapon against him.

“You see, she’s mentioned that he’s been hinting about marriage,” she said earnestly, “but knowing Emily, I’m worried she’ll talk herself out of it if he waits too long to ask her, so perhaps if we just prod them in the right—”

She was unable to complete her sentence owing to the fact that, without warning, James thwacked her in the head with the pillow.

Tossing it aside, he leaned towards her through yet another cloud of feathers. “Has it ever occurred to you, Violet, that perhaps Emily might like you to leave it well enough alone?”

“No,” Violet said, wounded, but it was difficult to work up a proper note of indignation when James was suddenly looming over her, his eyes on hers, and she was reminded for the hundredth—thousandth—time in the past month of how terribly lovely it was to be able to kiss one’s husband whenever he was looking particularly handsome (albeit befeathered).

So, reaching up to pluck a feather out of his hair, she proceeded to do just that.

“But!” she added a minute or two later, when they came up for air, and Violet was beginning to wonder why she’d even bothered to set her clothes to rights if she was just going to get them in disarray once more. “We still must talk to her! Let’s find Diana and Jeremy—enlist the troops, if you will!”

“I will,” James agreed good-humoredly. “But not just now,” he added, lowering his head, and Violet very soon forgot about Emily, and Belfry, and all the feathers in her hair, and everything that was not the taste of James’s mouth and the warmth of his body and a feeling of faint appreciation for the fact that the rug before the fireplace was really quite remarkably soft indeed.

One could say what one liked about Jeremy, Diana thought, but one couldn’t deny that he was thorough.

The fact that she was capable of mustering this thought at all under her current circumstances was something of a miracle, considering her position: pressed against a wall, biting on her own hand to stifle her cries, her fiancé’s head and shoulders invisible beneath her voluminous skirts, and his mouth extremely occupied at present by matters other than speaking. He did something with his tongue at that moment that made her bang her head back against the wall, going boneless and limp for the third time in the past hour, and by the time she had returned to herself enough to open her eyes—somewhat dazedly, it must be confessed—and attempt to string words together in a sentence, Jeremy had emerged from

beneath her skirts and was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and grinning at her in that smug way that had so often in the past led her to contemplate inflicting violent harm upon him.

At the moment, however, her thoughts were somewhat less vindictive, and considerably more—

“Adoring,” Jeremy said after surveying her for a moment.

“What?” Diana asked, after a distressingly long pause while she attempted to remember the English language.

“That’s how I would describe the way you are looking at me,” he said cheerfully. “I’ve never seen you regard anything other than a particularly fetching hat like that before,” he added. “It’s downright touching.”

Diana mastered her facial muscles sufficiently to frown at him. “I do not look *adoring*,” she said. Jeremy arched an eyebrow. “*Appreciative*, perhaps,” she allowed.

“My mistake,” he said, leaning forward to place a kiss behind her ear in the spot that always made Diana squirm. “I must be so unfamiliar with the sight of you looking at me with anything other than irritation that I became confused.”

She scowled at him as he drew back. “If you expect me to return the favor”—she gestured down at her still-rumpled skirts, under which he had spent an impressively long time without coming up for air, and then at his breeches, which were showing quite clearly that he had not been entirely unaffected by the proceedings—“you might wish to stop speaking now.”

Jeremy reached out a hand to cup the back of her head, preventing her from putting more space between them. “I wasn’t expecting anything of the sort,” he said, and for once there was no smile evident in his voice or even in his eyes as he spoke. Instead, that blue gaze was intent on her face, scorching her with its heat. “That was for *you*, because you are glorious and I love you.”

It was so rare that he spoke to her this way—that he was not the cheerful, rakish, devil-may-care Jeremy that society had become accustomed to—that Diana always found herself caught off guard in these infrequent moments, ones in which he made no attempt to hide a single thing that he felt for her. She ceded the space between them, reaching up with her hand to tug his mouth down to hers.

The sound of a door closing quite nearby recalled them to their present circumstances: in the library, where Jeremy had lured Diana under the pretense of wanting to show her a book of art—the art in question had been *extremely* lurid—an hour earlier while the rest of their party was preparing for dinner. No sooner had they drawn apart than a clock chimed the hour, reminding Diana that she really did need to change her dress and somehow repair her

her hair, lest the rest of the party suspect—well, suspect what they likely already suspected, given the fact that, as her brother had had cause to note sourly the evening before, Jeremy was in the habit of gazing at her like a lion surveying its prey.

