



A DEAL WITH A

Duke

LORDS OF TEMPTATION BOOK FOUR

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A DEAL WITH A DUKE

LORDS OF TEMPTATION

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A DEAL WITH A DUKE

He's her brother's best friend...

Which is the ONLY reason the Duke of Upton agrees to take Anna Smith away from London to protect the fragile beauty. Rath's dark looks and derelict life are not compatible with the effervescent Anna. In fact, she quakes in fear every time he comes near her.

As she should. If she had any idea of the dark past he holds in his cold black heart, she'd surely run screaming from his country estate.

And that can't happen, because he's not the biggest bad in the North of England. When the very villain who forced her to flee London finds her, Rath, beast of a man that he is, is the only one who can protect her.

To truly keep her safe, he has to keep her close. And soon it's not fear that has her trembling in his arms, and his need to protect her has nothing to do with duty.

But his past is as much a danger as hers and soon he realizes that she isn't just his greatest temptation and his most important job.

She's also...

His one weakness.

A Deal with a Duke is a brother's best friend, bodyguard, forced proximity, enemies-to-lovers, steamy romance.

CHAPTER ONE

“ABSOLUTELY NOT.” The low rumble of the Duke of Upton filtered down the hall, unmistakable in the way the deep baritone echoed off the low ceilings.

Impressive, considering Anna Smith’s Cheapside home did not have the large, vaulted spaces that the residence of an aristocrat would certainly boast. Her home was what she liked to call *cozy*.

It had small, though comfortable, rooms that her five large brothers had always easily filled. Of course, that was changing. First, because her brothers had all gotten married and most of them had left the family home.

But also because her eldest brother, the new Marquess of Highgrove, was attempting to pawn her off on the duke. That fact hurt. She’d like to believe he just wished to protect her, but...

“Why not?” Ace asked.

“You’re not serious?” the duke rumbled back, giving no ground.

“I am serious, Rath. Deadly serious,” her brother answered, and Anna shifted closer. His voice was harder to hear, it didn’t carry in the same fashion, and she had to sneak forward while still attempting to remain out of sight.

Bent low and leaning toward the open door, she appeared the very picture of a person who might be guilty of eavesdropping. Which she absolutely was.

To be fair, they were discussing her future, a conversation, as usual, she had not been invited into.

“What in the bloody blue bollocks would I do with a woman like Anna at my country estate?”

“Do? Rath, you don’t have to do anything. Other than keep her safe.”

The duke grunted, long and loud, his annoyance evident. “You’re telling me she isn’t perfectly safe here with all you strapping Smiths about?”

Ace cleared his throat. “Fulton’s back in Italy, Rush at his new home—”

“Why not send her to Rush then?”

“You know why. Every friend and enemy seems aware of where Rush lives. Gyla has even attacked the place. She wouldn’t be safe.” Gyla, from what she had gathered from her eavesdropping, was a criminal who’d been trying to steal her brothers’ gaming hells.

Upton made some noise that she only assumed was a concession of sorts. “Tris?”

“With his wife here in the city. I’d like Anna far away from here.” Those words hurt too.

Another grunt. “Why me?”

Anna dared to peek around the open door, just enough to see her brother shrug. “Because I know you’ve got the strength.”

“Bullshit,” the duke answered. “It’s because you know I need the money from the clubs.”

“It isn’t bullshit,” Ace replied. “No lord is better suited to keeping her safe than you. I know you are uniquely skilled in this regard. You are an excellent fighter and instinctually aware of danger. You’ve stopped several fights at the club because you anticipate them happening.”

Anna dared to crane forward just a bit further to catch a glimpse of him. The duke. She studied his profile where he sat in one of the high-back chairs near the crackling fire. She loved those chairs. The leather was worn but soft, and comfortable on a cold spring morning.

She felt exactly about them as she did her home. She looked above the mantel in the study, where a picture of herself hung on the wall.

She was two in the painting, maybe three, the only one of her siblings to have had such a portrait done. Some might have thought it a privilege, but she knew better.

That painting was part of what made her separate. Different from her siblings. The other.

Which was one of the many reasons she didn't want to leave. She ought to be here, proving she was as much part of this family as the rest of them.

Well, that, and the Duke of Upton was the last man she wished to travel anywhere with. He was...scary.

Tall, broad, with thick muscles, he had a craggy brow that hung low over his eyes, always masking his intentions. His mop of overlong, nearly black hair didn't help either.

His cheekbones were strong, almost menacingly so, his jaw lean and hard, and his mouth was nearly always set in a perpetual frown.

She shivered, fear sliding along her spine. Anna was nineteen and, if her family had not been under attack from not one but two nefarious villains, she'd have started her first season this year, an event she was very much looking forward to and another reason she didn't wish to leave. Anna was desperate to create a future of her own and that could only happen in London. She was an artist, and everyone in England who might help her succeed was in this city.

After years of waiting, of being overshadowed by everyone in her family, she deserved her own chance to make her dreams come true.

Instead, she was about to be shunted off to the country estate of a man who frightened her half to death. This plan was a terrible idea.

A sentiment she and the duke seemed to agree upon.

“Although I am better than most at fighting, I am most definitely the worst at spending time with refined ladies. An artist, isn’t she? What would we even talk about?”

“You don’t have to talk. Mira and Boxby will be with you to entertain her. Just keep her safe.”

“Why can’t Boxby babysit her at his country estate? Why do I need to be part of this plan? Don’t you think I’m best for finding Kingsley?” Kingsley, a marquess, was Gyla’s partner, and he’d joined the fight against her family.

Ace grimaced. “I’ve considered that. But both Kingsley and Gyla have attempted to compromise the unattached women close to us. It makes Anna the most vulnerable. And Boxby is distracted with Mira. Newly married men seem only able to attend their wives...”

“Boxby has been my friend for a very long time. He’s smart enough to care for two people, I’m certain.”

Ace glared. “It’s her life you’re betting on. If she were your kin, wouldn’t you want someone dedicated to her care?”

“I wouldn’t know,” the duke grumbled, but she could hear the concession in his words laced with a bitterness that made her cock her head in question.

“Rath. This is important,” Ace said. “Please.”

She watched the duke’s shoulders fall, and she knew that her brother had won—which meant the meeting would be over soon. Straightening up, she began backing away. Best not to be caught.

But she'd only made it a few paces when her brother appeared in the door. "Anna. Just the person I hoped to see."

Inwardly, she cringed. Apparently, she'd made it far enough away that he didn't realize she'd been listening. But the duke was still in Ace's study and so that meant that Ace would speak to her in front of the other man.

Didn't Ace respect her enough to at least make the conversation private? Apparently not. Then again, her family never considered what she might like.

ANNA WALKED into the room and Rath felt his frown deepen with growing irritation. How did she always manage to elicit such a strong reaction?

She was pretty enough with her silky blond hair, always neat and artistically arranged. Her features were angelic, with eyes that were crystal blue, like a lake in summer, and her tiny little nose or the way her pink lips always looked like summer berries.

Despite her beauty, however, she was a mouse of a woman, always appearing frightened. Her eyes were wide and frequently averted, her hands clasped in tight balls. She even hid in her own clothes, her dresses forever hanging loosely off her body.

Everything about her was in stark contrast to himself. He looked down at his skin-tight breeches. There wasn't a single soft edge on him. Which meant he felt this ridiculous need to

chase the scared little mouse back into her hole every time he saw her.

Yes, he was a beast. He even looked like one, with his overgrown hair and his craggy features. And everyone knew he acted like one as well.

Taking a gentle and meek female to the country was the very last task he wished to complete.

And he meant the words—*absolute last*. Mentally, he ticked off the all the things he would rather do: Wrestle with bears.

Recover from an epic night of drinking.

Clean their gaming hell, Hell's Corner, after a Saturday night.

Fight the villains that had plagued said gaming hell for the last several months. Definitely that last one.

Lord Gyla, a foreign count who'd tried to steal their women, pillage their earnings, and attacked their homes had been attempting to force them to sell their businesses. And while Gyla was on the run somewhere in Europe, his partner, the Marquess of Kingsley, was still in England and very much a threat.

Rath understood why Ace wished for his sister, Anna, to be tucked away. The part of the plan he chafed at was being the man who had to do the tucking.

Did he look like the fucking type? The answer was a resounding *no*.

Which might have been the understatement of the century. His father had married his mother in secret and when Rath had been born, he and his mother had been spirited off to live a life so far away from the dukedom and all its trappings that he hadn't even known his father was the heir until his grandfather had passed. It hadn't been a difficult secret to keep...Rath barely saw his father. And his mother, who had grown increasingly resentful about being hidden away, had taken her frustration out on the only person available—him.

When the father had finally gained power, Rath had been sixteen, and after spending most of his life in Northern England with a mother who couldn't stand the sight of him, he was half wild. Far more comfortable trapping, fishing, and fighting anything that would take up the challenge than attending parties and sipping champagne.

And his father hadn't expressed much interest in him even then. The new duke had been too busy spending every last hay penny the dukedom possessed to pay attention to his son and forgotten wife.

“Anna,” Ace started, standing straight and tall as he looked down at his delicate sister, “Mira and Boxby are going to take you back to the country.”

She said not a word of complaint, her gaze cast to the floor, her hands clasped in front of her.

“And we've decided that it's best that His Grace escort you.”

Her cheeks flushed pink, the only indication she'd even heard Ace's words.

“You’ll leave first thing in the morning, and you’ll be traveling to His Grace’s country estate in Cumberland.”

“Cumberland?” she finally said, her voice wobbling as though she might cry. Christ. He hoped she wasn’t the crying sort. There was nothing worse than a leaky female.

“Don’t sound like that, Anna Banana,” Ace pleaded as he stepped closer to his sister.

Rath’s lip curled. Ace was a strong man. He’d fooled the entire *ton* into thinking him the heir to a marquessate until he’d managed to acquire said marquessate, lifting his family up to the highest tiers of the English peerage. Did a man like that really plead with a woman he’d just called Anna Banana?

“I didn’t sound like anything,” she answered, chin still tucked.

Rath rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. Why was the world torturing him so?

“You’ll be back before Christmas—”

She squeaked. Actually squeaked, and he pushed out of his chair, unable to witness any more of this ridiculous charade. “You really think it will take that long?”

“To catch our villain?” Ace grimaced. “I don’t know.”

Anna took a step toward her brother then, her delicate fingers reaching out to rest on his sleeve. “Are you that worried?”

He watched as Ace melted, his teeth grinding together at the sight of the other man weakening for a woman. “About

you? Always.”

Some of his breakfast rose in his throat. Disgusting.

But Ace didn't pay him any mind. “You'll be able to paint. I'm sure the setting is beautiful.”

“My home is rough,” Rath supplied, wanting to make certain expectations were low. Perhaps he could even scare her into not going. The house was his least favorite place in the world, so he wasn't even lying.

And if he did frighten her off, then he could do what he really wanted, and help hunt down their attackers. He'd continued to work as security for the gaming hells, a business he was highly invested in, because they were slowly helping him climb out of the debt his father had left him.

Anna's gaze met his, her brows lifting slightly. For a moment she didn't look like a mouse at all. In fact, she silently questioned him. For some reason, this irritated him even more. The mouse did not strike back at the cat. “You have something to say?”

Her mouth pressed into a thin line. Well, as thin as her plump lips would allow. “Does this house look like I'm used to luxury?”

His eyes widened in surprise. Where had that come from? But Ace's chuckle kept him from responding as the man continued with his sister's point. “You should see my seat in Northumberland. The building is falling around the inhabitants. It's going to take a pretty penny to bring it back, which is why we need to wrap this business up quickly.”

But Rath saw a different opening. He needed to continue working with these men, his financial future depended on it, but he wanted any other job than the one he was being assigned. “But that’s my point. With new gaming hells opening—”

Ace slashed his hand through the air. Was Rath not supposed to speak about their business in front of Anna’s sensitive ears? Christ.

“Not now,” the marquess gritted out.

“Who’s going to run them?” he pressed on, not caring if Ace wanted him to speak or not. Ace might be his partner, but Rath was the one doing him a favor.

“I’ve hired two new men,” Ace said in clipped tones. “Lockton’s cousin and his brother-in-law. They both know the business.”

Rath had to admit, that was a smart move. Ace was good like that. Lockton had been an original owner of the Den of Sins, one of their three clubs. His family surely already knew exactly what needed to be done.

Which meant Rath had lost his edge in this conversation. “I want a larger share.”

Ace’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“For this favor. I want a larger share.”

Anna’s chin dropped to her chest again.

“Done,” Ace said, reaching out his hand.

Rath took it, knowing he was getting the raw end of this deal. But he hadn't much choice. Ace was right. There was no one else to watch her and if something happened to the youngest Smith sister, Rath was certain that would mean the end of their business for good.

With a grumbling sigh, he took Ace's hand. "When do you want us to leave?"

"Tomorrow," Ace said with a quick jerk of his chin. "Let's see this business done."

Done? Rath was being sent to hell and his purgatory was only just beginning.

THE COOL MORNING air chafed Kingsley's face as he stood in the shadows, watching. Until recently, he'd rarely visited Cheapside, preferring the much posher parts of London. To think these people of all people had been besting them.

The Smiths—a group of thugs masquerading as lords, they were a vile scourge who'd somehow convinced the king that they were on the right side of the disagreement.

Ridiculous. Yes, his partner Gyla had come to the country to make the purchases illegally, but Gyla had learned from his mistakes and retained a legitimate partner, one who understood British law. Himself.

And the Smiths? How were they better? They'd faked their legitimacy, owned illegal clubs. He was a legitimate marquess.

He was the wronged party here. And soon everyone would understand that.

The Smiths had been a constant thorn in both his and Gyla's sides, but no more.

The front door opened and several family members, along with a few partners, stepped out.

He sneered to see them all hugging and acting as though they weren't base pretenders. At the back of the group stood a lovely blonde. Anna. He knew her.

She might be the exception to the Smith rule. Where most of them were barely housebroken, she seemed to have some manners, at least. She was still one of them, of course. But he'd tolerate her long enough to enact his revenge.

And he'd prove to the entire world what the Smiths really were—usurpers.

He watched as Anna was loaded into a carriage along with the Duke of Upton. Behind them Boxby and his filthy Smith wife, Mirabelle, climbed into another.

He smiled. It was too easy. He'd follow them, find out where they were going, and then he'd enact his revenge. Victory was so close that he could smell it in the fresh fall air.

CHAPTER TWO

ANNA STARED at the two carriages that sat in front of her home. The home she was leaving.

The first was plain, black, nondescript. The second was ornate with red-painted accents and gold inlays. *That* carriage belonged to Baron Boxby, her sister's husband of a year, and the one that Anna intended to ride in.

Not that she cared about wealth. That wasn't it at all. It was simply that if the duke did not want to make conversation with her on this trip, she was equally determined to avoid him as much as possible. Which meant traveling with her sister.

She was at the back of the group, everyone hugging and saying their goodbyes, her brothers Tris, Gris, and Ace lined up on the walkway to the street.

She reached Gris first, who wrapped her in a giant hug. She hugged him back, wishing that she could stay with her brother and his new wife and baby. "Tell Ace not to send me away," she whispered. Gris was the biggest, and some might think him the fiercest, but when it came to women, he had the softest heart.

“Oh, Anna,” he whispered back. “I’ll miss you so much, but you must go. Upton will keep you safe.”

Her mouth pinched. “Et tu, Gris?”

He gave her a squeeze. “I love that you tell me what you’re thinking. Don’t be afraid to share with others too, Anna. It’s time for you to come out of that shell.”

She didn’t have a shell. Did she? She did think a great deal that she didn’t say out loud. Was that a shell?

Next came Tris, her boxer brother, the most muscular, who also pulled her in for a hug. “I’ll crack any heads that need cracking. Just send the word.”

She gave Tris a smile. She didn’t even bother to make her plea to allow her to stay home. Tris rarely compromised on anything.

Last came Ace.

He pulled her to his chest, and she gave him a cursory hug back. She’d have liked to refuse, but then that would lead to an entire discussion about how he was doing this all for her own good. As if he’d even asked her what she might want. What risks she might be willing to take to stay with her family.

She didn’t speak a word as she pulled out of Ace’s embrace and started for Boxby’s carriage.

“Anna.” The tone of Ace’s voice stopped her in her tracks. “Not that one.”

Silently, she turned back to him as he pointed at Upton’s carriage and inwardly, she cringed. Why did she need to ride

with him?

Again, the Duke of Upton seemed to read her thoughts. He appeared out of his own carriage door, scowling. “You’re not serious?”

“As the plague,” Ace answered. “Anna rides with you.”

She might have argued, really, she might have, but all the men began speaking at once. Tris waved his fist and yelled at Upton to have some respect.

Gris growled at Ace to think of Anna.

But it was Upton’s voice that rose above them all. “You said I didn’t have to talk to her.”

“You don’t.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to?” Gris practically spat. Then he glared at Ace. “He isn’t the right man for the job. I’ve changed my mind.”

Anna couldn’t help but agree. “I could just stay—”

“He is.” Ace ignored her completely. “Trust me. No one is stronger, scrappier, more capable of defending our sister. Not even Tris.”

Tris puffed his chest at that. “I don’t know whether to be offended or feel complimented.”

“I’m being flattered into performing a loathsome task,” Upton grumped, still standing on the first step.

Gris let out a dark rumble, stepping closer. “Watch yourself.”

Upton's jaw tensed and he straightened up. "I'm up for a good scrape if you are. You Smiths don't scare me."

"No." Ace pointed his finger. "No fighting, Gris. Upton, back in your carriage."

"Fine, as long as she's going in the other one." Upton pointed at Ken Boxby's vehicle, which caused her to wince. She didn't want to ride with him either, but did he have to insult her in front of her brothers like this?

"She rides with you." Ace punctuated every word with a jab of his finger. "If you want the shares, she rides with you."

Anna squeaked at that. She ought to point out that a real bodyguard would not have to be continually convinced. Wasn't that proof enough she'd be safer here? What was Ace thinking, sending her off with this man? Was he just tired of caring for her?

But before she could articulate any of this, Ace was reaching for her and pulled her toward the black carriage, stuffing her into Upton's vehicle like a carpet bag.

Before she'd said a word, the door snapped behind her and the carriage began to roll.

Upton stared at her. Not knowing what else to do, she stared back.

"We're not talking."

She swallowed down a lump as she tried to form words. She'd practically been trussed, tied, and carted away from her family. Did the man have to insist on being such a cad about

it? To her dismay, tears pricked at her eyes, and she found herself whispering. “Then don’t talk.”

For a moment he looked surprised she’d said anything, but as a soft sob rose in her throat, his brows pulled down while his lip curled up. “Does not talking mean you’re going to cry?”

She didn’t answer, instead she looked out the window, watching her family disappear, the large forms of her brothers growing smaller and smaller until the carriage finally turned a corner and they were gone.

And then several more tears fell because she didn’t want to leave, but also because this was ridiculous. She shouldn’t be here with this man, leaving her family, her home.

“Please don’t cry,” he said, sounding like he had some small amount of concern for a single moment. “I hate crying.” But of course, his concern was only for himself.

She choked on her tears. “I think I might hate you.” Those words stopped the tears. She’d never in her life told anyone she didn’t like them, let alone hated them. But suddenly the anger made her feel better. “In fact, I’ve never hated anyone in my life more than I hate you.”

He sat back in his seat, looking neither offended nor annoyed. In fact, he looked almost relieved. “You hate me, do you?”

“Yes,” she said, sitting straighter. “I do.”

He shrugged. “That’s all right. I’m used to people hating me. In fact, I’d say that would work well.”

And then he tipped his head back and closed his eyes as if he were going to sleep.

She couldn't help but stare. Who said that? What was wrong with this man?

HE'D EFFECTIVELY SILENCED HIS...ERM...GUEST. Anna had neither cried nor spoken for the last six hours.

What she did instead was scratch at some notebook. Ceaselessly.

He might have preferred the crying.

The incessant noise of the charcoal on the paper had seemed to grow louder with each passing hour. Finally, he could stand it no longer. "What are you doing?"

Her eyes did not lift from the page, the charcoal did not stop, but her mouth did tilt down into a frown. "We're not talking. Remember?"

Damn her. "I've seen you in the company of your brothers a half dozen times at least. Why have you chosen now to begin arguing with someone?"

"I like my brothers," she answered, the charcoal never slowing. "As we've discussed, I do not like you."

Fuck him if that wasn't a good answer. "All right, then. We don't need to talk, and you don't have to tell me what you're doing. But stop that infernal scratching."

She didn't.

In fact, she only picked up the pace. “I said stop.”

She kept going, not acknowledging that he’d spoken at all. “Listen,” he growled, leaning forward. “I’m not like other lords. You’ll do as I say or—” Instead of finishing, he reached out and snatched the book from her hand.

She cried out, lunging forward to try to get it back. But with his other hand, he grabbed her shoulder, holding her away. His arms were significantly longer and easily kept her from the book.

The charcoal still in her grasp, she slashed a thick line of it onto his jacket as she made another grab for the book of paper. “Give that back!”

“No.”

She let out a huff of air. “Give it back or I’m telling Boxby that you put your hands on me.”

Fuck her. And not in the good way. She’d narrowed in on his weakest point. He needed the clubs and the partnership. Which meant he actually needed to babysit the little brat in front of him.

He dropped his hand and the book at the same time, the picture she’d been working on landing face up on the floor.

Immediately, he realized what she’d been drawing.

Him.

His profile, anyway. And he looked...interesting. She scrambled down to pick up the book, but he reached out his hand to stop her again.

Only he was looking at the picture and when he grabbed for her shoulder, he accidentally placed his hand on something much, much softer.

“Fuck,” he mumbled out loud as he automatically squeezed the breast he’d inadvertently grabbed. Why had he done that? He should have pulled his hand away, it was just that Anna was so slender, he’d expected her chest to be... well...smaller, as it were. She was quite well endowed.

“Your Grace,” she gasped, jumping back into her seat. “You did not just—”

“Mistake,” he rumbled, cursing himself seven times the fool. “I meant to touch your shoulder and...”

“Why touch me at all?”

The drawing. That’s what they should be talking about. But damn him if the ample, round breast he’d just fondled hadn’t felt deliciously good. Shaking his head, he tried to clear his thoughts. He looked down at the picture again, frowning and staring.

The likeness was uncanny. But something in the lines of his face bothered him.

Bending down, he picked up the drawing, noting that she’d captured his jaw, the slight hook in his nose, the arch of his brow. “You made me look handsome.” He tried to decide why he still hated the picture.

“You are handsome,” she answered with a shake of her head. “Insufferable and handsy. But handsome.”

“I’ve never heard you talk like that.” He looked down at the picture again, his eyes narrowing.

She shrugged. “I’d like to say you don’t know me very well, but the truth is, I don’t normally. Except for with Mira and Gris. They love me. You, however, seem to bring out the worst in me.”

That comment stung somewhere deep in his chest. It wasn’t the first time someone had made that accusation. Even his mother had found his company insufferable. It was likely true and that’s what hurt.

But he ignored the emotion stirring in his chest and again looked at the picture. He’d been annoyed when Ace had mentioned she was an artist. He’d thought that it had meant she was silly and frivolous, but this drawing wasn’t silly, it was...brilliant.

And disturbing.

He grimaced as he picked up the book and tossed it at her. “Judging by that picture, you bring out the worst in me too.”

CHAPTER THREE

UPTON'S WORDS stole Anna's breath. What did he mean by that?

She opened her mouth to answer but then closed it again, choosing her words carefully. She ought not to care about his feelings, but she was sensitive, and his words stung. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He frowned down at the picture now resting in her hands. "I look..." But he didn't finish, letting out a growl instead.

She blinked in surprise. For a single moment, she thought they might actually be having a real conversation. "What did you see in the drawing?"

His jaw turned to granite as he glared at her, as fierce as any man she'd ever seen. "That's none of your fucking business."

His tone was sharp and loud enough that she jumped, a shiver of fear running down her spine. Her own jaw clamped shut, her body curling in on itself. She hugged the notebook to her chest, but quickly pulled it away again, knowing that she'd smudge the drawing.

Why did she even care? She ought to rip the rendering from the book and toss it out the window. Allow the horses to trample the page and then spit on it for good measure.

Then again, she wished to study it. Find out what had upset him. Anger swelled in her chest again. If she could dissect the emotion, perhaps she could use it to taunt him. If she dared. Did she dare?

She had said more to him than she did to most. But she'd been rewarded for that sharing with his mean, coarse yelling.

She winced again, tucking the charcoal back into its pouch. She'd not be able to work on the drawing anymore this trip.

Upton grunted from across the carriage. "I changed my mind. You can draw if you want."

"How generous," she said, but her reply came out as almost a whisper. Still, ten minutes later, she found herself pulling the charcoal out again.

She didn't work on the drawing she'd been doing. Instead, she started a new one. She'd meant to draw the landscape outside but instead, she found herself drawing Upton again. Rath. The name suited him.

As her charcoal slashed over the page, the planes of his face appeared. But whatever he'd seen in the last one, he'd not see in this. Normally, she didn't draw with any particular emotion in mind, just letting her inner eye transfer the emotion to the page, but with this one, she knew exactly what she wished to capture: his anger.

