



A MASQUERADE WITH A

Marquess

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A MASQUERADE WITH A
MARQUESS

LORDS OF TEMPTATION

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A MASQUERADE WITH A MARQUESS

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.

And perhaps an agent of his enemy...

Is she part of the plot against him or in grave peril at his side? 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...

CHAPTER ONE

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 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 Cumberland.

At least that's what his very expensive investigator had told Cade. But 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 Prinny 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, making a distracted bob.

“Mrs. Grafton.”

“I was hoping for a moment”—she smoothed her rumpled apron—“I am trying to decide between two types of tablecloths, 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. Grafton."

"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. It was hell and gone from the rest of society and from everything that was important to Cade. It was given to his mother as a way to ensure that she'd have a home should her husband fail her...as everyone expected he would.

The staff was ill-prepared for such an undertaking, and the house was likely too small.

Neither deterred Cade 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, Greeves.

Sure enough, the ancient man appeared, carrying a tray with several notes. His hands shook as he set it down in front of Cade, then stepped back to fold them in obvious relief.

Cade sifted through the letters, noting several locals had responded that they'd come.

"Oh." Mrs. Grafton pointed at one note. "That's from Baron Blackstone. His daughter is regarded as a great beauty."

Greeves cleared his throat, grimacing. An odd gesture to be certain. Did beautiful women make him uncomfortable? Was she notoriously spoiled? Then he shook his head—it didn't matter.

Opening the letter, he noted that the baron had agreed to attend. 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 behind 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 with their warmth.

She reached under her heavy cloak and smoothed down the silk of her gown, a deep blue, a color her mother had told her would offset her dark-blond hair. Colors 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 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.

Yet another disappointment her father could add to his growing list of reasons his daughter was worthless. The very first reason, not being born a boy, had started their rocky relationship, one that grew worse by the day.

Which was why she needed tonight to be a success. She had to find a means to support herself.

She'd settle for a small cottage that had enough room for her to create, and a connection to help give her art much-needed exposure, and hopefully one day, a profit.

If she was even good enough as 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 on which to base one's entire future.

Meeting with the duchess was important to furthering her cause. Not only was she in the upper echelon of society, she was a renowned painter. At the very least, Mia would appreciate the woman's unbiased opinion.

She had a small marble piece tucked in her reticule to show the duchess. A replica of her favorite pet, her parakeet. 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 she hadn't learned how to do so herself. Not that she didn't appreciate her mother's help. But at nearly two and twenty, what Mia craved most was to be treated like an adult.

"Thank you," she replied, not bothering to remind her mother she was perfectly capable. It was an old conversation that would only result in an argument. Instead, she reached for her mask to place over her eyes. The slits were very narrow, purposely so, so that no one would see the discoloration of her irises. She didn't exactly intend to lie to the duchess about her sight, but she did wish for the woman to assess the piece first.

"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, not a vocation for a lady to pursue.

And Mia saw enough of the world to know that despite her supposed beauty and her artistic talent, 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.

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 nearly two and twenty, she'd soon be on the shelf.

But she needed to escape her father's house and her only hope there was to be able to sell her work.

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 aware of the secure hand she'd need to make her way down.

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, she joined the crowd.

With the loss of sight, all of Mia had learned to rely more acutely on her other senses. She heard the rustle of clothing, the fall of footsteps, the low murmur of voices.

They moved along with the others. "Steps," her mother whispered faintly.

She gave a nearly imperceptible nod. She could make out stairs in the light of the 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 the surrounding scents. The ballroom would be full of perfumes and body odor. She'd take the fresh smell of 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 the urge to lean closer, draw in more of him. “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, his hand still on her elbow as that silky, decadent 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 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.

CHAPTER TWO

CADE WATCHED the duke and his bride across the ballroom. The pixie-like blonde hung on her husband's arm, smiling demurely as a ring of partygoers vied for her attention.

There was nothing demure about the Duke of Upton. He glowered at everyone around him, his heavy brow pulled tight above his eyes as he stood straight and tall. His sheer size and stern expression made more than one guest cut him a wide path.

His wife tilted her chin up and he immediately bent lower so that she might whisper in his ear. The ghost of a smile touched his mouth before he straightened, returning to his glare.

A lesser man might be intimidated. But not Cade. Instead, he made note of the fact that the only softness the man displayed was toward his wife. It was good to know an enemy's weak points.

Stalking around the edge of the ballroom, Cade tried to remain in the shadows, not wanting to be caught by any guests himself.

His first step would be to listen from the shadows. He knew he was unlikely to discover anything of importance, but it was worth an attempt.

Next, he'd catch the duke alone for a conversation. One where he'd use everything he'd learned so far to work a confession from the duke. Perhaps that was ambitious. But he'd at least make the first chess move, so to speak. Let the duke know that Cade knew he was involved in his uncle's death.

Upton owned three clubs, one of which had been in his uncle's possession for a short time before the king had personally made certain the Den of Sins was turned over to Upton and his partners.

Gaming hells were not legal businesses. But Upton had been smart. He made certain the crown got its cut.

The second piece of information he knew for certain. His uncle had been seen socially with a Miss Natalie Blake, a woman his junior by at least ten or fifteen years. A woman who had married Upton's friend, the Earl of Somersworth.

And three...his uncle had come to Cumberland at the same time as Upton. None of these things proved anything definitely. But all three...they told a story.

But he needed facts. And a tighter connection between Upton and his uncle. He finally reached the duke, then leaned against the wall and turned one ear toward the crowd gathered about the Duke and Duchess of Upton.

“And I was saying, of course you’d choose to live in Cumberland. Why wouldn’t you? The people here are made of sterner stuff.”

Cade rolled his eyes. It was likely true. The weather was dreadful enough, it would make anyone hard and miserable.

“It’s lovely,” the duchess replied with a kind smile. He could just make it out from her profile in his position behind them. “The landscape is unsurpassed.”

Upton said nothing, staring across the ballroom, with his feet spread wide, his broad shoulders flexing.

From Her Grace’s right, two more ladies approached, both easily recognizable. Baroness Blackstone and her daughter.

Amelia.

His body clenched in awareness as he watched her hips sway, her arm linked with her mother’s.

She’d not been one of those women who had made herself known at this party. She didn’t laugh loudly, or dance with every dandy, or giggle in packs of roving debutantes. She’d been quiet, demure, almost invisible.

Which had not kept him from noticing her everywhere.

It was her height, first. She was taller than most of the women here, which made her easily recognizable. At more than six feet himself, he’d liked the way the top of her head had reached his chin when he’d been standing next to her.

Then there was her beauty.

Classic features with rich, dark-blond hair and a mouth so full and lush, it was made for sin.

She wore a mask, as did they all, and for good reason. He'd planned this as a masquerade because he hoped to hide as he spied on the duke. But it meant he couldn't see her eyes. Still, her high cheekbones and the delicate arch of her brow promised a beauty, just as Mrs. Grafton had said.

The dress clung to every lush curve and he ran his eyes over her again, lust making his groin tight.

She was a distraction he could ill afford.

"Your Grace," the baroness called, waving her hand that held her closed fan. "What a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The duchess turned to Amelia and her mother, her smile genuine as the two women dipped into a bow of respect.

The three of them moved into a tighter circle, their voices dropping so that he could no longer hear them.

The other partygoers wandered away from the silent duke, and he now stood alone. This was his moment to catch Upton.

But Amelia laughed, the sound like a tinkling bell, tickling his ears and drawing his attention back to her. Her chin was tilted back, the long column of her neck exposed. He wanted to taste that skin, pull her close, and fit her against his body while he kissed a path up the length of her exposed skin.

Her dress only showed a hint of cleavage, but it was enough. He could picture dropping his face into it and...

He blinked, cursing under his breath.

The duke was gone.

His wife still stood with Amelia, but Upton had disappeared. What was wrong with him? How had he allowed himself to be so sidetracked? He had a marquessate to claim and a battle of wits against a duke to win.

He did not need any distractions now. Least of all not the kind that came in the form of a beautiful woman. His future hung in the balance, and he'd not allow anything or anyone get in his way.

MIA TRIED to focus on the duchess before her. Her Grace was as kind as she was attentive, and Mia ought to be thanking her lucky stars. She'd waited a long time for this meeting.

But the scent of sandalwood and pine wafted from the shadows and the air around her crackled like a storm about to break.

She leaned away from the duchess, scanning the crowd, not that she could make out much in the dim light.

Still, Mia knew the marquess was close, she could feel him. Her mother waved to another friend, momentarily diverted.

“As I was saying,” the duchess continued, “I’ve found Cumberland to be the most wonderful refuge from London. I enjoy painting and the scenery is unparalleled.”

This was her moment.

Forgetting about the marquess and his maddening scent, she smiled at the Duchess of Upton. “How lovely. I also fancy myself an artist.”

“Really? Do you paint as well?” Her Grace asked.

Mia laughed. Of course, the duchess didn’t know about her impairment, it was hidden this evening. But the idea of her being able to paint... “I wish,” she replied. Then she moved closer. “But I do sculpt, and I would love your opinion as a fellow artist.”

Her heart was thrumming wildly in her chest. This was the moment she’d been waiting for.

“Of course,” the duchess said.

Mia could hear the genuine regard in the other woman’s voice and her shoulders slumped in relief.

She leaned closer to Her Grace’s voice. “I’ve brought a small piece. I could show you tonight so as not to take too much of your time, but I need a bit of privacy. My mother does not precisely approve.”

She heard Her Grace suck in a quick breath. “Oh. I understand that.” Her Grace’s skirts rustled as she shifted closer. “We could meet on the veranda in a quarter hour. I find the noise and crowd draining anyhow.”

“As do I,” Mia answered, reaching for the other woman’s hand. They shared a great deal and touch would strengthen the bond, but it was dark and her vision was so weak, she must

have missed Her Grace's fingers. Instead, the hard bones of her wrist skimmed Mia's fingertips.

Drat. Had she just ruined it?

But Her Grace's other hand came to hers, covering Mia's hand and then holding it in both of hers. "Artists are more sensitive," the other woman said. "At least I am."

Mia nodded her agreement. "Thank you for your understanding." Did the other woman know of her impairment? Perhaps even with a mask she couldn't pretend she had fully functioning vision. What had given her away? The way she moved? She'd ask when they were alone, after she'd showed Her Grace her sculpture.

"My pleasure." The other woman leaned closer. "And my given name is Anna. I will see you very soon."

Mia let out a long breath, calming her excitement as the other woman slipped into the crowd. *Anna*. The duchess had encouraged her to use her given name. Her palms went clammy inside her gloves. She rubbed them together and drew in a steady breath. Was this really happening?

Her mother returned to her side, threading her arm through her daughter's. "You and the duchess seemed to get on quite well."

"We've a great deal in common."

"Do you?" her mother asked, her skepticism clear in her voice. "I have to confess, I don't know much about her. She wasn't part of society before her marriage." Did her mother

not know that Anna was an artist? Even better. “What interests do you share?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re both outsiders. It would be nice to have a friend like her.” Most of her childhood friends had ceased being her friend when she’d lost her sight. She didn’t even blame them. She wasn’t as much fun when she couldn’t dance or run or even crochet.

She’d begun sculpting because she could touch something, map it in her mind and then replicate the dimensions by feel. It was born out of both a desperation to fill her time and remembering the world that had grown dim. And later, it had become a possible path forward when people would surely fail her again.

“I’m going to step outside for a moment and clear my nose.”

“Your nose?” Her mother was clearly wrinkling hers, Mia could hear the way her tone became more nasally.

“You know I struggle with scent.”

A long sigh. “Fine. But be back in plenty of time for your dance.”

“I will,” she answered, releasing her mother’s arm.

Slowly navigating through the crowd, she used her fan to feel her way past the crush of people, everyone jostling so much that no one noticed she couldn’t see them when she touched them.

She adjusted the mask, smelling the air that wafted through the open doors and moving toward it.

Slipping outside, she moved along the house.

A few lanterns shined for guests who wished for air, but the light wasn't bright enough for her to really see and she moved along the wall, trailing her hand over the brick until the noise had quieted.

Was she too secluded for Anna to find? She cocked her head, listening to hear if anyone moved toward her.

CHAPTER THREE

CADE HAD SEARCHED the entire house, but the duke seemed to have vanished.

Where was the man? He'd had a moment when he'd been worried that the duke had turned the tables and was here to investigate him.

He wouldn't find anything on Cade.

Despite the rotten tree Cade came from, he didn't commit crimes, never had, not like the rest of the men in his family.

Still, Cade would prefer to have the upper hand with the duke and his own distraction had cost him that disadvantage.

Finally, having searched nearly every room, he decided to take a turn about the veranda.

The man clearly didn't enjoy socializing. It had been obvious by his scowl. Perhaps he'd simply stepped outside to take some air.

Moving through the doors, he scanned the darkness, no one else about. Or perhaps there was... He caught a small movement in the garden beyond.

Was that the duke? What was he doing out here? There was only one way to answer both of his questions.

Stalking toward the figure, he let his eyes adjust to the darkness as he closed the distance between them.

He recognized the man's broad shoulders first, the stance, legs wide, hands clasped as though he owned the world.

"Your Grace," he called into the cold night. "Catching a bit of air?"

"Good of you to join me, Mr. Kingsley. I thought I might freeze my balls off waiting for you."

Waiting? Cade's teeth clenched, grinding together. Clearly, the man had known this meeting was coming. Which only proved to Cade that he was guilty. If there had been any doubt, the emotion was gone. And his first chess piece had been moved. A good start, he'd say. "Too bad," he responded, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "We wouldn't want you to lose those."

The other man turned to him, his dark eyes glittering dangerously in the sliver of moonlight. "We're not even going to pretend this is cordial? Good."

Cade stopped several feet away, next to a towering pine tree. Best to have somewhere to hide lest swords or pistols became involved. "I agree. Which is why I am just going to ask you—where is my uncle?"

"Uncle? Haven't seen him."

Cade had expected nothing less. "Really? Because I've got evidence that he was here in Cumberland. Not visiting you?"

The man who stole his club out from under him?”

There was a pause. It filled the air with tension, and inwardly, Cade crowed with another victory.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh yes, you do,” Cade answered. “Just like I know all sorts of intimate details about why he was here and when he disappeared.” He was being intentionally vague about the details.

The hope was that the duke would return home and check his tracks, so to speak. Then Cade’s investigator could find new information as he followed the duke. The man was stationed in the village the duke’s home bordered, ready to watch Upton’s every move.

Cade had put some pieces in play as well.

“I know lots of intimate details too,” the duke murmured, low and rough, giving Cade a once-over. “Details that would taint your family forever if they were discovered.”

Cade grimaced, a bit of fear tightening his chest. Not that he was surprised. This had always been the duke’s move. Cade knew that. Both men had the potential power to destroy the other. It was now a game of who would act first. His fingers itched to move, but he held still. This was a war of minds, not of hands.

The duke would hope to keep Cade silent by threatening to reveal the former Kingsley’s sins. It was the most obvious move but most certainly not a checkmate. “They are not my deeds.”

“But they are ones that would assuredly ruin your business and social dealings if the world discovered them.”

There was too much truth in those words for Cade’s liking. But his job was not to best the duke today. He needed only to worry the man enough that he led Cade’s investigator to more clues. With that in mind, he leaned his shoulder against the tree trunk, crossing his arms. “Where does that leave us?”

“You stay out of my business, and I’ll stay out of yours,” the duke said, crossing his arms too.

That was easy for the man who held his title to say. Cade cocked his head to the side, assessing the man. “You can see how I might find that less satisfactory than you. Being that my title is held by a missing man.” He’d very carefully not said *dead*.

The duke rolled his shoulders. It was slight but unmistakable. “You don’t want to wait for the title? Eventually, when enough time has passed, if he hasn’t returned, the king will declare him dead.”