Before she could make any moves in that direction, however, the door to the library opened and Violet poked her head around it.

And . . . why did Violet have a *feather* behind her ear?

“Oh, good, you’re here,” Violet said brightly once she had spotted Diana and Jeremy, though her cheerful words were almost immediately followed by a suspicious scowl. “And why are you looking so ruffled, Diana? Hmm?”

“Please don’t answer that question,” Audley said, propelling his wife forward into the room with a firm hand at her back, nodding in greeting to Diana and Jeremy.

“Why have you got a feather sticking out of your hair, Violet?” Diana shot back, and Violet flushed, reaching up on the wrong side of her head entirely to pat ineffectually at her hair before Audley at last took pity on her and plucked it out of her curls.

“Were you not going to tell me that I’d missed one?” she asked her husband.

“I was going to,” Audley said. “Eventually.”

“I shudder to even contemplate the fate of the pillow that seems to have been abused,” Diana said. “So to spare me that horrifying thought, was there something you needed from us?”

And, indeed, this did not have the appearance of a casual library visit before the evening meal. Violet had a determined glint in her eye that Diana had learned, over the course of the past two months, to regard with some trepidation, lest she find herself involved in elaborate ruses regarding respiratory diseases.

“Funny you should ask, Diana,” Violet said, beaming at her; next to Diana, Jeremy heaved a heavy sigh and moved past her towards the sideboard where a few decanters of various spirits were kept. He touched her waist lightly as he passed her, and Diana felt the warmth of his hand—no more than the slightest of glancing touches—as though there was no fabric at all between his skin and hers.

Was it always going to be like this, she wondered? They had only become engaged the day before, so one might expect some degree of spark between them, she supposed—and yet, she could not imagine *not* feeling this way about him, so peculiarly attuned to his body, to his very presence.

It was almost enough to make her feel a bit apologetic for how much she’d teased Violet after she’d reconciled with Audley earlier that summer.

Almost. But not quite.

“I think we need to discuss Emily,” Violet said. Diana’s ears perked up.

“Has Belfry proposed?” she asked eagerly, all thoughts of Jeremy’s physical attributes instantly put out of her mind.

“Excuse me?” asked her just-forgotten fiancé from his spot at the sideboard, where he was pouring a drink; he waved the decanter in inquiry at Audley, who nodded, with the air of a man who had been tricked into boarding a sinking ship. “Since when are we expecting Julian Belfry to *propose*?”

Diana allowed herself an eye roll. *Men*.

“Since he’s been sniffing around Emily’s skirts for the past fortnight, you idiot,” she informed him with exaggerated patience. “How is it possible you haven’t noticed this?”

“I’ve been a *bit busy of late*, Diana,” he said defensively. “Wooing really takes it out of a man, you know.”

“Yes,” she said. “My heart breaks for you. Truly it is unfair, the societal expectations that govern men’s behavior.”

Jeremy, wisely sensing that he had perhaps wandered onto dangerous ground, beat a hasty retreat. “In any case, I didn’t think Belfry would actually be considering *marriage*, of all things. I see no evidence of any sort of grand passion between him and Emily, so I don’t see why Belfry should be eager to wed.”

“Don’t you?” Diana asked skeptically. “Because I do. He’s been giving every appearance of courting her ever since they arrived here—I know she says he’s trying to convince the *ton* that he’s turned over a new leaf, but I think there’s more to it than that. Have you seen the way the man looks at her?”

“He does seem quite taken with her,” Violet agreed. “And I’m certain that, given time, they could be quite happy together—”

“If they would just get on with it,” Diana finished. “She says he’s hinted at marriage before—I’ll bet he just needs a bit of encouragement.”

“From us?” Jeremy asked, seeming to brighten at the prospect of someone else being the recipient of well-intentioned romantic advice, after the rather tumultuous fortnight he had just endured.

“No,” Violet and Diana said in unison.

“From Emily, I think,” Violet said. “My concern is that if Belfry waits too long to propose, she’ll panic at the thought of defying her parents’ wishes and risking offending Cartham—Belfry needs to get on with it. But we can’t tell him that.” She explained all this in the tones one might use when addressing a rather simple-minded toddler, which was perhaps appropriate, given the frowns of incomprehension from Audley and Jeremy.