Every line was rigid, every angle harsh. The last drawing had taken hours as she'd attempted to choose each sweep of the charcoal with care. This one appeared in a matter of minutes—the drawing complete within the hour.

“Are you going to show me?”

“No.” Instinctively, she pulled the book tighter to her chest.

“Why not?”

Her eyes widened at the audacity of the question. She didn't answer this time. She'd learned her lesson. Talking with him had only done what she always feared it would. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, ducking her chin.

He let out a long, rumbling breath. “Fine.”

She kept her chin down, her gaze on her lap, the book almost to her chest so that it was safe from his grasp without smudging the work. Later, she'd look at them both and decide what the first one held that had upset him so.

But that exercise could wait. She'd not risk letting him yank the book from her grasp again.

“Can you show me another of your drawings?” he asked, his tone almost soft. Or was that her imagination? There was so little that was soft about this man.

“No.” She kept her eyes down, not wanting to see the irritation in his.

“Why not?”

She swallowed down a lump. “I don’t have any others.” It was the truth, though she’d not have shown him anyway.

He’d hurt her feelings, yelling at her like that.

The silence settled between them once again, though this one didn’t last long. The driver called, “Your Grace, we’ve reached the first inn.”

She let out a long breath, relief making her limp. “How many days will it take to reach your home?”

“Six.”

They’d already made it through the first. Five more days of being trapped in this carriage with him. Hopefully, once they’d reached his estate, they’d hardly need see each other at all.

The door snapped open, and then Rath exited, reaching back to hand her from the vehicle.

She wasn’t sure she wished to touch him. She never had before. Then again, she didn’t have much choice.

She slid her hand into his, another shiver running down her spine. Was that fear? Or something altogether different? There was an element of danger, for certain.

He helped her down, a flush climbing up her cheeks as she went down the steps.

Her sister was exiting the carriage behind them at the same moment and their gazes met, Mira’s brows lifting in question.

Anna looked away. If Mira wanted answers, she’d have to ask someone else. The last person Anna wished to discuss was the surly duke.

ANNA'S HAND slid from Rath's, her gaze everywhere but on him.

He had regrets about the way he'd acted in the carriage. Coincidentally, they mirrored much of his lifelong feelings of remorse. He was gruff, wild, ill tempered.

His father had been wildly disappointed in his only son. Then again, the man should have set a better example, or if not that, then at least attended some of Rath's childhood. That might have been nice.

But he pushed those thoughts aside. They didn't help him, and he'd grown into a strong and capable man despite the circumstances of his youth.

Entering the dark interior of the inn, he made the request for three rooms and a private dining room.

Not that he intended to eat with Anna and Lord and Lady Boxby. After an infuriating day, he needed some time alone. He'd stand guard outside the door while they ate to fulfill his obligation and then take his own meal alone when the little butterfly was safely tucked in her room.

But as he made his way upstairs, while everyone prepared for dinner after a long day of travel, he found himself pacing his room with memories of the day torturing his thoughts.

He remembered those rare moments with Anna talking, or the more common ones where she curled into herself in the seat across from him. And then there was that damned

drawing. Had she seen what he had? Of course she had. There had been something...vulnerable in the lines of his face. An emotion he despised. He didn't like feeling that way ever and he certainly didn't wish for someone else to witness such an emotion from him. He never allowed vulnerability to show.

What he needed was some exercise to push that revelation out of his brain.

Shucking his coat, he took off his cravat and waistcoat, rolling up his sleeves. In the narrow space of his room, he did fifty pushups and then fifty more.

Still not satisfied, he opened the door, intent upon walking the hall until dinner.

But as he clomped down the stairs, he caught sight of blond hair like spun silk crossing the common room. What was she doing out of her room?

He paused on the third step from the bottom, long enough to watch her make her way through the crowd, his little mouse skirting the edge.

From his vantage point, he could catch the moment another man noticed her. Dressed in simple clothes, the hulking man stood from the stool he'd been seated on, tracking her with beady eyes. Didn't she understand that showing such vulnerability only encouraged others to try to take advantage?

Protectiveness stirred deep in Rath's chest. This is why Ace had sent him to look out for her. The man eyed Anna for another moment before he left his place at the bar and started moving toward her.

Rath began working his way toward her too. Cutting through the crowd as only a man not afraid to push a few people could, he reached Anna at the same moment the other fellow did.

“Hello, beautiful,” the man said, giving Anna a smarmy smile.

But before Anna could answer, Rath stepped in front of her. “Who do you think you’re talking to?” he growled out while giving the other fellow a hard stare.

“Not to you,” the man answered, baring his teeth. Since Rath’s jacket was already off and his sleeves rolled up, it likely made him look less like a duke, not that he ever appeared very distinguished. “Why don’t you step out of the way and allow me to greet the lady proper like—”

Rath had heard enough. Rearing back, he shot both his open palms forward, sending the larger man stumbling back into the crowd. Satisfaction filled his chest as the man fell to the ground, several others going with him.

But that feeling only lasted for a moment, as shouts filled the room, a jostle of men collected themselves from where they’d landed on the floor, and then...a surge of bodies came toward him, ready for retaliation.

He grinned. A fight would feel much better than walking the halls like a ghost.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANNA CRIED out as a swarm of men swallowed Rath whole, jumping on his back, pummeling him with their fists.

It wasn't that she'd never seen a fight before. In fact, brawling was a pastime in the Smith home. But unlike the rest of her siblings, she'd never liked watching or participating in the violence. It made her hectic inside.

She cringed away, skirting the edge of the room. This was exactly why her family had sent her away. Where the others could fight, she never could. She was always the other... different, separate from the rest of them.

Boxby came racing out from the dining room and immediately forced himself into the fray, fighting next to Upton. Which made sense—Ken Boxby had been friends with Upton for a long time, he was likely used to the trouble.

Mira came out too, and snatching up a broom, began to beat men back from her husband, all the while yelling at the other men to show a bit of decency. Which also made sense—Mira was a Smith and Smiths fought their way out of most troubles. Except for Anna.

She bit her lip and shrank into the door jamb of the private dining room as she held on to the wood frame.

Someone clanged a wooden spoon against a pan, the loud ringing rising over the noise of the fight and calling the men down. They slowed their fists, moved back from one another, sheepishly surveying the damage.

Upton, still standing, gave the man who'd just been whaling on his abdomen a light shove before swinging his gaze to hers.

He rumbled when their eyes met, and at the exact same moment she cried out because his face—it was a mess. Bloodied and swollen, he looked more like a side of meat than a man.

Pushing herself off the jamb, she crossed to him, wanting a closer look. The view did not get better.

“You look awful,” she cried.

He swiped a hand over his cheek, only managing to smear the blood. “I’m fine.”

She raised her brows. “Fine?”

“Are you all right?”

The question caught her off guard. “Me?”

“You look frightened.”

She blinked in surprise. Was he expressing concern for her? How odd. “I’m fine.” She swallowed down a lump, sure she was going to regret these next words. “And I’m adept at patching up quarrelling men. Come on. I’ll clean your face.”

He hesitated for a moment before he began to follow.

The innkeeper gave them a hard glare and Anna ducked her chin. She'd meant to ask for water, but she couldn't possibly ask now—

“You,” Rath rumbled from behind her. “What are you thinking, allowing that sort of riffraff into your establishment?”

Her chin snapped up. Was Rath chastising the innkeeper after he'd been the one to start a fight?

But the innkeeper did not call Rath out. In fact, he gave an awkward bow. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

It wasn't that Anna was exactly surprised. She'd seen how her brothers' bravado turned a situation to their advantage. She'd just never mastered the skill.

Which wasn't unexpected, considering she couldn't even hold a conversation. “I'll need water and clean rags.”

Upton looked at the innkeeper. “You heard the lady.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The man rushed off, appearing moments later with the items.

Anna took the rags and Upton the bucket and they started up the stairs. He moved ahead of her, inserting his key into his door, opening it, and then walking into the room. She hesitated in the entrance. Yes, they'd been together in the carriage, but a footman was stationed just outside the doors and this felt very different. Had she made a mistake?

“I’ll leave the door open,” he said, sitting heavily in a chair.

“All right,” she said, walking in. His eyes had closed, his head tipping back. Silently, she dipped the rag into the bucket of cool water and began dabbing at the blood, removing as much as she could and identifying exactly where the cuts were.

She kept her touch light and gentle, not wanting to cause him more pain, but he still winced when she swiped a larger cut. “Apologies,” she murmured, wincing too. She did not want to wake the beast.

“No need,” he said, his voice low and calm. Calmer than she ever heard. “Your touch is very gentle. Soothing.”

Had he just complimented her? She didn’t dare ask questions or else they might end up exactly where they’d been in the carriage. So she just kept working.

Blood cleaned away, she examined the cuts, trying to decide if one of them should be stitched.

She ran her finger over the skin of his cheek, the artist in her marveling at their differences. His was rough and yet very pleasant. “Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

Had she said that out loud? “I might need to stitch this one.”

“Don’t bother.”

“It is your face.”

“I’ve had worse.”

She’d like to argue that he was a duke, and he might wish to look the part, but he clearly didn’t care. Maybe that was how a man of his station could act—however he wished. What must freedom be like? “All clean.” She dropped the rag into the bucket.

“Thank you.”

“I’m in the room next door if you change your mind and wish for me to stitch the cut.”

“I won’t,” he mumbled.

She tried one more time. “But it will scar.”

He let out a rumble, his muscles tensing under her hands. “I don’t need mothering.”

“But—”

“I don’t need a fucking mother.”

She pivoted and left the room through the open door. The beast was awake again, and she’d remain tucked behind a locked door until he was gone.

She’d meant to have dinner, study her drawings. But now, a new drawing had appeared in her mind, and she knew without a doubt that she’d put it on paper before she went to bed.

THE NEXT MORNING, Rath held his hands in his head. For a brief moment after that fight, he'd been more relaxed. Content.

He'd like to think that it was because he'd needed exercise, but even he knew that some part of him had enjoyed protecting her. It turned out that a man who wished to chase the mouse also wanted to keep it for himself.

Then Anna had gotten pushy. He knew that was a wild exaggeration. But her behavior had still pissed him off.

He'd gone downstairs to have a whiskey, just to ease the physical pain and his irritation—and some mental anguish too. God damn Anna and her angelic features and soft nature. She reminded him of every part of himself he'd so carefully stamped out.

Why did she have to act all soft and sweet, reminding him about what his life had never had. Not once.

Well, that wasn't true. Other women had tried, he supposed. But he found their attempts cloying and obvious. Hers had been...genuine. And he hated it. Softness had meant weakness in his life. It was only his strength that had ensured he'd survived his mother's iron hand and red-hot anger.

Three hours later, he was completely numb and definitely drunk.

And paying for it this morning.

He rubbed his sore jaw as he stood outside Anna's door. Where the hell was she? Never mind that he'd only been waiting for a minute. She was proving far more troublesome than he'd imagined.

Had she been the fool that had entered the common room without him yesterday? Also yes, and he had every right to be angry. This was not the hangover. This was justifiable indignation...

She appeared in the doorway, a soft smile on her face.

Which only served to irritate him. What did she have to be happy about? She'd kept him waiting and besides, it was her fault he'd been beaten the day before.

Where did she get off being so beautifully vulnerable? She wore that vulnerability like a badge on her chest and men could spot it from great distances.

She needed five brothers to keep her safe, for fuck's sake.

"You're late." He scowled, running a hand through his hair before he offered her his arm to escort her down to the carriage.

Her answer was to purse her lips and refuse his arm and begin walking down the hall. Part of him was relieved. Her touch yesterday had riled him, and he wondered if it might again today. The light, gentle stroke of her hand had left his body humming the day before. Best not to find out if it would have the same effect again. "The sooner we leave the inn, the sooner we make it to the next."

She cast her eyes down and said nothing. They made their way outside to the waiting carriage. Lifting her skirts, she revealed slender ankles as she climbed in without his assistance and settled on the forward facing seat.

Then, she opened her book. He sat across from her while she took the coal out, beginning to lightly shade her latest drawing.

He dared a peek over the top of her hand to view her latest work, and saw a man sitting in a chair. Ugliness settled in his chest. Who had she drawn this time and why was he annoyed it wasn't him? "Are you going to be scratching all day again?"

A muscle in her cheek ticced. "Perhaps today it would be better if I rode with—"

"No," he barked out, irritation making him blow a breath right after the word. "Didn't I prove yesterday that you're safest with me?"

Her gaze did snap up then. "You think you proved that?"

"Of course I did." He gave a fist pump, a zing of energy making him feel slightly better. "That man—"

"Said two words," she huffed back.

"It wasn't going to end there."

"How would you know?" She lifted her chin, a bit of fire in her eyes.

He liked this side of her, far more than the little mouse. "Because you reek of weakness." He knew the words were harsh as hurt flashed in her eyes, darkening them.

"I do not," she said, but her voice sounded pitiful and scared.

"Yes, you do. Your meek, pitiful personality is why your brothers sent you away with me. They were tired of—"

“Don’t—” she cried, the distress in her voice setting off some alarm bell in his mind. She didn’t just sound angry, she sounded like a wounded animal that was fighting for its very life.

He reared back, already regretting his ill temper and the anguish he’d so easily inflicted. He rubbed his hands along his thighs, working up to his apology when she grabbed his cane and, lifting it up, leaned toward him.

For a moment, he thought she might hit him with it. He might deserve it.

But instead, she knocked on the wall behind his head. “Stop the carriage,” she cried. The driver did as she asked, pulling on the reins.

He heard the carriage behind them slow as well, the driver calling to the horses, making the reins jangle.

She tossed his cane in his lap and then, grabbing up her book and her little satchel with the charcoal, she opened the door and stomped out without another word or a single look back.

He shot after her, going from regret to another round of hot anger in a second. “Get back here.”

“No,” she said, not even looking back over her shoulder. He stomped toward her, quickly eating the ground between them.

“Anna.” He gnashed his teeth and made a grab for her. “You are to ride with me.” He caught her shoulder, only taking

a moment to admire how small it appeared in his large hand, before he spun her back toward him.

Ken Boxby chose that exact moment to open his carriage door. “Rath,” the man barked, leaping from the carriage without bothering to use the stairs.

Many considered Ken softer than Rath or their other friend, the Earl of Somersworth. But Rath knew there was an iron core deep inside Ken Boxby. The other man’s hand came down hard on Rath’s wrist, sending a shock reverberating through him.

His response was to swing his fist in a wide arc toward Ken’s head. Anna stumbled back, falling into the dirt, which was a good thing. Because his fist’s arc might have caught her if she hadn’t stumbled and Ken’s wide eyes said he knew it.

That should have slowed Rath’s hand, but it kept careening toward Ken, catching him clean in the jaw.

His friend’s head snapped back, Anna letting out a scream and Mira crying from the carriage door.

Ken recovered, charging at him like a bull, ramming into his stomach with a force that knocked all the air from his body. Both men tumbled to the ground, Ken landing on top of him.

He looked to the side to see Anna scrambling back, her eyes so frightened that her pupils completely covered the clear blue of her irises.

“Stop,” he wheezed, coughing. “I’ll stop.”

Ken gave him a hard shove to the ground. “You’re damn right you’ll stop.” Then he looked at his sister-in-law. “Anna,

in my carriage, please.”

Anna obeyed instantly, rushing into her sister’s arms.

Ken was up and pulling him by collar of his shirt toward his own carriage.

It wasn’t that Rath couldn’t escape. He grabbed Ken’s hand to keep the other man from choking him. “You don’t need to pull. I’m coming.”

“You’re fucking right you’re coming. The question is, where are we going? Because in this moment, I’m fairly certain the answer is back to London.”

“What the fuck?” He did rip himself from Ken’s grasp then.

“You’re saying that to me?” Ken’s eyes were so wide, his mouth so taut, Rath had a moment of fear for the man’s heart. “You put your hand on her.” And then Ken was jabbing his chest with a surprisingly sharp finger. “I know you don’t play by rules, but there are a few that are absolute and one of them is that you are the force that protects her, not the one that hurts her. Ever.”

Was that how it was supposed to work? How was he to even know? His parents had always been the people who inflicted wounds.

CHAPTER FIVE

A SOFT SOB tore from Anna's lips as Mira pulled her into the other carriage. "Anna," her sister Mirabelle cooed, holding Anna in her arms. "Don't cry."

"I try not to." Anna felt another sob welling in her throat.

Mira rocked her softly. "I know you do."

"I know it makes me weak. I know I'm not strong like the rest of you. It's one more way that I am not one of you." The words tumbled from her lips before she could hold them back.

It was a truth that their family rarely acknowledged, but it always lived in the shadows. Anna wasn't actually a Smith.

Everyone in the family knew it was true, though they didn't speak of it. But it was obvious in several known ways. She didn't fight like a Smith, didn't hold ground like a Smith, didn't even look like a Smith.

They all sported their father's dark hair and eyes, while she... She fingered the blond lock that never seemed to stay in her coif. The single wisp of hair always fell into her eyes and was a constant reminder of who she was not.

“You are our sister,” Mira exclaimed, giving Anna a hard squeeze. “Never forget that.”

She wouldn't, but she feared most of her brothers did. Could she even blame them? They must be so tired of taking care of weak Anna, the girl who was not even their full sister. They didn't let on, of course. They'd been raised to be loyal and strong.

“Do you think they all feel the way you do? About me?” Anna drew in a shuddering breath.

“There is no question that they do.”

She shook her head. “How can you be so sure? Ace takes care of me out of duty.”

“Ace does everything out of duty. He treats you no different than he does anyone else in the family.”

“Tris—”

“Tris is grumpy with everyone. That's who he is.” Mira pulled back to look her in the eyes. “Anna, try to understand. They treat us the same. You just...”

Anna knew. She just took their gruff natures more personally. The problem wasn't them. As usual, it was her. She was sensitive. Perhaps they did love her just as much. Maybe it was herself who wished that she was a real Smith and not an impostor.

Mira pulled Anna to her chest and rocked her softly until she willed herself to stem the tears. When they were under control, she sat up. “May I please ride with you today?”

Mira nodded. Unlike Anna, if Mira decided something, the people around her bent to her will. Especially Mirabelle's husband, Ken. "Do you need anything from the other carriage?"

"My paper and charcoal are on the ground. I dropped them when I fell. Would you get them, please?"

"Of course. I hope none of your drawings are ruined." Mira's jaw hardened. "If he lays another hand on you, I'll knock him out myself."

Anna sighed. If any other woman said that, she might not believe them, but Mira seemed to find a way. For her older sister, growing up with five rough and tumble brothers had made her stronger. Why hadn't it done the same for Anna?

Because they didn't love her the same way? Or because her father, an artist, had passed all his sensitive and silly qualities on to her?

She'd met him when she was young. Her mother, the mistress of an earl, had finally grown tired of the fact that the Earl of Easton came, planted another baby in her belly, dropped a few coins, and left again.

And so she'd met a man with heart...or at least, that's what Anna assumed from the one conversation she'd overheard between the two of them. Her mother and father had begun a brief affair that had quickly ended when the earl returned to his mistress's side.

She'd heard her mother demanding help from her father for his child. His gift? He'd painted her. That was it. And the

picture remained in the den to remind her of all she wasn't.

She'd sat for the portrait, saying nothing as he'd worked.

And then he'd disappeared again, and he hadn't returned when the earl had died. She'd never seen him again—rejected by the first man who ought to have loved her.

Her mother certainly had known how to pick them.

But that was in the past. And while she might have some feeling of ill will toward her father, and wonder about her brothers, there was one man she knew she hated with a burning passion: the Duke of Upton.

Mira came back with the pad and charcoal, and Anna hardly even looked at the drawings she'd already done as she flipped past them, but she heard Mira suck in her breath. “Who have you been drawing?”

“Nobody.” She waved her sister away and started a new picture. A man standing outside, hands on his hips, strong, proud, large, yet sinister. Horns came out of his head, a tale swished past one leg, his teeth were bared.

Her hand flew over the page, her gaze narrowed in concentration so that she hardly heard Mira speak. “That does make a statement.”

Her hand eased as she filled in the details around him. A broken carriage, a lonely dark country road, trees that were bent and a bit twisted.

“May I?” Mira asked, holding out her hand.

“Of course.” She handed the book to her sister. “What do you think?”

“It’s as stunning as everything you do and very telling. May I tear it out?”

Part of her wished to say no. But she gave a tentative nod and Mira carefully tore the page out of the book.

Then her sister opened the carriage door and stepped back outside.

RATH STARED AT KEN, his arms crossed, legs splayed wide where he sat on the rear-facing bench. “I told them I wasn’t the man for this job. I should be fighting Kingsley or Gyla, not playing nanny.”

Ken cracked a smile in his seat across from Rath. “You’d make the worst nanny in the history of nannies.”

He would. “See. I shouldn’t do it.”

“Then don’t,” Ken said, leaning forward. “Take her back to London and face the consequence of not completing the job.”

“To hell with you, Ken.” Because his friend was right. Rath was a lot of things, but he was not a man who left a job undone and he always owned up to his responsibilities.

“No. To hell with you.” Ken’s gaze grew hard, his usual charming smile gone. “No one in all the world is as important to Mira as Anna. Not even me. If you make an enemy of my wife, it doesn’t matter that we’ve been friends for years. You’ll

make an enemy of me too. Coupled with the Smiths, which means, Rath, you'll be out of the business. I won't fight for you on this."

Rath grunted, the words settling over him like a scratchy blanket. He didn't like them, he'd even like to yell at Ken, but he knew they were true.

If he did not do right by Anna, he'd lose his one chance to right the wrongs in his life. Erase his father's past and leave the home his mother had made him hate. "Fine. I'll be a good babysitter. I'll take myself to the country and sit around and pretend that once again, I haven't been shunted away while the real action happens in London."

"I'd wondered if your irritation on this trip was about dear old dad."

Was it? Wasn't that just shitty. And how was he the last to realize these sorts of things? But why did no one ever want him by their side? Why was he always being sent away?

Then there was his mother. Who had taught him to hurt the people he ought to be protecting? Christ...no wonder he found weakness so irritating. His had always been used against him.

The door to the carriage banged open, Mira appearing in the door looking spitting mad, lifting her skirts to climb up the steps.

Ken sprang forward to help her, and Rath had a moment to wonder how the woman had so thoroughly smitten his friend. Ken had just admitted that Mira loved someone more than him, and yet he supported her completely. He shrugged to

himself, likely he already knew the answer—she was good in bed.

But he hardly had time to look at Mira and assess whether or not that was the reason before her hand appeared in front of his face with a picture. She was shaking enough that he couldn't attend a single detail, and so he snatched the paper from her fingers.

The satisfaction of grabbing the page only lasted a moment before her hand pulled back and then she smacked him full across the face with enough force to make his ears ring.

“That was for Anna.”

He let out a gurgling roar, planting his hands on the seat to push up, but Ken's hand landed on the soft part of his neck, shoving him back against the seat. “Don't.”

“Let him up, Ken. I want him to look at it.” Mira pointed at the picture.

Ken eased his grasp and Rath stared at the other Smith sister, attempting to decide what he did next. He would care for Anna. Ken was right. But that didn't mean he needed to tolerate shit from her sister.

But Ken distracted him as his friend sucked in a breath. “Christ. I've never seen her draw anything like that before.”

He looked down at the paper too and his eyes widened, his irritation over the slap forgotten. It was him. His face, his craggy features, his muscular build. Only she'd cast him as the devil. And all around him, she'd twisted the bucolic country setting with a hellish light.

“How long did it take her to draw this?” Ken asked, still staring.

“Quarter of an hour,” Mira answered while giving Rath a dark, angry look. “She was inspired.”

His expression was twisted into ugly lines in the drawing, ones that made him wince with regret.

If he were honest, it was how he pictured his father. The devil that had ravaged Rath’s life. He didn’t like being seen that way and the guilt of it sat like a lead ball in his stomach.

He raked his hand through his hair. Being a man who took responsibility, he knew what he had to do. He disliked apologizing immensely, but he had no choice. He’d made the mess, but he’d clean it up. “Tell her to come back.”

“No.” Mira crossed her arms. “She rides with us.”

“But how am I going to keep her safe if she’s with you?”

Mira gave him the sort of look that was filled with so much vitriol, it could melt the bones of a lesser man. “I am far more concerned with keeping her safe from you.”

He let out a rumbling sigh. He had to complete the job. Ken was right. Which only meant one thing. “Well, this is going to get cozy.”

CHAPTER SIX

TWO DAYS of all four of them riding in the same carriage and Anna was ready to cry uncle. She might take Upton's abuse for a little more room to stretch her legs.

The duke had decided it was his duty to ride with her, and Mira had decided that the duke was the biggest threat of all, so the stalemate had all four of them locked in a tiny space.

The togetherness was not going well.

Not only did they have little room, but Mira and Rath spent all the day bickering. She'd almost preferred it when the duke was irritated directly with her. She knew how to ignore him, unlike her sister.

"Your feet are on my side again," Rath rumbled, nudging her sister's boot.