Cade tensed. A decade or longer could pass if he left this in the king’s hands. “Patience? That’s what you suggest?” He needed more. A way to make the duke offer him some piece of evidence to aid his cause. Cade would take the information but not the deal. He might know his family members were snakes, but that wouldn’t stop him from getting revenge.

He’d keep his family’s secrets and gain the title. And most of all, he’d not allow the Duke of Upton to keep a dangling sword above his head.

The other man gave a nod. “Perhaps we can come to an understanding, then.”

“Perhaps.” Enough said. He’d not lie, and he’d planted all the seeds he’d hoped to. With that in mind, he turned back toward the house, content that he’d made his points.

But as he walked toward the candlelit ballroom, another shadow against the house caught his notice. It shifted. Was it the flickering candlelight?

But no. It was too slow, too deliberate for that. It was a person. A random stranger or a spy for the duke? There was only one way to find out. He changed direction and headed for the shadows.

“Hello?” a feminine voice called out, halting his progress, even as the voice tickled his ears. He knew that voice.

“Miss Blackstone,” he murmured, both pleased at the chance meeting and cursing his luck. What was she doing out here? Was she meeting a man? A beau? An unpleasant trickle of jealousy slid down his spine.

Was she in league with the duke? Intense irritation jolted through him. A beautiful woman would be the perfect spy.

“Lord Kingsley.” The breathy way she said his name had him clenching with a different emotion entirely. Perfect spy, indeed.

He stepped closer at the same moment her arm reached out, the palm of her hand landing square on his chest.

She gasped as he rumbled low and deep, the feel of her hand on him making his keen interest sharper still. Right along

with his wariness.

Amelia did not drop her hand. Instead, her fingers flexed. He wore a waistcoat, a shirt, and a cravat, but his muscles flexed at her touch and her breath hitched.

Automatically, he covered her hand with his, binding them together. He'd assumed that Amelia was an innocent, considering she was unmarried, but her touch did not speak of a hesitant virgin.

It spoke of a woman with a mission. She was confident and surely issuing an invitation.

Did he call her bluff? Up the ante? Perhaps this was how the men in his family fell to ruin. One temptation that was too strong to resist.

He leaned closer. "What are you doing out here, my lady?"

Her breath fluttered like the wings of a bird as she quietly answered, "I find the ballroom constricting."

"Me too," he said, moving closer still. Her arm bent to allow him, her fingers splayed out over the center of his chest. "Private meetings are so much more satisfying."

"They smell better too."

That made him pause. Her statement was not sexy, and certainly not meant to seduce. Wasn't that what they were doing out here? "Smell?"

Her tongue darted out to lick her lips and he followed its path, his body drifting nearer still, the slow methodical movement meant to keep her at ease.

“I’m sensitive to scent,” she answered. “And most of them in the ballroom leave a great deal to be desired, but not you...”

Now they were back to seduction. “What do I smell like?”

“Sandalwood.”

His soap. His other hand came to her waist and he held the curve of it in his hand, gently pulling their bodies together.

“What else?”

WHAT ELSE? Words escaped her. How did she tell the man he smelled like desire? Like temptation...

“Tell me, Miss Blackstone—”

“Mia,” she corrected. “Most people who know me call me Mia.”

“Is that what we’re going to do? Know one another?” There was an edge to his voice, a new sound that was sharp and dangerous.

She pulled her hand back from his chest, though his was still on her hip. “My lord?”

“It’s very nice that you call me *lord*, but everyone knows I’m not the marquess yet.”

With every word his tone grew more brittle, his hand tightening on her hip. She drew in a deep breath, knowing she was in trouble. “I should return to my mother. Would you see me inside?”

“Not yet,” he replied, though his grip eased. Still, his refusal to bring her inside made her wary. Yes, she’d felt an instant attraction to this man, but what did she know about him? Nothing.

“My lord,” she tried again and then stopped because the term of respect clearly upset him. “Mr. Kingsley,” she tried again. “My mother will be worried.”

“Why isn’t your father here?”

She cocked her head in question, not sure how to answer. What did her father have to do with anything? “I am supposed to tell you he’s unwell. Nothing serious, but enough that he didn’t wish to venture out in the cold.” He also did not like socializing. Or spending time with his daughter. Sometimes it amazed Mia that her parents’ marriage worked at all. Her mother loved parties and her child, despite Mia’s many flaws, while her father detested both her and any social gathering.

“But the truth?”

“He almost never attends events.”

“And you’re out here alone, and not in there, because of the smell?”

She didn’t understand what he was attempting to discern. Granted, she had come out to meet someone, and perhaps he sensed that? But why would that matter to him? “I told you already...”

He gave a growl of dissatisfaction even as his face dropped closer to hers. She ought to be frightened, but his scent was

wrapping about her again, the heat of his body warming her on this cold night.

“I saw you speaking with the duke and his duchess.”

Of all the inquiries he might have made, this one confused her. She shook her head, her lips parting as she tried to understand. “Her Grace is a painter. I’d hoped...” She licked her lips slowly as she tried to order her thoughts to make herself clear.

But she felt his attention shift to her mouth. It was as though the air moved differently as he noticed her tongue.

Her own breath caught, her belly tightening, the place between her legs pulsing with need.

“An artist?” he whispered, his mouth so close she felt the warm air fan her face.

Her hands came to his biceps then, needing the support, but holding on to him only confounded her thoughts more. “I also fancy myself an—” she answered, just before his mouth brushed hers. She ought to tell him to stop. But she didn’t care in the slightest if she were ruined and this man...she was certain she’d never experience an attraction so powerful again.

So instead of protesting, she closed her eyes as his lips caressed hers. They weren’t possessive, angry, or frightening.

The touch was delicious. His mouth was warm and soft, his lips the perfect combination of firm and supple.

She gasped in a breath, tightening her fingers on his arms, and her back arched so that she fit into the curve of him. He

pulled her hip against his, the press of his member making her own wanton need ache all the more.

He kissed her again, a longer, more insistent touch that had her head spinning and her nipples hardening.

Her body had no desire to stop, her mind a delightful blank as his tongue teased across her bottom lip.

She wanted more from this man, she wanted all that he might wish to give. She slid her hands up his arms and onto his shoulders while his tongue slid between her lips, touching hers.

Molten fire coursed through her.

But a deep voice interrupted the tight bubble of intimacy they'd been wrapped in. "Well, well, well, what do we have here?"

CHAPTER FOUR

CADE STRAIGHTENED, dread pulling at his limbs. He wasn't a man who made mistakes often, but he'd made an enormous one this time.

Mia. Damn, but the name suited her. Mysterious and beautiful, just like the woman who held it.

Her hands were still on his shoulders and she stiffened, shrinking into him.

Was she frightened?

Of him or of the duke that Cade knew stood behind him? Was this a setup? Was she acting now?

His gut clenched as he eased away from her, her hands still clinging to him. "Upton," he spoke into the night, determined to hold whatever ground he was able.

"Kingsley."

The other man's voice was smug, and all at once, Cade knew the play. He'd been caught kissing an eligible woman.

A marriageable one.

Upton was about to insist that Cade marry the chit and then Upton would be able to hold an investigation all his own with a little bird for a spy. Mia.

It was brilliant and he should have known that if this man had bested his uncle, he'd be a formidable foe.

“Miss Blackstone,” Upton rumbled.

“Rath?” a feminine voice called from the dark. “Is that you? What are you doing out here?”

Well. Everyone was here now. The duchess appeared and Mia gave a small jolt in his arms.

His brow furrowed in question at her reaction to the other woman, but his attention was quickly drawn to the duke again as he said into the night, “Shall we send the ladies inside? I think we've more to discuss.”

The duke's last words rang bitterly through his thoughts. He'd won their first contest of wits just minutes ago; he knew he'd not win this one. And worse still, being caught with Mia was a miscalculation that he was certainly going to regret.

“I think Miss Blackstone would prefer to be here while you insist we wed,” Cade said.

Mia gasped—her reaction well done, he might add—the duchess let out a cry, and the duke chuckled.

“He is not going to do that—” Mia started but Upton interrupted her.

“Forgive me, Miss Blackstone, but he's exactly right. He's compromised you and I must insist that he act the part of

gentleman.”

“Act?”

“That’s right. Now, Anna, would you be so kind as to help Miss Blackstone return to her mother?”

“Rath.” His wife’s voice bit into the night as she appeared at her husband’s side. Was she part of the show too? The disapproving wife who tried to talk reason into her husband. “We ought to send the matter to her father. Let him decide how he wishes to proceed—”

Mia jolted in his arms again. Her fingers began to tremble. “My father is not likely to be sympathetic to either of us,” she said just loud enough that everyone heard.

So, he was well and truly trapped? He eased back from Mia, knowing that he’d been fooled. He’d even realized the plot in advance and yet he’d still been caught up in her wiles. She was too beautiful, too tempting, and as a man who considered himself adept at plotting—it was a family trait, after all—he’d been completely taken in by her.

Her touch on him lingered and as he let go, she stumbled. His hand automatically righted her, and she fumbled in the darkness, touching his elbow and then skirting her hand down his forearm until her fingers locked in his. “I can’t see,” she whispered low, her body drifting closer again.

It was dark, but his eyes had adjusted. Why hadn’t hers? And he ought not to care that she’d stumbled but he found himself holding her elbow in a protective grip. “I’d say that

your safety is not my problem, but I have a feeling it's going to be very soon, isn't it?"

She let out a small cry, shaking her head. "No. I'll see that it isn't."

What could she do about it? And why would she help him when she was likely in league with his enemy?

His lip curled and he stared down at her softly parted mouth.

The attraction still burned bright, and he could have cursed himself. Why would he want her knowing that she had likely just trapped him?

Then again, when did the men in his family ever choose the right path? A growl of irritation rattled around his throat as he looked back at Upton.

"Ready to send the ladies back inside?"

He gave a stiff nod. Might as well get this over with. There would be no taking his time and planning a careful strategy now. Decisions needed to be made very quickly.

His mind began to turn. Cade would become the marquess one way or the other. He'd have to marry and create an heir to secure his line, unlike his uncle, who'd died without a son. That was not a mistake he intended to make.

And the beautiful daughter of a baron who was used to being shunted far away from London would suit his purposes just fine. Was it ideal that she may be in league with his enemy? Definitely not. But bedding her would be very enjoyable and he'd have every reason to return to London and

leave his bride in Cumberland after they'd made an heir. Then he would be free to resume his life as it had been.

There was some upside to this arrangement. Now to see what the duke had planned and why he attempted to force Cade's hand.

"Come with me, Miss Blackstone," the duchess called. "I'll see you back to your mother."

Her Grace crossed the terrace and reached out a hand to Mia, but she did not take it. Finally, the duchess slipped her fingers into Mia's hand, and only then did she let go of Cade's arm.

Curious. One more mystery about the woman he would soon call wife.

MIA HELD the duchess's hand, knowing that the woman had realized she was blind. Not that it was a secret. Most people around here knew. But she'd hoped to present her art to Her Grace before sharing her impairment. She hadn't wanted the duchess to compliment her sculpture simply out of pity. Or to say that she was considering what she lacked...

Still, this was her opportunity. She turned back toward Kingsley, the low murmur of the two men's voices slowing her steps.

"His Grace is going to demand that Kingsley marry you."

“I...” She swallowed down a lump. She’d only just formed a different future and she knew so little about the man. What if he was dreadful? There was an edge to him, and she knew far too much about hard, unyielding men. It made her stomach twist into a thousand knots.

Neither her mother nor her father would disagree with the duke. Mia has assumed she’d get no offers and that was how she’d manage to become a spinster artist.

But with an offer from a soon-to-be marquess...

Her parents would jump at the chance. “It would seem so.” Her own breath rattled about her chest, despite the numbness that filled her thoughts. Everything was happening so quickly. And then there was the man she’d kissed. The attraction hinted at a wonderful connection, but there was something so hard about the man...Fear made her shiver.

“I’ll try to sway him, but...” Her Grace swallowed, Mia heard the sound. “When he sets his mind to things, he can be difficult to sway.”

Mia nodded. “I understand. It’s just that...” She shook her head. “I don’t know Mr. Kingsley at all.”

Her Grace paused, her step faltering. “You must know him a bit. You did kiss him.”

And what a kiss it had been. Mia had never imagined that kissing would feel so good. “I’ve never even had a suitor before. I became carried away by the way he...” Smelled? Made her feel? Each of those confessions sounded so intimate.

Her Grace's hand tightened. "I'm worried for you. Mr. Kingsley's person is somewhat suspect."

Alarm rang through her. Because if she were honest, she sensed that certain dangerous undercurrent in him. It did little to lessen her attraction. In fact, the feeling may have heightened it. But what did that say about her future? Should she take this opportunity to be wed, or fight against it? Was that even possible? "How so?"

"Well, his uncle was..." Her Grace stopped, turning toward Mia. "I don't want to say too much. I'd hate to color your view unnecessarily. But if you ever need help, please ask."

This was Mia's moment. "Actually, I'd hoped to ask you a favor." She drew in a ragged breath. Marrying the marquess would mean there was little chance she'd become a full-time artist, but that didn't mean she still shouldn't ask. She needed to know—might she have been successful? This had been her dream.

"What is it?"

Mia reached into her reticule and pulled out the tiny bird sculpture, fashioned from her own parakeet. She loved the bird and she'd spent hours petting the little creature until she'd memorized every line and curve and had sculpted the creature from touch memory.

She pulled out the figure, fashioned from clay, and held it up for other woman. "I'd like your opinion on my work."

Her Grace drew in a sharp breath. “Your work?” Gently, the other woman’s fingers touched the small piece, taking it from Mia’s hand. “But how...”

Mia waved her hand. “I sculpt from memory and from touch. But sincerely, Your Grace—”

“Call me Anna.”

“Anna?” Mia smiled at the offer, a very good sign. “I’m Mia.”

“Mia, this piece is stunning. The detail. The feather pattern, it’s...”

“I don’t want to know if I’m good for a woman who is blind. I wish to know if I’m good enough to...” But her words tapered off. “Before tonight, I thought I’d never marry. I planned to become an artist.”

Anna blew out a long breath. “Your talent is undeniable. Exceptional.”

A thrill passed down Mia’s body. “I’d hoped you might help create connections to sell my pieces. I know that’s unlikely now, but...”

“I don’t think so.” Anna’s hand touched hers again, her fingers holding Mia’s. “In fact, it might be good for you to continue to pursue a career just in case.”

“In case?” Mia asked.

“In case the marquess isn’t the husband you’d hoped.” The other woman finished before she began leading Mia toward

the ballroom. “May I keep this piece? I have a friend I’d like to share it with.”

Mia’s heart jumped in her throat. That was a dream come true. How that dream fit with her new future, she had no idea.

But somehow, she’d have to find a way.

CHAPTER FIVE

CADE GLARED AT THE DUKE, eyes drawn into narrow slits.

“Why are you attempting to force me into marriage?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“That’s horse dung and we both know it.”

The other man cocked his head to the side, staring at Cade.

“We have a mutual problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Your uncle.”

“My uncle is dead. How is that your problem, Your Grace?” Cade knew the answer, but how Upton handled the question would prove very telling.

The duke’s jaw tightened. “You know very well that your uncle was attempting to steal our businesses.”

Cade didn’t answer. Instead, he drew a cheroot from his pocket and tapped it against his palm, allowing the duke to keep talking.

“Did you invite me here tonight to form a partnership, Kingsley, or continue your uncle’s illicit work?”

Cade's brows lifted. "Neither." Which was the truth. He didn't want the clubs and he certainly didn't wish to make friends with Upton. "I've already told you why I'm here."

