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Kiss Me  
Again

**Margaret Moore**



MARGARET  
MOORE

Kiss Me  
Again

*Always, Bill*



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# Chapter 1



*London, the third of May, 1819*

*Dear Aunt Euphenia,*

*I'm so sorry you weren't well enough to attend the baptism yesterday, and I hope you're feeling better today. My sweet boy acquitted himself in a manner I don't expect will surprise you, given that I'm his mother. He cried loudly throughout. I shall give you a detailed description later in my letter, because first I must tell you that however distressing D'Arcy's crying was at the time, it was nothing compared to what happened afterward. . . .*

*Lady Diana Westover Terrington*

**H**is green eyes twinkling, the Honorable Brixton Smythe-Medway spread his arms across the back of a cabriole sofa in the library of Viscount Adderley's town house. A merry smile on his pleasant face, he surveyed the decidedly masculine room furnished with the aforementioned sofa and comfortable oval-backed chairs, shelves of leather-bound volumes and walls pan-

eled in age-darkened oak. He felt at peace with the whole world and the equal of anybody, including the other gentlemen who were there with him, for he had the special privilege of being the godfather of the son and heir of his best friend, Edmond Terrington, Viscount Adderley.

At the moment, Edmond was upstairs with his wife Diana and, judging from the wails wafting from above, he wasn't having much luck helping her and the nursemaid getting little D'Arcy Douglas to nap.

Brix glanced at Lord Justinian Bromwell, Buggy to his friends, who was deaf to the baby's crying and the conversation in general as he studied the various books on the shelves near the door as if looking for the secret of El Dorado—or perhaps an interesting spider, as arachnids were his specialty.

Lieutenant Charles Grendon of His Majesty's Royal Navy stood properly at ease in front of one of the tall, narrow windows. He had the air and attitude of a commander and, Brix reflected, the uniforms of naval officers couldn't have been better designed to highlight Charlie's impressive physique.

While Charlie didn't lack for female admirers, it was no secret among the group of former schoolmates that Sir Douglas Drury, baronet and barrister, could claim to have conquered more hearts than any of them.

Brix watched the most famous attorney in London as he poured the brandies, finding himself

once again slightly perplexed as to Drury's attraction. His sardonic friend wasn't particularly good-looking, and he never dressed with any regard for fashion, preferring plain black wool and white linen. On the other hand, Brix could see that Drury's dark hair and angular features, his propensity to brood since he'd returned from being interred in a French prison during the war, and the fact that Drury had never lost a case might render him an object of some fascination to the fairer sex.

Not that he was jealous. Far from it. He had had a few conquests of his own, despite his mop of unruly straw-colored hair that was his valet's bane, his average features and lean build. Indeed, he had some cause to wish he was even less attractive, at least in one case.

But this was not the day to have unpleasant thoughts about anybody.

Drury handed round the brandies, and once all the men had their drinks, Brix held up his glass. "To the Honorable D'Arcy Douglas Brixton Bromwell Grendon Terrington!"

The toast drunk, Brix set down his brandy on the pedestal side table near him. He'd had a fair bit of wine at the breakfast and didn't want to be foxed.

"That name has quite a ring to it, doesn't it?" he mused aloud as he made himself comfortable. "I did feel for the poor vicar, though, having to remember it all. I'd have had to write the names on my cuff."

The other men exchanged rueful smiles, except for Drury, who rarely smiled at anything.

"Edmond looked proud enough to burst the buttons on his vest, didn't he?" Charlie said after finishing his drink. He set the glass on the console table beside him and returned to his habitual attitude, hands clasped behind his back. "Even when little D'Arcy was screaming fit to wake the dead."

"That merely proves the infant has strong, healthy lungs," Buggy noted as he wandered closer, past the large globe.

Brix laughed. "Try telling that to the vicar, Buggy. I thought he was going to drop the little fellow in the font."

"I appreciate being second on the list of names," Drury remarked in the deep voice that many of his legal enemies claimed was the sole secret of his success. He settled in the chair nearest the marble hearth. "But how the devil did Edmond and Diana come up with that spelling of D'Arcy? I don't recall any family names of D'Arcy, and as far as I know, neither one of them has a drop of French blood in their veins."

There was a moment of awkward silence before Brix stepped jovially into the breach. Although he appreciated that Drury had suffered at French hands, this was no time for grim denunciations. "I daresay it was Diana's idea. Sounds like the sort of name a romantic woman would pick, and she does write those novels, you know."

Drury's broad shoulders relaxed. "I suppose the boy should be grateful she didn't name him

after that villain in her book. What was he called?"

"Korlovsky," Buggy supplied.