Mira wrinkled her nose. "They are not, your feet are just excessively large and taking up more than your share of the space."

"My feet are normal men's feet. It's yours that are excessively—"

"Rath," Ken warned.

And so it had gone on for days. Now Anna sighed, attempting to catch Rath's eye. Perhaps it was time to break into two carriages once again. It wasn't that Rath didn't still feel like a coiled snake ready to strike, but he did seem to do a better job of controlling whatever urge drove him.

But he didn't look at her. In fact, he'd not spoken a word or made eye contact since the scene outside the carriage.

Was she disappointed? He was a mean, terrible ogre, but she cared less about what he thought of her because she didn't like him. So she'd been free to argue with him. Or at least that was her assumption about why she was more assertive with him when riding in his carriage. It was a theory she wouldn't mind testing a bit more.

Then again, who wanted to poke at a coiled snake?

Mira, apparently. "My feet? I've never seen such a bulbous man. Don't you think, Anna?"

"She does not. She thinks I'm handsome," Rath snapped back.

Her sister gave a tutting noise of dissent. "No, she does not."

"I do, actually." Anna spoke her first words of the day and it had to be nearing late afternoon. She might be late to the argument, but her words silenced the carriage, and all eyes, even Rath's, turned to her.

"Him?" Mira asked, pointing a finger in Rath's direction, her lip curling into a sneer.

Anna hid a smile behind her hand, still holding the charcoal. It was gratifying to see her sister give Rath the business. But a little tiring too.

“One might even call me devilishly handsome,” he said, laughing at his own joke.

Was he referencing her drawing? Their eyes met and a frisson of something electric coursed down her spine. He certainly was both devilish and handsome.

And dangerous, a fact that had her gaze dropping to her lap once again. Still, tonight she’d find a way to discuss spending the last few days of their journey in two carriages. She’d rather face Rath’s surly nature alone than listen to him and Mira bicker.

They arrived at the next village just as dusk began to fall, and Anna stepped out of the carriage, admiring the beautiful streak of colors that lit the sky.

Mira and Ken walked ahead, Mira grumbling not so subtly about arrogant dukes, when a sharp cry echoed from the alley next to the inn.

She jolted, shrinking sideways, her body pressing into Rath’s. Which made her jolt again.

His arm was came her in a possessive hold that had her giving him a curious stare which had nothing to do with the noise. Was he less irritable about being her protector? “What do you think that was?” she asked, remaining against his side. The hard length of him was both reassuring and exciting.

“Cat? Child?”

She let out a breath, relieved, as a group of boys tumbled out of the alley. Still, Rath stepped in front of her, placing himself between her and them. Which was silly, but all the same, Anna had to acknowledge that if something dangerous had happened, Rath would not hesitate to protect her.

Her insides went a bit soft at the thought as Rath continued to stand in front of her.

He let out a growl, alerting her that the action was not done, and she hazarded a peek over his shoulder.

Another boy limped out of the alley, looking far worse than the others.

“You there,” Rath rumbled out, crossing his arms. For a moment Anna thought he was angry. She cringed a bit, but rather than yell, his voice softened. “What happened back there?”

“They jumped me,” the boy sniffled, pulling the back of his hand across his nose.

“You tuck or fight?”

His little shoulders straightened. “I fought. Got two of ‘em good.”

“Good boy,” Rath said.

The boy looked down at himself. “Me mum’s going to ‘ave my hide for this.”

Anna tapped Rath’s shoulder. “I’ll clean him up.”

He looked back at her, surprise making his eyebrows arch before he gave a quick nod of consent. His features softened

like she'd never seen, the look stealing her breath. He'd better go back to being a grump. This man could be devastating.

“Come on, then,” Rath said to the boy, waving him forward before escorting them both inside.

RATH LEANED IN THE DOORWAY, swallowing down a lump as he pretended indifference. After sitting the boy on a stool, Anna gently wiped away the dirt and the grime from his face, washing out several of his cuts.

As she worked, she made small, sympathetic noises. They pulled at some deep need in his chest. Did she even realize she made them? She'd done the same when she'd cleaned him up.

It had irritated him in the moment—not that she made them, but that he liked those little sounds. He didn't want to want her sympathy. He'd gone his whole life without sympathy, and it had become a point of pride that he didn't need it. That he'd overcome his desire for affection and coddling.

Except, watching this boy relax into her ministrations, for the first time in a long time, he wondered what sort of man he'd have become if he'd gotten a bit of that love and affection he'd craved as a child.

Something inside him unwound a bit at the idea.

“My shirt has a ‘ole,” the boy said and held up his elbow, showing Anna.

“I’ll give it a quick mend.” She hummed as she finished cleaning his face. “Your mother will notice eventually, but it’ll be a bit before she does and then you can just pretend you don’t know.”

She brushed her fingers over his exposed elbow and Rath recalled the memory of her hands skimming over his own skin.

It hadn’t been unpleasant. Instead, it had been soft like velvet with an undercurrent of excitement that had lasted for days. In fact, if he’d allowed himself, he might have liked it.

Shaking his head, he cast these thoughts aside. They were foolish.

She’d never touch him again and he was glad for it. Softness was a weakness, and he had no room in his life for such frivolities. He had a fortune to make and a dukedom to wash clean of his father’s sins and—

“You’ve another rip here. Take the shirt off and I’ll stitch this one too.”

“You sure?” the boy asked. “I don’t want to put you through any trouble.”

She chucked his chin, giving him a wink. “I’ve got five brothers.”

“Five!”

“That’s right.” She smiled, her face full of tender sweetness. “I’ve mended shirts nearly every day since I was about your age, and it’s been odd on this trip, not needing to complete the task.”

“So...you don’t mind?” The boy gave her a hopeful stare, the sort that told Rath he’d really prefer to avoid the trouble.

“Not at all. Off with the shirt.” She took the garment, reaching into her reticule and pulling out a needle and thread.

Women’s bags were full of useful items, he thought as she sat down with the shirt. Soft touches and careful stitches. Perhaps having a woman about wasn’t all bad.

“My brother Triston Smith is a boxer.”

A moment of fear trickled down his spine. They ought not to tell anyone her identity.

The boy jumped from the stool. “Not *the* Triston Smith?” he half-shouted—his excitement completely evident.

Then again, this boy might love Anna for the rest of his life.

Anna nodded and threaded the needle. “That’s right.” She set down the shirt, standing back up. “And he told me that when an opponent has a longer reach than you, you need to duck low and aim for the body.” She ducked down, pretending to throw a punch at the little boy’s stomach.

Rath rolled his eyes to the ceiling in a show of disapproval, but honestly, her form wasn’t that bad. “Boy,” he called. “What’s your name?”

“Nathan.”

“Nathan, come here.” He waved the boy over.

Warily, the boy started forward. But Rath only shook his head. The kid reminded Rath of himself at that age. He was a

scrappy little thing and fighting alone against difficult odds. “I’m going to take a swing at you. I won’t hit. You practice the move.”

Nathan’s gaze lit as he hustled over, doing exactly as Rath asked. Three attempts and he had it, and Anna went back to repairing the shirt.

Rath watched her with one eye while he tussled with the boy, her stitches as quick and sure as her imaginary punch had been. She’d make a good mother to boys despite her timid nature, he thought, finishing with Nathan. That knot that had been slowly unwinding in his chest unraveled even more. A child needed a bit of tenderness. And as much as he prized being tough, even he was aware that sometimes he took it too far. Maybe if he’d had a bit of love...

The boy put his shirt back on and hustled off to return home, and Rath gave Anna a quick jerk of his chin before he left the room to start for his.

But long after he’d settled into his bed, over and over he remembered the feel of Anna’s hands on his skin and the sight of her tending a little boy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANNA SAT ACROSS FROM RATH. The silence was far more comfortable than the bickering had been.

Ken and Mira now drove ahead of them, and the separate carriages had allowed Anna and Rath to fall into an easy silence.

“Do you mind if I draw?” she asked, almost hesitant to interrupt the peace.

“No,” he answered, not even looking her way.

With a nod, she pulled out her supplies. She’d be happy to arrive at his home in a few days’ time. She missed a real bed and her fingers itched to paint.

Clearing her throat, she determined to draw something other the man who sat across from her. He was infuriating despite his rare moments of kindness.

Like how he’d been with the boy the night before. That had been...heartwarming. But she couldn’t forget that he was the man who’d also nearly knocked her head off when he’d been swinging for Ken. And he yelled—a lot.

She needed to stop thinking about him. And why did she obsessively draw him? It was as much a mystery to her as it would surely be to anyone else.

Art had taken over her mind and, in these times, the only answers appeared on the page, not in her thoughts. So rather than try to determine her feelings, she began a drawing of the scene outside the carriage. It was bucolic, with rolling fields and wildflowers. The sun shone through the large puffs of clouds. It was a perfect landscape that would take her hours to complete.

Fixing the picture in her mind, she began, her charcoal brushing over the page as everything else melted away—even the man across from her.

She drew tiny flowers and rolling hills. Trees that stood straight and tall, and large skies filled with pillowy clouds.

Only one cloud took on sharp strong edges. Was she afraid a storm was brewing? She paused, squinting at the page.

“What’s wrong?” Rath asked, sitting up straighter.

“Why would you think something was wrong?”

“Because.” He leaned toward her, his brow an angry slash. “You’ve been working without interruption for the past three hours.”

Her own eyes widened in surprise. Had it been that long? And what about the clouds bothered her? “It’s just that the scene was coming along fine, and suddenly some cloud, of all things, is giving me trouble.”

“Trouble?” One of his brows lifted. “The only trouble clouds usually give is when they leak rain.”

“I know.” She squinted down at the drawing. “That’s what I thought too.”

He leaned over, looking at the picture. “I see your problem.”

“You do?”

He nodded, sitting back in his seat. “That last one isn’t a cloud, it’s a face.”

Confusion knit her brow as she looked down at the page, a startled cry falling from her lips. He was right. Not only was it a face, but it was also *his* face.

She’d drawn him...again.

Had he noticed the cloud resembled him? His gaze was focused back out the window. He didn’t appear concerned or irritated, so perhaps he hadn’t.

Perhaps because he’d been looking at the...er...face upside down?

She breathed out a sigh of relief, quickly turning the page. Some sheep grazed in the field as they passed, and she determined to draw them instead.

She would not obsess about the duke. If that’s what she was doing. Was she?

She couldn’t say.

But as she drew sheep upon sheep, a dog appeared in the picture and then a shepherd with his hood drawn up. She

started to fill in the face but suddenly the dripping of rain hit the top of the carriage and she stopped, looking up. “Oh. Perhaps that was meant to be a storm cloud after all.”

Rath chuckled then. “Perhaps it was.”

Hours had passed, but he seemed to know exactly what she spoke of. She put away her charcoal and closed her book of drawings as more drops hit the roof. The sky had grown dark and ominous. “Do you think there will be a lot of rain?”

But even as she asked the question, the rain began to beat more frequently and soon it was pummeling the carriage in a deluge so loud, Anna could hardly hear her own thoughts.

The driver called over the noise, “There’s a tree up ahead next to the river. I think I’ll take cover, Your Grace.”

“Good idea,” Rath called back, when a strange noise filled the carriage. It was a rushing sound, and she craned her neck to see what it might be.

Almost immediately she gasped when she realized that the river snaking along the road was flooding its banks and now they were heading directly for a rush of water.

Rath must have seen the flood at the same moment she did because when she gasped, he let out a string of curses so colorful she momentarily forgot the danger, staring agape. “Rath—”

But his name was cut short as the water hit the carriage and vehicle tipped wildly, careening sideways.

She screamed as she slid across the seat, crashing into the far wall.

Her hands just managed to keep her head from cracking against the wood, but pain exploded in the back of her left hand.

Thank goodness it wasn't her right.

The carriage tipped again, the horse giving a screaming cry, and Anna began to slide again in the other direction.

This time, however, she crashed into nothing but the hard wall of Rath's chest. His arms came about her, his body curling around hers as they slammed into other side of the carriage. She hardly felt the impact, her body protected in the cocoon of his.

She wrapped her arms about him, taking shelter in his strength, until the vehicle finally came to a halt.

With barely a pause, he was lifting her, tossing open the door and carrying her outside.

The rain pelted her, drenching her in an instant, while Rath made a dash for the tree, carrying her through the floodwaters and onto higher ground. She felt him straining against the water so she tightened her arms about his neck, her body crushed to his, the heat of him the only thing keeping her warm until they made it to the cover of the thick branches.

And then he set her down on her feet, the ground still wet under her boots, and began to run his hands all over her body. For a moment she stiffened—why was he touching her like this?

But his hands were light, skimming every part of her arms, her back, her neck, and finally bending down to check her

legs. He stole her breath with the pulse his hands on her caused. And that's when she realized.... He was checking her for injuries.

His care started another ache in her chest. Anna brought her hands to his shoulders, resting her fingers lightly on the breadth of them. "I'm all right," she softly said over the beat of the rain. "Only my left hand is injured."

He stood, his gaze catching hers as he stared into her eyes. A lump formed in her throat at the intensity and heat she found in the depths of his eyes, and her pulse skipped several beats.

And then, ever so gently, he took her hand in his, lifting it up for inspection. His gaze finally left hers, averting to her hand as he touched the bones, turning her hand this way and that, his touch so gentle that she could hardly breathe for the contrast.

"It doesn't look broken."

She'd have to take his word for it. As she looked at him, studying her hand, she couldn't feel a thing but this driving need to shift closer and take shelter against the width of his chest.

CHRIST, the possibility of Anna being hurt had frightened Rath half to death.

It wasn't his own safety that he worried for. He'd been in far worse scrapes with startling regularity. But Anna was delicate, and she needed protection.

He thought back to the day that he'd suggested Boxby take both women. What would have happened if Boxby had a tipping carriage with two ladies in it? Anna would have had to fend for herself...and Ace had known that.

He grimaced, thinking of her slamming into that wall, and he pulled her closer, his gaze scanning the horizon. Boxby's carriage stood unharmed a hundred yards ahead and well clear of the floodwaters.

Ken appeared in the door of his carriage, his gaze sliding from Rath to the vehicle Rath and Anna had just exited.

Rath looked at it too and winced. There would be no driving it from here. One wheel was bent at an odd angle, the carriage sloping down on the right front.

Damn. Replacing or repairing it was a loss he could ill afford.

Anna's arms wrapped about him, her hands splaying out on his back as she rested her chin on his shoulder. "Are you all right?" she asked in that soft, soothing voice. One that seemed to calm him like no other.

Had she felt his tension when she'd asked? The knots in his muscles loosened. "Fine."

She pulled away to peer up into his face. Need coursed through him as her blue eyes met and held his. "Your heart. It's beating very quickly."

He eased back from her, knowing that he'd let her too close. Anna was an assignment, a means to an end, and one he'd begrudgingly entered into. The last thing he needed was

to care. Those sorts of feelings would lead nowhere good. He didn't even like this woman and he... But he stopped.

He didn't *not* like her, either. When had that happened?

It was somewhere between her drawing him like a devil and patching up a small boy that he'd understood Anna wasn't just a mouse. She had vision and compassion and, he couldn't forget, the body of Venus underneath her shapeless clothes.

He'd touched her everywhere today, and with no corset, he'd felt every lush curve of her.

Still, he kept all women at a distance, especially gentle, sweet ones. He neither wanted nor could afford to go soft now. They were in a war with Gyla and Kingsley, close to winning, and the bounty could undo all his father's sins.

"I should check the carriage." He needed to move this interaction along, break the intimate spell that surrounded them.

She nodded. "I'll stay here?"

"No," he said, then tightened his grip again, lifting her as he pressed her to his chest. Mistake. Her body melded to his from hip to stern, her arms wrapped about his neck.

Every muscle tightened in response, her soft curves fitting against him with such lush decadence that he had the urge to slide a hand down and cup her ass, give a cheek a good squeeze to see how it felt.

He'd already gotten a feel of her breast, and if her ass was anything like—

“Rath,” Ken called, interrupting his sinful thoughts. “How bad do you think it is?”

“Bad enough,” he yelled back. The rest of today and tomorrow would be spent in Ken’s cozy carriage for four. He sighed.

Anna gave him a look of concern. “Can you fix it, do you think?”

He shook his head, stepping out from the cover of the trees and once again carrying her through the heavy rain.

Reaching Ken’s carriage, he wrenched open the door, setting her inside. “I’ll be back.”

Her gaze met his from the doorway, her eyes filled with hesitation as she gave a tentative nod before moving deeper inside.

He closed the door behind her, glad to see her safe and out of his arms, and he jogged back to his vehicle. Sloshing through the foot-deep water, he didn’t need to see the bottom of the wheels to know he’d broken an axle.

“Shit,” he growled out, looking up at the driver.

The man pulled his collar up tighter. “Drop me in the next village. I’ll see it repaired.”

Rath jerked his chin. “Thank you.” If he had enough funds to leave the man, he would. But as it stood, he’d have to return to the village to pay for the repair. He doubted he had enough on his person.

“Let’s unhook the horse,” Ken said, jamming his hat tighter on his head.

The men made quick work of the job and then, tying the animal to the back of Ken’s carriage, started their journey once again with all four of them crammed together. The rain had lightened, but Rath’s mood remained dark and grey.

Anna sat across from him, neither drawing nor talking. She stared out the window, her profile as lovely as the rest of her, staring somewhere far away.

Mira wrapped her arms about her sister, warming her as she shivered from the cold, and he had a moment where he wished he could sit on Anna’s other side and do the same.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANNA STEPPED FROM THE CARRIAGE, glad beyond measure to be out of the small space. And then, as the afternoon sun lit the sky, she was even happier that she'd come.

Rath's home was stunning. There was no other word for the stone structure. Cranston wasn't symmetrical. There was a large, square, more traditional section with a connected addition that looked more like a manor house.

Anna loved it. It was complicated, craggy, and a bit intimidating...she looked over at Rath, who frowned at the building. Rath's home was exactly like him.

"I hate this place," he muttered under his breath.

Her eyes widened in response. "Why?" She looked back to see that Ken and Mira hadn't yet exited the carriage. Mira had fallen asleep and was likely slow to wake.

"Because." His voice took on that menacing tone. "All my worst memories are here."

She nipped at her lip and debated asking. What memories? Had his childhood been difficult? Was that what made him

hard and angry? “I’m sorry for that. I had the luxury of moving from the place that held all my worst memories.”

He looked over at her. “That so?”

She nodded. “Before we moved to our home in Cheapside, we lived in the very heart of the West End in a tenement house with rats so large...” She shivered. “I was glad to leave it behind.”

Rath stared at her silently for several seconds, his face unreadable. “I’d imagine.”

“I’m sorry you don’t like this place,” she said, shifting the conversation back to him. “But the outside is beautiful. A place like this incites the imagination.”

He frowned at the structure again. “My father put my mother and me here because he knew it was the one place no one would bother to look for us.”

Her brows lifted. “In the dukedom?”

“That’s right.”

“But they were married. Even then?”

He scowled at her, and she knew the question had been too personal. Of course they’d been married. He wouldn’t be the duke if they hadn’t been. But still...she was digging into his past.

“He married her. He just didn’t tell anyone about her or me.”

Her mouth formed a small *o* as she processed those words. “I see.”

“I know. It’s why I said it.”

His voice was quiet, with a rawness she’d never heard. Her throat ached in sympathy and she swallowed hard. She didn’t talk about her past, either, except with Mira. Still, she was tempted to tell him her own story, though she didn’t. He might have been a hidden child, but he was a legitimate one. She wasn’t even the bastard of a peer. She was the step-bastard in a family of bastards. Daughter to a poor artist who hadn’t cared enough to do more than paint her one time.

“Do you stay in the other ducal estates?”

“No. Not really. Only two others remain in my possession. The London town house and the ducal seat. I hate the second more than I dislike this place.” She didn’t ask, but not because she wasn’t curious—the rawness in his voice had hardened and she was beginning to learn that this was not a moment to push him.

“I could love this place,” she said instead. “It’s got real character.”

He shook his head. “Agree to disagree.”

“That’s fine with me. I’ll take any form of agreement I can get from you.”

He looked over at her for a moment before he started a low chuckle, and then it bloomed louder into a full, throaty laugh, until she was laughing too. “Well said.”

“Thank you.” She gave a side glance as he offered his elbow. He’d never been so gentlemanly, and it was so out of character that the act caused her to hesitate.

He scowled again. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Still frightened of me?”

She huffed. “You carried me around two days ago like a travel bag. I’m not afraid of touching you.”

“What, then?”

“It’s odd, that’s all, you doing something so mundane as offering your elbow.” His brows lifted as she placed her hand on his arm. His very muscular arm that flexed under her hand and sent a riot of butterflies through her stomach.

Ken and Mira finally exited, and the group started forward up the stairs and into the house, where she was quickly shown to her room.

It was exceptionally large and rather grand despite the age of the castle. She looked at the large four-post bed and then the massive wardrobe, wondering if all the guest accommodations were so spacious.

To her right a doorknob rattled and then the door swung in. It was not the door she’d entered in from the hall, and she stepped back for a moment, wondering if there was a servant’s quarters off the room.

But it was Rath who appeared in the doorway. She flushed, not sure what to do. She’d been in his room at the inn. This was somehow different. But while she stared at him, he lifted a key. “Connecting door.”

“I see that.” She peeked around him to look into the very masculine room beyond, with its dark wood and heavy, deep-blue bed curtains. “Why are we in connecting rooms?”

“So that I might keep an eye on you.”

She cleared her throat, not sure how she felt about the duke having so much access to her person. In the best of circumstances, he discomfited her, and in the worst... “It’s a very large room.”

“It was my mother’s.” He pointed to a painting in the corner. “And that is a portrait of my father.”

Anna blinked at it, noting some damage to the canvas. “It’s ripped.” She wasn’t sure what else to say. The man in the picture bore a striking resemblance to Rath, only harder and less—Rath would hate her for thinking this, but when she looked at Rath, there was a softness in his eyes that this painting did not have.

“Not ripped. My mother threw knives at it for a time.”

“Oh.” Anna sucked in her breath, her gaze swinging to Rath. They had this in common: abandoned by their fathers. “That is...”

“She hated him. And as I got older, she hated me too.”

Anna nodded. “I can see her dilemma.”

“What can you see?” His voice had grown sharp, but for some reason that didn’t worry her anymore. She’d grown accustomed to his hard edge.

“You look a great deal like him. I would imagine the older you became, the more of a reminder you were.” She thought the same of her own reflection. The older she became, the more she saw her father rather than her siblings. She hated it.

Rath cocked his head to the side. “You really think that’s the reason?”

“What else would it be?” But her heart had sped up in her chest. Because she knew the other reasons. Her list read...too weak, too different, too blond. The things that she was certain her siblings noticed and disliked. His list likely included too angry, too rough. Was he like his father in that regard?

He shrugged. “Don’t know. She never said.”

Her heart turned in her chest. She found herself moving closer to him, their eyes meeting.

As she approached, he held out his hand and, without hesitation, she threaded her fingers through his. A current of warm energy passed between them. “It wasn’t you. It was always him.”

His fingers squeezed hers, their gazes still locked, so much intimacy passing between them that she could hardly breathe.

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing, before he let her fingers go. “You of all people know I can be rough.” So that was the problem.

“I also know about resentful mothers,” she whispered, clasping her hands together.

“You must,” he said, setting the key on the table, “lock the door any time you like, but I’d prefer if you leave it open as

much as possible. I won't invade your privacy. I just want access should the worst happen."

"The worst?"

"Monsters under the bed," he said, before turning and walking back through the connecting door, closing it behind him.

She looked up at the painting again. This place was filled with Rath's monsters, that was for certain.

RATH SPENT the next day prowling around the estate like a caged animal. Rain had begun to fall, and it trapped him in the house, each room holding memories that made him angry, restless.

He avoided his guests. *Guests*. Was that what he called a woman he'd been hired to guard?

He swiped a hand through his hair, dismissing the question. It didn't matter. He didn't trust himself to be gentle with Anna and he'd not allow his anger to touch her again. It wasn't fair and...

It made him feel as though he was repeating his own past. All this time he'd been actively attempting to correct his father's mistakes without even noticing he'd been allowing anger to rule his life, exactly like his mother.

Still. It bothered him a bit that Anna was working her way into his thoughts. He wasn't supposed to care about her

feelings, just her safety.

He sat in the library, the place his mother had often taken him to hear about his latest crime and then dole out his punishments. The belt for fighting, crop for stealing, fists for yelling. He rolled his shoulders, attempting to unknot them.

The walls were lined with musty old books, most of them not cracked open for years. Could he burn them? Toss them into the fire one at a time until they all turned to ash? Would the room smell better?

Would he feel better?

The door swished open, and he looked in time to see Anna enter. She didn't seem to notice him as her gaze traveled up the two-story room, taking in the ladder that slid along the wall. "Oh my."

"Don't sound impressed," he grumped. "It stinks in here. No one has properly cleaned this room in years."

"Someone loved this place once." Her gaze drifted along the walls again.

"My grandmother. Apparently, it was her favorite property."

"What was she like?" Anna asked, trailing a finger along the spines that lined a low shelf.