Diana decided to ignore their perplexed masculine audience entirely. “We just need to teach her how to encourage him,” she said thoughtfully. She could already practically see the wheels turning in Violet’s mind, and a series of possibilities raced across her own mind—

“Have you considered that perhaps Emily knows what she’s doing, and we should leave well enough alone?” Audley suggested.

“Violet, please tell Audley not to be absurd,” Diana said, distracted.

“James, don’t be absurd,” Violet said, beginning to pace.

“Another drink, Audley?” Jeremy asked, and he settled back into an armchair with the air of a man who did not expect to move again for the foreseeable future.

Which was wise, Diana thought—because she was beginning to have an inkling of an idea for how, exactly, he could be of use. Really, men *could* be quite convenient—if they were willing to simply listen as she told them exactly what to do.

Emily felt as though she had walked into a trap.

There was no specific reason for this feeling, and she was not a suspicious creature by nature—that was more Diana’s tendency than her own. And yet, as soon as she walked into the library at Elderswild and found Diana, Lord Willingham, Violet, and Lord James all oh-so-casually drinking cups of tea and beaming at her with demented glee, she was quite certain that something was afoot.

“Hello,” she said cautiously, reaching up to smooth her hair, a nervous habit that she had mostly shaken but which still tended to emerge at inconvenient times. “What’s this?”

When her abigail had appeared at her door with a note inviting her to before-dinner drinks in the library, she hadn’t thought too much of it, though no such notes had been forthcoming at other points during Lord Willingham’s house party—previously, everyone had just gathered in one of the drawing rooms a quarter-hour before the dinner hour for a bit of conversation before the evening meal. This, however, had requested her presence as soon as she was available; it was odd, but Emily didn’t dwell on it, instead dressing for the evening more quickly than she would otherwise have done and making her way downstairs.

Downstairs, to . . . whatever this was.

Emily loved her friends, truly she did, but in this moment, she did not trust them one bit.

“Sherry, Lady Emily?” Lord Willingham asked from his spot by the sideboard.

She frowned. Sherry, before dinner? Something was most definitely afoot. Thinking it wisest to go along with whatever was happening—to begin with, at least—she said, “Thank you,” and accepted a small glass from him.

“Come sit!” Violet said cheerfully, patting the empty spot beside her on a settee, and Emily crossed the room with measured steps to sit down next to her friend. Diana was sitting opposite them on another settee, and Lord James stood before the fire, his arm braced on the mantel.

Silence fell for moment as, somewhat disturbingly, her friends watched her take a small sip of sherry.

“Do you think it will rain tomorrow?” she asked blandly.

As expected, the prospect of making small talk about the weather was enough to force Diana’s hand. “Emily, darling, we have something we wish to discuss with you,” her friend said, clapping her hands together as if to call a meeting to order.

“Oh?” This was uttered very cautiously indeed, as Emily was nearly certain that she was not going to enjoy whatever topic was up for discussion.

“The thing is,” Diana said, with a glance at Violet, “we feel this situation with Belfry has gone on long enough.”

Emily took another sip of sherry, suppressing a sigh. By *this situation*, Diana meant the fact that Lord Julian Belfry had been paying her marked attentions for the duration of her stay at Elderwild. It was an unexpected turn of events from a man who was rather famously (or infamously) devoted to the lifestyle of a rake, and Emily was growing increasingly curious as to what his aim was.

This fact did not mean, however, that she was interested in any interference from her infuriating, albeit well-meaning friends.

“Diana, I appreciate your concern,” she said carefully, “but I assure you I have the situation well in hand.”

Next to her, Violet shook her head. “Emily, I know you’re sensible but Belfry is—well, he’s the sort of gentleman you’ve not had many dealings with before. That’s why we’re here to help.”

Alarm bells began ringing in Emily’s head. “How do you intend to help, precisely?”

“We’re going to instruct you on how to encourage a proposal from him,” Violet said brightly.

“I don’t think—”

“Nonsense!” Diana said cheerfully. “Jeremy, do come here,” she added, beckoning to her fiancé, who had a tumbler of brandy in hand. He set down his glass with the air of a man being called up to military service, flicked an invisible speck of dust from his cuffs, and made his way across the room to stand before Emily.

“Good afternoon, Lady Emily,” he said, affecting a strangely gruff tone. “Would you care to take a turn about the gardens?” He dropped a lascivious wink at her. “I’ve heard they

are most . . . *private*.”