"Egad, yes!" Brix seconded. "Wouldn't that have raised a few eyebrows among the *ton*? As it was, I tried to warn Edmond that the boys at Harrow would probably tease the lad no end. I can hear them now—Arssy D'Arcy." He sighed melodramatically. "Alas, he refused to heed my sage advice, so the boy's stuck with it, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps the boys in his class at Harrow won't think of that," Buggy suggested.

Brix snorted. "If they have an ounce of brains between them, they will. Still, perhaps D'Arcy will be the stronger for it, eh? Or maybe he just won't care. It never bothered me when anybody called me Middling Medway, but then, they were right," he finished with a broad grin. "Middling I was, and middling I continue."

"I did inquire about the name," Buggy gravely remarked. "Edmond says they simply liked it. He assured me they chose the order of subsequent names not with any sort of ranking in mind. It was all about the rhythm."

"I'm flattered any way you look at it," Charlie said, rocking back and forth on his heels. "To think a viscount's son shares any part of his name with me! My family still can't quite believe it, and neither can I."

"Diana looked lovely, didn't she?" Brix said, deciding to move away from the topic of names altogether, for in truth and despite the explana-

tion, he'd been a little hurt that his name had come after Drury's. "A wife who adores you, a fine healthy son . . . it's nearly enough to make a man contemplate marriage himself."

Charlie stopped rocking. "Don't tell me you are?"

"Not at all," Brix assured him. "Edmond got lucky when he found Diana—or she found him. Not many people are so fortunate. For most of us, marriage will be no more than a duty or a financial arrangement." He shivered with mock horror at the very notion. "I have no desire to tie myself to a woman under such conditions until I'm too old to care about, well . . ." He gave them a knowing wink. "Much of anything. Then I'll find myself a placid little wife to provide me with an heir."

"We've heard this all before," Drury reminded him. "You bet us you won't marry until you're fifty, remember?"

"I most certainly do," Brix replied, straightening. "I'm glad to hear *you* do."

"A bet of fifteen hundred pounds does rather stay in one's mind," Buggy observed.

"Especially since I have every intention of winning it," Brix replied. "I have absolutely no desire and no need to tie myself legally to a woman until I have to. I'm going to remain free, and carefree, until I'm at *least* fifty."

"What about the other part of the bet?" Charlie asked, walking away from the window toward the fireplace, where Edmond kept a box of che-

roots on the mantel. "You're still adamant you'll never marry Fanny Epping?"

"I can assure you, gentlemen," Brix replied with complete conviction, "that no force on earth will ever compel me to marry my annoying little shadow, despite the oft-stated wishes of my family."

"Come, Brix, tell us how you *really* feel," Drury said with a hint of a smirk as he reached for the brandy at his elbow.

"I don't understand your abhorrence of her," Buggy said, regarding Brix as studiously as if he were planning to write a treatise on men opposed to marriage with Fanny Epping. "She may not be a beauty, but she's quiet and sweet and—"

"Too quiet, and too sweet," Brix declared, smacking his hands on his knees as he hoisted himself to his feet and headed toward the brandy decanter on the mahogany side table to refill his glass. "Too bland, too boring."

"Unlike those actresses you're always consorting with?" Drury asked, one dark brow slightly raised.

"Exactly!" Brix cried. He went to pour more brandy into his glass, then realized he'd never finished the first. Regardless, he topped it up, then turned toward them, grinning and not the least bit embarrassed. After all, Drury was hardly chaste. Rumor had him in a different woman's bed every week.

"Doesn't it at least flatter you that she's infatuated with you?" Buggy asked. "She *is* the daughter of a duke."

"Perhaps I might not mind her hounding me if she were a beauty," Brix allowed. "But she's not. You don't know what it's like to have a woman like that following you about, making a nuisance of herself."

"You're right, I don't know," Buggy gravely agreed. "I've never been so lucky."

"Lucky?" Brix scoffed. "Ask Edmond how it feels—he'll tell you, and he only had to deal with Diana for a few weeks. It's been damned annoying being shadowed by a mousy little creature without an ounce of vitality for the past fourteen years."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't have kissed her," Charlie suggested.

"It was only once, and I was just trying to cheer her up because our brothers had been teasing her again, yet she seems to think one kiss means I belong to her for the rest of our lives," Brix explained, regretting that he'd ever told his friends about that day in his mother's rose garden when he and Fanny were twelve years old.

At least he'd refrained from revealing anything more, such as how he'd felt when Fanny had looked up at him adoringly, her big blue eyes still moist with tears, her lips parted, a little breathless. How he'd immediately acted on the sudden, overwhelming impulse to press his lips to hers.

He pushed that memory away.

"Even though I try to ignore her, she still trails after me at parties and balls and receptions," he went on. "Gad, I can't even avoid her at Medway

Manor. Mother invites her every year, so I'm forced to stay in town or go to Bath or Brighton."

"You hate visiting your family in the country anyway," Charlie said, sitting on the wide windowsill. "You wouldn't go whether Fanny was there or not."