Why was he even answering these questions? Where was Ken, and why was Rath making conversation with Anna when he'd been promised he wouldn't have to?

But he and Anna had moved past that, hadn't they? She was no longer just the woman he guarded, she was one he actually liked. The first in a very long time. "Don't know. She died before I was even born. Not that I would have met her either way. Never met my father's father and he lived until I was sixteen."

Anna spun toward him. "I met my father once. Probably would have been better if I hadn't."

His brows drew together in confusion. "You only met the earl once?"

But she turned back to the books. "It would take a great deal of effort to shine up all these volumes."

"And an army of staff I don't have."

She nodded. "We didn't have any staff until very recently."

"Who cleaned and cooked?"

"Mostly Mira and me," she said quietly, drawing something in the dust on one shelf.

He shook his head. "When I first met you, I thought you were a princess."

Her finger stilled. "My brothers likely share your view. They're kind enough to not say."

"If you cooked and cleaned for them, I doubt it."

She cast her eyes down, but he noted that her mouth was unusually tight. "I'm artistic and I don't like conflict. Everyone had to tiptoe around me when the rest of them liked to make a whole lot of noise."

He winced, knowing that he'd given her a difficult time for all the same reasons. The other day, she'd had words of wisdom that had made him feel marginally better. That his mother had hated his father and not Rath himself. He wished he had similar words of comfort for her now, but he was no good at this sort of thing. He tried anyway. "I don't think the world could hold another loud Smith."

Her eyes lifted to his, the corners pulled tight in pain. "Perhaps not."

He let out a long breath, trying again. "They might like that you're different."

"I doubt it," she whispered, her gaze dropping to the floor again. She drew in a deep breath before she looked at him. "Would it make you feel better or worse to clean this place?"

He shook his head. "No idea."

She looked up at the shelves. "Activity would be good. And cleaning might make it feel more like yours. Then again, if you hate it enough, you might want to destroy it rather than mend it."

His brows lifted in surprise. "How right you are."

"Want to try cleaning it first? If it makes you feel worse, you'll have your answer. You can always destroy later."

That was rather logical and not a bad plan. He rose, fetching a bucket of water and several rags.

When he came back, Anna had a stack of decrepit books.

"What are those?"

“Too far gone,” she murmured. “Even if it’s raining now, we can burn them later.”

That thought really did make him feel better, and dipping the rag into the water, he wrung it out, starting to wipe a dust covered shelf.

Anna shifted away from the shelf, dusting and cleaning the furniture.

With his hands busy, he really did begin to unwind, and at some point, Mira entered the room too. She had brought a broom, and began to sweep the floors.

“A broom is your favorite tool,” he murmured to Mira with a chuckle. He’d seen her break up two fights using a broom—one on the way here and the other when she and Ken had been courting.

She gave him a cheeky grin. “I do believe you’re right. So useful.” Then she wrinkled her nose. “Why don’t the servants clean this room?”

He sighed. “I told them not to. I have a limited staff here and...” It was one of his least favorite rooms.

Anna looked out the large windows to the grounds beyond. “It could be beautiful.”

He shook his head. “To me, it might always be ugly.”

Mira looked at Anna, and she gave a tiny shake of her head, warning Mira not to ask. Which he appreciated. He didn’t know what had gotten into him, sharing all these feelings. Something inside him was breaking open and he wasn’t quite sure how to seal it back up.

CHAPTER NINE

ANNA WOKE the next morning to the sight of sunshine. She rose from bed, hurrying to dress. She rushed to the breakfast room, and with no one up and about, she was free to have nothing more than a piece of toast and cup of tea. She was eager to be outside.

She'd been looking at the grounds from the windows, and after two days, she'd not miss the chance to explore.

Stepping out into the morning sun, she tipped her face up to the warm rays, hugging her supplies to her chest.

She hoped to paint a landscape that she might leave with Rath. Something so that he might see the beauty in this place. But first she'd draw, finding the perfect picture to move to canvas.

She wasn't sure when she'd decided she hoped to change his mind about his home, but the anger that filled him was blackening his entire life. That she could sense.

And this place seemed to be at the core of his darkness.

Rushing through a garden, she moved further out onto the property. The overgrown beds were not going to capture what

was beautiful about this place.

She moved to the edge of the landscaped area about the house, woods to the left, a field to the right. She'd seen from the second-story window that at the far end of the sloping field there was a pond fed by a river.

A trail cut through the field, which she was certain would lead right to the water.

She half ran along the path, her feet light under her. Ahead the water shimmered, the sun glinting off its surface.

Stopping, she held her breath, just admiring the sight as the trees beyond danced in the autumn breeze.

"Hello there," an unfamiliar voice called, and she jumped, not expecting to meet anyone. Some unease slid through her as she turned to see a man coming toward her. "I live on the neighboring property." He pointed toward the woods. "Fairfield's the name."

"Hello," she replied with a fair bit of disquiet. She'd not told anyone she was coming out and she thought of Rath's insistence that they have adjoining rooms. What would he think if he knew she'd left the house and run right into a stranger?

"An artist?" he asked, pointing toward her supplies. "How wonderful."

"Thank you," she answered quietly, starting to move slowly back the way she'd come.

He held up a hand, his steps halting, his smile easy. He was a handsome man with brown hair and eyes, none of the hard

edges that Rath boasted.

“I fancy myself an artist as well,” he said, then chuckled. “Well, that’s not true. I’d like to be. My mother was quite good, and I’ve been working on it but...”

She nodded absently when a disturbance along the water caught her gaze. A break. She squinted into the sun and saw someone’s head rising out of the water.

Even at this distance, she recognized Rath’s rough features and relief made her limp.

Mr. Fairfield saw him too, his hands dropping. “Saturday there is a fair in the village. A few artists will have booths set up. You should come.”

Anna ripped her gaze away from Rath and back at Fairfield. “Most kind. Thank you for telling me.”

He gave her a warm smile. “My pleasure. It was nice to meet you...”

“Lady Anna,” she murmured, with a curtsy. “The pleasure is mine, Mr. Fairfield.”

Fairfield turned and disappeared into the woods, Anna’s gaze only following him for a moment before she glanced back toward Rath. He’d risen from the lake, his chest bare, his muscles flexing. The sight of him nearly stole her breath.

His body was so powerful, the strength of him rippled like the surface of the water. Rath moved with a fluid, untamed grace that suited the land around him.

Handsome in London, here...

The man was devastating.

Rath caught sight of her, and his knees lifted higher as he charged out of the water. She suddenly wondered if he wore anything on his bottom half, but as his hips emerged from the water, she noted that he wore breeches still.

She let out a long breath, relief and a tinge of disappointment pushing her gaze back up.

“What are you doing here?” his rough voice cut the space between them.

She found herself rushing toward him, not scared but happy to see him. “Should I tell you before I leave the house?”

“Yes,” he growled.

“My apologies,” she said as she came to the edge of the water. “The grounds looked so beautiful I was carried away.”

He stopped, knee-deep in the water still. “You shouldn’t be wandering outdoors alone.”

“I know,” she said. “I was coming here, and I ran into one of your neighbors, Mr. Fairfield.”

“Fairfield? He was here?”

She shook her head. “He was. But it made me realize I shouldn’t have left the manor without an escort.” She shifted. “But since I’m here now...” and she held up her book.

His shoulders dropped. “You’re lucky I swam the length several times and now I’m tired.”

“Several times?” She peered over him, looking at the far shore. “You don’t mean all the way over there?”

He looked back too, that masculine chuckle making another appearance. “All the way over there. Three times.”

“No wonder you look like that...” She pointed at his rippling muscles, more akin to sculpture than man.

He gave her a dazzling smile, one she’d never seen before, and her pulse fluttered wildly at the sight. “You like how I look?”

What woman wouldn’t? But thinking that made heat flush in her cheeks. “Perhaps while I’m here, I can walk more. I have an artist’s body, I think, always sitting.”

His smile disappeared. “You have a perfect body.”

The words and his tone of assurance surprised her. “How would you know?”

“I’ve felt it.”

That heat in her cheeks traveled down her neck and lower still, warming her in all sorts of unmentionable places. “Oh.”

“Draw if you want. I’ll sit under the tree.” And then he came out of the water, wrapping himself in a large blanket.

But despite the fact that he covered all his muscles, she kept seeing them, rippling with power as he left the water.

She began to draw, the lake, the trees, the sky, the shore, but before she knew it, a figure appeared in the water, rising like Zeus himself.

RATH WATCHED ANNA WORK, her hand flying over the page, her gaze jumping from the scene stretched out before her to the page and back again. He waited near an hour, just enjoying the sight of her.

And the sound. The scratch of her charcoal had irritated him when they'd first met, but today it combined with the rustle of the wind and the exhaustion of the swim to lull him into a state somewhere between wakefulness and sleep.

Not wanting to leave her unguarded, he rose, needing to shake off the listlessness. He found himself approaching Anna. Despite the brushing sound his still-damp breeches made, she didn't notice his movements, so engrossed in her task she didn't even pull the book to her chest.

The drawing stole his breath.

If the devil picture had bothered him, this one had his chest puffing in pride.

He rose from the lake, looking like a god among men, with the water parting for him, spraying on either side, the trees somehow appearing both straight and yet growing toward him in some sort of deference.

Even the birds above seemed to ring him, like they answered his call.

His body was exaggerated in its perfection, and his face... with every drawing she did, he seemed to grow more handsome.

Was it strange that she drew him so much? He had no idea.

The blanket that had been about his shoulders slid down his back and he caught it at his waist, securing it about his hips. “You do make this place look beautiful.”

She jumped, a small smudge appearing on the page. A mark he instantly regretted. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She used her little finger to blend the mark, and her cheeks flushed with color. “I didn’t know you’d moved.”

He was glad she hadn’t known. “Do you need to remain out here to keep working?”

“No, why?”

He put a hand over his bare stomach. “My body is protesting the exercise combined with a lack of food.”

She gave him a soft smile, her eyes dancing. “I see.” She stood, stretching. “I can finish this at home. In fact, I can probably call it done.”

Home. It was an odd word, considering she’d been here two days. But one that didn’t displease him.

She’d been right about the library. Scrubbing it had made it feel less like his mother’s space and more like his.

It had helped when he’d looked at the desk and said, “I hate that thing.” Anna had looked up from the shelf she was dusting and matter-of-factly declared, “Add it to the burn pile.”

Add it to the burn pile...

Burn it.

“I look like I belong in that scene,” he said as Anna stretched, holding the open book out in her left hand.

“You feel like you belong here. Terrible parents aside, this place suits you.”

She started ahead of him down the path, her hips softly swaying along with the grasses. The place suited her too.

But he kept those words to himself. “You can keep working on your piece, if you’d like, while I’ll keep cleaning. The library is well lit.” He didn’t admit that he just wanted to watch her.

There was something so soothing about watching her work.

She looked back at him, smiling. “I think I’m done for the day. Back in London, I’d draw in the early morning before the rest of the house was up.”

“And then you’d set yourself to chores.”

“That’s right.”

“You don’t have to clean here.”

“I don’t mind.” She gave him another easy smile over her shoulder. “I like a bit of activity too and I’m enjoying transforming your library. It’s a work of art all on its own.”

The house came into view, the stone beaming in the sun. He’d never thought of this place as suiting him or as a work of art and he’d never considered transforming it into his own.

Perhaps there were times, however, when change was the best medicine. He looked at the woman walking before him.

What else might he be willing to change?

CHAPTER TEN

THAT AFTERNOON, they worked their way through cleaning the library, the plumes of dust filling the sunlit air.

Anna stopped, admiring the swirling patterns.

“What are you looking at?” Rath asked. She turned to him, noting that he’d stopped piling newspapers onto the grate next to the fire, his gaze fixed on her. When had he become so interested in her observations?

“It’s silly. I just like the way dust looks when it moves through the air.”

He came to stand next to her and she swirled her arm, making the air move all the more.

“Hmm,” he muttered, “I see what you mean.”

She pointed to their growing pile of refuse. “When Mira and Ken return from the village, we could start a fire in the garden.”

He looked over at the desk that was stacked with the few books that couldn’t be saved. “I’ll have to break that thing into pieces first.”

That made her giggle. “That will be a hardship, I’m certain.”

He smiled too. “You know it won’t.”

“Will you break it apart in here?”

“No. Outside.” Then he gave her a cheeky look. “Want to help?”

“Help?” Her heart skipped a beat.

“Breaking things can be fun.”

She cocked her head, considering his words. “I have always found violence disconcerting.”

“This is controlled. Not angry.” He crossed to the desk, studying its surface. “Maybe a bit angry.”

She came up behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Tell me.”

“She’d bend me over this desk for my punishments,” he replied, his voice flatter than she’d ever heard it before. “Crop to the back. Paddle to my ass, depending on the transgression.”

Anna didn’t think, she just wrapped her arms about his middle and pressed herself to his back. His arms crossed over hers, pulling her tighter against him and tipping his head back to rest on hers.

“I think you’d better break it. You deserve to watch it splinter into a thousand pieces and I shall rejoice with you.”

He was quiet for a bit before he picked up his head and turned to look at her. “Break it.”

“That’s right.”

“I like your plan. But I want you to splinter it first. It was your idea.”

She blinked in surprise. She wasn’t certain she even could. “What would you use for a tool?”

“An ax,” he answered. “I can have the butler help me take it out to the courtyard.”

The creaking of the door kept her from answering and she took a hasty step back, not that Ken and Mira noticed. As they walked into the room, they were busy speaking to one another.

“How was the village?” Anna asked, pressing her hands down her loose skirts.

“Wonderful,” Mira answered. “And guess what? There is a fair in two days.”

“We should attend.” Ken gave her a beaming smile. “It would be nice to be out after the arduous journey here.”

She looked at Rath and he gave a quick nod of approval. “I’ll escort you myself.”

“That would be very nice,” she murmured, warmth spreading through her. Art was like breathing for her and her desire to make it a larger part of her future still beat right along with her heart. What a treat it would be to look at others’ work.

Ducking her chin, she turned to Ken. “But we’ve another project for today.” And she spread her arms wide over the desk.

A quarter hour later, the men had moved the large piece of furniture out into the courtyard that bordered the gardens.

“Tell me again why we’re doing this?” Ken asked, his face red from the effort.

It was Rath’s turn to look away, ducking his chin. Anna stepped in front of him, blocking him from view. “It’s a cathartic exercise.”

“Cathartic in that it’s turned my muscles to custard?” Ken asked.

“Cathartic in that we’re going to break it to pieces and then burn it,” Anna added, looking over her shoulder at Rath’s face. He gave her a tight nod and then turned away.

“I’ll get the ax,” he said as he walked toward a shed.

“Tell me again why we’re destroying perfectly good furniture,” Mira whispered.

“It holds bad memories,” Anna whispered back. “He needs to destroy it.”

“When did you start helping him?” Ken asked, scratching his chin. “Doesn’t he drive you mad?”

Anna shrugged. “If we’re staying here for some length of time, it would help if he wasn’t prowling around like a bear in a cage.” But that wasn’t the reason. She hurt with him. For him. And she’d very much like to find a way to exercise her own demons, but as she’d not figured out a solution for herself, helping him seemed like an excellent place to start.

“Don’t hold your breath,” Ken murmured. “It’s kind of his thing.”

“Prowling?” Mira asked.

“Most certainly.” Ken nodded. “Right along with drinking and fighting.”

“This was your best friend before our marriage?”

“He’s also fiercely loyal,” Ken said. “And a good man to have at your back in a fight.”

Rath started toward them with two different tools in hand. “An ax for me”—he held up one—“and a hatchet for you.” And then the other.

The hatchet, a smaller, one-handed version of the ax, was an excellent tool for her. She’d even used one before when she’d needed small pieces of wood to light the kitchen stove.

“Good choice.”

“Anna,” Mira cried, looking a bit alarmed, “why do you need a hatchet?”

“Because this was her idea, so she’s taking the first swing.” He reached them, handing her the tool. “Do you need any help?”

“Oh no.” She shook her head. “I’ve used one before. What I’m not sure about is whether I’ve got enough force to actually do any damage.”

Ken shook his head. “I wonder if Ace envisioned moments like this when he sent his sister off with you, Rath.”

“Likely not.” Rath lifted his shoulder in a careless shrug and his mouth tipped in a one-sided grin. “But having her practice weaponry just seems like good sense to me.”

Mira snorted. “I can’t believe it. We agree on something.”

“Go for the side panel first,” Rath said, using the ax to point at one of the short ends of the desk. “Break her wide open.”

With a nod, Anna stepped up and raised the hatchet. “Here goes nothing.” And then she brought the hatchet down with all the force she possessed.

WOOD SPLINTERED EVERYWHERE, shards flying through the air, tearing a roar of satisfaction from his throat. “That’s the stuff,” he called to Anna, his chest puffing with pride.

He’d had this moment, when she’d suggested breaking the desk, where he’d wondered if she might feel more powerful through exertion.

Because his feelings about her were shifting, he didn’t wish for her to be a little mouse any longer. Of course, if she was, he’d protect her as long as she was in his charge, but after he was gone...

It would be better if she could protect herself.

“Hit it again. Harder.” He pointed at the side. “Take its legs out and crash it to the ground.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I really prefer creating things.”

He stepped closer. “Which is commendable. But sometimes, particularly when someone is trying to make you their victim, it’s good to know how prove to them that you’re not their target.”

She gave a nod and lifted the hatchet again, sending it crashing into the side of the desk. “Tris tried to teach me to fight once,” she said as she took another swing. “But every time he came at me...”

Rath nodded in understanding. “The desk is a better place to start.”

Mira and Ken stood silently to one side watching as Anna swung again. Sweat began to bead on her brow and her breaths shortened. After another swing, she took a step back. “I think it’s your turn.”

He was anxious to begin, but he paused before he lifted his ax. “How do you feel?”

“Tired.”

“Anything else?” He’d hoped a little aggression might bring her some satisfaction.

She cocked her head, considering. “I didn’t mind as much as I thought I would,” she said. “You were right. The desk was an excellent place to begin. I’m still not sure I could suffer a man charging me.”

He swiped a hand down his cheek. “Don’t worry. There is a lot more furniture I’d like to destroy.”

She laughed and he joined in, Mira and Ken adding in quiet chuckles of their own. Oddly, he’d anticipated this

moment of destroying the thing that had been an integral part of his mother's vitriol toward him. And yet, as he stood here, he found himself more concerned with her.

So strange that he felt this way. Where was his normal anger?

But he lifted the ax anyway as Anna stepped back.

The first stroke he brought crashing down on the desk's top, a satisfying divot appearing where his face had rested as a young boy.

He added another and another and another, until the large piece of furniture finally gave, breaking into two pieces and crashing to the ground.

Everyone gave a loud cheer as he stepped back, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Me next," Ken called. "Just because it looks like fun."

He started on one half, breaking it into bits, and soon Mira had taken the hatchet, working on the other side.

When the pieces were small enough, he lit a fire with tinder, beginning to burn the parts of the desk that were unrecognizable now.

A light rain began to fall but the fire roared on. It was a good fire, the wood dry and easy to burn, but he didn't need to watch the flames licking at the wood to feel better.

"Haven't felt this light in years," he murmured as much to himself as to the others.

But Anna's soft "Good" still filled his ears over the crackle of the wood.

"I'm not sure breaking stuff proves that I'm not like him and above her, though."

Anna gave him a sideways glance. "Is that what you want? To be less like them?"

"I suppose it is," he answered, realizing the truth. He'd wanted to erase his father's financial mistakes, his mother's abusive ones. He wished to rise above the neglect and the hurt that had caused.

"I don't think it's about acting differently."

"Isn't it?"

She shook her head. "Maybe. But ruining a desk doesn't make you like them or not like them. Breaking their patterns, that's what will set you apart. If chopping up a desk brings you the peace you need to let go of your anger, then by all means...I've got my hatchet ready."

A muscle in his jaw flexed, the words sticking in his throat. No one had ever expressed such simple commitment to helping him, and he just... "Thank you, Anna."

"You're welcome."

Across the fire, Mira stared at them, her gaze flicking from one to the other. Was she surprised that he and Anna were helping one another?

No one was more shocked than him. How had the trip he never wanted to take proved to be the very thing he'd needed?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MORNING of the fair dawned bright and sunny, and Anna gave a small cheer to think of going into the village.

Rath's home was proving to be quite pleasant, but she rarely had the opportunity to see other artists and she hoped to meet one she might share with. She spent so much time separate and alone...

She drew in an excited breath and began preparing herself for the day. It would be hours before they left, and as she looked at her gowns, she had the sudden urge to take her favorite wool gown in.

Before, she'd been happy hiding in her clothes, but just now, she'd like to be seen a bit more.

Was this change in attire the product of meeting artists? Beating up desks? Or was it her host?

She shivered at that last thought, an awareness moving down her body. Sitting down near the fire, she pulled out her needle and thread and began to pull in the seams at the waist.

By the time she was finished, breakfast was being served, so she donned the gown and made her way downstairs.

She heard the voices of Mira and Ken from the other room and then the deep rumble of Rath.

Smiling, she entered the room, meaning to join without interrupting conversation. But as she walked in, conversation stopped.

Her smile slipped because everyone was staring at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, stopping in the middle of the room. “Why is everyone looking at me so?”

“Anna.” Mira shook her head, her gaze sliding over Anna’s frame. “Your dress.”

Anna looked down at herself, her cheeks heating. “Did I not do a good job?” She resisted the urge to wrap her arms about herself and hide.

“No.” Ken stood, giving her a small wink. “The dress looks marvelous and so do you. It’s just that you don’t normally wear your clothes like that. We were caught off guard.”

Her cheeks radiated heat, and she was certain they were bright red. “I see.”

“Anna.” Rath stood. “You look beautiful.”

And just like that, her embarrassment turned to pleasure. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He gestured toward the buffet. “Now let’s eat so that we might leave.”

She gave a nod, moving toward the buffet once again. She filled her plate, but her excitement was so great that she hardly

ate, and finally, they all headed outside to the waiting carriage.

The ride was short, but both she and Mira laughed at the idea of all of them piling into the small space once again.

As she settled next to her sister, she murmured. “Did I tell you that I’d already heard about the fair?”

“No,” Mira replied. “From whom?”

“Rath’s neighbor told me. He saw me with my drawing supplies.”

“Rath’s neighbor?” Mira looked over at the two men, who were talking together. “I didn’t know you’d met a neighbor.”

“Mr. Fairfield. He was walking on the property when I went out to draw.”

“Were you alone?”

“No. Rath was with me.”

Mira nodded, looking relieved. “Good. Glad Rath was with you and that he knew the neighbor you spoke with.”

“Hmm,” Anna replied, because Rath had not been with her exactly. Not that there was a problem. Rath had known who Mr. Fairfield was and hadn’t seemed concerned. It was just that it wasn’t precisely what Mira thought. Was that a problem?

But she didn’t ask as the village came into view, its streets lined with tables where people already milled about.

The carriage stopped to allow them to exit, and Anna threaded her arm through Rath’s and they started toward the main street.

They looked at several booths selling pasties, ale, bolts of fabric, pottery, and the like, until Anna finally came across an old woman sitting by several paintings.

She stopped, cocking her head. "Is this your work?"

"It is," the woman answered, pointing toward one. "That one I think I painted when I was your age."

Anna glanced over the work, noting the change in skill as the painter progressed. She'd seen changes like this in her own work. "It's beautiful. Your grasp of color is exceptional."

Rath had stopped next to her, and he silently observed her as she looked at each piece. "In this one, the way you've conveyed the river, it's almost like a living person."

The woman smiled, her eyes dancing with delight. "Thank you kindly."

Anna moved on, looking at other pieces, moving across the display as the woman shifted in her chair. "Don't mind those. My eyes aren't what they used to be."

Anna's heart gave a little stutter of sympathy. She could see the shake, but also, there was a depth of emotion in this work that was exceptional, and it left her in awe. One of a boy and his dog in a field made her stop. "Who's this?"

"My grandson."

Anna could see the love and she smiled. "This one isn't for sale?"

"It is."

Her brows lifted. If she'd painted this of someone she loved, she'd wish to keep it forever. "Really?"

The old woman pressed out her skirts. "Little boys need to eat."

Anna's chest constricted as she looked back at Rath. She had pin money, a little that Ace had given her. "How much?"

The old woman's eyes widened in surprise. "Make me an offer."

But it was Rath who answered, "Five pounds."

The woman gasped and Anna spun around to him, her surprise keeping her silent.

"Your Grace," the old woman stuttered out. "I didn't realize that was you until you spoke."

"Worry not, Mrs. Worthington. But while I'm purchasing, I'd like the one of the river as well. Three pounds." The woman quickly accepted, and Rath pulled out the coin, then took the paintings.

"Rath," Anna whispered when they were out of earshot. "You didn't need to do that."

"She used to give me sweets when I was a boy," Rath whispered back. "When she passes, I'll return the first painting to her grandson."

"And the one of the river?"

"For you to keep."

Her heart rose into her throat. It might have been the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her.

“Rath. I...”

He held up a hand. “I’m just going to bring these to the carriage. I’ll be right back. Ken and Mira are just there.” He pointed two booths down.