"To gain the title."

"That's right."

The duke scratched his chin. "And if you find proof of your uncle's death?"

Now this conversation was getting interesting. "Then I could take over the marquessate and return to my life in London." Was the duke interested in getting Cade proof while keeping his own guilt from the king's knowledge? That could work and it would give Cade power over the man for a very long time.

"It's a decent plan and one I might be willing to support. But until then, I think you ought to stay here in Cumberland."

Cade's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I want to keep my eye on you, and it would suit your new bride, anyway."

Now they were getting down to the parts where Cade was weak. "Why force this match?"

"Because," Upton said and pulled his shoulders straighter, "a man about to be a marquess ought to marry."

Cade let out a frustrated rumble. "Or because a duke trying to blackmail a marquess needs a spy?"

"Spy?" Upton snorted. "A blind woman as a spy?"

Cade started, any façade of control gone. Blind? But her words filtered back to him. *I can't see.* The way she'd stumbled on the stairs. The way she held on to her mother and then the duchess. Cade's lip curled as reality washed over him like ice-cold water. Christ. How had he missed that?

He'd been distracted by her beauty, the attraction that sizzled between them. "Then why?" he gritted out.

"Because..." Upton shrugged. "We have unfinished business, and a man of your soon-to-be station needs a clean reputation. Does he not?"

Cade took a step toward the other man, something raw clawing at his chest. He'd have taken a different tack if he'd realized Mia was blind. Tried to maneuver away from the match or...

But it didn't matter. "Tell me, Your Grace, how are the two of you connected? Please. I'd love to know."

"Don't be ridiculous. We've already said that your uncle was trying to steal my clubs."

"But what does that have to do with me? Unless you know something about his death." He was a wounded animal, striking out at Upton. But finding out he'd missed such an obvious fact about the woman he was now going to marry had made him raw, out of control.

This was not a cool chess match. This was a mongoose and a cobra fighting to the death. Anger and the need to lash out overwhelmed him. Which animal was he? Who would win?

Upton's lip curled. "Your uncle had a partner by the name of Gyla. My clubs are still in danger."

Cade blinked in surprise. "That has nothing to do with me." He'd known his uncle had had a partner, but the investigator had yet to identify the man's identity. Another important discovery.

But it did lead to another question. Was it possible that Upton wasn't responsible for his uncle's death? That this Gyla had double-crossed his partner? Cade doubted it. All evidence pointed to the Duke being involved.

Upton had much he could teach Cade. "I can stay in Cumberland without marrying Miss Blackstone."

"Didn't I hear you use her given name?" The duke shook his head. "No. I think marriage is just what you need. And she most certainly does as well. I'll expect my wedding invitation by the end of next week. For her benefit, you should likely just propose as quickly as possible. We need not tell her parents about what happened tonight. Tell them it's a love match, for all I care. Just see it done."

Fuck him. Upton was good. Yet another secret the man was going to hold close to his chest to keep Cade in line.

But Cade had learned all sorts of useful information from this conversation as well.

And then there was Mia. He'd hold to the plan unless he could determine a better course of action.

MIA STOOD next to her mother. She didn't have to see Kingsley coming to know that he drew near.

Her skin tingled and her breath held in her chest.

“Miss Blackstone, I believe this is our dance.”

Her mother let out a giddy titter, sounding more like a schoolgirl than the matron she was. Mia gave a nod as she slipped her hand into Kingsley's waiting palm, but touching him did not ease the tension, it only increased it.

Partially because his energy was different. While she'd described him as having an air of danger, in this moment, he felt more like a coiled snake.

She shivered, knowing there was nothing to do but let him lead her onto the floor. Her mother would never allow her to sit out the dance and she would be near stranded in the crowded ballroom if she let him go.

She was at his mercy.

Her nerves jangled for another reason. The dance...

She didn't generally partake in the risk of making a fool of herself. But as Kingsley turned to her, his hand coming firmly to her waist, she already knew. He would lead with all the power she could feel flowing through him.

The music began and exactly as she'd suspected, his sure steps and firm hands led her about the floor with an effortless mastery that had her eyes closing as her body moved with his.

She forgot about the danger lurking just under the surface and instead sank into the feeling that she was floating

gracefully over the floor.

She let out a quiet sigh, thinking this might be the most magical moment of her life.

“You do that so well.”

His honey baritone whispered over her skin despite the notes of danger that were also laced into the words. “What’s that?”

“Play the part of smitten woman.”

“I don’t know which part of that sentence to respond to first. Which part am I playing and why do you think me smitten?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were blind?”

She shivered in shock. “Did you not know?”

He tensed under her hands, the muscles in his shoulders conveying his irritation. “We’ve only known each other for a very short time.”

“That is my answer to your question as well.”

He gave a humorless laugh. “You’re quick-witted, I’ll give you that.”

“And you are...” She searched for the right word, finally landing on the feeling he conveyed. “Magnetic.”

Silence met her words but something in him relaxed. “Have you always been without sight?”

She shook her head. “No. I contracted a fever when I was five. I still have the memories of how things appear. Houses,

trees, clouds..." She nipped at her lip, her eyes behind the mask squeezing shut. There were so many questions she wished to ask that had nothing to do with her sight. Questions like: How...how had his conversation gone with the duke? Did he actually plan to wed her?

What had he meant about her playing a part?

Her father, however, had taught her to ask for information sparingly. One always risked making a situation worse by probing.

The music was already drawing to a close, the steps slowing. Regret lanced through her. She'd never danced like that before and she worried she never would again. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"That dance. This evening. It has been..." She cleared her throat, unsure about what else to say. "No matter what happens, I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Kingsley."

"You might as well call me Cade. And there is no need for goodbyes. I shall see you tomorrow when I call upon your family."

Her heart jumped in her throat. The edge of tension was back in his voice, which could only mean one thing...the duke was forcing Cade to court her and he was not happy about it.

Mia shouldn't be happy, either. She had a plan, a good one, but in his arms, all she could feel was him. If she could just take a moment to think, perhaps she could come up with an alternative to this marriage trap. "I could run away."

“I beg your pardon?”

She shook her head. “All right. Perhaps I can’t run on my own. I’d need help.”

“Are you propositioning me?”

“I am trying to help you. Help us both. If I could just have a small place to live, then—”

“You want a life I support without the bonds of marriage? Is that what you are asking for?” He didn’t sound hopeful. In fact, his voice grew harder with irritation.

“My dear.” He leaned close then, the warmth of his breath tickling her ear, despite the steel that laced his voice. “I would not consider courting you if you did not suit me. If I’m going to support you, then you are going to warm my bed and provide me with an heir. There will be no cottage and you will never see the Duke of Upton unless I am with you.”

Her brow furrowed. What did that mean? She knew the duke was forcing the match, but still... Before she could ask, Cade tucked her hand into his elbow and navigated the crowd back to her mother.

“But why would you want to marry a woman you hardly know? A woman who is broken?”

“You’re not broken,” he said, pulling her to the side. The night grew even darker, and the crowd had hushed. Where were they? A hall? Were they alone? “You said it yourself. If it was a fever, there is no more risk than usual to my children. Though, you do bring up a valuable point. We might need a spare.”

“What?” she cried, trying to feel for him in the dark. She met the hard edge of his shoulder, and even though he frightened her for the first time since she’d met him, she held on, feeling grounded in the touch.

“It does make me feel better to think you have your own game, that you’re not that loyal.”

“To whom?”

“But all the same, little bird, I think we need to be clear that I am not a man who likes to be double-crossed.”

“Cade,” she whispered. “Please. I don’t know what—”

But her words were cut off as his mouth descended over hers in a kiss that stole her breath with its fierce passion. It was nothing like the last kiss. This one was hard and demanding and utterly wonderful and her own passion rose to meet his. She’d never imagined such intense feeling, but her entire body responded to his, molded to him as his tongue clashed with hers. Her heart thumped wildly as she held on to him, her tongue pushing back as their mouths locked together.

It was sinful and heavenly all in the same breath, and her body ached for more.

When he finally raised his head, she was dizzy with passion. His own breathing was ragged as his fingers dug into her hips. “Well, little bird, at least I know the passion is real.”

And then he was pulling her back into the crowd.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Mia sat in a chair as the sun streamed into the music room. Cade would arrive soon for her calling hours.

She drew in a shuddering breath, the memory of their first meeting dancing through her thoughts. She was going to see the man who, by all accounts, was about to propose.

The greater the attraction that had crackled between them, the tension that had burned even brighter, the more dangerous he'd felt. He'd alluded to things that she didn't quite understand...a mistrust of her. Was that about her impairment? Many thought less of her because she lacked a sense. Her own belly fluttered at the thought. She'd not ask him.

She'd learned long ago to listen to people's words and tone rather than ask. They never gave her real answers anyway, their voices dripped with condescending sympathy instead.

Her parents stood on the other side of the room, talking softly with one another. They often forgot just how sensitive her hearing had become.

“What's wrong with him?” her father asked in bitter tones.

Speaking of condescending. She bristled and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from interfering in the conversation.

“Nothing,” her mother answered. “He’s perfect.”

“Can’t be.”

Her mother cleared her throat. “There are rumors about his family...”

Rumors? Mia sat perfectly still, except to increase the pressure of her molars on her skin. Her involvement would only end their discussion and likely incite her father. People rarely thought to include her in decision-making, and her parents certainly wouldn’t now.

“Will they taint our family?”

“Do we have a choice?” her mother asked. “If not him, then whom?”

Silence met her mother’s words.

Mia drew in a ragged breath. She knew if she asked, she’d be chastised, and she rarely placed herself in a position to be so, but today was too important. “What sort of rumors about his family?”

More silence.

Finally, her father cleared his throat, a warning ringing in his words. “Never mind.”

She hesitated for a moment. She knew what she risked but this was of the utmost importance. Her entire future hung in the balance. “I could refuse the offer,” she answered, bracing for her father’s anger.

She heard him walking toward her, the speed of his movements alerting her to his intentions.

There was enough light for her to stand and move around the blurry settee. But she'd never be as quick as him. And that was her vulnerability.

He was next to her in a second, his hand clamped about her arm so painfully that she cried out. "You'll do what I tell you," he gritted out loudly near her ear. She cringed away. "Do you hear me, girl? You'll do exactly as I say, because we all know it's the only path forward for you."

A small whimper escaped her lips. She didn't remember her father before the blindness struck. She didn't remember if he'd had any shred of love for her or not, but there was no mistaking his feelings now.

She was the burden he never wanted.

"My lord," the butler called from the door, "Mr. Kingsley is here."

Her father instantly released her, and she stumbled, her hand reaching for the settee to stop her fall.

But he'd already turned, following the butler to greet Cade.

Her lips trembled as she tried to compose herself. Her mother came to her side next, pulling at the sleeve of her gown, likely to straighten the creases. "Why do you provoke him?"

She didn't answer, falling back into silence. There was no right answer.

“Kingsley’s a handsome man. About to be a marquess. It’s a miraculous opportunity. Be grateful.” Her mother pinched both her cheeks, making Mia cringe again.

“And the rumors?” She didn’t know why she argued. She’d been drawn to the man and her parents weren’t likely to be swayed. But with a bit of distance from the ball, some of the passion had cooled, leaving her with an unsettled feeling that she was about to venture into waters too deep and too dark.

“Just that.” Mia heard her mother’s frown, the tell that she said what she thought Mia needed to hear rather than the truth.

“Mr. Kingsley,” her father said from the doorway. “Please come in. My daughter is most happy that you’ve come.”

She turned toward the door, seeing the fuzzy outline of her father with Cade standing next to him. He moved closer until she caught his scent, the tension in her shoulders unwinding as she drew in a deep gulp of air.

CADE LOOKED AT MIA, the woman he’d decided to marry, and several facts became apparent.

She was even more beautiful in the light. Nearly flawless. Her dark-blond hair was pinned in thick waves at her nape, her face a perfect heart that was accentuated by full lips and a tiny, pert nose.

Her brows arched over her eyes, unfocused and a bit cloudy, her only flaw.

He stopped, taking her in his sights. She was too beautiful for him. That was his first thought. Rarely in his life did he feel inferior, but in this moment, he knew he didn't deserve a woman this lovely.

Not only was he not handsome enough, he wasn't good enough. Then he shook his head. This woman would marry him just to help a duke keep from rightfully going to prison. Good did not factor into this game. But one thought led to another—what did she mean to Upton?

Jealousy tore through him, another emotion he tamped down. It had no place in their bargain.

Her father left, her mother settling in the corner as he approached.

This time, Mia seemed to track his movements. "Mia," he murmured quietly as he grazed his hand down her arm.

She flinched, shuddering away.

But his gaze narrowed. "Today, you don't like my touch?" It was spoken quietly so as not to be overheard.

"That isn't it." She shifted back. "I hurt my arm. A hazard of poor sight." She cocked her head toward her mother as if she were waiting for a reaction. One that never came.

The baroness began to work on her embroidery, seeming content to give them a bit of time to talk.

"How poor is your sight? Can you see me now?"

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, the movement holding his gaze. "In the light, I can make out the outline of

things, their shape. “

He winced, his gaze lifting to the wintery scene out the window. “Then how do you know I’m handsome enough for you?”

That actually pulled a smile from her lips. “Handsome enough?” Her smile grew. “I’d never even considered the notion you wouldn’t be. I must confess, you are a delight to my other senses.”

His brows lifted at that. “Am I?”

She nodded. “Do you still intend to marry me?”

Did he have a choice? He did. But his plan and Upton’s plan were moving along the same path...for now. Besides, he’d need an heir at some point. Why not marry the one woman who intrigued him? Whether or not he trusted her, that was a different story. “I do.”

“My father”—her voice dropped even lower so he could hardly hear her—“my father would see us matched as well.”

He noted that she had not said she wished it. Was this her out for later? He didn’t like it. “But not you?”

Her breath hitched as she placed a hand on her collarbones, thumb on one, forefingers on the other. “I don’t know yet.”

“Even though I’m a delight to your senses?”

“You also feel...” She shook her head. “The air about you is charged with danger.”

Truer words. It was likely the curse of every man in his family. Trouble lived all about them. “Does this mean you

won't consent to be my wife?"

"Why do you want me?" she asked. The question came out breathy and almost desperate. Did she not wish to be a pawn? That was something. "I'm..."

"You are exceedingly beautiful, already sensual, and you suit my purposes perfectly."

"Which purposes? To make an heir? And a spare?"

"That and more..." Travel would surely be difficult for a woman such as herself. The perfect reason to keep her in Cumberland and go to London alone when the time came. "Which is why when I leave this room, I shall ask your father for your hand."

Her mouth twitched, and a furrow appeared between her brows. "Then he shall surely accept on my behalf."

He noted that she didn't outwardly refuse even though she clearly had reservations. He nearly hesitated. But he wasn't here to worry for her. For all he knew, this was all part of the plan. Artful acting on her part... He had his own agenda, his game, his title, and she was, after all, just a pawn.

A man did not worry about the loss of one in the game of chess.

"Very well, then, Mia. I shall see you at the altar."

She turned her gaze to the window, her eyes closing as she tipped her face up to the light. She looked even more lovely in profile, the soft winter light bathing her skin in an almost ethereal glow.

“The altar...” she repeated softly. “Until then.”

“Until then.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

CADE SAT BEHIND HIS DESK, contemplating a drink despite the early hour.

A fortnight had passed since his ball. It was a few days before Christmastide, and today...he was getting married. A decision he'd questioned at least a hundred times since that fateful night.

What had he been thinking?

Mia was far too dangerous to put her on the playing board. She had an effect on him.... He rose with a growl, crossing to the buffet and splashing a generous amount of brandy into a snifter.

Bringing the glass to his lips, he paused before taking a drink.