Brix laughed. "Oh, all right. I don't get along with my family, so I probably wouldn't." He gave them a magnanimous smile. "If you all feel so bad about the wager, I'm willing to end it—provided you concede defeat and give me my winnings."

"You don't need the money, do you?" Charlie asked warily.

"Not a bit," Brix breezily replied. "I've got a fine income from my investments, and you all know I never gamble more than I can afford to lose. But a win's a win, gentlemen, and I do have my pride."

"I'm not willing to concede defeat," Drury said, twisting his brandy glass in long, somewhat gnarled fingers that had been broken more than once. "I'm sure you'll succumb to a woman's charms in the next twenty-two years, and attractive or not, I have every hope that Lady Francesca Cecilia Epping will be the one to reel you in. If she does, I'll consider you fortunate. She's a sensible young woman who'll do you a lot of good."

"Oh, yes, that's what we all want in a wife, isn't it—somebody to do us some good," Brix replied, his tone grave, but with a roguish sparkle in his eyes. "Especially you, Drury. You'd love some chaste, dutiful nunlike woman to constantly point out the error of your ways, I'm sure."

Brix's grin widened when Drury didn't answer. "There's nothing in our wager about a vow of chastity," he said, "so I may very well succumb to a woman's charms, as long as marriage isn't part of the bargain. As for Fanny, here's hoping she'll soon realize how ridiculous she looks and how hopeless her feelings, and leave me alone."

*"You could have told me."*

Definitely exhibiting signs of vitality, Lady Francesca Cecilia Epping stormed toward Brix across the crimson-and-blue Aubusson carpet. Her face was flushed, her plain, Nile green silk gown swished about her ankles and the simple crucifix on a thin gold chain around her neck bounced with each furious step.

Brix wanted to both disappear and stare with fascinated horror at the enraged young woman striding toward him, her blue eyes fairly dancing with rage as she came to a halt in front of him, their noses nearly touching.

"You think I'm *annoying*?" she demanded, her usually soft and dulcet voice stern and low-pitched, as if she were fighting not to shout. "You want me to leave you alone? Why didn't you have the decency to tell me? In private?"

Being caught in a tornado might be as disconcerting as being upbraided by Fanny. But surely a harmless agreement between friends didn't warrant this extreme reaction. "Fanny, you don't under—"

She cut him off. "Instead of doing the honorable thing, the *kind* thing, the *Honorable* Brixton

Smythe-Medway decides to make a wager, to both enrich and amuse himself at my expense, as if my feelings are nothing but a joke!"

Well aware that his friends were looking on and dismayed by this unexpected turn of events, Brix decided they didn't need an audience. He put his hand on her elbow to steer her out of the room. "We can discuss this—"

She wrenched herself free of his grasp. "You saw fit to make fun of me and my feelings in front of your friends, so we'll discuss this here and now."

Still hoping to placate her, he gave her his very best smile and spread his hands. "It's just a bit of sport among the four of us, Fanny. I never meant to hurt you."

Her expression grew even more murderous. "And that makes it all right? Four men I considered my friends know that the thought of marrying me is absolutely abhorrent to you, and I'm not supposed to be hurt and humiliated? I'm supposed to be *amused*?"

Brix didn't appreciate being chastised, by anybody. And it wasn't as if she were completely innocent of wrongdoing. "You wouldn't have had your feelings hurt if you hadn't been eavesdropping. You know what they say about people who do that. They rarely hear anything good."

"So now it's *my* fault?" Fanny cried, her hands balling into fists.

For an instant, Brix thought she might actually hit him, and he took a step back. "Fanny, you're

getting all worked up over nothing," he said, still struggling to maintain some semblance of calm. "It was just a friendly little wager between Buggy, Charlie, Drury and me. Nobody else knows, so there's no need for these theatrics."

"Actually, it isn't just between the four of us anymore," Drury noted, standing by the Doric-inspired chimney piece. "Somebody wrote the wagers in the betting book at White's yesterday."

Brix stared at the lawyer with shocked dismay. A lighthearted bet between friends was one thing; a wager that all the *ton* would hear about was quite another.

Even worse, one of these men, friends he thought he could trust, was responsible for this terrible turn of events. "Which one of you wrote our wagers up in White's?"

Buggy immediately shook his head. "Not I."

"Nor I," Charlie added, obviously taken aback by both what had happened, and the accusation.

"Any number of people could have done it," Drury said with a shrug. "You talked about the wagers that night in our club after Edmond's son was born."

As dismayed as Brix was to hear that his loose tongue was responsible, he was relieved to think that none of his friends had made those wagers public knowledge.

"What does it matter who actually wrote it there, or when people first heard of it?" Fanny demanded. "What's important is that this *disgusting* wager is now known among the *ton*."