She nodded as he tucked the paintings under his arms, heading back the way they’d come.

She turned toward Mira once again but found her path blocked. “Pardon,” she gasped, stepping back.

The man’s hand shot out, stopping her. “Lady Anna. ’Tis me, Mr. Fairfield.”

It was the second time the man had frightened her, and her lips pressed into a straight line as she looked up into the man’s handsome features. “Mr. Fairfield, you must have very quiet feet. I never hear you coming.”

He gave an apologetic smile. “Sorry, my lady. I was eager to speak with you after I saw you buy Mrs. Worthington’s work.”

That eased some of her irritation.

“And I must ask what you see in it that you like.”

“Oh.” She nodded, looking back at Mrs. Worthington’s paintings. “The color work is exceptional. The way one color blends effortlessly into another. But the real beauty is in the emotion that she conveys.”

Mr. Fairfield gave her a large smile. “Fascinating.”

“Do you agree?” she asked, aware she’d been spouting her own opinions.

“I can agree that you are brilliant.” His teeth flashed whiter with his large smile and she flushed with pleasure. Her art was something that most others in her life merely tolerated.

“Thank you,” she said, looking down at the pebbled road under her feet to hide her pleasure.

“And I would love to have you come see my mother’s work sometime. I’m an admirer of the arts, if not a knowledgeable one.”

She shook her head. She couldn’t be so bold as to give her opinion of another’s work to their family member. “I would never try to define your mother.”

Mr. Fairfield took her gloved hand, squeezing her fingers. “You’d be giving me the words to embark upon my own artistic journey.”

She nodded absently, so pleased at his admiration but also not wanting to overstep. It was one thing to tell Mrs. Worthington she admired some aspect of her work, but another to dissect someone’s late mother’s artistry. “I will see what I can do, Mr. Fairfield.”

“Do,” he answered, looking over his shoulder. When he looked back, the smile was gone. “I’ll let you return to your party. I live just up the road from you in the little stone cottage with the red door. Come for tea anytime.”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“And if you have any paintings for sale, I’d like to see them.”

Her heart jolted. Sell her work? It was a dream that she'd thought had been delayed when Ace had sent her away. He glanced over his shoulder again and then with a final smile, he disappeared, just as Ken came toward her. "Who was that?"

"Rath's neighbor, Mr. Fairfield. His mother was an artist."

Ken nodded. "I see another booth with paintings. Let's go take a look."

She nodded absently, scanning the crowd for Mr. Fairfield, but he'd completely vanished. It had been a very pleasant interaction with him admiring her knowledge, but something in it left her feeling unnerved.

"I'm almost afraid to look—the last booth, I bought two paintings. Or Rath bought them for me."

"Rath bought you paintings?" Ken stopped with her on his arm.

She nipped at her lip. "I know, I'm not supposed to accept gifts from men. It just—"

"I was more marveling because he isn't the type to give them. Especially considering his financial situation."

She winced, realizing that Ken was right. Even Anna knew he'd escorted her because money was a difficulty for him. It had been foolish to allow him to buy those pictures.

She looked around for Mr. Fairfield once again.

Then again, she knew just where she might make some money to return the duke's funds. At least for the painting he'd said that she could keep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RATH LOADED the paintings into the back of the wagon, wondering what the hell was happening to him.

He could ill afford artwork and yet here he was. But the idea of ripping that painting of his father out of his mother's room and hanging the river piece instead... It eased some of the tension inside. Could he make Cranston his own? Exorcise the demons of his past from the house?

He couldn't remove those memories from his mind, but maybe, just maybe, he could remove them from his heart.

He shook his head. He'd thought the only way to do that would be to replace the fortune his father had pissed away and buy a home with no history. He'd assumed he wouldn't marry, wouldn't have children, never risk being the piece of shit father his had been.

But since Anna flitted into his life, a butterfly of breathless beauty, touching all the surfaces about him and leaving each one better than she'd found it, he was beginning to consider a different path...

He shook his head. He could hang a few pieces of new artwork in the house without abandoning his entire fucking

plan.

With that in mind, he stepped back into the crowd, easily spotting Ken, Mira, and Anna chatting at another booth.

He joined them, silently watching as Anna admired every artisan, giving each one a compliment that was so specific to their work, their person, that she left all of them smiling with joy.

How did she do it?

By the end of the day, when they'd loaded into the carriage, he watched as she leaned her head on the frame, looking out the window, and he wished to have her head on his shoulder.

She'd sparkled today.

“Tired?”

She nodded. “I woke early. I was too excited to sleep.”

He cleared his throat. “It was that exciting?”

She nipped at her lip. “My family was always attempting to survive. There have not been many opportunities for such activities. I really enjoyed seeing other artists' finished products.”

He leaned toward her with a shake of his head. She was pulling at his sympathies again. He wanted to promise to take her to another fair, or a gallery opening. He didn't even like galleries. In fact, he was the least likely man of any he'd ever met to be seen puttering about galleries.

“And it’s an excellent opportunity for you to make friends,” Ken added with a smile.

“Friends?” he asked, something unpleasant sliding down his spine.

“Mr. Fairfield,” Anna said absently. “He was there today.”

“When did you speak with him?” But it came out as a growl, an animal kind of sound. Which was ridiculous. Fairfield had to be seventy if he was a day and the man was completely harmless.

But some need to keep Anna to himself had him spitting out his words.

“When you were loading the paintings,” Anna said with a shrug. “He came to ask me about Mrs. Worthington’s work.”

“Why is Mr. Fairfield asking you about art?” The man was a farmer without a creative bone in his body. Something was off and his nerves tingled with unease.

“Why are you so angry?” she huffed back. “There’s no need to sound so agitated.”

“I’ll sound angry if I want. We’re here to protect you.”

“From your neighbors?” she cried. “Don’t be silly.”

Was he being silly? It was completely possible. “Still—”

“Just stop,” Anna cried. “I don’t want to hear any more.”

His jaw clamped shut and he slammed himself back against his seat.

Mira leaned forward, catching his eye, and he mentally prepared himself for the next Smith sister to tear into him, but instead she winked.

He was so taken aback that he furrowed his brow. “What?”

Mira just smiled. “What have you done to my sister?”

“He’s annoyed me,” Anna snapped as she turned back to the window. But once again Mira winked.

They returned to the house and Anna made a point of walking ahead of him, holding her skirts in her hands. With her dress newly taken in, he got to watch her narrow waist and the sway of her hips when she stomped up the stairs. When she reached the entry, he called to her. “Anna.”

She turned, her nose wrinkled in irritation. “What?”

“You forgot your painting.” He held out his arm.

He watched her shoulders fall as she stared at the picture. “I’m ungrateful, aren’t I?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m annoying.”

She moved closer, carefully taking the painting from his hand. “It was a lovely gift, but I’d actually like to pay you back.”

Now, that turned him sour. Pay him back? “Anna.”

She shook her head. “Unmarried women are not supposed to accept gifts from men. Even I know that.”

She had a point there. “You are helping me. It’s a gift between...”

“Friends?” she asked with a smile.

Him? Friends with a woman? The idea didn't quite fit, but he gave a nod anyway. “Sure. Friends.”

Slowly, she took the painting from his hand. “Thank you for the painting and thank you for being my friend. I've never had one before. We weren't allowed to socialize outside of the family with all the secrets that we had to keep.”

Just when he wished to feel really sorry for himself, she said something that reminded him that she'd had it so much worse than him and yet she chose to go around making other people happier. Even himself.

Which led him to the natural conclusion that if he wished to shake off the remnants of his childhood, he had a long way yet to go in his personal journey.

ANNA WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, her fingers itching to paint.

Yesterday had been inspiring and confusing all at once. She and Rath seemed to either be the best of friends or completely irritated with one another.

She went to breakfast, intent upon eating a quick piece of toast before she started to work. When she reached the breakfast room, she noted that Rath's chair was empty.

“Where is our host?” she asked, crossing to the buffet.

“He received a note that his assistance was needed to fetch his carriage,” Ken said, taking a large bite of his eggs

Florentine. “He’ll be back tomorrow or the next day.”

She felt a niggle of disappointment to know she’d not see him. “Oh.”

“He left instructions that you’re not to wander about the surrounding grounds without me in attendance.”

And then her disappointment was gone. “Are all dukes this bossy?” she huffed as she plucked a pastie from the tray.

Both Ken and Mira laughed as they answered “Yes” in unison.

Eating her breakfast, she then set herself in the library, intent upon painting the picture she’d drawn of Rath rising out of the water. She ought not, considering how irritating she found him, but despite all that, he was still in the forefront of her thoughts. And what was more, there was something in their relationship she didn’t quite understand.

Did friends always drive each other so mad? She set up her easel and her picture and began to paint, only layering the sky, the water, and the large sweeps of grass and trees. She lost herself in the work, her thoughts focused on the brush strokes, but also thinking of Rath in the back of her mind as the figure in the water began to take shape.

She’d been at it for a long time when she finally dropped her brush to study her canvas. That’s when she realized she was nearly out of her blue paint and she had almost no linseed oil with which to mix more.

“Anna.”

She turned to find her sister in the nearby chair, Anna's sketchbook in hand. "Mira. When did you arrive?"

"Some time ago."

"Oh."

"Anna." Mira set down the book. "I think we need to talk."

"About?"

"Rath."

"Is this about the carriage last night? You should talk to him. He's the one who got all upset over nothing. I was mere feet away from you and Ken, in a public venue. His temper is detestable."

"His temper is softening by the day. I've never seen a man change so quickly."

That made Anna pause. "But then why was he such a beast last night?"

Mira chuckled. "Fairfield is a handsome man."

"So?"

Her chin dropped as she gave Anna a long stare. "So? He's jealous, my love."

Her breath hissed out. "Jealous of what?"

"Of you and Fairfield, of course."

"Why?"

Mira let out a much longer laugh that only served to annoy Anna. But she finally controlled her mirth enough to say. "Because the Duke of Upton is smitten with you."

Her mouth fell open. “He is not.”

“Oh, he is.” Mira laughed along with her own words. “I knew it when I saw him carry you. He held you like you were a treasure, Anna.”

A fog took over her mind, and unable to form thoughts, she just stared at her sister. “But those first days...”

Mira shrugged and picked up the book. “You didn’t like him those first days, either.”

“That’s true.”

“Then why did you draw him over and over?”

Anna didn’t know how to answer. At first, he’d intrigued her, even with his lack of manners. She’d been curious and sketched him as a way to explore him, understand him, be nearer to him.

“He’s in every picture. Even when you weren’t drawing him, he somehow appears in every single one. He’s the shepherd, his face is in the cloud, he’s rising from the water. And you’ve caught his every mood.”

“I have not.”

“Anna.” Mira set down the book, open to the picture of his profile, the one she’d drawn on the first day. “You’ve caught his vulnerability, his strength. Your brush strokes are filled with—”

Anna gasped in her surprise. Because every word her sister was saying was true. And she didn’t know why she hadn’t seen it, but she’d not even realized the affection, the want that

had been building inside her where Rath was concerned. But also... “You study my strokes?”

Mira laughed. “Your drawings are my favorite things in the world.”

“They are?”

Mira pointed at the page. “You were angry but also curious with this one. I can tell by the thickness of lines and the way they stop and start as you paused.”

Mira was exactly right. And the fact that her sister cared so much about her work made her throat tight with emotion. “Mira, I had no idea—”

“I love you, Anna. We all love you. And I am proud to have to such a talented sister.”

Anna swallowed the lump that had formed. “But I’m so different. Timid. I have so little to offer. How can you be proud?”

“Do you realize that each of our siblings has an amazing talent? Ace pulled us up from the depths of poverty and placed us among the elite when he managed to secure that marquessate. Tris has his boxing, Gris has his gin. Fulton has his shipping business. Rush works with numbers. I am the only one who doesn’t have that thing that makes them special.”

Anna’s mouth opened and then closed. Was she not the only one who felt like an outsider in the family? “But you’re so like them.”

“And so are you in your own way.” Mira squeezed her hand. “And just like the rest of our brothers, you haven’t realized that you are falling in love.”

Her? Falling in love? “He gave me that painting.”

“I know.”

“I wanted to pay Rath back by selling a painting to Mr. Fairfield.”

Mira shook her head. “You don’t need to pay him back. He gave you that gift because he likes you.”

Emotion made her chest tight. “I could give him a painting. This one.”

“That is a wonderful idea.”

“I’ll need more oil.”

“We’ll go tomorrow.”

Would Rath be home tomorrow? “Think there is still time today?”

Mira nodded. “If we hurry. I’ll get Ken.”

Anna rose too, wiping her hands on her smock. Was Mira right? Was she falling in love? She looked back at the drawings, seeing them through her sister’s eyes.

The flutter she always felt in her belly when Rath was near settled lower, in her nether regions, where it thrummed and ached.

She didn’t know if she was falling in love or not, but suddenly, she understood lust. What did one do with such an

ache?

Anna thought she might know the right person to ask.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DRIVE to the village was uneventful and Anna managed to purchase the oil without incident.

Now, as she, Mira, and Ken returned to Cranston, she watched out the window, not really seeing anything. Her thoughts were on her painting and the man who dominated both her canvases and her mind.

The carriage rounded a corner and close to the road, a small cottage appeared, overlooking a vast hill filled with fields. The little stone structure boasted a faded red door, and she realized this was where Mr. Fairfield lived.

She sat up just as the cottage door opened and Mr. Fairfield stepped out. He smiled at the carriage and waved, moving toward them as though he meant to greet them.

“Is that Fairfield?” Ken asked, looking out the window from his seat across from Anna.

“Yes.”

“Younger than I thought. Straighter.”

Mira leaned over her husband to look out too. “Is he married?”

“I don’t know,” Anna answered. “He’s only mentioned his mother.”

“We’ll have to ask Rath,” Ken said as Mr. Fairfield waved again, clearly signaling them to stop.

Ken rapped on the wall behind the driver and the man pulled up on the reins.

Ken stepped out first, snapping the door closed behind him. “Good day, sir. Boxby’s my name. Pleasure.”

“Lord Boxby, nice to meet you. Mr. Ian Fairfield at your service.”

The two shook hands. “How long have you lived in the shadow of Cranston?” Boxby asked, gesturing at the sweet cottage.

“My entire life,” the man answered.

“You must know Upton very well, then. You grew up together?”

Fairfield shifted. “Indeed.” Then he gave Boxby a winning smile. “Would you all care for tea? My offerings are simple, but I’d happily oblige.”

Boxby gave his head a small shake. “The hour grows late. Perhaps another time.”

Anna watched Fairfield’s hand clench and unclench, tension running through him she’d not seen before. Her head cocked as he shifted closer to Ken. “Might I confess to you, my lord, that I’d very much like Lady Anna’s opinion on some of my mother’s pieces.”

“I’ll speak with His Grace. I’m sure you’d like to catch up with your old friend and then—”

“It’s a rather desperate situation, my lord,” Fairfield cut him off with, which made Anna’s head snap back. Most farmers would never...

Ken’s mouth thinned into a razor-sharp line, and he looked back at the carriage. He turned, meeting her eye, his indecision clear.

Anna understood. Rath had become upset when Anna had spoken to Fairfield at a crowded fair, which had been ridiculous. And while entering this man’s home felt different, she was also completely chaperoned by her brother-in-law.

She gave a quick jerk of her chin and Ken did the same in response, his almost imperceptible, and she opened the carriage door. “Of course I’ll see your mother’s paintings, Mr. Fairfield.”

Fairfield’s eyes gleamed with something like triumph as he waved her forward, but the look had her hesitating.

She understood emotions, but sometimes her mind moved slowly when capturing them. The feelings would come out in her work instead of in her thoughts. For example, the way someone’s mouth pulled or their eyes tensed she didn’t read in the moment, she only saw it on paper later. But not this time. She had no desire to capture Mr. Fairfield on paper and instead she tried to understand why he wished for her to look at his mother’s pictures so much.

He'd offered to buy one of her paintings, but when he'd been speaking to Ken, he'd claimed to be in a desperate situation. How did those two details pair up?

She stopped halfway to the door. "What am I looking for in your mother's art?"

He stopped too, turning back to her, Ken and Mira just behind them. "Quality, mostly."

"For the purpose of?"

He swallowed, his eyes going hard around the edges. "I'd like for her work to be recognized."

That was the emergency? He turned back and continued toward the door, but something in her gut pulled at her, and she did not continue. Something felt wrong...

"Mr. Fairfield," she said, raising a hand, "what did your mother use for pigment, do you know?"

He shrugged. "Whatever the farm might provide." And then he opened the door.

Anna hesitated on the threshold, her eyes quickly scanning the small but comfortable space.

Small tables, neat chairs, pictures scattered about the wall.

She frowned. One of the pieces was clearly that of Mrs. Worthington's. Anna would recognize the color blends and brush strokes anywhere.

"Which are your mother's?" she asked as Mr. Fairfield moved toward the kitchen.

"All of them," he answered. "Let me get you tea."

Anna remained silent, but her brows drew together in question. He must be wrong. Because the pieces had no cohesion at all. One was pastel with dim lines, another striking and bold, a third rudimentary in the painter's talent. She moved into the room, Mira and Ken behind her as she studied each painting.

“What do you like most about these pieces?” she asked, picking at the edge of something. Did she mention that they were not painted by the same person?

He appeared with four mugs on a tray. “Perhaps it's all sentimental. I loved watching her work.”

Anna's mouth turned down. Whatever answer she'd expected, that was the very last. Her muscles tightened with some unnamed apprehension. “You'd watch her work?”

He nodded. “It's my favorite memory of her.” Then he handed her a cup. “Are you going to tell me that my memories don't make her work valuable?”

No. She was going to tell him that his mother could not have painted all these. Not unless she was three or four different people. “How many did you see her paint?”

“All of them,” he answered with a smile, pointing at the mug. “Drink up. It's the least I can do to provide you with tea as you help me.”

She set the mug down and then glared at Mira who was about to take a sip. Mira's brow drew together in confusion. Anna didn't quite understand it either, but his insistence that she drink made her gut churn and her resolve harden.

They were not drinking this tea.

“Mira says that she can tell my mood by my hand stroke,” Anna said, eyeing her sister. “These pictures each tell a very different story.”

Fairfield shifted, staring at her mug. “Right. I suppose each picture does represent a different time in her life.”

But Mira was looking too, her own brow drawn down in confusion, so much so that Ken began to look around as well, even as he took a sip of his tea. “Do these have a common brush stroke, Mirabelle?”

“No,” Mira said, looking back at her sister.

Ken’s mug lowered as a brow cocked.

Fairfield gave her a wide smile. “Please. Drink.”

She shook her head. She needed more information to suss out what was happening here. “Mr. Fairfield, might I take a few pieces back with me to study? I could return them to you in a day or two?”

“Come back?” he asked, his smile slipping. “I’d been hoping—”

“I’m so sorry, but I can’t make an assessment here. Not a careful one that does your mother justice.”

His frown deepened. “All right. Which pictures would you like?”

She pointed at Mrs. Worthington’s and another. “Those.”

He crossed the room, pulling Mrs. Worthington’s from the wall. Behind it, the wall was a lighter, brighter color. It

happened often when work spent a long time in one place.

Then he reached for the second, taking it down. The wall behind it was unchanged. She blinked in surprise, some piece clicking into place.

That picture had only just been hung.

Mr. Fairfield was clearly lying. Now she wondered how much and why? But the tension that had been building threatened to snap. They needed to leave. Rath wasn't even here. She stood, grasping Mrs. Worthington's painting.

"Lord Boxby, would you be so kind?"

Ken stood, swiping a hand down his face, swaying on his feet, before he took the painting and began leading the way out the door.

Anna breathed a large sigh of relief when they stepped outside. She'd once called Rath a coiled snake, but he'd never unnerved her like this.

Mr. Fairfield called out the door. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'm sure," she said, then gave him a reassuring smile, though she never intended to step into his cottage again.

Perhaps Rath's distrust of the other man had not been so foolish after all.



RATH ARRIVED back home to Cranston in the wee hours of the morning. His mouth quirked at the word *home*. He'd not called

this place home in a very long time. He'd never thought that would be possible before Anna came into his life.

Rath had successfully collected his carriage. He likely ought to have stayed the night in the village and made the journey in the morning, but he'd been itching to return.

And he knew why. He worried after Anna, and it was more than just the job. He hated the way he'd left things between them.

She'd been right. He'd overreacted about Fairfield, a habit of his. The anger inside him had been abating. For the first time in his adult life, his head was clearing. But in that moment, it had fogged again, with the idea of another man usurping him in her esteem...

Striding through the dark house, he noted that the library door was open, and that light spilled out of the room. He changed directions, heading for the double doors. Stopping on the threshold, he scanned the interior.

It had changed.

A warmth filled the space now. It was clean and cheery, and the wood had been polished to a high shine. The desk was gone, in its place a worn settee meant for relaxing. Everything about the space was softer.

Next to the settee, an easel had been erected, a painting resting on the stand.

He recognized the picture already, even though it was still fuzzy and not detailed...it was the pond on the property where

he swam. He was in the picture too, coming out of the water, looking even more impressive in color.

He stopped, staring at the work. Was that really how she saw him? Always, or just in that moment? His chest swelled. No one cared about him like that.

A rustling on the settee pulled his gaze from the canvas as Anna lifted her head, pushing her body up from the surface. “You’re home.”

“You were sleeping,” he answered, crossing over to her. He sat down on the end—her body’s warmth having seeped into the cushions. She started to push the rest of the way to sitting but he reached for her shoulder, gently pulling her head back against his chest.

“I was working and then I got tired. I was up early, I suppose.”

He quirked a half smile and wrapped his other arm about her torso. “You ought to go to bed.”

“I will. And I’ll sleep late. I was just feeling inspired.”

“Were you?” he whispered, his eyes drifting back to the canvas as he held her closer.

“I was,” she murmured into his chest, snuggling into him. “I realized some things while you were gone, and I wanted to capture those feelings.”

“What feelings did you realize?” For some reason his chest was tight as he waited for her answer.

Her gaze lifted to his, her blue eyes wide as they locked with his. “I realized that some of the tension between us is not the bad kind.”

Fuck him—was she saying what he thought she was saying? He’d known since the beginning that he wanted this woman. But acknowledging a mutual attraction while he held her in his arms had his body erupting in flames.

He bent his head down, brushing his lips across the softness of hers. The flesh was achingly soft, her sumptuous body pressing closer to his. He kissed her again, a firmer press of their lips, her arms snaking about his neck.

He was losing his grip as he pressed their mouths together a third time. He had rules and a plan, and Anna fit into neither of those. But he could hardly attend those thoughts as he trailed his fingers down the curve of her spine. “There has always been a tension between us.”

She nodded, searching his face. “I’m curious to feel more.” The same intensity she displayed when she drew filled her features now. Anna was a woman of passion when it came to her art, and like lightning, he realized that passion could very well be applied to bed sport.

Need coursed through him, rolling over him like waves crashing into the sand. “Anna,” he warned, “we can’t go down this road.”

She nodded, sitting up. He instantly regretted the loss of her heat, and he nearly pulled her back. “I know. I’m not a proper choice for you.”

“Proper?” he snorted. “Do I seem like I give a shit about proper?”

She stared at him with questions filling her eyes. “You’re a duke.”

“So?”

“Even you must care that I’m not legitimate.”

“You’re the daughter of an earl and your brother has seen to your legitimacy.” Not that he would care if she wasn’t. Society and all its trapping meant so little to him. He’d see the dukedom right because he’d prove he was a better man than his father, not for any other reason and certainly not to prove himself to the *ton*.

“I’m not,” she whispered.

He stared at her, confused. “Not what?”

“The daughter of an earl.”

The words didn’t quite make sense. “Not the daughter of an earl?”

“My father wasn’t the earl,” she whispered. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m no one, Rath.”

His jaw worked as he stared at her. No one? She was the most talented and warm person he’d ever met. But she pushed off the settee, wrapping her arms about herself and moving in front of the painting. “You’re someone to me. Someone incredibly important.”

“I’m your job,” she replied, pain lacing her voice. “Isn’t that what you were about to say?”

“You’re more than that.” Did he explain? That he cared for her, but he’d not marry her, not because she was a bastard but because he was broken?

But then two paintings caught his eye. Propped in the corner, they rested against a wall. “What are those?”

Anna waved her hand. “They are from Mr. Fairfield.”

“He was here?” What was going on with his neighbor? He beat back the jealousy that pulsed through him.

“No. He stopped us on the way back from the village.”

“You were in the village?” He felt his anger rising, a feeling laced with some unknown panic. He’d been letting go of so much of the anger, but then these flashes would occur.

Granted, they always involved Anna and another man.

“To get the linseed oil to mix the paint,” she pointed at the canvas.

“I told you not to go out—”

“You told me not to wander the grounds without Ken.”

“Why must I explain everything?” His teeth clenched as he pushed out the words between them. “This is your safety.”

She spun back to him, her eyes narrowed. “I was with my brother-in-law.”

That was true. The very man he’d argued should be in charge of her full-time care. “I know, but...” He raked a hand through his hair. “I...”