Mia had a temporary place in his life. She'd serve a purpose by providing him with heirs and she'd unwittingly help him in his investigation against the duke.

And she'd be a delight in his bed while it lasted...

All set in his mind, he tossed back the drink, setting the glass down on the buffet with a hard *thunk*.

He had all of this under control. He was moving the pieces in the order that they would give him a checkmate. Wasn't he?

He'd all but accused her of being Upton's spy the night of the ball and she'd hardly argued.

Their last meeting hadn't been much better. He'd almost wished he'd asked her outright, *are you in league with the duke? Do you wish to see me ruined?*

At least he'd confirmed the attraction between them was as tangible as his own body. Or nearly so.

It pulsed between them, "a...delight to her senses," she'd said. She had no idea. She was a feast for his eyes, and somehow it bothered him that she couldn't see him, measure him compared to herself.

It surprised him that he found this a deficit, the fact that he might very well not be attractive enough for her. Perhaps it was because he knew he wasn't moral enough. He was willing to marry her and use her, for Christ's sake. Then again, she was playing a game of her own, so they had that in common.

He shook his head, tossing another generous shot in the glass. Still, he wasn't used to feeling at a disadvantage. And with both Upton and Mia he felt like he was on his back foot, so to speak.

He brought the glass to his lips, drawing in a deep sniff of the liquor before he took a swallow.

He'd gain ground on both fronts. With Mia, he'd be the experienced lover, wooing her into believing he was smitten. All the while, he'd reveal nothing about Upton or his uncle.

And with Upton...his investigator was tirelessly dogging the man to see if Upton would lead them to any clues.

With that in mind, he set the snifter down again and started for the door. He met Mrs. Grafton in the hall, the housekeeper giving him a beaming smile. "Best wishes, Mr. Kingsley."

He gave a curt nod. "Thank you, Mrs. Grafton."

The butler came to stand next to her. "It's been so nice to see life returning to this house."

"I agree, Greeves." And he did. This would be Mia's home for the rest of her life.

Both servants watched him make his way outside, where the carriage waited to take him to the village chapel where he and Mia would wed.

The drive was short and quiet, the chapel looming above the rest of the village as he approached.

A small crowd waited outside its doors, but his vehicle turned down a drive before they reached the house of worship. He'd enter through the back.

He hadn't bothered to invite any of his friends from London and he barely associated with his family. Which meant he was surprised to find a man waiting in the back room of the chapel for him. He immediately recognized the craggy features of the Duke of Upton. "You," he spat. "It's bad enough you're attending."

Upton chuckled. "Don't be ridiculous. Every man needs someone to stand witness for him. I volunteered myself."

Cade's hand clenched. Just as he sank a bit deeper into Mia, he received a reminder that he shouldn't. The duke's participation in his nuptials only made him more certain that Mia was intimately involved with the other man.

Was she even a virgin?

The thought of Upton touching her had rage clawing at his chest. "I don't need you."

Upton held up a hand. "No need to be angry. I've other news."

Cade's blood ceased to roar, his thoughts clearing. "What?"

"Gyla has been spotted in the south of England."

He furrowed his brow in confusion. What did that mean for him? For his plans? "My uncle's partner?"

"That's right. Our friend, the Viscount Northville, has been chasing him about Europe and he sent word that the villain had finally returned to England."

"How many lords are involved in your operation besides you and Northville?"

Upton cocked a brow. "Northville isn't involved in my operation, he's just a shareholder. He's been chasing Gyla for the crown long before I took possession of any gaming hell."

Cade frowned. He'd hoped to get more information. "I know of the Smiths, of course. And your friend Somersworth."

Upton's nostrils flared, confirming Cade's knowledge. "Is Boxby involved?"

This time, the duke's jaw clenched. "What of it?"

He was making a list. Men he could use to further his investigation. "No reason in particular."

"Rath." The duchess appeared. "It's nearly time."

Cade gave himself a shake. Right. He was getting married. He started for the front of the chapel, Upton falling in step just behind.

"I said no." Cade tossed over his shoulder.

"Trust me, you having a friend will help to put her parents' minds at ease."

"You're not my friend."

"No one need know that. Besides, consider me the holder of the pistol at your back who makes certain you actually say your vows."

He didn't need threats from the duke to see his nuptials through. At least some part of him was anxious to tuck Mia into his bed. But the duke didn't need that information. In fact, for the other man to understand the depths of his attraction could be dangerous. "I'm going to kill you for this. Slowly."

Upton chuckled. "I look forward to your attempt."

But they'd reached the front of the chapel, where a small crowd had gathered in the seats.

And once he'd taken his position, the organ began to play, signaling that the bride was about to enter.

MIA STOOD at the end of the aisle, hardly able to make Cade out in the dim candlelight. Her arm was tucked into her father's elbow, the smell of incense filling the air as the music swelled all around her.

She wished she could catch Cade's scent, which would surely ground her in this moment. She felt adrift and her father's presence next to her did nothing to calm her nerves.

"Amelia," her father bit out between his clenched teeth. "You're moving very slowly. People are staring."

She was the bride. But she didn't dare speak out against him, even now. She tried to move faster, her breath shallow, the veil further impairing her sight.

Her father gave her the smallest jerk, and her left foot caught on the carpet. She tightened her grip on his arm as he came to an abrupt stop.

That's when the scent of sandalwood and Cade's particular musk filled her nostrils. "Allow me," he murmured, the slightest threatening rumble lacing his words.

Her father dutifully handed her over to Cade. The sure grip of his fingers made her release the breath she'd been holding, and he carefully helped her up the two steps.

Her eyes closed as he slipped her other hand into his. "I've got you," he said close to her ear.

“Thank you,” she whispered back. Her fear was gone, replaced with the knowledge that this might not be the future she’d wished for but at least it was one away from her father. Would Cade be a better or worse caretaker?

His fingers held hers in a sure grip that comforted while the vicar began the ceremony that would make them husband and wife.

She spoke where needed, and listened to his honey rumble, noting that his promises were neither filled with malice nor excitement. His voice was steady and flat.

But as the ceremony came to an end, the vicar said, “You may now kiss the bride.”

He pulled her close, his lips dropping close to hers. “Ready, wife?” And then he was lifting the veil from her face so that his features came into blurred view.

Did it matter? He kissed her then, short and sure, his lips a firm press that stole her breath and made her stomach flutter with excitement and nerves.

And then they were moving back down the aisle. But this time, Cade had one hand about her waist, the other hand holding hers as he led her effortlessly out of the church.

They climbed into his carriage, making the short journey back to his home for the wedding breakfast.

Mia sat silently across from her new husband, having no idea what to say.

“When will your things arrive?” he asked, leaning back in his seat, his face turned toward the window instead of at her.

“Today.”

“Good.”

Did she tell him that her father had packed up every sculpture, every bit of clay, stone, and moulds she possessed? It was as though he'd wished to scrub the house of her.

She'd often wondered if he disliked her because she was blind or because she was female. Perhaps it was both. But without her sight, she'd been robbed of another defense. Would it be the same in her marriage?

Only time would tell. There was little point in asking. Life had taught her that.

They arrived at his home, his steady hands helping her from the carriage, his arm remaining about her waist as they greeted their guests.

And for the first time, Mia allowed herself to hope. Perhaps this life wouldn't be so awful. Should she tell him about her art?

She winced. Not many husbands wanted a wife so passionate about a profession. And she still didn't know what sort of man he was. Not really. Not yet.

Everyone met in the breakfast room, where a spread had been prepared.

She sat eating while Cade spoke with her father, when Anna appeared at her right. “Mia.” The other woman bent close. “I've news.”

“What?”

“I’ve sent your figurine to my friend and curator, Mr. Bingsley, a fortnight ago, and. I received word back from him just yesterday.”

“What did he say?” Her breath caught in her throat.

“That he loved the piece. That he’d like more. He’d like to do a show.”

Blood roared in her ears, as excitement made her pulse thrum wildly. “I have more. They’re all packed up, but I can get them to you.”

Anna squeezed her shoulder as excitement ballooned in Mia’s chest, making her feel light as a feather. The duchess’s voice gushed, adding to Mia’s excitement, “Really? That’s wonderful news!”

“I quite agree. If those sell, I’m sure he would purchase more.” Anna gave her an encouraging smile.

Mia’s smile slipped a bit. Could she be an artist and a wife? She caught Cade’s scent before his hand touched her other shoulder. “What are you ladies discussing?”

Was there a new edge to his voice? She swallowed down a lump as her hand covered his. “Her Grace was congratulating us.”

“How kind.” But he did not sound pleased.

She squeezed his fingers. Was he the sort of man who might understand that she wished to create beautiful pieces of art?

Would Cade support her? She'd have to tread very carefully in order to find out. The last thing she wished was to be at the mercy of another man who resented her. Why had this offer for a future as a sculptor come just a little too late?

CHAPTER EIGHT

CARRIAGE UPON CARRIAGE arrived with Mia's belongings. Cade watched them in mild fascination.

How could one woman need that many things?

The staff put her personal belongings in the room that connected to his, along with a small cage that apparently held her pet bird—a dependent he'd not been informed about. The rest, whatever it was, was placed in a far room in the west wing of the house. He'd barely even entered that section of the rambling estate. Most of the common rooms were in the center, and his own suite of rooms were in the east wing.

He hadn't been intent upon exploring when he'd moved in, but perhaps he had cause now...

But not tonight.

With their guests gone, his new wife had been led by her maid to her bedchamber and it was nearly time for them to retire for the evening. He'd be lying if he didn't admit that this was a much-anticipated moment for him. Mia was the most stunning woman he'd ever laid eyes on and the attraction between them was palpable.

How would making love to her be? His body tightened in excitement, his manhood already thickening at the idea of touching her. Seeing her without clothes.

How would the experience be for her? Would her lack of sight diminish the experience? Though he tried not to care, he couldn't push away the sliver of worry. She was so vulnerable. He rolled his shoulders and then made his way up the stairs to his chamber.

Mia was already in hers, the soft voices of her maid and Mrs. Reeves filtering through the doorway that connected their rooms.

It was open a crack and the temptation to look in had him staring at the door. Would he find her in silk or cotton? Would her hair be done or undone? Anticipation made his chest tight and he scrubbed a hand down his cheek.

And then the voices quieted, the soft click of her door to the hall his indication that she was now alone.

He reached for his cravat, undoing the knot and tossing it on his bed. Next went his jacket, waistcoat, boots, and stockings.

He looked down at his shirt, debating whether or not to remove it. He didn't wish to intimidate her. Belatedly, he realized she wouldn't see him anyhow, and then he cringed. How foolish could he get? Pulling the garment over his head, he stood in nothing but his breeches, and then he crossed to the connecting door.

“Cade?”

He stopped. He'd not touched the door yet. "How did you know?" He pushed the door open to find her perched on the edge of the bed, her back to him but her head cocked to the side.

Mia's hair was in a loose plait over her shoulder, and a sheer, silky night rail skimmed over the elegant curve to her back.

He swallowed, stopping once again.

"I could hear you moving. Your footfalls are distinctive."

She turned toward him to reveal her hands clasped in a tight ball in her lap. She was nervous.

His own gut tightened. "Mia. I need to ask you a question.... Are you a virgin?"

She blinked, her brow furrowing. "Of course."

A simple answer to an increasingly complicated question. How involved with Upton was she? But he was about to make love to her, so this particular question had to be answered honestly. "It's all right if you're not."

A small smile played at her lips. "Forgive me, Cade. I can see how you might think me experienced. My reaction to you at the ball was not precisely one of an innocent, but until you..." She rose, her hands sliding over her hips, smoothing out the fabric.

It appeared an almost nervous gesture, but his gaze naturally followed the curve of her hips as she traced them. Not overly large, her figure was more willowy, but dressed as she was now, the word *elegant* suited her perfectly.

His fingers itched to touch her.

She swallowed. “Until you, I’d never even...” Even in the darkening room, he could see the blush of red that tinted her cheeks.

“What?”

“I’d never kissed a man.”

His brows rose at that. “Forgive me, love, but you did not kiss like a woman who’d never done so before.”

A husky laugh fell from her lips. “I’m glad. I’m soon to be two and twenty, did I tell you that?”

He shook his head.

“I suppose at my age, I’m not frightened of this experience at all. In fact, I’m eager.”

So was he.

“My father has paid for four seasons, and not one of them resulted in a single suitor.”

His lips parted in surprise, and he was striding toward her then. Surely, several men would have been willing to make the trade? Though she was sightless, her beauty was undeniable.

He stopped just in front of her. “I find that hard to believe.”

“My father did not appreciate having to care for me,” she whispered. “Most men did not wish to take on the task, either. Only you...” And then she reached out, her warm palm landing on the right side of his chest.

“Only me.” Those words filled him with satisfaction. It should be only him—only him that touched her, held her, made love to her.

“I thought I might never experience this moment in my life. Now that I’m here, I intend to take full advantage.”

Her hand began to move over his body, a light touch that caused goose flesh. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t see you in this light. But I want to know you,” she said. “Would you mind? If I just touched you for a bit?”

Mind? Tendrils of excitement rolled down his spine. “No, love, I don’t mind.”

Her other hand joined the first, a light skimming as she traced his arms, hands, chest, stomach, neck, shoulders, face. At the point her hands worked through his hair, feeling each divot of his skull, his entire body hummed with enough energy to set the room ablaze.

He held still. Perfectly still, though. Because as much as he wished to move, to wrap his arms about her, lay her on the bed and bury himself deep inside her, he also didn’t wish to break the spell.

Her hand slid from his hair, down his neck, and over the muscles of his back. He finally laid a light hand on her hip. “You said you can’t see when the light is low.”

“That’s right.”

“Should I stoke the fire?”

“That would be wonderful,” she said with a smile.

He agreed. With the light, he'd be able to see every part of her.

But still he didn't move. He was entranced by her touch. The way her hands seemed to touch every trace, every bit of his skin, leaving not an inch bare.

“May I—” she whispered, “may I touch your legs?”

Holy hell... His already raging erection throbbed so painfully, he thought he might break. “Yes,” his reply fell from his lips, but he wondered if he'd be able to withstand the sweet torture.

MIA NEVER WANTED to stop touching him. His body was near...godly. Lean muscles rippled under her fingers, the breadth of his shoulders alone might make a woman swoon.

At least this woman.

She still wished to be an artist, for the joy of it. But part of her had wanted independence simply because she was tired of being a burden. Her father had never wanted the task and neither had the men she'd met in London.

Only Cade had ever been strong enough, and she worshipped those muscles now. Would he grow to find her burdensome too?

She'd find a way to make it so that she wasn't.

She had her maid, Mary. A gift from her mother, Mary understood her needs.

But she wouldn't need her maid here. Cade could lead her skillfully through more than a dance.

Her fingers worked the buttons of his breeches, the fabric giving under her fingers. She knelt as she worked the clothing over his hips and down his legs.

But his scent was even stronger, that musk that surrounded him overwhelming her. She leaned into the smell, drawing deep, when warm, velvety flesh bumped right into her cheek. "Oh!" she gasped.

A rich male chuckle followed. "Sorry about that."

"What..." She started licking her lips. She felt him tense. "What is that?"

"That is the part of me that will be inside you," he answered.

She swallowed again, her body stilling. Her mother had explained as much, but still, when met with the actual appendage...

Tentatively, she ran a finger back up his hip, his coarse skin giving way to hair and softer flesh and then...

Gently, she traced along the side of his staff until the head mushroomed out. She felt it all. The slight indent at the very end, the way it seemed to grow harder, and then some small bit of fluid leaked out.

"Mia." His voice was rougher than she'd ever heard it.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, tipping her face up to his.

“No.” He reached down for her then, placing his hands under her elbows and lifting her up his body until his mouth crashed over hers.