Diana rolled her eyes heavenward. “You’re laying it on a bit thick, Jeremy, and for heaven’s sake, stop that absurd voice at once.”

Lord Willingham turned to his betrothed in irritation. “I’m sorry, did you wish to play Belfry, then?”

“No, no,” Diana said at once. “Carry on.”

Mollified, Lord Willingham turned back to Emily expectantly. She realized, after a moment, that he was awaiting her reply.

“Um,” she said. “Am I feverish? What is happening?”

“*Feverish*?” Lord Willingham asked with a disturbing eyebrow waggle. “I have been told I have that effect on ladies.”

“For the love of—”

“Hush, Diana, can’t you see he’s acting?” asked Violet, who sounded as though she was approximately two seconds away from hysterical laughter.

“Jeremy, for Christ’s sake, give Belfry some credit,” Lord James said good-humoredly. “I think he could manage better than that.”

“That’s fair,” Lord Willingham agreed, speaking in his normal voice for a moment. “Shall we start over again?” He turned back to Emily. “Lady Emily, would you care to take a turn about the gardens?” Another wink. “I’ve always had a great interest in flowers . . . deflowerings—”

“Jeremy, *enough!*” Diana exclaimed, throwing her hands into the air.

Emily decided it was time to bring this to a halt. “Would someone mind explaining to me what, precisely, is going on?” she asked. Because she was Emily, she made sure to ask this with utter politeness, with no trace of impatience in her voice.

“We’re *meant* to be helping you,” Diana said, irritation evident in her voice. “How else are you going to know how to *trick* Belfry into proposing to you?”

Emily flushed—whether with embarrassment or anger, she wasn’t certain, because she was feeling some degree of both emotions at the moment. “I don’t need to trick anyone into proposing to me,” she said. “And if you keep this up, I’m not going to tell you a single thing more about Lord Julian ever again!”

“Bravo,” Lord James said, raising his glass to her in salute.

Emily ignored this, rounding on Lord Willingham next. “And, Lord Willingham, I don’t mean to be rude, but have you ever heard Lord Julian *speak* before?”

“A valid question,” Diana said, with an icy look at her fiancé. “I think it’s best that I play the role of Belfry this time.” Before Emily could protest, Diana stood up and began

began sauntering towards her in a disturbingly seductive fashion.

“Lady Emily,” she said, allowing her voice to drop an octave—though, mercifully, nowhere near the tone Lord Willingham had attempted. She seized Emily’s hand and made rather a production out of bowing over it; given the view this offered of Diana’s rather impressive bosom, it was perhaps unsurprising that Lord Willingham seemed to revive in spirits considerably at this juncture. “Might I ask you for a . . . *private* moment?”

Emily sighed, and was just beginning to wonder if it would just be easier to go along with this after all, when there was a light tap at the library door. Startled, five heads turned in unison—

Only to see the door open, and the unfairly handsome face of Lord Julian Belfry peer through the crack.

“Hello,” he said mildly, opening the door wider once he’d registered who the room’s occupants were.

“Belfry, come in,” Lord James said, waving a hand in invitation. Violet, helpfully, chose this moment to dissolve into giggles.

“I came to see if I could escort Lady Emily to the drawing room before dinner—her maid said she was down here,” he began, then paused, blinking at the sight of Diana, who was still clutching Emily’s hand. “Have I missed something?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

And Emily—who had, in her entire acquaintance with Lord Julian, never been quite so happy to see him as she was in that moment—seized this opportunity with both hands. “Thank you, Lord Julian, I would appreciate your escort,” she said, rising from her seat and tugging her hand from Diana’s grasp. “Diana was in the midst of proposing to me, you see, and I hadn’t yet worked out how to let her down gently.”

And it was with some satisfaction that she took the arm of Lord Julian—who seemed impressively unfazed by this announcement—and sailed from the room on the sound of her friends’ laughter.

“I do hope it’s merely marriage to Lady Templeton you’re opposed to,” he said in an undertone as he led her the short distance down the hall towards the designated drawing room. “And not the institution in general.”

There was a laughing note in his voice as he said this, but before Emily could reply, he lifted her hand to his mouth to press a brief, entirely improper kiss to it, and then opened the door to the drawing room where West, Sophie, and the Dowager Marchioness of Willingham were already awaiting them.

And, even through her glove, Emily felt the warmth of that kiss for the rest of the evening.