She waved her hand. “No. It’s fine. You’re right. Something is off with Fairfield.”

“What?” he asked, his anger over her leaving quickly forgotten. In its place was cold fear. What had happened for her to say such words?

“I don’t know, precisely. I appreciated his artistic support, but he’s lying about his mother’s work. Those were not painted by the same person, and he was so insistent that we drink the tea and then Ken fell asleep on the ride home and could barely be roused to get him to bed.”

“What?”

“Mira thinks he’s falling ill, but...”

His heart hammered in his chest. “Did you drink the tea?”

“No. Why?”

“Because,” he said, then he spun on his heel, a frustrated hand raking through his hair. “I’m going to check on Ken.”

“He was just tired. We got him up to bed. Mira’s with him.”

But so many pieces were not making sense. He was striding back through the house, Anna scurrying to keep up.

Why would Fairfield claim his mother was an artist? “I’ve never heard of Old Man Fairfield serving tea or studying art or —”

“He’s hardly old.”

He stopped so suddenly Anna ran into his back. Turning, he held her arms in his hands and stared down at her, his

nerves strung so tight, they threatened to snap. “How old?”

“Not old.”

“Guess. How old?”

“Your age. Five years older, maybe.”

Blood roared in his ears, his muscles stiff as he pulled Anna into his arms. “Anna.”

“You’re scaring me,” she cried, wrapping her arms about his waist.

He let out a long breath. If he weren’t so worried, he’d be relieved to see how much she’d come out of her shell with him. “I’m sorry, love. It’s just that my neighbor, Mr. Fairfield, is seventy, give or take a few years.”

Anna’s eyes went wide. “But...”

He dropped his forehead to hers before he wrapped his arms around her back, picked her up, and began carrying her up the stairs. “Let me be clear. Please don’t leave to go anywhere without me again.” One hand had splayed out on her back, one sliding down her generous behind to hold her up.

“I won’t,” she promised as they reached the top of the stairs. He set her down, wrapping an arm about her waist as he started for Mira and Ken’s room. Raising his hand, he gave a loud knock on Mira and Ken’s door.

The war he’d been grousing about missing, he wasn’t missing at all. The enemy had come to Cumberland. In his wildest dreams, he’d never thought the fight would come here. As he held Anna’s hand in his, he knew he’d give every penny

he'd made these past few years to send the fight to someone else's door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ANNA HELD her breath until Mira opened the door. By slow degrees, things were clicking into place.

Fairfield was not who he claimed to be. The paintings were frauds and the tea... She'd known that Fairfield was lying about the paintings, but she'd never imagined that he was an impostor. What did that mean, and had he really done something to Ken?

Her breath rushed out of her lungs when a sleepy Mira opened the door. "What's wrong?"

"How's Ken?"

"What?" Mira asked, her forehead wrinkling. Rath didn't bother to ask questions, he just pushed into the room, stalking toward the bed.

"What's he doing?" Mira demanded, coming instantly awake, her irritation evident in her sharp tone.

"Mira," she said and heard the fear in her own voice. Mira heard it too, her body tensing as she turned to Anna.

"Tell me."

"It's Fairfield. He's not who he claims to be."

“Ken’s fine,” Rath called. “Sleeping like a child. Laudanum would be my guess.”

“Laudanum?” Mira gasped. “When would he have taken...” But her eyes widened.

“Fairfield is a seventy-year-old man,” Anna whispered.

“Then who did we meet?” Mira asked the same question that had been bouncing about Anna’s thoughts.

“I don’t know,” Rath growled, returning to the doorway. “But I’m about to find out.”

“What?” Anna asked, reaching for his arm as Rath started back toward the stairs. She once again found herself trotting along behind him, with Mira now following just behind her. “Now?”

“Why not?”

“It’s the middle of the night,” she reasoned, trying to keep up.

“Better to surprise him.”

“What if he’s waiting for you?” Mira called from the back. “He did drug my husband. He might be expecting you to come.”

Rath stopped at that, and she just managed to keep from running into his back again, but Mira didn’t stop in time, and she smacked into Anna, who then fell into Rath.

He reached back, securing them both. “That’s good thinking, Mira.”

“Thank you,” her sister answered. “You should wait for Ken, so that you’re not alone and you can plan your next move.”

He frowned as he let them go, placing a hand around Anna’s waist.

Mira’s eyes narrowed at the gesture, but her sister said nothing when he pulled Anna closer. “Rath?” Anna asked. He was staring off in the distance, his mouth turned down in a frown. She touched his chest, wondering what he was considering.

“I’ll find out more tonight.” And then he dropped a kiss on her forehead.

“Please wait,” she begged as he let her go again.

He shook his head. “My job is to keep you safe, Anna. That means finding out who this impostor is and what he wants with you, because it’s clearly you he’s targeted. I’ll go tonight, but I’ll be careful.”

And then he trotted toward the door and into the night.

“Mira,” Anna said, her broken whisper echoing in the entry.

“I know.” Mira wrapped her arms about her sister. “It’s hard to watch the man you love put himself in danger, even if it is for your benefit.”

“I don’t love him.” But the words sounded false even to her own ears.

“Pish,” Mira said, hugging her close. “Of course you do.”

“How do you know?”

“Not only are you obsessed with him, you also don’t hide who you are with him. You can’t even say that about some of our brothers. It’s deep, sweetheart.”

Deep...

Her breath broke as she tried to fill her lungs. What if something happened to him? “I told him the truth.”

“About?”

Anna wrinkled her nose. “I only have the one secret—my father.”

Mira’s fingers flexed on Anna’s arms. “Well. If he chooses you, then he knows exactly who he’s getting.”

“He won’t choose me. He’s already told me so.”

“We’ll see,” Anna murmured against her temple. “The man might just be clay in your hands and you, my love, are a beautiful artist capable of forming him into a magnificent creation. I’m already witnessing the transformation and it’s glorious.”

“You think too much of me, Mira,” she said, trying very hard to quash the hope blooming in her chest.

“I do not.” Mira shook her head. “You do not think enough of yourself. But he’s reshaping you too.”

Was he? How interesting... “Will he be all right?”

“He is as tough as they come.”

“A beast of a man.”

Mira laughed at that. “In that case, don’t worry. He’ll tear his competition apart.”

She nipped at her lip, understanding her sister’s intent, but a more sinister thought had her clutching at her chest. Would he do the same to her heart?

RATH WALKED the dark path that led from Cranston to Fairfield’s cottage. He’d walked this path a thousand times, he knew every bend and he could move through it blindfolded or in the pitch dark.

Convenient, considering he did not want the impostor to know he was coming.

He arrived at the cottage, the silence making him pause outside. How did he wish to proceed? Bang on the door? Enter without announcing himself?

His gaze narrowed and he flexed his fingers. He didn’t normally hesitate like this, preferring to charge into the fray of any fight. But this wasn’t just about him. For Anna’s sake, he had to be smart. And perhaps he wasn’t quite the man he used to be.

Shaking his head, he focused on the cottage again. Who was inside? It wasn’t a coincidence that they’d been running from Gyla and Kingsley and now someone had arrived who kept trying to engage with Anna. Was a man who worked for them or against them inside the cottage?

That thought had his feet moving toward the door. He tested the knob but found the door locked. Cursing softly under his breath, he took a step back to assess. He gently tried a window and let out a long breath of satisfaction when the sash slid open.

But the window wasn't that large and he grimaced to think of climbing silently through. He wasn't the smallest man and crawling through the small opening would be difficult.

"Don't bother, Your Grace."

Damn. He ducked down below the window, regret lancing through him. So much for the element of surprise. "I don't have the benefit of knowing how to address you."

"I suppose you've figured out I'm not Fairfield."

"Who are you?" He lifted his head higher, trying to search the interior, but he couldn't see anything in the darkness.

"I'm sure you have some guesses."

"You were going to drug Anna and what?" He was already tired of the games. He wanted answers.

An answer came with the blast of a pistol. The ball whizzed above his head, the light from the exploding powder just enough to see the man who sat in one of the sitting room chairs.

Aristocratic. That was his first thought. It was the features: the aquiline nose, high brow, proudly tilted chin. Then there was the arrogant confidence, straight shoulders, the smug expression.

“You’re not Gyla,” he said as though the man hadn’t just shot at him. Quietly, he began to load his own weapon.

“How observant,” the man said, and his sarcastic tone rang in Rath’s ears. “How you thugs have outwitted us is beyond me.”

Outwitted us? Was Rath actually speaking to Kingsley? “It’s nice to finally meet you, my lord.”

Kingsley gave a dry chuckle. “Not as dumb as you look.”

He snorted. “You can do better than that, I’m certain.”

“I’m legitimizing our businesses. You won’t be in the right for long.”

“In the meantime, you thought to what? Kidnap another young woman?” He stuffed the ball down the barrel. Kingsley was likely doing the same. “Clearly, you’re turning over a new leaf.”

Rath could hear the other man’s sneer. “An insurance policy. Nothing more.”

“Is this like Tris’s wife, Emma? Did you think to marry Anna, Kingsley?”

“Marry the bastard? You must be joking.”

A snarl pulled from Rath’s lips. “She’s worth ten of you.”

“Hardly,” the other man drawled. “But we digress. How does this end, Your Grace? Should I kill you now or do we have a stalemate until later?”

Rath stood, aiming where his memory told him the man had sat. Firing, he had a moment of light to see Kingsley’s gun

was also pointed, a second blast rending the air.

Rath dove, the ball ripping through his sleeve.

Landing hard on the ground, he had a moment to check and noted the shot had missed his flesh, only tearing his coat. But he didn't have time to think more before he was up and crashing into the door, sending it splintering off its hinges.

He entered just in time to see Kingsley slink out the back, his shoulder hunched to one side.

Letting out a yell of frustration, he followed, racing out the back of the cottage just as the man disappeared between two bushes.

Hurting after him, Rath's heart pounded with the chase and the need to see this done. He didn't stop even when he heard the whinny of a horse. But as he entered a small clearing, he just caught sight of the rump of the animal as Kingsley made his escape.

His fists clenched at his sides, Rath let out a growl of frustration. But he didn't have time to wallow. Changing direction, he began running for home. He didn't know if Kingsley would make a move against Anna tonight, but Rath would be there if anything happened.

His first priority was to keep her safe.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANNA FELT as though she'd only been asleep for moments when a crashing noise woke her.

She sat up, groggy and disoriented, attempting to clear the fog from her mind. Her eyes blinked rapidly as her sleep-addled brain attempted to catch up. Was she in danger?

“Anna,” Rath growled from the connecting door.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she tried to scramble from bed, stumbled, and then righted herself.

He was at her side in a moment, steadying her, his hand on her hip. “You’re all right?”

“I’m fine. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I just...” She felt for him in the dark, her hands landing on the firmness of his chest. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. I’ll heal.”

Heal? She gasped in a breath. “What happened?” she cried, her hands sliding over him, searching for injuries.

“It’s nothing worse than a powder burn.” He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms about her. “I chased him off, but I was worried he’d come here.”

“You chased Fairfield off?”

“Not Fairfield. Kingsley.”

She started in surprise, and Rath pulled her closer. “The Marquess of Kingsley? The man I traveled across the country to avoid?”

“One of two,” Rath answered, his lips brushing her forehead. “First thing in the morning, I’ll write to your brothers to inform them of what’s happened and decide what to do next, but for now, it’s my job to keep you safe.”

She nodded absently, snuggling into his chest. “Do you think I’m in danger tonight?”

“I think that I’m not taking any chances,” he said, then eased away, his palm settling on her back. “I’m sleeping in here tonight.”

Her pulse gave a wild thrum. “Sleeping in here?” Did he mean in the room or in the bed? The ache between her legs, which had been growing increasingly restless, throbbed and blood rushed through her ears.

“I can bring blankets to the floor,” he started.

But she shook her head. She’d been timid all her life, but something about Rath made her wish to be bold. “Take off your shirt and sit by the fire so that I might see your wounds.”

“It’s barely anything,” he said with a frown. “I don’t need —”

“Sit,” she said, pointing at the chair. He tugged off his shirt and then did as she commanded, taking the seat, which only

sent more pleasure coursing through her.

She'd seen him without his shirt before. He was no less magnificent now. But this time, unlike the last, she intended to touch him. And she did. Everywhere.

She ran her hands over his massive shoulders, down the muscles of his arms, feeling the heat of the powder burn on his bicep. "I'll make a paste for you."

"I'll be fine."

She tutted. "You are protecting me. You ought to let me tend you."

It was an exchange as old as time, and perhaps her words reminded him of that because his hand landed on her hip, squeezing the curve of her. "I have been letting you tend me."

Her brows shot up. She leaned over him, her fingers brushing over his elbows, her face bent close to his. "How have I been helping you?"

"We both know that you have been soothing my hurts. Perhaps not the ones on the outside, but..." and then he leaned closer, moving slowly, carefully, as his lips brushed hers.

The ache inside her gave another throb, her body tightening, her nipples peaking at the simple touch.

It was short and far too quick, then he leaned away again. Anna licked her lips, tasting all the places he lingered on her flesh. "You've been helping me too. On the inside."

"How?" he whispered.

She swallowed, looking into his eyes. “You’re making me bolder.” More self-assured. Which was why she had the fortitude to follow him when he leaned back and press her mouth to his again.

His chest rumbled as he returned her kiss, his mouth firmer, harder, the press longer. He was delicious and the touch so exciting that the ache between her thighs increased.

His tongue brushed against her mouth, and she gasped at the sensation, opening for him so that he had access to explore deeper. And when his tongue touched hers, she moaned at the flutter of sensation that spread through her.

“Anna,” he rumbled, pulling back just enough to speak. “We should not be doing this.”

She shook her head. She’d never been good at holding back once she was inspired and she was completely and absolutely determined to explore every delicious inch of him. “I want to study you,” she said in reply. “I want to paint you. I want—”

“You’re already painting me. The picture downstairs—”

“No. I want to paint on you. All over you. Make you my canvas.” And then she slid her hands back up his arms and over his chest, feeling every muscle and ridge. “Why isn’t more art filled with men’s forms? They are spectacular.”

“Anna,” he groaned, sounding pained. “I need to keep you safe tonight.”

“Then you’d better stay very close,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Fuck,” he answered just before he kissed her again, his tongue tangling with hers. His lips overwhelmed her, his kiss wiping her mind clean so that she wasn’t certain the moment she ended up in his lap until her legs were dangling over the side of the chair, the cool night air touching her legs as Rath pushed her night rail up past her knees.

She pulled back, breaking the kiss to look into his eyes.

His were so dark and deep, she thought she might drown in them. Her breath came out in short gasps as she ran a hand down his face. “So beautiful,” she murmured as much to herself as to him.

“I’m supposed to say that.”

She shook her head. “You’re stunning.”

“So are you,” he answered, kissing her again, his hand trailing up the inside of her thigh.

Pleasure coursed through her from both his words and his touch. She’d kissed him because she was completely fascinated. But to think he wanted her too... So much of her life she’d felt as though people cared for her out of obligation and not out of true affection.

He’d reached the inside of her thigh. Her legs naturally parted, wanting him to have access to the place that ached with need.

He let out another rumble as he slid his hand higher, brushing over her most sensitive flesh.

Her head fell back and a cry tore from her lips. It was even better than she’d imagined.

He brushed his hand over her center again, the ache inside her intensifying, her body crying out for more.

She threaded her fingers into his hair, his mouth claiming hers, fingers settling over her flesh and beginning a slow, lazy circle at the center of her pleasure.

She shuddered as the ache gave another pulse, the need inside her only growing more intense.

“Rath,” she gasped into his mouth.

“I know,” he replied. One of his fingers slid inside her channel, the heel of his hand settling against the center of her pleasure.

The pleasure grew so intense, she could hardly breathe. She let out a low, keening moan and then she broke apart, spasm after spasm rolling over her. When she could finally catch her breath, she opened her eyes to stare into the dark depths of Rath’s gaze. Deep inside, she felt that her body belonged here, curled against his.

NO WOMAN’S finish had ever ripped through Rath the way Anna’s had. She’d come alive under his hand, his timid kitten turning into a full-grown cat at his touch.

She hissed and clawed, her fingers digging into his scalp while she chased her pleasure.

And now as she looked up at him, a promise lit the depths of her blue eyes.

She'd give him so much more if he'd let her.

He wanted all she had to give.

His doubts, his worries were cast aside, thoughts of the future forgotten as he looked down at the woman who was stealing his reason but also soothing the pain. In its place, a desire he had never known filled him.

Was this what it was like to be really cared for? To have someone understand what he needed and give it to him? Had he ever felt that in his life?

It didn't matter, because her hand slid down his chest between their bodies and then she cupped his staff outside his breeches, rubbing the length of him.

"Anna," he growled out, stiffening at the touch.

"Tell me what you like," she answered back. "Tell me what you want."

What did he want? In this moment, he wanted all of her. He wished to sink into her softness, lose himself in her body.

But that was not meant to be and so he'd have to settle for something far less damaging for both of them. "Just keep touching me, just like that."

Her mouth puckered into a frown, her brows drawing together, forehead creasing. "Can I take off your breeches? I want to see and touch all of you."

The sincerity in her voice undid him. He'd known women to posture such words, thinking they were what he wanted to hear. And he did.

But Anna did not say them for his benefit. She meant them. He could picture her mapping him, drawing him.

Christ. If he showed her, would she create a nude of him?

She shifted off his lap, sliding to the floor, her hands coming to the falls of breeches. His thoughts were cast aside as he helped her with the set of buttons, his hips lifting so that she might slide the fitted fabric over his hips.

She gasped as she stared at him, her mouth agape. “Magnificent.”

He didn’t blush. He was a fucking duke, a rough one at that. But if ever he’d had a moment in his adult life where he could have succumbed to insecurity, this might be the one. Her reverent appreciation was almost unnerving.

She wrapped her fingers about his girth, testing his size, moving over his flesh. While the touch was experimental, her inexperience evident, her fingers were magic. Dexterous, she seemed to find each sensitive spot on him, sliding over that place, learning the exact pressure and placement that brought him pleasure until his hips were lifting off the chair, pushing his staff deeper into her hand, chasing pleasure he’d never imagined.

“Anna,” he gritted out between clenched teeth.

She licked her lips, sending another wave of want crashing over him, his cock so thick it threatened to burst.

She didn’t look at him though, her gaze was fixed on his member. “I should warn you, when I decide I’m enamored

with an activity, I never tire of it. I want to do it over and over until I've become its master.”

He had to close his eyes, a throb behind them threatening to blind him. This woman was going to undo him. “You want to master me?”

“Your body. My body. Our bodies together.”

He wanted that too. So much. The very idea of it sent his orgasm crashing over him. His body pulsed and twitched, leaving him so spent it barely worked, and he sagged into the chair.

For a brief moment, his mind was wiped clean, nothing but the bliss registering. And then a fear niggling in the back of his mind had his muscles pulling taut. He was her protector. Satiated like this, he wasn't keeping her safe.

He pulled up, pushing out of the chair. Anna slid back to make room.

Bending over, he reached under her arms and lifted her too. “Let's get you to bed.”

“I'm not tired anymore,” she whispered and he heard the edge in her voice. It was same one that had her drawing for hours without pause.

He would love to be her muse, the focus of her passion. But first: “I need to keep watch, love. I can't do that when you're touching me.”

“Oh,” she gasped, letting him pull her up. “Of course. I didn't mean...I'm sorry.”

He chuckled low and deep. He had time to decide how to proceed with Anna, but tonight had changed everything. He'd never intended to let a woman in, but she'd snuck past his defenses and now that she was here, he had no intention of letting her go again.

What that meant for his future, he didn't know yet. But he had time for that. His first assignment was keeping her safe.

And that was not because he was being paid but because she'd become more precious to him than anything else in the world.

He laid her back on her bed and, placing a kiss on her forehead, settled next to her. She curled into him, falling asleep before he'd even murmured, "Rest, love."

He placed a hand around her body and kissed the spot just behind her ear.

Kingsley was about to know his wrath. Nothing and no one would hurt Anna. Not while he lived and breathed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ANNA WOKE SLOWLY, so warm and comfortable she didn't wish to move an inch. She sighed, sure she wanted to just fall back to sleep, when the weight behind her shifted and suddenly she remembered it all.

Rath's touch, his member between her hands, how he'd laid her in the bed and pressed against her.

And the way she'd slept like she hadn't in years...so safe and protected that she'd not stirred once.

"You're awake." He spoke into her hair, his arm around her so that his hand rested just above her breast.

"Mmh," she murmured, shifting a bit, which only served to press her derriere deeper into the cradle of his hips.

He rumbled with satisfaction, the roll of it in his chest reverberating through hers. And then his hand was sliding down lower to cup the weight of her breast in his hand.

She arched into the touch, still half asleep, which only seemed to heighten the sensation and further lower her inhibitions.

He tweaked her nipple through her night rail, causing a small cry of pleasure to fall from her lips.

“Anna,” he rumbled against her ear and shifted, rolling onto his back and pulling her on top of him. He was rock hard again and his member pressed into her behind. “We must be careful. I can’t compromise you.”

Her legs naturally fell to either side of his, and while he still worked her breast with one hand, he’d begun to tug the hem of her night rail up her thighs with the other, his fingers once again skimming the inside of her thigh until he was cupping her sex, his middle finger sliding through her folds.

She moaned out her pleasure, her hips rolling, which caused her still-covered bottom to rub up the length of his staff.

He moaned too, setting a rhythm that had them both panting.

His breath, hot in her ear, only made her more excited, and the strong band of his arm held her to his chest.

She covered his hands with hers, locking them even tighter together as they both climbed higher and higher, until she tipped over the precipice, falling into pleasure.

“Rath?” she panted, her fingers so tight in his she was surely leaving divots in the back of his hands.

“Yes, love?”

“It’s good for you?” She was holding back, trying to make certain.

He gave a broken chuckle in her ear. “So good.”

With a breathy moan she fell over the edge of pleasure completely. He continued cupping her, however, kept her body moving over his manhood until he panted in her ear, his body so taut, she knew he was almost there.

She tightened her grip, her body arcing even deeper into his, wanting his finish as much as she’d wished for his own.

When he came undone, his roar filled her ear, her own lips parting into a satisfied smile. “That was…”

“Perfect,” he finished, his voice just a rasp against her neck.

“Perfect,” she agreed, turning her face to the side to nuzzle his cheek. Then she pulled back a bit. “Although…”

His brows lifted in question for a moment before his features relaxed again, his eyes closing. “I am most eager to explore what you intend to say next, but I am hoping that our sleeping beauty will wake soon so that I might sleep.”

She gasped. “You didn’t sleep?”

“Vigilance will be needed from here on out until Kingsley is taken care of.”

“Taken care of?” she asked, furrowing her brow. What did that mean exactly?

A knock reverberated through the room. “Anna?” Mira called. “Are you awake?”

Anna sat up with a gasp, causing her behind to press hard on his nether regions.

“Oof,” he groaned.

“Anna?” Mira called, her voice rising with panic. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Anna called back, rolling off Rath and shimmying her night rail down her legs. “One moment.”

“One moment?” Mira returned, sounding both perplexed and annoyed. The doorknob rattled as Anna sprinted across the room, picking up Rath’s strewn clothing and tossing it in his direction.

He propped on his elbow, easily catching each one before he stood, completely naked, and strode over to her.

She ought to be nervous about her sister discovering them, but the sight of his rippling muscles in the morning sun wiped her brain clean of any worry.

He stopped in front of her and dropped a kiss on her lips. “I’ll be just next door.”

And then he disappeared through the connecting door, closing it softly behind him.

But apparently, not softly enough. Because Mira asked, “Did I just hear another door?”

Anna didn’t answer as she twisted the lock, opening the door. Her sister stood in the hall with her arms crossed.

“How’s Ken?” Anna asked as Mira pushed passed her.

“Ken’s fine,” Mira huffed. “Who was in here?”

“What?”

“Never mind. I already know it was Rath.” And then her sister was crossing the room, pounding on the connecting door. “You!” Her sister banged again. “Open up.”

Rath opened the door, now wearing breeches, but his chest was still bare. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” Mira huffed. “You know very well. You were in my sister’s room last night.”

Rath scowled. “Of course I was. Fairfield is Kingsley.”

Mira staggered back, spinning toward Anna and tossing her arms about her sister.

“I need to sleep for a few hours and then I need to speak with Ken. Is he up? Capable of protecting Anna?”

“Yes to both,” Mira answered, frowning at Rath. “But—”

“He was up all night, Mira,” Anna said softly, touching her sister’s arm. “He needs some sleep.”

Mira’s expression turned black. “Don’t you start defending him.” Then she pointed a finger at Rath. “This isn’t done. We’re continuing this conversation very soon.”

Rath gave a stiff nod before he turned away, leaving the door between the rooms open. “I’ll ring for a bath for you, Anna, before I go to sleep.”

Mira wrinkled her nose. “Well, isn’t this just cozy.”

RATH STOOD on the other side of the door, closing his eyes, scrubbing his face. What was he doing?

Yes, last night had been unbelievably erotic.

And yes, he knew that he wanted more from Anna.