So it hadn't been pain, but pleasure. The torturous kind. She nearly smiled against his lips, but the kiss was too consuming, his tongue sliding against hers, his arms around her in tight bands that left no room for her to fumble or misstep.

He held Mia to him, lifting her from the ground as he carried her back to the bed. Laying her down, it was his turn to run his hands all over her.

And where her touch had been light and exploratory, his was possessive, strong. He traced over her arms, across her collarbone, and then down to her breasts, cupping them both in his hands.

Her nipples peaked into his palms, and he gave a satisfied growl as she arched into the touch.

She flung her hand over her head but as he touched lower, she found herself reaching for him, holding his biceps until he slid his hand over her hips and down her legs.

And then, when he'd reached the hem of her night rail, the fabric was moving up her legs, the cool night air making her shiver.

Her skin came alive under his hands, her legs naturally parting as he ran his hands along her inner thighs.

And when he brushed his thumb over her apex, a cry of pleasure fell from her lips. “Cade,” she begged, knowing that

as much as she'd enjoyed touching him, she was going to like what he did to her even more.

“I know, love,” he answered, his honey tone vibrating through her. “But don't you worry. I'm going to take good care of you.”

The words stole her breath. Or was that the way he repeated the light brush with the pad of his thumb, moving through her curls to the sensitive skin of her sex.

She lost herself in the spiraling pleasure as he increased the pressure. Over and over he brushed her skin until, just when she thought she might burst from the feeling, he inserted a finger inside her channel.

They both let out a deep rush of air—her because it only heightened her pleasure and she felt as though she might fall over some edge.

But Cade muttered a curse. “You're so tight,” he gritted out between his teeth.

She didn't know what that meant and in this moment she didn't care. Her pleasure broke, sparking through her entire body. She'd never felt so much in one single moment and she knew that whatever else happened, this moment was worth it.

CHAPTER NINE

CADE THOUGHT he might go mad from the longing. Mia lay beneath him, her legs open to him, her body arching into his touch. Her eyes were closed but her expression was unmistakable.

Her lips were parted, needy moans falling from her mouth. She was so wet for him, and her hands tugged at his arms, his neck as she softly begged for more.

And then broke apart under his hands, the spasms of her pleasure rocking through him.

He let out a growl of satisfaction, his cock steadily leaking seed as one of her legs hooked around the back of his.

“Mia,” he growled. Her responses to him had been the reason he’d thought she might not be a virgin.

But with his finger inside her, he knew without a doubt she was innocent. He’d never felt a sheath this tight.

He didn’t think it mattered, but knowing that she was his and his alone filled him with even more need as he yielded to the pull of her leg, placing a knee on the bed as he climbed up her body.

She reached her arms up to him, wrapping them about his neck and pulling him even closer.

He came willingly, the slide of her skin, the feel of her softness threatening to overwhelm his senses.

He'd never wanted a woman more.

His desire threatened to undo his control as his hands slid under back, coming up to cradle her head.

He kissed her then. All his doubts and worries had melted away in the blaze of their desire, their tongues melding together as he began to slide inside her.

She stiffened, a gasp falling from her lips, and he gritted his teeth, his jaw clenching when he stilled. He'd hardly pushed inside her. "Mia?"

"I'm all right."

But he could hear the pain laced in her voice. He leaned back, his fingers still twined in her hair, his thumbs coming up to brush her cheeks.

This was his wife.

The weight of those words settled over him as he stared down at her perfect features pulled tight with pain.

She was giving herself to him—a fact that wasn't lost on him. And it humbled him, moved him in ways he'd never been moved. "Sweetheart."

Her fingers dug into his biceps. "I'm fine. Go on."

He eased in another inch, sweat breaking out on his brow, when he felt her stiffen again, so once more he stopped. She

lifted a hand to his face, her fingers not just resting on his cheek or jaw but exploring his features. “This is difficult for you too.”

“For an entirely different reason,” he affirmed, sliding in the smallest bit more.

“Tell me your reason.”

“You feel...” He drew in a ragged breath. “So good.”

Her fingers stilled. “It’s difficult to go slowly.”

“That’s right.” The smallest bit of talking seemed to relax her. “But not to worry. I’m capable of going as slow as you need. I want...” Christ, he wanted this to be good for her too. Had that always been part of the equation? He had his goals, and they did not involve staying here with her, or catering to her needs.

“I know you’ll take care of me,” she whispered. “I trust you.”

Those words nearly undid his control. She shouldn’t trust him, but the words pulled him even closer to her as he slid another inch inside until finally, he was fully seated within her.

“Mia,” he groaned, burying his face in her neck. In this moment a thousand invisible cords seemed to tie them together and he was incapable of severing them.

Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. “I’m good. Are you?”

He lifted his head to stare down at her. “You are asking about me?”

“You sound pained,” she whispered. “I can hear it in your voice.”

He was awed by her worry, by the connection between them. He kissed her again, softly this time, slowly pulling out from her tight sheath, his pleasure only heightened by the slowness of his movements.

“Oh,” she gasped, her eyes widening. “That hurts less.”

He knew this time wouldn’t be wonderful for her. Fortunately, it wouldn’t last long, either.

His body was already tightening with his need for release. A slow push back inside her and he tingled with his impending climax.

He held her tightly to his chest, forcing himself to remain slow even as his body cried out to let the passion take control. But he couldn’t hurt her. Not in this moment, not with her skin melded to his, her lips pressing kisses to his neck.

One more push in and he roared as his seed spilled inside her.

They stayed locked like that for a minute or more before he finally managed to pull himself from her sheath and stand up.

Even in the dying light he could see the blood. He winced, his hand trailing down her abdomen.

“Are you leaving?” She sat up, propping herself on her elbows and looking over his shoulder.

He should. This was not part of the plan. But as she reached out to him, he found himself sliding back into her arms.

THE SUN HAD long slid through the curtains when Mia finally woke.

She stretched, both satisfied and sore, when she bumped into a hard and unyielding mass behind her.

Her husband.

“Good morning,” he rumbled, hand swiping down her arm as she nestled her back into his front.

“Good morning,” she replied, a flush coloring her cheeks. “Have you been awake long?”

“Long enough.”

What did that mean? She nipped her lip, wondering at the subtext that was always present in their conversations. Perhaps because she couldn't read facial expressions, she'd asked a great deal of questions shortly after she'd lost her sight.

She'd learned better, however. Still, she had to find a way to learn what Cade wasn't saying. Begin learning what her new husband meant with his cryptic responses. “Long enough for what?”

“To see, in the light of day, that your arms are covered in bruises.”

Oh. That. Her jaw flexed, and she was at a loss for words. Her hand came up to grasp the other arm, covering the worst of the marks.

“I’d like you to start by telling me who gave them to you.”

She swallowed a lump, turning her face toward the light from the window. Cade sounded angry, but his hand on her hip was still light. “My father doesn’t appreciate...”

“What?” His voice just grew harder.

“He only got the one child. And not only am I a girl, I am defective as well.”

His heart sped up against her back. It was the only movement as seconds ticked by. “You’re saying that your father gave you all those marks.”

She jerked her chin in affirmation, her eyes fluttering closed. “He is exceptionally glad that I have wed.”

“Why didn’t he come to my ball?”

She’d already told him. “He doesn’t like to socialize.”

“And why is that?”

She shrugged. “Maybe he never liked it. But he finds my neediness annoying or perhaps embarrassing. He stopped attending after my first season.”

His fingers climbed her hip, stroking gently up the bruised flesh of her arm. “You struggle to get about?”

She shrugged. “You’ve seen me. I require support.”

He traced her shoulder with the tip of one finger. “I suppose it makes more sense for you to not travel so much. To stay in one familiar environment.”

She looked back at him then, not able to see more than a blur but still sensing they’d taken some significant turn in their conversation. “I suppose.”

“So when I travel to London, for example, it would likely be best if you stayed here.”

Cold washed down her body. Was he embarrassed by her? Already regretting his choice of wife? She barely pushed out a whispered “If you think it best.”

“I’m sure I do. For both our sakes.” And then he was getting off the bed. “I’m going to ring for a bath for you. Soaking will help your sore flesh.”

She gave a small nod, but tears had welled in her eyes. She forced them back down. What had she expected? She was a burden. She’d been a burden all her life, and nothing had changed.

Sitting up, she stretched, trying to put her thoughts aside. She could console herself with one fact...if he didn’t take her to London, she’d be able to pursue her first dream—being a sculptor.

But that didn’t quite alleviate the pulsing pain making her chest tight.

“Mia.”

She turned toward her husband, looking over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“You’re naked.”

She blinked in surprise. “Does that bother you?”

“No. Not at all. But most women new to this sort of intimacy are far more timid.” His voice thickened and darkened, passion evident in the explanation.

She shrugged, glancing back toward the window. “It’s all the same to me. Colder, maybe.” Then she stood and slowly sauntered toward the window. Did she have a weapon here? She believed she did.

Her husband might very well leave her behind when he traveled. He might find her burdensome, but in their bed, she’d give him all the passion she knew how.

Maybe he’d stay...

But even if he didn’t, this sort of intimacy was a pleasure she’d thought never to experience, and she would enjoy every moment while she could.

Drawing in a breath, she reached the window and slid a hand down one of the gauzy drapes, light and soft under her fingers.

She hadn’t been there a moment when she heard Cade moving toward her. And a few seconds later, his arms wrapped about her middle, his lips dropping to the crook of her neck.

She smiled to herself. “What shall we do today?”

His lips slid over her skin, moving to the shell of her ear. “Unfortunately, I have business to attend to.”

Another stab of disappointment coursed through her. “I see.”

“But I’ll be back before dinner. It will give you time to settle in while I’m gone.”

“Of course.”

A knock sounded at the door. “One moment,” Cade called before leaving her side again. But he was back a second later, dropping a housecoat over her shoulders. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Soon.” She tightened the garment about herself. The tub was pulled into the room, water sloshing as it was filled. Mary entered, her maid helping and her into the bath.

Cade had left the left the room through the connecting door. But long after he’d gone, she wondered about the mystery of her new husband.

She rose from the bath, she dressed, and had breakfast, then asked Mary, “Perhaps you can help me find my way to the west wing. I might as well put my day to use.”

“Of course, Mrs. Kingsley,” Mary said, reaching out her hand. “We’ll walk close to the wall so you can feel your way and I’ll bring a candle to help you see a bit.”

“Thank you, Mary.” She rose and placed her hand in Mary’s. She might as well begin setting up her studio. Because sculpting might be the real future that awaited her in this house.

CHAPTER TEN

CADE SWUNG OFF HIS HORSE, tying the reins outside a pub two villages over from Hillcrest and very close to the home of the Duke of Upton. Not that he planned to see the duke.

Cade pulled his hat lower and stepped inside the pub. Tucked in a quiet corner was Mr. Clemens, his investigator.

The man had a pint in front him, along with a bowl of stew. Mr. Clemens insisted they actually eat at every meeting. Made them look less suspicious, he claimed. Cade neither agreed nor disagreed, but he found stomaching anything during these chats difficult.

He almost always found out something he didn't wish to know. His uncle was a thief, criminal, and murderer. He kidnapped women.

He lied, cheated, and stole.

Cade drew in a fortifying breath. His own father had only been marginally better. The man had been a degenerate drunk and a philanderer, abandoning Cade's mother for large swaths of time as he participated in month-long binges of debauchery. Turned Cade's stomach.

Cade could say one thing about the man...he'd not beaten his wife and child. Mia's bruises flashed in his memory again. Whether or not his wife was in league with the duke, whether or not he left Cumberland and never returned...her father was going to pay for what he'd done.

Mia was still his wife and he'd made a promise to protect her. Shifting the brim of his hat even lower, he crossed to the table. "Clemens."

"Kingsley." The other man gave a curt nod in greeting. "Have a seat."

He did, and Clemens raised his hand to call the barmaid over. "Ale?"

Cade nodded. Not that he'd drink much. Even now, his stomach churned. But holding the glass would give him something to do with his hands.

The ale arrived, with Clemens taking several bites of his stew. Finally, he set down his spoon. "Before we begin, I hear congratulations are in order."

Cade raised his brows.

"Your marriage?"

He ought not to be surprised. The man was an investigator. "Keeping tabs on me?"

"Nope," the other man answered. "It's all anyone has talked about. The way the next Marquess of Kingsley clearly fell madly in love with the Beauty of Cumberland."

He shifted in his seat, scowling. "If they say so."

Clemens gave him a curious glance. “It’s good for a man to be married. Keeps him from trouble.”

Cade’s gut clenched right along with his jaw. This man understood his family history better than most—at least the details that pertained to Cade’s uncle. “You think I should be worried about trouble?”

“No more than anyone else,” Clemens said. “All men ought to be wed. Gives them purpose. That’s all.”

Cade took a deep breath, refraining from saying more, though he was certain the comment had been meant personally. “You called me here.”

Clemens nodded. “Right. I’ve news.”

Cade did take a swig of his ale then, trying very hard not to jump to any conclusions. “Tell me.”

“Well, I’ve been slowly but surely tracking your uncle’s movements once the former marquess arrived in Cumberland.”

Cade grimaced in impatience. He knew all this.

“What threw me for a bit was that I was looking at inns, and then homes he might have stayed in that would have suited a man of his station.”

Cade had learned it best not to interrupt Clemens. The man would only meander more if distracted. But his fingers were so tight on the pint glass that he worried he might actually shatter it. He eased his grip, sitting back. “Go on.”

“After a great deal of searching, I finally found his temporary residence—a little cottage.”

Cade stared at the other man incredulously, his brow furrowed. “My uncle?” Clemens must be mistaken.

“That’s right. A little cottage in the shadow of the Duke of Upton’s ancestral estate.”

A thrill of victory coursed through Cade. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“The original owner of the cottage disappeared mysteriously.”

Any excitement he’d had rushed out with his exhale. Another crime to add to his uncle’s list? “All right.”

“But regardless, your uncle was last seen on the edge of Upton’s property. It’s not definitive evidence, but...”

Cade agreed. The noose around Upton’s neck had just gotten tighter. “Discreetly start searching the property for an impromptu grave.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Clemens answered, standing from the table.

But as the man turned, Cade lifted a hand. “Clemens?”

“Yes?” The man half turned back, looked over his shoulder to Cade.

“Are you married?”

“Twenty years.”

That surprised Cade. The man must be gone a great deal for his work. “Your wife tolerates all the travel?”

“Hates it. Rails at me for the first three days I’m home. But then we make up.” Clemens winked. “I’ll be in touch.”

Cade turned back to his ale and took another swig. Throwing some coins on the table, he rose. He had a new bride to return to, after all. And whatever the future held, he knew that tonight promised the best sort of delights.

MIA HAD SPENT the morning and early afternoon unpacking boxes and setting up her supplies. As the sun streamed into the large windows, she found it easier and easier to work. Soon, she had a makeshift studio ready. It would take a long time, and the installation of several shelves to really organize her things, but she’d get there in time...

Time. When it came to sculpting, she’d have plenty.

She’d brought a few blocks of clay as well as the material for moulds. She’d not worked with the clay for some time, having mastered the form of her little bird, Theo, some time ago.

“Mary,” she called to her maid who was organizing the bits of wood and wire that helped Mia make forms, “would you please get me water?”

“Of course,” the other woman answered before making her way to the door.

While Mia waited, her lids fluttered closed, her mind’s eye remembering every ridge and sharp line on Cade’s body.

He was a masterpiece.

A spasm of pain followed, recalling this morning. He'd all but told her he'd be leaving her here. But she swiped her hand away. She'd enjoy him now, and then she'd pursue what had always been her passion. At least she was far from her father's claws. Maybe her husband was embarrassed to take her to London, but she doubted he'd hurt her physically.