But how much more? How much was he really willing to give? How far could he go? He hadn't even completed the first part of erasing his father's legacy—financial stability. How could he ever trust himself to be a good husband and father? He'd had no good example from either of his parents.

He winced, knowing his father's blood ran in his veins. Had he done anything to prove he was a better man?

The answer was a resounding *no*. He hadn't.

He leaned his forehead on the door. Mira knew that he'd been intimate with Anna. Soon, Ken was certain to find out. Rath had to decide.... Did he offer for her hand or did he try to avoid a match? He had reasonable doubt in terms of being in her room. Trouble with Kingsley was imminent.

And he could argue that they ought to shelve any discussions about the future until after Kingsley was eliminated.

Running a frustrated hand through his hair, he crossed to pull the bell cord and then, after issuing the orders for Anna's bath, he crawled into his bed.

Which was decidedly cold.

He thought of the way Anna's body fit to his, the way she sounded when she broke apart, and his cock was instantly hard

again.

He needed to sleep. And then make a plan. How was he going to keep Anna safe? He'd wanted to be part of the action, to prove his worth.

Here was his chance. The fight had come to him.

He rolled over, punching his fist into the pillow. What if he failed? He sat up, pushing his hair back with a frustrated hand.

A loud knock sounded on his door. "Yes?"

"Open." Ken barked out the single word, banging again to punctuate the command.

Rath let out a long, frustrated breath before he opened the door.

Ken gave him a hard glare before he gave a quick jab right into Rath's gut.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ANNA HEARD Ken and then the sound of flesh meeting flesh...

She raced to the connecting door in time to see Ken dive at Rath, the two men tumbling to the floor of Rath's room.

She gasped in a breath as they vied for position. She briefly considered fetching the broom and emulating her sister when Rath let out a guttural roar.

"Stop."

"You are supposed to be the man who protects her," Ken snarled back, landing a fist in Rath's side.

Rath responded with a solid hit to Ken's jaw. "I *am* protecting her."

Ken snarled. "That's how you normally care for women?"

"You're the one who told me to be nice," Rath bit back as he pushed Ken off, standing up.

Those words sliced through Anna, and she took a step back from the door. Surely, he didn't mean that, did he? Ken had maybe helped soften Rath toward her, but now he cared, didn't he?

But her old demons started talking, the ones that said he only cared for her because he was required to. She was an obligation.

“I told you to be nice, not to ruin her.” Ken rose too, standing just in front of Rath, his jaw already swelling.

“I did not ruin her. Mira must have told you—Kingsley is Fairfield, and I will not allow him to steal her in the night.”

“You better tell me you slept in the chair,” Ken growled, pushing at Rath’s chest.

“She’s worried, Ken.” Was that what he’d been doing? Comforting her? A sob rose in her throat as all her thoughts spun. Was he really no different than any other man in her life? Tears blurred her vision.

“So pat her on the head and keep the door open,” Ken growled back.

“Fine.” Rath threw up his hands. “Will that make you cease yelling and allow me to go to bed?”

That was it? That’s all he intended to do to fight for her? That’s how little she meant? *I won’t touch her if you’ll let me take a nap?* Her throat burned with the effort to keep her emotions in check.

“No. You’re telling me exactly what happened, and then we’re determining if you and Anna should wed.”

She didn’t hear what Rath said, her ears filling with a white noise. Marry a man to whom she was nothing more than another job? “No.” The word ripped from her lips, not that Rath or Ken ceased arguing.

She balled her fists, stepping into the other room. “No.”

Ken, who faced her, noticed her first. “What, Anna?”

“No,” she repeated one more time.

Rath turned toward her too. “No what, love?”

“Don’t call me love,” she choked out. “And no, we’re not marrying.” She looked away, attempting to control the emotions that threatened to sink her.

“Why not?”

Her gaze fixed back on Rath. “Why not?” Her chin trembled but she forced it to remain notched up. “Because...” She waved at Ken. “Because...” She shook her head. “Because I will not enter a marriage like that.”

And then she spun, leaving his room, leaving hers. She didn’t know where she was going, but she knew it would be far away from the man who had just broken her heart.

RATH NEVER FELL ASLEEP. His body was exhausted, his muscles crying for rest. His eyes burned and his neck ached, but his brain would not quiet.

Anna had rejected him. He was a duke, for fuck’s sake, and yet when the issue of marriage had come up, she’d emphatically declared him unfit for the role of her husband. Not that she’d said those exact words. But she’d enunciated the word *no* enough times with enough force for him to understand.

She did not wish to be tied to him.

He hated himself, but he wasn't even sure he could blame her. He'd started their relationship by yelling at her constantly.

He got up and crossed to the dressing table, opening a drawer and pulling out the drawing she'd done of him as the devil.

His teeth were bared, the scene around him full of dark intent. That was how she saw him: a devil. It was how he'd seen his father too. The man responsible for all the hurt and pain in his life.

His chest tightened, and with the drawing in hand, he started downstairs. He still hadn't bothered with a shirt, and as he made his way down the stairs, he swiped a hand down his bare chest.

He knew right where he'd find Anna. Stopping in the library doors, he shuddered with regret as he watched her sitting in front of her easel, her brush lightly stroking across the canvas.

His feet were bare, and he moved across the room with light footfalls, noting that she worked on the water of the pond, blending various blues and greens, even a bit of black to create a depth that stole his breath.

"Not painting me today?" he asked, stopping just behind her.

"No." Her brush did not even pause, but the hurt in her voice penetrated the fog of his sleep-deprived brain. What had he done to hurt her? She was the one who'd rejected him.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No,” she repeated. That word grated on his nerves.

“Me neither.” He tossed himself on the settee. “But I can’t sleep up there.”

She didn’t look at him. “Sleep here, then.”

His body was already relaxing knowing that she was close. “I think I will.”

“Fine,” she whispered, a hint of tremble lacing her voice.

“Anna.” He forced his eyes open.

“Yes?”

Finally, a yes. “Tell me you’re going to stay here while I sleep. You should be with Ken, not here alone.”

Her shoulders drooped then. “Worried about my safety?” There was a hard edge to her voice that he didn’t understand. Shouldn’t he be worried?

“I am always worried about your safety.”

She nodded. “Because I’m a job.”

That was his first clue, and if he could have kept his eyes open, he’d have studied it. “Because.” He laid his picture on his chest. “I need you to finish that painting.”

He heard her brush stop again, his body sinking deeper, reaching that middle place between sleeping and waking.

“Why is that?”

He hardly knew what he was saying. “Because it’s the best version of me anyone has ever seen. Most people only see

this.” He patted the drawing on his chest.

And then he remembered nothing else as the exhaustion finally overtook him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HIS WORDS ECHOED in Anna's thoughts long after Rath had fallen asleep.

If he cared so little about her, why did he care what she thought of him? Perhaps he just liked the way she'd seen him on that day. Everyone wanted to someone to worship them. That didn't mean he cared.

He'd made it rather clear that he held little regard for her. Still, watching him sleep, some of her sadness abated and she found herself not just working on the water, but on Rath as he rose from its depths.

She added more detail to his bare abdomen. She had a living, breathing example of the actual torso right in front of her. The details came to life on the canvas, every ridge and shadow carefully attended. And then she moved up to his neck, to his face.

Now, sleeping on the settee, he looked softer than she'd ever seen him. Drawing him that day, he'd look every inch a man of strength and power.

As she flipped back through her book of drawings, she noted how much of the man she'd captured.

She pulled out the sketch she'd drawn of him looking like the devil. Here she'd shown his rage. In the very first one she'd sketched, she noted what pulled at his mouth and eyes: sadness.

Flipping through, she saw his strength, his vulnerability, his fierce need to protect, and in just one, his laugh. What she never saw was affection.

She stopped, unsure if she should keep painting him. Instead, she moved over to the fire. On the far wall was a mirror. She studied her face, remembered how she'd felt last night when Rath had touched her, held her in his arms.

For the first time since she'd met him, she started a drawing that was not of him. She drew...herself.

Her face, a soft smile, a blush, but also, the sadness that tugged at the corners of her eyes. She'd never been good at controlling the art, it controlled her instead, and by the time she'd finished, she could see it all: Her love for him, her hurt because he didn't return it, but also a strength she hadn't seen before. He wasn't going to love her.

Pain made her chest ache. But who was going to love her if she didn't love herself? And that's when she set down the book. She could be angry at him for not caring more, but how could she expect him to see her value when she didn't recognize it in herself?

Shaking her head, she closed her sketchbook and set it aside, then looked into the fire's blazing flames. She'd taken in another dress, and she wore it now. Standing, she tried to catch herself in the mirror. She had a nice face, decent figure.

She wasn't much for strength, but she had talent. Mira had been right about that. And she had passion. Even now, her body ached to allow Rath to touch her again.

She twisted, trying to look at her back. It was a nice line.

"Anna," Rath called from the couch, his voice slurred.

"Here," she called back, turning away from the mirror.

He pushed up. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Maybe four hours," she replied.

He scrubbed his face, looking at his painting. "You stopped at my face."

"I'm not ready to finish," she whispered. She wasn't sure she ever would be. When she'd drawn him, it had been a moment of deep passion, of wanting and a dawning understanding of affection. Could she ever represent that again?

"What were you doing?" he asked, stretching his back.

"Trying to draw myself," she answered honestly.

He pushed off the settee. "Did you?"

"I did," she answered, looking down at the book, frowning. "Just my face, though."

He was striding toward her, the muscles of his chest on full display. She turned away, not wanting to acknowledge the attraction pulsing through her still.

Another picture bloomed in her thoughts. Her lying on top of him, her legs on either side of his, his arms about her, her

arms covering his. Only there was no night rail between them.

She gave her head a small shake. The need for his touch threatened to overwhelm her even as her fist tightened in resolve. If she were going to love herself, she'd not give herself to a man who didn't care for her. A man who only saw her as means to an end.

Still, her fingers itched to draw the vision. She knew she could not repeat last night, but that didn't mean she couldn't explore her feelings, her memories.

She'd promised herself she'd not draw him anymore, but she was drawing herself too...

“When was the last time you ate?”

“What?” Her attention snapped back to the naked chest in front of her.

“Food, Anna. Sustenance. Have you eaten today?”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened as she looked at him. “A bit this morning.”

“I know you want to draw again...”

A little thrill of pleasure filled her that he'd anticipated her needs. Understood them even when she didn't. “How do you know that?”

“I see it in your face. Your eyes. You get a dreamy look.”

He read her face? That unsettled her. They should not be so intimately acquainted. “Your job, as we are all aware, is to keep me safe from Kingsley. I can see to my own needs otherwise.”

He stopped just in front of her. “I’m going to get food for us. If you’d like to start on your drawing, might I request you do so upstairs and not on the ground floor? I was too tired to ask where Ken was when I first came in, but he ought to be with you when I’m not.”

“Mira was tending his face. He’s got a black eye coming in.”

Rath frowned. “Upstairs?”

“All right,” she sighed. He was confusing her. She’d heard his words today, but then there were the visions she had running through her head and the fact that he was worried after her.

She left the library, though, and started up the stairs, lighting several candles in her room before she started to draw. Her hand raced over the page, the scene spilling from her thoughts. She’d always created in batches like this, the rest of the world melting away.

She had no idea how much time had passed when Rath entered the room, a tray of cheese, bread, and fruit in hand.

That’s when she realized he’d been right—she was ravenous. Her stomach growled loudly and she began to salivate. Setting aside her sketchbook, she crossed over to him as he set down the tray and promptly ripped off a piece of bread, then handed it to her.

She started to eat, taking several bites of cheese and bread before she popped a fig into her mouth.

Rath took a second section of bread. “Eat more, sweetheart, you shouldn’t skip meals like that.” Then he started toward the fire.

“Sweetheart?” she asked between bites, taking a slice of apple from the tray.

“You told me not to call you love—” but the word cut short as he let out a curse. “Fuck me, Anna.”

She turned to see him standing over her book, still open to the drawing she’d been working on.

The bread turned to paste in her mouth. “Rath,” she cried around the food. The drawing was erotic and telling, even more intimate than their actual liaison had been.

His gaze flicked up to hers, the heat in his eyes threatening to melt her bones. “Is this how you see us?” His tone held a promise that was strong enough to make her forget. But she couldn’t.

She looked away. “I don’t want to talk about us.”

“Then why are you drawing this?”

She shook her head, no longer sure she should explain her feelings about their physical relationship. Shifting, she finally settled on the words. “It made me feel powerful.”

“It should,” he said, his voice so husky that she shivered despite herself. And then he flipped back the page.

“Rath. Stop.” She started crossing the room as he flicked past her self-portrait, to the last drawing of him, and then another and then another.

“Love,” he rumbled, hot and a bit broken.

“Don’t call me that and stop looking at my sketchbook.” She finally reached him and snapped the book from the table, closing it before he could see any more. “Those renderings are private.”

He reached for the book then, wrapping his large, tan hand about it. “Let me see, Anna. Please.”

It was the *please*. A word she’d never heard before that loosened the knotted muscles in her hand and made her release the book.

RATH’S PULSE roared in his ears as he took the book from her hand.

Because Holy Mother Mary, these drawings.

The one of them twined together in a scene of lovemaking had not just his cock stiff, but his chest tight, his head aching, and his heart... It beat a steady rhythm for the woman standing before him.

In the drawing, he was power personified. Rippling muscle, darker skin, his pose protective and strong, holding her to his torso.

And she...she was splayed out, her smaller body fitting into his, her pale skin glistening with a sheen of sweat, or was that his imagination?

But somehow, despite him obviously being the stronger one in the picture, she was its focus, pleasure clear on her face, his eyes on her, waiting for her to come undone.

She was the queen, and he her willing servant.

Rath wanted a reenactment immediately. A chance to worship her again.

He flipped past that picture, though, as it was too erotic for him to even think straight, to the self-portrait she'd done. Her face showed pain, but also... He could see something in her eyes, a wanting.

And then he went back through, each picture of him showing a different mood, a different side. He looked up at her again. Not the devil like his father, but a man who was torn and sad and... He closed the book.

“Rath.” His name was a plea. “Please don’t say anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” Her voice cracked. “This morning hurt too much, and I can’t...”

“Hurt?” How had he hurt her? Her rejection had nearly slayed him, but before him was the evidence of a woman who understood him deep down to his soul. He forced himself to soften his voice, something he’d grown more accustomed to doing, better at doing. “How did I hurt you, love?”

“Stop calling me that.” She shook her head, her mouth puckering into a frown.

“Tell me.”

“You said that...” Her hands twisted together and her chin jutted out at an angle. “You said that you’ve only been nice to me because Ken told you to be.”

He sucked in a deep gulp of air because he understood. “You refused marriage to me because—”

“I won’t be tied to a man who marries me out of obligation. My family already...” But her words tapered off.

“Your family what?” He felt something rising in him as he moved closer. He sensed they were getting to the heart of what hurt her, and he’d touch her when she needed his comfort.

“I’m different from the rest of them. I don’t belong and everyone knows it. They care for me, but I’m a burden. Too weak...too sensitive.”

He shook his head. Is that what she thought? “I know that I am legitimate, and you are not, but Anna, your family loves you far more than mine ever cared for me. Don’t you know that?”

She shrugged, her chin dipping. “Maybe you’re right.” Her chin lifted again so that their eyes met. “Today, I started to think that perhaps the person who doesn’t love me is...me.”

He stepped closer, dropping her book to wrap his arms about her. “You should love you. You’re wonderful.”

He pressed his nose to her cheek, feeling her smile. “I’ve never heard you talk like that.”

“That’s because...” He hesitated, knowing that once he let the words out, there was no taking them back. But her hurt

was more important than his pride and that made his decision.
“That’s because I love you too.”

She gasped, pulling back to look at him. “You don’t mean that—”

“I do,” he said, his hands splaying out on her back. “I only said what I said to Ken because I was frightened of how I felt, and I’m not sure...” He hesitated. “I’m not sure I like myself, either.”

That wasn’t the complete truth. He actually thought he might hate himself. Or he had. But Anna was slowly smoothing his anger, rewriting the parts of himself that reminded him of his father.

Rath could see so clearly that he pushed everyone away because he was afraid he would be just like him, but in pushing everyone away, he was doing the very thing he’d always feared.

What a ridiculous cycle.

But here, with Anna in his arms...he felt like he could see the end of his anger. A way forward.

A path to be happy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ANNA STARED into Rath's eyes and saw something she'd never seen before. She forced herself to attend it, categorize it.

So often, she'd note it in the back of her thoughts, and she wouldn't process until the expression came through her eyes and onto the page.

But not now. She looked into the gleam and what she witnessed was...hope. Bright and clear, it shone back at her, mirroring her own.

She ought to ask him what all these words and feelings meant for their future.

She'd not allowed him to answer Ken's demand earlier when Ken had insisted they wed. And she didn't wish to ask now. It wasn't that she was afraid. It was more that...whatever his response, she knew she wanted him now.

So she pushed up on her toes and brushed her mouth against his.

The response was instantaneous. Like a flame to dry wood, passion ignited between them.

His mouth crashed down on hers a second time, pillaging it with every swipe of his tongue. But his rough kiss didn't frighten her, either—it excited.

She'd found her power...it was passion. And she kissed him back with every ounce of it until they were both panting for breath.

She wore a simple gown, no corset, which came in handy when Rath plucked at the buttons of her gown, the fabric falling away.

Only then did he break the kiss, pulling at strings and tugging at fabric until she was in nothing but her chemise.

He kissed her again, a quick, fierce press of his lips, and then he lifted her in his arms. They crossed the room, her feet dangling over the floor as he easily carried her. Her hands had wrapped around his neck but the moment he laid her across the bed, coming down on top of her, she raked her palms over the bulging muscles of his arms. When she reached his wrists, she moved back up his arms, feeling them all over again.

She didn't think she'd ever get enough of the feel of him, the sight of him, rippling before her.

He growled out his appreciation, settling between her legs, which forced her chemise higher up her thighs.

But that didn't seem to be enough to content him as he fisted the hem and pulled the fabric higher.

When he reached her waist, he stopped tugging up and instead, slid his mouth down, skimming her jaw, her neck, over the neckline of her chemise, kissing each of her nipples

and then sucking them into his mouth, making her cry out for more.

He reached for her chemise again, but this time, she helped him, pulling on the other side and sitting up so that he could tug the garment over her head.

She was nude and as she fell back, her hands lifting over her head, she felt...free.

Rath was balanced on his hands, hovering over her, looking down, his eyes roving over her.

“Anna,” he said through clenched teeth. “You look...”

She nipped at her lip. Was it odd that she wished for a mirror to see how they looked? “Would I look good in a drawing?”

Slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers. “Like a goddess,” he said just before he kissed her.

She threaded her fingers into his hair, lifting one of her legs to wrap about his waist.

He still wore his breeches and the fabric, stretched over his bulging manhood, pressed into her most intimate area.

His lips began to wander again, sliding down her neck and over her bare chest.

He held both her breasts in his hands, sliding his thumbs across her nipples, making them peak all over again.

She cried out, arching into the touch as he lowered his mouth to one of her nipples, sucking the sensitive flesh between his lips.

Her other leg came about his waist, her body aching for more as he kissed a path lower, across her belly and over the swell of her hip.

She had a moment to wonder where he'd kiss her next when his lips danced over a tickly spot between her leg and her abdomen.

A giggle erupted from her lips even as his teeth nipped at the sensitive flesh.

“You cad,” she gasped, swatting at his shoulder. “That tickles.”

He laughed too, sounding more carefree than she'd ever heard him. “I'll test that out more later. For right now...” And then he sank lower, planting a kiss on the triangle of hair at her juncture.

Her giggles abruptly stopped, her body going tense with the promise of that kiss. His thumb slid over her seam, making her shudder with need, but she didn't have the chance to ask for what she wanted because his lips followed the path, kissing down her most intimate parts.

As desire tingled through her, Anna was sure that she'd died and gone to heaven.

RATH RAN his tongue over her most intimate parts, noting that she still tasted like the lavender soap she'd used for her bath. It mixed perfectly with her earthier scents, his tongue sliding through her perfectly pink flesh.

Anna was a delight to the senses.

It wasn't just her flawless skin, her delicate beauty, or her lush curves. It was the way she touched him, as though she couldn't get enough. It was the feel of her thighs over his back, the sounds she made, and her taste.

He started a rhythm, intent upon seeing her to completion as quickly as he could because he was burning up with desire.

He knew tonight would not quench his thirst—that was going to take a lifetime—but he still wanted a drink. A sip from the well of her desire.

The tension in her body built, her fingers tugging at his hair, her cries growing desperate as he inserted a finger into her channel, adding to her pleasure and opening her up for what came next.

He was going to make Anna his. Now. Forever.

She cried out, her finish breaking over her as her insides clenched around his finger. Male satisfaction coursed through him as he helped her ride to the end, and then he was up, shucking his breeches.

“Anna. Love,” he said, tossing them onto the heap of clothes. “Don't be afraid, but...”

“I'm not afraid,” she said, lifting onto her elbows. Their lovemaking had pulled her hair from its pins, the long silky tresses streaming down over the bed.

The position plumped her breasts, and her lips, pouty from all his kisses, pulled into a smile. “You don't scare me, Rath.”

He gave her a wolfish grin. “If you knew how I long to be inside you—”

“I want that too.”

And then she lay back down, lifting her arms to him.

It was all the invitation he needed and he climbed up her body, settling between her thighs.

He’d never wanted anything more, but he didn’t rush this moment. Instead, he brushed back her hair, holding her face in his hands. “You’re mine, now, love.”

“Yours?”

“For better and for worse. And with me, there might be some worse.”

“For richer and for poorer?” She grinned as her palms slid down his back.

“I’m relatively poor. You know that.”

“In sickness and in health?”

And then he understood. She was reciting wedding vows. In his defense, the rare occasion he’d been forced to attend a wedding, he’d tried exceptionally hard to *not* pay attention.

Still, he did know the rest of the words. “From this day forward until death do us part.”

“We don’t have to make promises,” she said, her clear blue eyes holding his captive. “I’m here in your arms because I’m finding myself and I know that I am not made for the role of duchess.”

He snorted. “You are made for me. And I will not only marry you, but I will also be by your side for the rest of my life.” That was how he broke the cycle of his father—by loving a woman enough to stand with her no matter what.

“Really?” she asked, her leg sliding about his to lock them tighter together. “You mean that?”

“Every word.”

“Oh,” she whispered as she kissed him again. “That is lovely.”

It wasn’t just lovely. It was the truth. And he could insist now or...he could make love to her and then show her how serious he was later when he posted the bans.

The head of his cock was nestled in her slick folds and a small twitch of his hips had him sinking into her channel.

He squeezed his eyes shut, the sensation almost too much as he slowly pressed deeper, allowing her body to adjust to his girth.

“Are you all right, love?”

“Fine,” she whispered, holding him tight.

“What does it feel like?”

“Pressure,” she answered.

And he knew she also meant pain. He could feel her tension and he stilled, allowing her time to adjust.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said against her cheek, just drinking in the softness of her skin as he rubbed his nose against the velvety flesh.

“You’re fine,” she said, her voice relaxing. “I’m ready for more.”

He sank deeper, his body shaking with the effort to go slow. He’d never wanted a woman more and yet he’d never been so motivated to cherish her rather than just take his pleasure.

Finally, he sank all way inside her, fully seated, the two of them joined as only lovers could be, so he kissed her again. Not with passion so much as possession. He wished to tell her that she was his and he was hers too.

He’d give every part of himself to her. As she kissed him back, their tongues entwined, he imagined she understood, made the same promise.

Finally, he slid out of her, keeping his movements slow and controlled, then he sank back in. With each stroke, she relaxed, the tension easing from her body, only to be replaced with a new need that had her hips lifting to meet his.

He maintained control for as long as he could, keeping his thrusts light and easy, but soon, he found himself chasing the pleasure that was building to perilous heights and Anna met him stroke for stroke until she cried out again, her body spasming underneath him.

It was the final straw, breaking his pleasure as he climaxed too.

He was propped on his elbows, cradling her head in his hands, kissing her over and over as they slowly floated back down.

And then he lifted. “Anna.”

“Yes?” Her brows drew together in confusion.

“You still haven’t eaten much.”

Her eyes widened in surprise and then she laughed. “I’m fine.”

He rose from the bed, taking a moment to admire the view before he fetched the tray. Settling in next to her, he grabbed a fig and lay back down, dangling the food over her lips. “Eat, my love. After what we just did, you’ll need your strength.”

She took a bite then, eating from his fingers. Which, by some miracle, had the passion rising in him again.

But as she plucked a piece of bread from the tray, she rolled on her side, facing him. “Do you think we can return to the library?”

“Why?”

“I’m ready.”

“For what?”

“To finish my painting. I know exactly how your face should appear.”

“Eat first,” he said, pushing off the bed to retrieve his breeches. “I’ll have to be with you. It’s growing dark and I’d not have you in the room alone.”

She nodded. “Perfect.”

It was. This moment, this night, had been the best of his life. And it was the first of many more.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ANNA SAT in front of her painting, candles all about her as she stared at the figure before her... Rath, rising from the rippling water, muscles flexing, body perfect, looking at her with...