Mary returned, a pitcher of water in hand. "Thank you, Mary."

"Most welcome, my lady."

Mia took the pitcher, setting it down before she squeezed the other woman's hand. "I'm sorry to have moved you."

Mary gave her fingers a return squeeze. "Don't be. The staff has been very welcoming. I think we'll both like it here."

Mia gave the other woman a smile of gratitude. "I shall talk to my husband about raising your salary."

"Thank you," Mary answered. "I would appreciate that greatly, though I am content now." The maid's fingers slipped from hers. "Shall I continue to organize the material for the moulds?"

"Please." As Mary returned to work, Mia began to wet the clay, working it into her hands as she attempted to decide where to begin. But she gave up attempting to think and just let the clay speak to her...

Some sculptors carved from stone. An arduous process, she'd attempted on a few occasions but without her sight, the chisel had proved challenging. Which was why clay was her

favorite. It would work through her hands, the silky texture soothing as it took her mind's shape.

Her eyes closed while she felt the piece take shape. Her mother had suggested she make bowls. They could be fired and glazed, displayed about the house, used in a lady's work.

Mia had tried to explain. She'd begun sculpting to remember. To map. To tie her inner sight to the outer world.

By the time she was done, she'd made a replica of a hand that fitted into hers. Fingers bent, larger, stronger than her own, she could slip her own hand into its grip.

Cade's hand...

Drawing in a rough breath, she opened her eyes, only to realize she'd lost most of the light. "How late is it?"

"Near dusk. The days are so short this time of year," Mary murmured.

Mia stood, shaking out her skirts and attempting to loosen her limbs. She carefully set the piece on a drying shelf and then threaded her arm through Mary's. "I should get ready for dinner."

"Very well," Mary answered. "Still, you wish to walk slowly to learn the house?"

"Yes, please," she answered. She'd feel her way down the hall. She could maneuver her parents' home without aid. Someday, she'd be able to do the same here.

A frown pulled at her lips. This was her new home now, her future. One way or the other, she belonged here.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FINALLY RETURNING HOME as the sun was setting, Cade walked into his chamber to ready himself for dinner, but his gaze immediately strayed to the connecting door.

Beyond, he could hear soft, feminine voices. The words were unclear, but the sound was pleasing, especially knowing one of them was his wife.

He ought to change, meet Mia downstairs, but he found himself drifting closer to the door, until he stood just on the other side.

Then, lifting his hand, he knocked.

“Yes?” Mia called.

“It’s me,” he answered, his forehead resting on the door. Part of him regretted going away so soon. They’d only just wed. But this was not a love match, and he’d never promised it was.

“Come in,” she called back.

He opened the door to find her sitting at her vanity, her maid putting the last pins in her hair. All he wanted to do was take them out.

Her long, lovely neck was exposed, the cut of her gown displaying an ample amount of her cleavage.

She turned to him, a soft smile pulling at the corners of her lips. “How was your day?”

She didn’t ask with any malice. Didn’t seem upset he’d been gone. He’d half expected her to be. Coupled with the fact that he’d mentioned leaving her here...

Perhaps she didn’t care.

He ought to be relieved but all that snaked down his spine was irritation. Their coupling the night before had been...

Transformative. That was the word that came to mind. Had she not felt it? Never had someone touched him like that, and he’d never wanted a woman more. He knew all of these feelings were a problem.

But he couldn’t push them back down as he strode into the room. “Mary,” he said, not looking away from his wife, “would you please ask the cook to send a tray up with our dinner?”

Mia’s lips parted. “We’re not going down to the dining room?”

“No.”

She gave a nod of acceptance in Mary’s direction and the maid bobbed a curtsy before she disappeared from the room.

He took Mary’s place, stationing himself behind his wife. “You look lovely this evening.” In the mirror, he had a full view of her face, her neck, her cleavage.

“Do I?” she murmured back.

Slowly, so as not to frighten her, he placed his hands on her shoulders, skimming his fingers along her exposed collarbone. Her head tilted back to allow him more access, and she drew in a long breath of air.

He traced the bone with a single tip of his finger and then he too closed his eyes. Much as she was a feast to look at, he had the urge to experience her the way she did him. “Your skin is so soft.”

“Are your eyes closed?”

He smiled. “How did you know I’d closed them?”

“The pressure of your fingers changed.”

His gaze naturally opened again. Her power of perception in areas other than sight was exceptional. “Did it feel better or worse?”

“Both feel good.” She tilted the top of her head back until it rested on his abdomen. “But when you can’t see, your fingers really begin to explore.”

Is that what she’d done to him last night? There was something so addicting about someone touching him as though she wanted to understand every tiny detail of his body. It made a man feel important. Like he mattered. Like he was special.

His breath blew out in a long, ragged trail, his control already fraying. When he was with her, all he wished to do was touch her.

A knock sounded at the door, then it opened and Mary stepped inside. “The tray will be up in just a few minutes.”

He nodded, glad for the distraction. He stepped back, taking a seat near the fire. Mia made her way toward him, sliding into the other seat.

“You didn’t need help.”

“I’m learning this room already and moving toward the fire is easier.”

Right. She’d asked him to increase the light last night, but he’d become distracted. He rose again, lighting all the candles in the room before he added several logs to the fire.

By the time he was done, the dinner tray arrived, and even knowing that Mia could cross the room herself, he reached for her hand. “Where shall we eat?”

“Right here? We could just pull the side table over to hold the tray?”

“Good idea,” he answered, fetching the table for the maid to set the tray on.

Both of them helped themselves to the roasted chicken and potatoes.

He uncorked the bottle of wine and poured them each a glass. “What shall we drink to?”

Mia took her glass. “Enjoying our time together?”

The words rang through him. Had he been that clear their time would be short, or did she have her own plans? She had

been remarkably calm about him leaving the day after the wedding. “To enjoying each other.”

They clinked glasses, each of them taking a drink. Then Mia said, “You know...”

“Yes?” He cocked a brow.

“If you’re interested in experiencing touch the way I do, there is something I could do to help you...”

His brows lifted. “What is that?”

Her sultry smile gave nothing away as she rose from her chair once again.

MIA INTENDED TO ENJOY HERSELF. She had no idea what motivated her husband, how long he’d remain by her side, and she knew she wouldn’t ask.

But that only spurred her to make certain that all the desires she’d ever dreamed of were fulfilled while she had Cade here. This might be her only chance.

She’d done endless turns around the ballrooms of London, and she’d never experienced a man who delighted her every sense the way he did.

Feeling for her armoire, she opened the door and reached in, pulling out a silky scarf. It was slightly opaque, enough that she imagined it would allow him to see blurry images but no more.

Exactly like her...

She turned back to him, holding the scarf with one hand, sliding her other along its length. She wished she could see his reaction. She rarely wished for sight anymore, but this one time...

While she didn't get to see his response, she heard it. His quick intake of breath, the way he shifted in his seat. "What are you planning, minx?"

"Minx? I thought I was your little bird?"

He chuckled then. "I did call you that, didn't I? I think I might have had it wrong."

She moved toward him. "In answer to your first question, I thought I might tie it about your eyes. Then you can experience the world—or more specifically me—the way I feel you."

He made a rumble deep in his throat, the sound predatory as he rose from his chair. "You want to blindfold me?"

"It's a bit see-through...partially translucent. I think."

He reached for the scarf, and she could see just enough to know that he lifted the fabric to his eyes. "It is."

"I can see some of you now, the shape of your shoulder, the set of your jaw. It's the particulars I can't make out."

In answer, he lifted the fabric to his face, and she listened while he tied the knot at the back of his head, cinching it tight. Then he reached for her hand, taking it in his. "I just realized I likely should have undressed before I put on the blindfold."

She laughed as she ran a hand over his chest. “We’ll figure out how to get you out of your clothes, I’m certain.”

He chuckled too, the sound reverberating through her hand. “Right. I’ve an expert here, don’t I?”

Pleasure made her cheeks heat. An expert. People rarely used such terms for her. Sliding her hands under his coat, she pushed the garment over the breadth of his shoulders. “So large,” she murmured. “Do all men have shoulders this big?”

“No,” he answered, a bit of possessiveness lacing through his voice and making her shiver. “Only me.”

“Only you...” Her fingers came to the buttons of his waistcoat, and she undid them one by one. “And your muscles. They are so defined. Not like mine.”

“Other men don’t have those either,” he growled out, hooking a hand about her waist to pull her close.

She clucked her tongue. “If I’m against you, I can’t undress you.”

“Will you touch me again, the way you did yesterday?”

“Did you like it?”

His hand splayed out on the small of her back. “Yes.”

She pushed back, removing the waistcoat, and then began to work on the knot of his cravat. His fingers joined hers, the fabric slipping free. “We could have just used this...” he murmured.

“Next time,” she answered breathlessly, tugging at his shirt, pulling it up over his head and revealing his skin.

Her palms flattened over his shoulders, skimming up and down his chest first and then his arms.

“What do you feel?”

“Your skin is rougher.”

“Hairier?”

She giggled again until she found the ridged muscles of his stomach, her fingers dancing even lower. “It hardly seems fair.”

“What’s that?”

“How much more physical power you have.” She winced at her own words, knowing she revealed how little she’d liked being at that mercy.

He pulled her close again, her stomach meeting his. “Mia.”

“Yes?”

“That power is meant for your protection, love. Not to harm you.”

She gave a small nod, her face turned away. Why she bothered, she didn’t know. Neither could really see the other.

But his lips brushed her cheek. “I will use mine to keep anyone from hurting you again.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. Did he mean that? Would he really protect her from the world that didn’t value her?

He’d said just this morning that he’d leave her here when he returned to London. Who would protect her then?

CHAPTER TWELVE

CADE SENSED the shift in her. Without his eyes, he felt the stiffening of her muscles, the way she pulled away just the smallest bit. What had he said?

He'd promised to protect her. Why would that upset her?
"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you. I felt the change."

She relaxed then. "Now you sound like me."

He smiled at that. "Tell me what's wrong, love."

Her cheek dropped to his chest. "I don't dare." The words were whispered but the tremble in her limbs was unmistakable.

Mia did not present as frightened, but he considered the bruises he'd seen. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No," she said, shaking her head, the warmth of her forehead on his bare skin. "Not precisely."

"All men?" He gripped her tighter.

“I think only my father, but it has made me cautious, I suppose.”

His chest tightened as he held her more firmly to him. “I would never, ever raise my hand to you. I am a lot of things, and many of them are not good, but physically hurting a woman is a level to which I would never stoop.” He meant the words. And for the first time in a very long time, he saw something good in himself, not just the bad. His chest swelled.

“Really?”

“Really. Now tell me what I said that has you stiffening away.”

She hesitated for a moment before she melted deeper into his embrace. “This morning, you said you’d leave me here. I just wondered who would protect me when...” She trailed off again, but he understood and it was his turn to stiffen.

His wife was not an ordinary woman. She was more of everything, but also, in one way, her needs were greater. He’d not considered those needs when he’d agreed to be her husband. “I only meant that travel might be difficult for you. You might be safer here.”

She nodded against him, and he inwardly cringed at the lie he’d just told. That wasn’t precisely what he’d meant this morning, and she likely knew it. She sensed these things. But her mouth pressed to his bare skin. “Thank you.”

Now he had to wonder...did she say that only to comfort him? He found himself murmuring words of comfort back to her. “I don’t come from a line of good men.”

She tightened her fingers on his biceps. “That’s surely not true—”

“But I’ll be the best at protecting you that I can possibly be.” He meant every word. With her in his arms, he forgot about his worries over his uncle, or Upton, and Mia’s possible involvement in the circumstances surrounding his missing uncle. He just focused on the vulnerable woman in his arms.

She rose on tiptoe, her breath fanning his face, until her lips pressed to his. He kissed her back with all the passion and promise he had, silently attempting to tell her that something inside him was shifting under her hands.

But they didn’t share any more words when he tugged at her clothing, the way he undressed her showing far less artistic than she had to hers of him.

But his palms finally came in contact with her skin, and he rumbled out his satisfaction, touching her everywhere.

He felt the curve of her spine, the flare of her hips, the taut skin of her stomach, the softness of the curls at her apex. His blood roared with need to touch her like this, and together they stumbled back toward the bed until he fell back onto the mattress, landing on his back while he held her protectively in his arms.

Her legs naturally landed on either side of him, her most intimate area opening to him. The head of his cock nestled into her folds, beginning to slide into the tight sheath of her sex.

“Oh,” she gasped, pushing up on his chest, which only caused him to sink deeper. He groaned at the sweet torture of

being inside her. “It works like this too?”

Did she mean with her on top? “It better than works. Go ahead, love. You have been steering this ship since the moment you tied that scarf over my eyes. Use me as you see fit.”

“Use you...” She sank all the way down on him, both of them moaning. “I don’t think I like that phrase.”

“I am here for your pleasure.” He held her hips, keeping them together for a moment before lifting her up to slide into her again.

“And I yours...” she said, her body moving with his. And then she gasped. “I didn’t know intimacy would be this good.”

He grinned, sure it was a wolfish, toothy grin. What man didn’t wish to satisfy? “Even I am in awe of how well we work together.”

“Really?” She leaned down, placing her lips over his. He kissed her, their tongues tangling together as they continued to move. “This is unusual?”

Everything about Mia was delightfully different. Better. More. “Once in a lifetime.”

“I think that you are once in a lifetime too,” she murmured against his mouth. “Which is why I will enjoy every moment, but I would never use you. We do this together.”

Together? It was a heady thought. For once, no games, no pretense. She pushed back up, her body moving faster.

He couldn't help it then, he pushed up the scarf and nearly choked, his throat constricting at the vision before him. Or rather above him. Mia, back arched, head thrown back, breasts out, took him over and over, her face flushed with her pleasure, her lips parted as she chased her passion. The very sight of her had his balls tingling and his hands tightening on her hips.

She gave a cry, her fingertips digging into his pectoral muscles, her channel squeezing him so tight, he knew she was about to find her finish.

“That’s it, my sweet little bird,” he pushed out through gritted teeth. “Take your pleasure.”

He barely kept from adding *I'd give everything to you...*

She cried out, her body spasming as she chased her climax.

It was the trigger that set off his own orgasm, his roar of satisfaction joining her cries. And then she collapsed on his chest.

He held her tightly for a minute, two, before he began pulling the pins from her hair. He'd loved the feel of her, but now he wished to see her dark-blond tresses spilled across his chest in the candlelight.

MIA WOKE as the sun rose, smiling to herself when she realized her husband's chest was her pillow. Her little parakeet tweeted softly from her cage in the corner as Mia nuzzled deeper into Cade's chest. Their bodies were twined together,

her leg across his hips, her arms about him. She'd never been warmer or more content.

Last night had been... She struggled for the words. They'd shared a bit with each other. Made love until she'd shattered into a thousand tiny pieces and then slept wrapped together. She'd never felt closer to another person, and she found herself idly tracing the lines of his body, her touch light so as not wake him.

“You must stop touching me like that.”

His deep voice moved through her, making her heartbeat tick up. “Why is that?”

“Because.” He slid a hand down the curve of her spine. “You are still very new to this, so we should proceed slowly, but if you keep touching me like that...”

“I like touching you.” She kissed his chest and kept moving her hand along his skin. “I'll memorize your shape, keeping you in my thoughts forever.”

He pulled her on top of him. “You are memorizing me?”

She nodded. “That's right. Each curve, angle.” Then she moved her hands over his shoulders and up his neck. “Might I touch your face?”

“You may.”

She ran the tips of her fingers over the square edge of his jaw, now covered in a bit of stubble. Her thumb traced the lush curve of his bottom lip, the lean, prominent angles of his cheeks, the small crook in his nose, and then the arch of his brows. “So handsome,” she murmured.

One of those brows arched under her fingers. “You jest.”

“I do not.” She traced his hairline. “I can picture you perfectly.”

He shook his head and then lifted up to place a soft kiss on the crook of her neck. “I meant what I said. Much as I’d like nothing more than to make love to you again, I think we should give your body a chance to recover.”

Her body felt fine. Better than fine. But she didn’t wish to argue. When did she ever? “What will you do today?”

“After I have breakfast with my wife?”

She nipped at her lip, heat filling her cheeks, joy spreading through her. “After that.”

“I shall work on my correspondence, I suppose.”

She nodded. “I’ll do the same.” A lie, and she was niggled by guilt to tell it. She actually meant that she’d go work in her studio, the one she’d set up in his house and not mentioned. But while they’d made progress, there was still so much she didn’t know about her new husband, and she wasn’t certain how to ask. “And I’ll have Mary walk me about the house. I’m learning to move about.”

“I can certainly help with that,” he said, placing a kiss on the tip her nose. “Now, why don’t I ring for a bath? I’m sure some salts would be soothing...” And then his fingers drifted over her behind and along the inside of her thigh.

She gasped at the intimate touch and the promise it held. Mia didn’t wish to be careful. What she wanted, when it came to Cade, was to be wild.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BREAKFAST WITH MIA had taken far longer than expected, which was why it was near lunch by the time he'd made his way to his study to review any letters that had come in the day before. Several from his uncle's solicitor had arrived and he read the reports with his gut clenched.

Finances in the marquessate were poor. Not unrepairable, but not flush either. In this regard, he'd been lucky his uncle had disappeared when he did. Cade would have inherited a proper mess if much more time had passed.

But as it was, the generally negative reports still weren't fun to digest. Understaffed farms and land that didn't produce. Cade raked a hand through his hair as he reviewed several documents, jotting down notes for decisions that would have to be made whenever he had total control of the title.

As he sifted through the pile, he found a more personal letter with the unmistakable seal of the Duke of Upton.

"Bollocks," he muttered, his fingers clenching and unclenching. He'd barely gotten a reprieve from the damned duke.

Ripping open the letter, he scanned the contents, his mood growing worse still. Upton had invited himself for dinner the very next night.

What was wrong with that man? Only a duke would be so crass as to issue his own invitation. Why did he wish to come?

He stood from his desk, crossing to the window, the bleak landscape suiting his mood. Upton's presence only reminded Cade that Mia was suspect and temporary. He scrubbed his face, crossing to the buffet and pouring himself a whiskey.

With each night that passed, he grew closer to Mia, their bond in the bedroom undeniable.

She appealed to every manly part of him. His need to protect, his desire to give himself over to her. But every time he started to forget, to heal from the wounds of his past, a reminder surfaced that his heart might not be safe in her hands.

He issued a curse.

Where was his wife now?

She mentioned correspondence. Was she in her room? He set down his glass and started for the door, but then stopped before he'd left. What did he say to her when he found her?

Did he ask about Upton? Would she tell him the truth if he did?

Continuing out the door, he made his way down the hall, up the stairs, and back to his chambers. The door between their rooms was open, no sound came from the other side. Stepping in, his stomach tightened as he noted a single letter on the vanity. Had she forgotten this piece of correspondence?

Where else in the house would she work? But then he remembered...she'd said she'd have her maid walk her about the house to learn the halls.

Perhaps he ought to have done so himself. Not only did he like being with her, but it ought to be his job to aid her in whatever she needed.

He walked into her chamber, moving toward the bed. The smell of wax and fire, and the scent that was distinctly her, filled the room. He drew in a deep breath as he ran his hand over her pillow.

Sleeping with her wrapped about him had been so satisfying. Several bottles sat on the vanity, and he walked toward them, picking the first up. Was this her scent?

Rosewater tickled his nose. He grimaced, not recognizing the smell on her, so he set the bottle down, intending to choose another.

But the single letter caught his eye again. Because he recognized the seal. His heart thudded loudly in his chest as a roar of protest clogged his throat.

It was from the Duke of Upton.

Did he need more confirmation than that? His wife, the one he knew he was falling in love with, was a spy.

Pain radiated out from his core, and he snatched up the letter and stuffed it in his front pocket. He turned away, stomping toward the connecting door.

He'd been played again. This did not happen to him, but ever since he'd met Mia, it was as though he was everyone's

fool. Upton's. Mia's.

He stormed down the hall, first thinking that he'd find Mia and her maid about the house, but instead he found himself in the entry.

And suddenly, it seemed an even better idea to go to Upton's village and see what he might learn.

If he confronted Mia now, she'd likely deny her involvement. He fingered the letter. He could read the words, but he'd rather know first—was Upton the man who'd murdered his uncle?

He knew he was going about this all wrong. Even he maintained the sense to see that. He ought to speak to Mia. Find out her involvement and cut her from his life.

But if he were being honest, there was a part of him that hoped...

If Upton were out of the picture, could he and Mia find a real future despite their rocky start?

Or was he always doomed to make wrong choices?

MIA WORKED on the next part of her sculpture, Cade's face, as Mary and Mrs. Reeves continued to unpack and organize her studio. The housekeeper had joined her when she'd found Mary and Mia wandering the halls. Now Mary and Mrs. Reeves chatted amiably as Mia manipulated the clay in her hands.

She remembered every detail of Cade's features and the clay came alive as she worked.

But the conversation behind her filtered into her thoughts.

"The soon-to-be marquess? I don't know him well. He's never come to Cumberland before, and he didn't say what brought him here this time."

Mia's brows scrunched, her hands paused. Never been here before?

"Really? I assumed this was his home because he moved his bride here."

"He's only just arrived. We didn't know he was coming, nor could we ever imagine him hosting an event like the one he did."

Now Mia was thoroughly confused. Why would her husband come here, immediately host a party, and then take a bride?

Butterflies flitted through her stomach. None of that sounded right. When he'd said he would return to London, she'd assumed he meant for the season...perhaps for Parliament. That he'd be in and out of her life.

But he'd never been here before now?

She turned her ear toward the women. Mary made some noise of incredulity in the back of her throat. "He didn't know you when he trusted you with an event like that?"

"That's right," Mrs. Reeves said, her voice dropped. "Leaves for large swaths of time too and never tells anyone

where he's going."

Mary gasped. "Oh...that's..."

"You keep an eye on your mistress, and I will too." Mrs. Reeves nodded. "She's a good egg, that one. But I worry."

His staff didn't trust him? Mia's insides turned as she set down the clay, her hands splaying out in front of her. This was the man she'd allowed in the most intimate parts of her body. The one who held her while she slept.

She drew in a ragged breath. After wiping her hands on a wet rag, she reached to a nearby table and found paper and charcoal sitting on the surface.

She didn't always draw, but somehow she needed to put down Cade's entire form, feel him, so to speak, to sort through her feelings.

Working quickly, she began the nude. Were her proportions off? With clay, she could create three-dimensional images that she used her hands to measure, but with paper, it was more difficult without sight.

Still, as she continued sketching, she visualized what she imagined Cade looked like. The slight crook in his nose, the lean edges of his cheeks and jaw.

As she drew, her stomach calmed and her worries disappeared. Despite Cade's words, and Mrs. Reeves's fears, something deep inside her trusted him. She'd trust herself too and her instincts about him.

Feeling better, she rose from her seat, setting the drawing aside. "Mary."

“Yes?”

“I think I’d like to prepare for dinner. I hope Cade isn’t waiting...”

“He likely isn’t,” Mrs. Reeves answered, the soft brush of her duster never pausing. “He went out this afternoon.”

And just like that, all her worries returned with a vengeance. “Out? Where?”

“He didn’t say,” Mrs. Reeves said quietly. “He never does.”

Mia reached for Mary and as quickly as she could, made her way back their suite of rooms.

But Cade was nowhere to be found. And as the evening progressed, he never appeared. Finally, when it had been dark for hours, she readied for bed, and slipped between the cold covers.

She refused to cry, but somewhere deep inside, she died a bit. She cared for Cade. If she were honest, she might very well love him. They’d only known each other a short time, but no one had reached out to her more, made her feel as wanted and as special as he did.

Still, some parts of him were so closed.

Could she open them? After her own past, did she even dare try?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CADE ENTERED the house well after midnight, having discovered exactly nothing. Not even his investigator.

The man wasn't in the village, nor at the inn. Surely, Clemens was out following some lead, but Cade had hoped to speak with him, learn something that might help Cade discover the truth behind his uncle's disappearance and Mia's involvement with Upton.

Not that he'd actually expected it to be fruitful. He knew that he ought to have just spoken to Mia.

The letter, unopened, sat in his pocket, a constant temptation and reminder that he and Mia had a giant crevasse between them. Why did he even care? He shucked off his coat, tugged at his cravat, and yanked off his boots, taking his frustration out on his apparel. He knew why—he cared for her. If he were honest, he was falling in love with a woman who was using him as a means to some end.

The connecting door was open, as it had been most of the last two days.

He heard the shuffle of covers and then Mia appeared in the doorway, in nothing but a gauzy night rail. "It's too cold

for a garment like that.”

She leaned against the jam. “Usually, my husband keeps me warm.”

“Not tonight,” he answered, his tone as clipped as his temper.

“Cade.” Her voice was soft, a pleading aspect making it higher pitched. “What...what’s wrong?”

He let out a long, frustrated breath. “What’s wrong?” *My wife is conspiring against me.* “Nothing. Long day, that’s all.”

“Please,” she whispered. “Tell me.”

He turned to her then, his face hard and angry as took two steps toward her. But he stopped when she cringed away. Damn him, but he knew he’d frightened her. “Mia, I won’t hurt you.”

“Your steps...” She trembled. “They were very aggressive.”

Swearing softly, he closed the distance between them, keeping his steps purposely light. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “I’m easily scared. I know.”

Another tear tracked down her face and he reached to wipe it away with his thumb. “Why did you marry me?”

She shook her head, her lips parting. “I...”

“I know your father didn’t give you much choice, but even before that—why did you allow me to kiss you at the ball?”

Why did you practically fall into my arms on the stairs?
Why...”

“Cade,” she said his name again, the breathless tone making her sound almost frantic. “I have so many questions too.”

But that only made him bristle. “Are they questions like ‘what is your affiliation with your uncle’s gaming hell?’”

“What?”

He turned away, too irritated to say any more and too confused by his need, even now, to pull her into his arms. Her hand tentatively touched his back. “We’ve known, really known each other, such a short time.”

“That is true.”

“How do we find a way to trust each other?” she asked.

He turned back to her, and her hand slid over his arm and onto his chest. Goosepimples had erupted all over her flesh and with a rough sigh, he pulled her into his embrace. “Tell me the truth. Why did you let me kiss you?”

She swallowed and then rested her cheek on his chest. “I told you. I was nearly a spinster and I’d never even wanted to kiss a man before you. Who cares if you’re ruined when you’re going to be put on the shelf anyway?” She tilted her chin up to him, her softly parted lips seeming to silently plead.

He shook his head. He wanted to believe her, but...

“Can I ask a question now?” she whispered. “And please don’t be angry.”

He was trying to hold on to the anger that had eaten at him all day. But with her in his arms... “I won’t be angry.”

“When you said that your uncle owned a gaming hell, you didn’t mean the Marquess of Kingsley, surely?”

It was such a basic question. Why would she ask that of all things? “I surely do.”

“But why would a marquess have an illegal business?”

His brows lifted. The duke owned one as well, did she not know that? “The finances are poor.”

Her brows drew together. “Will we be all right? My dowry must have helped.”

Now she was worried he wouldn’t provide for her? “We are fine, and we would have been fine, dowry or no. I am already repairing the damage.”

She relaxed against him. “I am certain you are. If there is one thing I have learned about you it’s that wherever you are, I am safe.”

Those words melted a bit more of his heart and he had to fight the urge to kiss the top of her head. “You are.”

“It’s your turn.”

“To what?”

“Ask a question.”

There were so many he wished to have answered. “How well did you know the Duke of Upton before we met?”

She slowly shook her head, confusion marking her brow. “I didn’t know him at all.”

Lie. His arms tightened about her. If she didn’t know him, she’d not be receiving correspondence from him.

She trembled in his grasp again, jerking back and nearly bumping into the door frame. He shot out a hand to stop her and she gave an alarmed cry.

“Mia,” he gritted out. “You were about to crash into the wooden trim.”

“Oh,” she gasped. “It’s just... I felt you get angry again. It’s not the first time the topic of His Grace has upset you, but I don’t understand why.”

He slipped his arm about her again, this time keeping his emotional distance, though he still walked her back into her room to the edge of her bed. “The duke and duchess are coming for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Dinner?” she asked, her fingers slipping over his chest, where the rapid beat surely betrayed his calm façade. “Why?”

“I don’t know, but I can tell you that the duke is no friend of mine.” Then he pulled the covers back a bit further, inviting her wordlessly into the bed.

“Are you coming with me?”

“No.”

“Please,” she begged, pressing herself against him, all her softness threatening to undo his control.

“Mia.” He placed his hands on her hips, intent upon putting some distance between them, but somehow, he didn’t quite push her away. “I’m too upset.”

“That’s all right.”

No, it wasn’t. “It’s not a good idea.”

“I want to be with you.” She rose up on tiptoe, kissing a path along his jaw.

This woman. How did she do it? How did she so thoroughly break down his resolve?

His mouth found hers then, his kiss greedy, hungry, testing.

She was afraid of him when he moved too quickly. And though he’d like nothing more than to bury himself in her softness, lose himself in her body, he’d not, even now and angry as he was, frighten her with his passion. That was a line he would never cross.

But she met his kiss with a passion all her own.

MIA DIDN’T CARE that his lips were hard, his arms steel bands about her body. His touch was still controlled, his passion still laced with enough tenderness for her to know he’d not hurt her.

Perhaps it was a poor strategy to nearly beg him to touch her. But she couldn’t hold back from him.

So she returned his kiss with all the passion she held inside, the worry that had built up as she lay alone.

She needed this man. Like lungs needed air, she'd struggled to breathe when he'd been gone. She knew he was going to break her heart. He was so distant at times. Cold.

But Mia had decided she'd take the pleasure now and give him all the love she could.

He raked his hands down her side and then, catching the hem of her night rail, he pushed the fabric up around her hips, the cool night air chilling her skin.

But he pressed to her front, his heat keeping her warm. "Cade," she cried, tugging at the hair about his nape.

His answer was to yank his falls open, multiple buttons cascading to the floor.

She skimmed a hand down his back, helping him push the breeches down, even as he hooked one of her thighs around his hips.

Muscles flexing against her, he bent down enough to angle his manhood inside her and then he plunged into her slick heat, both of them groaning in satisfaction.

"I missed you," she cried out, squeezing his waist with her leg. "I missed you so much."

He buried his face in her neck, lifting her up and settling her on the bed, never breaking the contact inside her.

When he began to move, his touch was more languid, less intense as he wrapped his arms about her. "Mia."

She held on to him as though she might lose him if she let go, as though he were a port in a storm.

Her breath hitched when he picked up the pace again, the thrust of his hips building the pressure and pleasure inside her until she was so taut with tension, she thought she might surely break.

On and on they climbed, moving together, their bodies locked in a dance that didn't require words or even sight.

Mia could feel the connection as palpably as she felt clay slip through her hands. Words fell from her lips, sounds she hardly attended, the passion so intense, she could barely breathe, let alone think.

And then she was falling over the edge, her body spasming about his, her arms locked so tightly about his neck that she surely had dug divots into his skin with her fingernails.

And that's when she realized his shoulder was damp, not just with sweat, but with her tears.

He still moved inside her, his hips thrusting with such power as he chased his own finish.