Love. Strength. Commitment. She lifted her brush, dipping it into the well of black paint that she'd mixed.

From outside her ring of light, Rath lounged on the settee. She could hardly see him, but she could feel his eyes on her.

"What do you think?" she murmured as her brush moved across the canvas.

She wore nothing but her chemise, a blanket wrapped about her like a shawl. "I think that I am going to give Ken another black eye for leaving you unattended for so long."

She laughed, low and husky. "He came in while you were sleeping earlier. I shoed him away. I was perfectly safe with you even if you were sleeping."

He murmured something low and noncommittal.

"But I was asking about the painting." She looked over at him, her brows lifting, trying to discern his expression.

"That is one handsome man you're painting."

She gave him a saucy grin. “He’s going to marry me, he says.”

“He is,” Rath rumbled back. “Any man who has a woman who paints him like that should never let her go.”

Pleasure coursed through her at the compliment.

“Honestly, Anna, I never in my wildest dreams imagined another person would ever see what you see inside me.” He pushed up to sitting. “And the fact that you’re able to put it onto the canvas... I wish I had your talent and could capture you like that.”

She blushed, finishing some shadowing about his eyes. “Almost done.”

But he went stone still when a creaking noise sounded in the room. Anna stilled too, dropping her brush into the waiting cup of mineral oil. “Who goes there?” she called out, looking back at Rath.

But he’d disappeared into the shadows.

She scanned the room, looking for Rath, searching for the source of the sound. “Hello?” she asked, swallowing down a lump of fear as she stood from her chair.

She wasn’t frightened that Rath was gone. Was he looking? Waiting? She trusted him implicitly to keep her safe, and what was more...

She straightened. She knew how to be brave.

A board creaked nearby, and she turned toward the sound. A shadow appeared in the darkness. “Rath?” she called, her

voice tight with fear.

“Guess again,” a deep voice said from the darkness.

“Kingsley,” she breathed, taking an inadvertent step back. She wished she had Mira’s broom. Or Tris’s fists.

Never mind, a pistol would do just fine.

“You finally figured out who I was.”

She didn’t bother to answer as he moved closer. She took several retreating steps, reaching the edge of her halo of candles. “I don’t know what you want with me, but—”

“I want to use you to force your brothers to sell their gaming hells,” he answered easily, looking at the canvas. He paused, his gaze sliding over the work, his lip curling. “Your talent is undeniable.”

Was she supposed to thank him? She slid another step back, moving closer to the darkness.

“It’s an annoying trait of you and your filthy Smith siblings—your talent.”

Another step. She forced herself to keep her breathing even, her eyes sliding about for a weapon. Where was Rath?

“I don’t want you to worry. I’ll allow you to paint while you stay with me. I’d like a portrait as well. Something more formal, I think, though you are allowed to glorify me in the same manner you have him. I’ve seen the Duke of Upton in person. He’s not that impressive.”

She swallowed down a lump as she reached the massive hearth. Leaning down, she grabbed a poker from the rack of

tools. Her hand shook as she clasped her fingers about it, but she forced herself to keep a strong grip and positioned the weapon straight out in front of her. “Obviously, I disagree.”

Kingsley, in the center of the candles, flashed her a sinister smile. “How many liberties have you allowed him?”

She gasped, her hand shaking as she held the poker up higher. “That is none of your business.”

“Oh, but my dear, it is.” Kingsley started moving toward her again. “You see, while I have very little regard for your family, even I can confess that you are exceptionally lovely.”

Ice-cold fear slid down her back. She knew what he insinuated, and even knowing that Rath was here to protect her, the idea of Kingsley touching her made her shrink into herself.

But she didn’t have a chance to answer because as Kingsley cleared the ring of candles, Rath appeared, snarling as he lunged at Kingsley, hurtling into him, both of them crashing to the ground.

She screamed then, long and loud, attempting to alert anyone and everyone to come to their aid.

A flash of steel caught her eye and she screamed again when she realized it was in Kingsley’s hand, the arc of the knife headed for Rath’s chest.

Her blanket dropped, and with her heart roaring in her ears, she raced toward both men, swinging the poker high above her head.

Rath's hand shot out, clipping Kingsley in the throat, the knife clattering down to the wooden floor a moment before Anna reached them.

But there was no changing course now and she brought the poker crashing down on Kingsley's head.

She heard the hit, the force of it reverberating through her arms. With a cry, she dropped the poker as Kingsley slumped to the side, landing on the floor next to Rath.

Her hands flew to her mouth as Rath pushed up. "Are you hurt?"

Was she? How would she even know, her blood rushed with such force. "I don't... I don't think so."

He wrapped her in his arms, brushing his lips across her forehead. "Go get Ken, love. Hurry."

And then he gave her a small push toward the door.

KILLING KINGSLEY HAD BEEN EASY.

Should Rath have turned the man in to the constable? Maybe. But he was a marquess and the odds that he might weasel his way out of punishment were high.

Besides, Kingsley had been in disguise, which meant no one even knew he was here.

And Rath had never been a man to hesitate when a job needed to be done. It was why the Smiths had trusted him with protecting Anna in the first place.

A trust he repaid by eliminating the threat to the woman he loved. He might be a more balanced man, but he was still one who'd move Heaven and Earth to keep the ones he loved safe.

So...killing Kingsley had been easy, burying his body a bit harder. Ken helped, despite his face looking as though he'd been tenderized.

"You're angry at me for hitting you," he said between grunts as he dug.

"No," Ken said from three feet away, also digging. "I am angry that you compromised my sister-in-law."

How could what they'd done be called *compromising*? She was absolutely perfect. "I'm in love with Anna."

Ken's shovel stopped. "You?"

"Me." He stopped too, resting his elbow on the top of the shovel's handle. It had to be midnight and only the barest sliver of moon lit their movements. But his eyes had adjusted and there was no mistaking Ken's shocked stare.

"What about your promise to never wed?"

"Foolish."

Ken spat into the dirt. "Rath? Is that you?"

He shook his head. "I know. I never thought..." Then he drew in a deep breath of cold night air. "But I'm not going to be him. And Anna, she's nothing like my mum. She drowned me in love and if I should start to doubt..."

"She'll clock you with a metal poker?"

Rath gave a little chuckle. “Exactly.” Not that there was a chance he’d actually ever doubt. He felt reborn, as though he’d been given a second chance at life, a life without anger but filled with love. There was no better chance than that.

EPILOGUE

ANNA STARED at her latest canvas, cocking her head to the side and considering her next stroke.

“It’s not done yet?” Rath asked, lifting his head.

“Shh,” she said, pushing his forehead back down. “You wrinkled the water when you flexed.”

“You like it when I flex.”

“Except when you are my canvas. Then, you must be still.”

Three weeks had passed since the night Kingsley had attacked. Last week they’d said goodbye to Mira and Ken.

Ken wished to return to his home before the winter. Besides, he had important news to share with Anna’s family.

Anna and Rath were wed. And Kingsley was no longer a threat—both pieces of news that her family would likely delight in.

She might not be a real Smith, but to the rest of the world, Lady Anna Smith had become a duchess.

It was something she’d yet to fully process.... Her. A duchess.

But that understanding would come in stages. Right now, she was busy painting a scene on her husband's stomach.

She didn't really care about him creasing her water scene. She was about to thoroughly ruin the work. Once done, she'd climb on top of him, smearing the paint between their two bodies, a sensation they both took great delight in.

"Wife," he rumbled, his brows drawing together. "You'd better hurry and finish. My cock has been aching for the last hour."

She laughed, looking up at the mirror they'd had installed on the ceiling. Her idea. She wanted to see them together.

Her drawing book was filled with images of them. "Your cock likes to be kept waiting," she murmured, swirling her brush lower down his stomach to the nest of hair just above his manhood.

He was right. The member was so wanton, it was beginning to weep. "Interesting," she said, and stuck her tongue out to give him a bit of a taste.

"Anna," he gritted through his clenched teeth. "You'll be the death of me, woman."

"Will you die happy?" she asked, standing to shuck her smock and then her dress.

"Glowingly," he answered, his eyes all over her body as he watched her undress. "Tell me we're done painting."

She frowned. "Look for yourself."

He did, his gaze on the mirror above. “You didn’t do the lower section.”

“My husband is impatient, and everyone knows that dukes are not known for their good tempers.”

He reached for her, delighting in the jiggle when she danced from his grasp. “My patience is leagues better since I married you, but you’re right. If you don’t come here soon, I’m going to come after you and—”

At one point in time the chase might have frightened her. But now all she felt was liquid, slow heat pooling in her loins as she took two more steps back. “Come get me, Rath.”

“With pleasure, my love.”

And then he was up in a flash, paint forgotten as he stalked toward her.

She stopped, letting him catch her, her breath in her throat, staring at the man who she’d made her own. The very last one she’d ever expected to heal her heart.

He caught her in his arms, the paint making their bodies slide together.

She gasped as her head arched back, opening herself to him. This was exactly where she belonged.

BONUS EPILOGUE

Bonus Epilogue

The first snow had just begun to swirl where Anna and Rath sat in the library. She quietly painted while he read correspondence.

“Your brother says that business is booming,” Rath murmured from his new desk.

She looked up at him, smiling. “That’s excellent news.”

“I agree. What I’ll have to do is decide how to best maximize all the money we’re making. I know this ground is fertile. Perhaps it’s time to plant it again. Unless we visit your family in the spring?”

She nipped at her lip. She dreaded seeing her brothers the smallest bit. So much had changed and she was excited to see them through her new lens, but what if she found that she’d been right all along? What if they were only relieved that they no longer needed to care for her? “I’m not certain.”

Rath picked up his head. “I recognize that tone. What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “I shouldn’t hide here at Cranston, should I?”

He sat back in his chair, waving her over to his lap. “We’re very happy here.”

“Even you?”

“Especially me.” He looked around. “Just like everything else, you’ve recast this place for me.”

His arms came about her as she leaned her head on his shoulder. “I’m glad.”

“But your brothers will be nothing but happy to see you,” he said and brushed his lips over her forehead before resting his cheek on the top of her head. “And if they’re not, smack them with a poker and remind them to behave.”

“You’re right. Thank you for reminding me that I am strong too.” She smiled into his chest and snuggled deeper. Her painting could wait. She’d always love her heart, but she was learning to live in more and more of the moments of her life.

He opened the next letter and then the next, keeping her perfectly balanced in his arms until she felt him shift underneath her. “What is it?” she asked, lifting her head.

“It’s...” He frowned down at a formal letter. “An invitation.”

“To where?”

“To the home of the Marquess of Kingsley.”

“Kingsley,” Anna gasped, sitting up straighter. “But that’s...”

Rath grimaced. “Impossible?”

Anna blinked. “Yes. Exactly.”

“We both know it’s not the former marquess but the heir...”

“Who is that?” she gasped, sitting up straighter in his lap.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. He’s having a Christmas party.”

“A party?” Her fist clenched against Rath’s chest, her heart beating wildly. Was this some kind of trap? Her jaw tightened. “If he tries to hurt you...”

Rath’s brows lifted. “I sometimes think that I did not rid myself of my anger. I just transferred it to you.”

She made a *pishing* noise, her fist thumping against him. “I’ll not allow him to hurt you, not when it was the former marquess who attacked us.”

“Feeling protective, my love?” Rath asked, one brow rising.

She scowled at him. “That man deserved what he got, the way he’s persecuted us.”

Rath leaned forward, capturing her lips with his. “I know. But all the same, I think you’ll stay here under heavy guard, and I’ll attend without you.”

She shook her head. “Not a chance. Who will swing the poker if he gets cheeky?”

“I love you, woman, you know that, don’t you?”

“I love you too,” she said, giving him another long kiss that melded into several more.

YAY!!! Upton has found his way to his happily ever after, but the Lords of Temptation are not over.

Northville is still hunting Gyla in *A Vendetta with a Viscount*. And now Kingsley’s heir is about to enter the Lords of Temptation in *A Masquerade with a Marquess*. What’s more, a few old friends from the Lords of Scandal are coming our way. There are still plenty more Lords of Temptation waiting for you!

A Vendetta with a Viscount

A Scandal with a Scot

A Masquerade with a Marquess

A Bargain with a Bastard

A MASQUERADE WITH A MARQUESS

A Masquerade with a Marquess

Lords of Temptation

By Tammy Andresen

She might be blind, but even she can SEE that he's trouble.

The moment Mia's fingers accidentally brush down Lord Kingsley's rippling chest during a chance encounter at a masquerade ball, she knows that her life will never be the same. Because the passion that flares between them is hot enough to melt all her hesitation away.

He's hell bent on revenge.

Until the broken little bird Mia lands in his path. But enemies take advantage of distraction and Mia is as stunning as she is passionate, making her the worst kind.

And thanks to that one ill-fated evening, she is also now his wife.

That means it's not just his life that's in danger, it's hers too. Which begs the question—how far is he willing to go to

protect the woman he never wanted but might just be the one person he can't live without?

It's time to find out...

A MASQUERADE WITH A MARQUESS

By all rights, Cade Kingsley should already be the Marquess of Kingsley...

Cade ran a frustrated hand through his dark hair, staring into the fire that lit the hearth on this bitterly cold Cumberland day.

This was the last place in England he wished to spend his Christmastide, but there was nothing for it.

His weasel of an uncle couldn't die in the normal way. No. He'd had to go and start some secret underground war and then just disappear off the face of the earth.

Even for a Kingsley, it was dastardly.

Which left Cade in a bloody bad spot, if you asked him. The last place his uncle had been seen and recognized was the border of Cumbria.

At least, that's what his very expensive investigator had told Cade. Because his uncle's body was nowhere to be found, they could not just presume him dead. He was a fucking marquess. Or he had been.

And while their king agreed that Kingsley was likely deceased and never to return, they had to keep up appearances and all that. Which meant that Cade, the heir presumptive, had to prove that his uncle was not coming back or wait years to assume the title.

And though Cade had always known his uncle was shady—and his investigation had proven that fact beyond a shadow of a doubt—to the rest of the world, Cade, for his own sake, would have to find evidence that his uncle was gone without revealing any of his uncle's crimes.

Crimes that seemed to haunt his family tree and if Cade wasn't careful, his own future.

A knock sounded at the door of the study. "Come in."

The harried-looking housekeeper entered, several bits of hair coming out of her pins and sticking out at odd angles. "My lord," she said with a distracted bob.

"Mrs. Raith."

"I was hoping for a moment," she said and smoothed her rumpled apron. "I am trying to decide between two types of tablecloth and I can't..."

He stopped listening. He could not care less about the color of the linens for his upcoming Christmastide ball, nor about the food being served, nor which wine from the cellar was poured. He had no idea what wine the house even boasted.

The estate was his mother's. Part of her inheritance from her father, gifted to her after her marriage to Cade's father. Cade had never been here before, and he was unlikely to ever

return again. Hell, he couldn't even remember the name of the village the house lorded over. "Whatever you think best, Mrs. Raith."

"Yes, my lord." The woman swallowed a visible lump, looking like she wished to ask more. He had some sympathy for her. No one from his family had been to this property in ages, let alone hosted a major event here.

The staff was ill prepared for such an undertaking and the house was likely too small.

Neither deterred him in the least.

He didn't give a whit if this party was a success. Only one detail mattered. "Have any more guests responded?"

The housekeeper gave a jerk of her chin, stepping into the hall and waving to someone he couldn't see. Likely the butler.

Sure enough, the ancient man appeared, carrying a tray with several notes. His hands shook as he set it down in front of Cade, stepping back to fold them in obvious relief.

Cade began to sift through the letters, noting several locals had responded that they'd come.

"Oh." Mrs. Raith pointed at one note. "That's from the Baron Blackstone. His daughter is regarded as a great beauty."

The butler cleared his throat, grimacing. An odd gesture to be certain. Did beautiful women make him uncomfortable?

He opened the letter, noting that the baron had agreed to attend, which was a good sign. The more distinguished the list of guests, the more likely his query would come as well.

He'd nearly reached the bottom of the pile when he found it. The letter he'd been waiting for.

With impatient hands, he broke the seal and unfolded the sheet of paper. Triumph flared in his eyes as he read the neat script.

The Duke and Duchess of Upton would be in attendance.

His trap was set. The bait taken.

"That will be all," he murmured, tossing the sheet back onto the tray and leaning back in his chair.

It had begun to snow and he watched the flakes drifting past the window with satisfaction.

Soon, he'd be able to get the proof he needed that his uncle was dead. And then he could leave Cumberland as the Marquess of Kingsley and never return.

Mia sat next to her mother as their carriage rolled through the darkness, the swaying lanterns the only light that cut through the night and penetrated her closed lids.

She reached under her heavy cloak and smoothed down the silk of her gown, a deep blue, her mother had told her, to offset her dark blond hair. Colors often eluded her.

She fidgeted with the lace cuff, her gloves catching on the delicate fabric. She was nervous.

Not for all the reasons a normal girl might be aflutter about for such an event. She didn't expect to dance, nor would she

watch the parade of fashion that would surely be on display. But her mother had told her that the new Duchess of Upton would be in attendance and Mia very much wished to meet the lady.

Not because she was a duchess. Titles were another thing that Mia cared very little about. Despite being told she was beautiful, Mia didn't expect to marry.

She'd settle for a small cottage that had enough room for her to create and a connection to help her art be seen.

If she was even good enough of an artist.

She didn't know. Her mother claimed that Mia had unsurpassed talent, but mothers often thought such things. It was not a measure with which to base one's entire future.

Which is why her meeting with the duchess was so important. Not only was she the upper echelon of society, she was a renowned artist. At the very least, Mia would like the woman's unbiased opinion.

She had a small clay piece tucked in her reticule to show the duchess. Her pulse fluttered wildly in her throat.

The carriage began to slow, the sound of other wheels crunching as they rolled along the gravel.

"We're nearly there," her mother murmured, always attempting to narrate the world around Mia as though Mia hadn't learned how to do so herself.

"Thank you," she replied, not bothering to remind her mother she was perfectly capable. Instead, she reached for her mask to place over her eyes. The slits were quite narrow,

purposely so, in order that no one would see the discoloration of her irises.

“You’re welcome, darling. Now remember, our host is about to become a marquess.”

Mia frowned. They’d been over the details a hundred times. Her mother was convinced that of all the properties the heir apparent might have visited, he’d come to Cumberland, where his mother had hailed from, to choose a bride from the hardiest stock in England.

Mia had no idea where her mother’s theory had come from, but if it were true, he likely would not consider Mia a prospective bride.

She could see just enough to maneuver in a crowd, broad shapes and splashes of color and light penetrating her damaged eyes. But that was it. And a blind bride was not exactly hardy stock even if she had lost her sight due to a childhood fever.

The carriage entered the queue of other vehicles waiting to drop the guests at the main doors.

Mia straightened her shoulders, clutching her reticule tighter. She’d not precisely told her mother of her plan for the evening. While her mother supported Mia’s art, the matriarch saw Mia’s pastime as the accomplishment that would help her daughter secure an excellent match.

And Mia saw enough of the world to know that despite her supposed beauty and her artistic accomplishments, she was likely not going to wed. She’d been passed over at nearly

every event she'd ever attended and this one would be no different.

Which was why it was time to begin testing alternative paths. Fortunately for her, her mother's matrimonial plans were likely to fizzle out without any work from Mia. Men would continue to ignore her and at two and twenty, she'd soon be on the shelf.

The carriage stopped once again, their footman snapping open the door. Lifting a hand, she carefully adjusted the mask that covered her eyes.

Her mother stepped out first, Mia second, the footman well aware of the secure hand she'd need to make her way down the steps.

She lifted her skirts in the other hand, attempting to move with as much grace as possible. Then, threading her arm through her mother's, they joined the crowd.

With the loss of sight, all of Mia's other senses had heightened. She heard the rustle of clothing, the fall of footsteps, the low murmur of voices.

They moved along with the others. "Steps," her mother faintly whispered.

She gave a near imperceptible nod. She could make out stairs in the light of day, but not as well at night.

The breeze blew cold air across her skin, and she lifted her chin to allow her nose to clear of the surrounding scents. The ballroom would be full of the scent of perfume and body odor.

She'd take the fresh smell of a cold winter night while she was able.

But as she drew in a deep breath, a different scent touched her nose. Strong and masculine, sandalwood mixed with pine and an earthy undertone that made her nipples tighten in the strangest way.

She paused, nearly tripping on the next step. She hardly had time to straighten when a hand was under her elbow.

Strong, lean fingers wrapped about the bare skin between the top of her glove and the sleeve of her dress, their firm, warm grip causing her to shiver.

"Careful, my lady." His voice rippled over her skin, the deep timbre of it making her suck in a great gulp of air.

"My lord," her mother gushed. "Thank you for both your invitation and your aid."

"You're welcome. But I must confess, I don't have the pleasure of knowing who I converse with."

"Beg your pardon." Her mother dipped into a curtsy. "I am Baroness Blackstone and this is my daughter, Miss Amelia Blackstone."

"Ah, the renowned beauty." His voice, though deep, had a touch of honey to it, making it so pleasant, she thought she could fall into it. Lose herself in its rich tones.

"Hardly," she answered as she dipped into a curtsy. His scent had so completely surrounded her that she had to fight her urge to lean closer, draw more of him in. "But I must also thank you, my lord."

“Hardly?” he said, leaning close to her ear. She drew in another deep breath through her nose, and his hand was still on her elbow as that honey baritone whispered across her ear. “Every word was true.”

She nipped at her lip to keep from swaying into him. Never had she reacted so strongly to anyone. She swallowed, trying to find her composure. “And when they spoke of my beauty, did they also mention my clumsiness?”

He chuckled, the sound making her pulse skip several beats. “May I request a dance this evening?”

That stuttering organ in her chest stopped altogether. Dance? She could. She’d had instructors. And if there were enough candles, she’d be able to make out the outlines of the other dancers so as not to crash into them.

Still, it was a risk most men didn’t take. Dancing with the blind girl. Did he know of her condition? His sure fingers gripped hers, their strength helping her to make a choice. He seemed like the sort of man who could lead without question.

She could trust in that.

“I’d be honored,” she answered and from next to her, her mother gave a faint squeak. Mia would like to tell her not to get her hopes up.

The night was young, and Mia would hazard a guess that by the end of this evening, the marquess would have an entirely different opinion of her.

Available on major retailers: [A Masquerade With a Marquess](#)

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www.tammyandresen.com

Hugs!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tammy Andresen lives with her husband and three children just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. She grew up on the Seacoast of Maine, where she spent countless days dreaming up stories in blueberry fields and among the scrub pines that line the coast. Her mother loved to spin a yarn and Tammy filled many hours listening to her mother retell the classics. It was inevitable that at the age of eighteen, she headed off to Simmons College, where she studied English literature and education. She never left Massachusetts but some of her heart still resides in Maine and her family visits often.

Find out more about Tammy:

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OTHER TITLES BY TAMMY

Lords of Scandal

Duke of Daring

Marquess of Malice

Earl of Exile

Viscount of Vice

Baron of Bad

Earl of Sin

Earl of Gold

Earl of Baxter

Duke of Decadence

Marquess of Menace

Duke of Dishonor

Baron of Blasphemy

Viscount of Vanity

Earl of Infamy

Laird of Longing

Duke of Chance

Marquess of Diamonds

Queen of Hearts

Baron of Clubs

Earl of Spades

King of Thieves

Marquess of Fortune

Calling All Rakes

Wanted: An Earl for Hire

Needed: A Dishonorable Duke

Found: Bare with a Baron

Vacancy: Viscount Required

Lost: The Love of a Lord

Missing: An Elusive Marquess

Wanted: Title of Countess

The Dark Duke's Legacy

Her Wicked White

Her Willful White

His Wallflower White

Her Wanton White

Her Wild White

His White Wager

Her White Wedding

The Rake's Ruin

When only an Indecent Duke Will Do

How to Catch an Elusive Earl
Where to Woo a Bawdy Baron
When a Marauding Marquess is Best
What a Vulgar Viscount Needs
Who Wants a Brawling Baron
When to Dare a Dishonorable Duke

The Wicked Wallflowers

Earl of Dryden
Too Wicked to Woo
Too Wicked to Wed
Too Wicked to Want

How to Reform a Rake

Don't Tell a Duke You Love Him
Meddle in a Marquess's Affairs
Never Trust an Errant Earl
Never Kiss an Earl at Midnight
Make a Viscount Beg

Wicked Lords of London

Earl of Sussex
My Duke's Seduction
My Duke's Deception
My Earl's Entrapment

My Duke's Desire

My Wicked Earl

Brethren of Stone

The Duke's Scottish Lass

Scottish Devil

Wicked Laird

Kilted Sin

Rogue Scot

The Fate of a Highland Rake

A Laird to Love

Christmastide with my Captain

My Enemy, My Earl

Heart of a Highlander

A Scot's Surrender

A Laird's Seduction

Taming the Duke's Heart

Taming a Duke's Reckless Heart

Taming a Duke's Wild Rose

Taming a Laird's Wild Lady

Taming a Rake into a Lord

Taming a Savage Gentleman

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American Brides

A Laird to Love

Wicked Lords of London