Mia held him tightly still, drinking in every moment as tears continued to leak from her eyes. This moment was everything and already bittersweet.

Cade roared in her ear, his body stiffening impossibly tight. And then he collapsed on her.

But still she didn't let go. She held him to her chest, wordlessly wishing for this moment to last forever.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TWO HOURS LATER, Cade still lay awake, watching his wife sleep. She was draped across him, her body snug against his side, her fingers still gripping him as though she were afraid he might disappear while she slept.

His chest tightened in pain as he remembered their lovemaking. It wasn't the act that hurt. That had been so satisfying, he still ached with longing.

It was her words while they'd made love. Half mumbled, nearly without consciousness, she'd begged him to stay close. Promised to give him all that was hers to give.

His heart thudded painfully in his chest. They hadn't sounded like the words of a woman meaning to double-cross him, but those of someone who deeply cared.

What was it about her vulnerability that called to him as a man, that demanded he do all that she asked and more?

Had she begun a ruse at the duke's behest that she regretted? Did she truly care for Cade the way he did for her?

He had a plan. A carefully crafted one that was for his own benefit, but also for hers...

He was not good husband material. Hadn't every man in his family proven that to be true? Was it even possible that he might be different? Not much in his past indicated he would break the cycle. He found himself locked in a match with a duke, a blind woman his pawn.

Or the queen. It still wasn't clear.

He swore, softly shifting as though he might leave. Mia's hand tightened on his waist. So he stayed.

Was he just swayed by good sex? Better than good—it was the best. And perhaps it was even worth falling on his sword. If it was bound to happen anyway, why not meet his ugly end like the rest of his family in the arms of a beautiful woman who touched him like he was a god among men? The plan had merit.

His turned toward her, his lips grazing her forehead, and in her sleep she sighed his name. "Cade."

At least it was him she called out for when she hardly even knew she spoke. That was something...

But tomorrow, well, technically now today, he'd have to face Upton and so much was unanswered still.

He growled in frustration. Mia's leg slid higher up his body, her hips undulating against him. Even now, his cock stiffened.

His arm was about her body, and he fanned his fingers out on her back, his eyes closing. "You don't want to let me go," he whispered into the night. "I don't want to let you go either. What are we going to do?"

She didn't answer. But in the silence, he finally drifted off to sleep.

He woke with the sun peeking in the windows, Mia still snug against his side.

He turned to her, watching the breath tremble out from her full lips as she sighed softly in her sleep. This time, when he slipped out from under her hold, she didn't protest.

Naked, he made his way into his own room.

Picking up his coat, he fished in the pocket, finding the letter.

He drew in a deep breath, knowing that he was a swine for spying on her personal correspondence. Then again, being a swine was the modus operandi. He sliced open the note and flipped it up, scanning the words, confusion knitting his brow.

MIA,

COMING FOR DINNER TONIGHT. Have the crate ready for Bingsley. I'll explain then.

A

THE CRATE? What the fuck was that? And who was A? Was it a code name for the duke? His first name was Rath.

But his wife's name was...Anna.

Was the duchess involved too?

He swiped a hand through his hair. Should he ask? Would Mia answer honestly if he did?

“Cade?”

He set the note on the stand next to his bed. “I’m here.”

Mia appeared in the doorway, sleepy, her tousled hair streaming down her back, her body completely nude. “Everything all right?”

“Fine,” he answered, crossing to her. “It’s too cold for you to be out of bed.”

She shook her head. “It’s cold in the bed without you.”

He quirked one side of his mouth as he crossed to her. “I’ll tuck you back in and stoke the fire.”

“You’re not coming back in with me?” Her mouth pulled down into a frown.

Pulling her against his chest, he let his hands tangle in her hair. “I need to see my solicitor this morning, but I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

The truth was that he was going to see his investigator and share the information he’d gotten from the letter. Perhaps it would lead to some more clues. He’d wait to see what he learned before he confronted Mia.

He knew he was living in a bubble of borrowed bliss. But he’d take it. For now, he’d pretend like there were no secrets between them.

MIA SMILED until her cheeks hurt and her lips felt brittle. On the surface their dinner with the duke and duchess was going fine.

They chatted about scintillating topics like the weather and their Christmastide plans, the holidays only a few days away.

“Were you invited to the Westmoreland Christmastide gala?” Anna asked. “It’s an extraordinary event.”

“We were,” Cade said without volunteering any more information. Mia looked at her husband. She’d had no idea they’d received such an invitation. What other secrets did he keep from her? It was the question that had plagued her since the beginning.

“Will you attend?” Anna tried again.

“No.” Cade took a sip of his wine, leaving both of the Uptons to stare at him.

“You ought to reconsider,” the Duke said next. “It would be beneficial to your cause.”

“Cause?” she asked, speaking for the first time in several minutes, as her brow furrowed. It somehow hurt that Upton, whom Cade didn’t even seem to like, knew more about her husband than she did.

Cade cleared his throat. “Perhaps it’s time for the gentlemen to part from the ladies.”

Her chest tightened with hurt. He wasn't going to answer and instead she was being dismissed? "So soon?"

"Mia." His voice rang with warning.

Mia pushed back her chair, irritation making her rigid. She was hardly able to see in the candlelight, but Mary came to her side, slipping a hand under her elbow.

Anna rose too. And as the Duchess came to her other side, she left the table without another word to her husband.

Despite her outward expression of irritated indifference, inside she died a bit. She was attempting to hold on to Cade for as long as she was able. But each day that passed, it felt as though he slipped through her fingers a little more.

She held her head high as Mary helped her down the hall, Anna on her other side.

"Where to?" Mary asked.

"My studio," Mia answered. She might as well show Anna her work.

"Oh good. I was worried when I didn't hear from you that you'd changed your mind about selling your pieces."

"Didn't hear from meme?" she asked, confusion pulling her brows together. "Was I supposed to have written? I don't understand."

Anna touched her arm. "I sent a note to you a few days ago, requesting the sculptures. I suggested that this was the perfect opportunity to acquire them from you."

Mia shook her head. “I didn’t receive it. I’m so sorry. But we can certainly pack them up now. Mary...” She turned to her maid. “Her Grace can help me from here. I know the way, more or less. Would you fetch an empty crate, please?”

“Of course,” Mary answered, letting go of her hand and returning the way they’d come.

“How odd, that you didn’t receive the note. I know my footman delivered it here two days ago.”

Mia frowned. The staff had been nothing but supportive. Which only left Cade. He wouldn’t have withheld her letters, would he? “That is strange.”

“Is...is everything all right? Are you settling in?”

Mia knew what the woman meant. Was there something wrong here? “It’s been fine. Cade and I...” She drew in a breath, trying to decide how much to say about their passion and difficulties communicating. She and Anna didn’t know each other that well.

“He looks at you as though you’re the only woman in the world.”

“Does he?” she whispered, wishing she might see that look. Perhaps it would make her feel better. “There is so much we aren’t saying to each other. And I’d like to ask, but this is all so new, I’m not sure I dare.”

Anna’s fingers squeezed her elbow. “Things with his uncle are surely complicating your marriage.”

“What things?”

“Oh dear, you really don’t talk with him, do you?” Anna paused. “I don’t know if it’s my place to share or not.”

“Please,” Mia begged. “I need to find some path forward, no matter how narrow.”

Anna drew in a ragged breath. “The marquess isn’t just missing, everyone assumes he is dead.”

Mia nodded. “I see.”

“His dealings were shady, and he’s left a cloud over Cade’s transition into the title.”

Mia blinked, remembering how bitter he’d sounded when he’d told her on that first night that he wasn’t a lord. “How shady?”

Anna made a ticking noise between her teeth. “He tried to trick me into playing the part of pawn in order to force my family to sell him their gaming clubs,” Anna whispered.

Mia tried to understand all that she’d just learned. Was Cade’s uncle, a titled lord, also a criminal? “How does that impact Cade?”

Anna leaned closer. “Well. He can’t let the world know his uncle is involved in such business. It would impact his own reputation. But how can he prove his uncle’s death if he doesn’t expose his secrets?”

Mia’s head spun. How could Cade have shared none of this information with her? Her heart ached at the knowledge that she knew so little about the man she’d married, the one she was falling in love with.

They'd reached her makeshift studio, and she opened the door, feeling for the candelabra that always sat to the left of the door.

Anna took her own candle and lit the room, so that even Mia could see enough to make her way about.

Anna gasped as she reached the worktable. "Oh, Mia... these pieces. They are divine."

Did Mia tell Anna that she was making a replica of her own husband so that she would have pieces of him when he left her? "I've been inspired."

"Inspired doesn't even..." Anna bent closer. "How do you manage to capture him so perfectly when you can't—"

"I feel him," she interrupted, her voice raw with all the feeling that she didn't put into words. How much she cared and how hurt she was that a chasm existed between them.

Mary entered with the crate and Mia moved to her shelves of finished sculptures. Anna joined her and the two women pored over the pieces, choosing the twelve that Anna would take.

"Poor Theo," Mia laughed, adding another little bird into the hay-lined box. "He used to be my muse."

"Theo?"

"My pet bird," Mia sighed. "I still love him, but I don't know that I'll ever sculpt him again. My artistic thoughts have been..." She searched for the right word, a vibration in the floor distracting her.

“Replaced?”

“Mmm.” She cocked her head. The vibration turned into audible footsteps. Sure, strong, and determined. “Cade.”

“What about him?” Anna asked.

“He’s coming and he’s not happy.” She shifted to face the door, her heart climbing into her throat as she drew in a steadying breath. This was not how she’d hoped to introduce her husband to her art.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AN HOUR BEFORE...

CADE SAT at the dining table, drink in hand, though he hardly touched liquor. He needed his wits.

The last time he'd faced off with the duke, he'd wished to know about his uncle, about his own title. Tonight, even that desire had faded, replaced with thoughts of his wife. How had Mia completely dominated his mind?

Upton kicked back in his chair, not really drinking either. While he'd appeared to take several sips, his glass remained full. "What shall we do?"

Cade swiped a hand through his hair. "Suggestions?"

"We're due for another chat."

"Chat? Are we women?"

Upton gave him a rare grin. "Too true. All right, then. Perhaps we engage in an activity while we talk."

Cade's brow lifted as an idea occurred to him. "Chess."

Upton gave a quick nod and the two men rose from their seats, neither bothering with their drinks.

They moved to the study where a board was set up, though Cade did not sit. He stared for a moment, wondering if in this scenario, he was the dark or the light.

“How is your new bride?” Upton asked, staring as well.

“I thought you might be able to tell me.”

Upton gave him a curious glance. “Me? Why is that?”

The sentence made Cade pause. He’d gone enough rounds with Upton to know that the man liked strength over trickery. And that first night, Cade had assumed that Upton wanted him to know that Mia was a spy.

“Don’t play coy with me. We both know you forced my hand in marriage for your own cause.”

“I did,” Upton nodded. “And yours too.”

Cade chose the side with the light pieces. “Explain.”

Upton slipped into the chair across from him. “You open.”

Cade looked down at the board. He’d imagined this whole affair as a large game of chess and now was his opportunity to win. He moved out a pawn, knowing it was most likely the first piece to be taken.

Instantly, his gut clenched, thinking of Mia.

Upton took out a pawn as well. “Marrying Mia will help you bring this mess to a close and give you a meaningful life.”

Cade's gaze drifted from the board. "Exactly how will my wife help solve the mystery of my uncle's death?"

Upton met his eyes. "I told you that your uncle had a partner."

"Yes."

"I told you that man is back in England. Once he learns what you already know—that your uncle died in pursuit of me—he's going to come north as well. It's a matter of time. And when he does, what will he see up here in Cumberland?"

Cade's gaze narrowed. "He'll see that I'm married. So?"

"No, he'll see that you and I are clearly working together."

Cade shook his head, irritation spreading through his body. He was being played. "I am bait."

"As am I."

He took a bishop out, grimacing. "And Mia agreed to all of this?"

Upton squinted at him, confusion marking his brow. "She agreed to marry you, clearly."

The best strategy in any chess game was subtlety. The other player shouldn't even see the trap coming. "At your encouragement."

Upton shook his head. "I suppose. If you consider me insisting that you wed her a form of encouragement."

Why did the circumstances of him marrying Mia continue to remain shrouded? Subtlety was getting him nowhere and he was tired of the unanswered questions about the woman who

was winning him by rapid degrees. “But she knew...She knew you’d force my hand, that’s why she was out in the garden. It was a trap.”

Upton’s eyes widened. “Don’t be absurd.”

Cade pulled out the letter from his breast pocket. “Then why are you and your wife corresponding with her?”

“You ought to ask Mia that.”

Cade stood, the game forgotten. That had been the problem ever since Mia had arrived—he could hardly attend anything besides her. He spun on his heel, mind made up that he was to finally going to talk to Mia and put this subject to rest—once and for all.

He strode into the music room first, then the front sitting room. But when both were empty, he knew precisely where the ladies had gone. With a rumble of frustration, he started for the west wing.

He wanted answers.

What had his wife been doing off in the depths of his own home?

MIA BRACED herself for Cade’s anger. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her, but something inside reacted just as she did with her father.

She cowered, knowing she couldn’t run.

“Mia?” Anna’s breathless cry rang in her ears. “Are you all right? Why are you so afraid?”

“I—” But that is all she got out before the door to her studio banged open.

“Mia,” Cade’s voice boomed into the room. “What the hell —”

She folded in on herself. Anna’s arms came around her. “My lord,” Anna cried. “Can’t you see you’re frightening her?”

Mia tried to catch her breath. She could see Cade’s outline with all the candles, his erect posture, his broad shoulders. Memories from when her father was angry at her unraveled, and fear pounded in her chest. No, her husband wouldn’t act the same way—he’d made her a promise. Though how could she be sure? The way he stepped on the floor reverberated through her.

Upton came in behind him. “What the hell?”

“That was my question,” Cade snapped. “What the hell is this place?”

Mia swallowed down a lump, trying to push herself back up to standing. “My...my studio.”

“Studio?” The word was spat and Mia shrank again. “You set up a studio in my house without my knowledge?”

Was there really a need to answer? She didn’t, choosing to shrink deeper into Anna.

“And what about you?” Anna answered for her. “How can Mia not know a single thing about your uncle?”

“My uncle?” His voice was practically a snarl. “But you told her all about it, didn’t you? Was that before or after you convinced her to ruin herself so that I’d marry her?”

“What?” That pulled Mia out of her frightened stupor and she stood. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play the fool with me. You are many things, but not that.”

She drew in a fortifying gulp of air. “You’ve been keeping much larger secrets from me than doing a bit of sculpting and yet somehow you are the angry one?”

“You’ve been lying to me since the moment we met.”

Those words completely befuddled her. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Did Upton make promises to you or did he strong-arm you into accepting my suit?”

She’d had enough. Her hands clenched into fists and her chin rose. “My father did the strong-arming. To my knowledge, the only part His Grace played in our match was finding us in the garden.”

She felt his waver, the way the energy about him shifted. “Are you saying that you are in no way connected to the Duke of Upton?”

“Of course I’m not.”

“Then why is Her Grace writing you directive letters?”

Now she was angry. “You took the note!”

“I need to know what’s going on.”

Her fist came up then, shaking. “I am a sculptor. Look around you.”

“A blind sculptor?” he scoffed. “That’s what you want me to believe?”

Those words hurt. Her fist dropped and she wrapped her arms about herself. “Believe what you like. But I introduced myself to Her Grace at your ball because I’d hoped she might help me sell my art. I expected to be a spinster and I needed a method to support myself. I might have abandoned my original plan and married you, but you told me you’d leave me here...alone.”

Silence met her words. To her left, the table with his pieces sat, the bits of his body close enough for her to touch.

She’d been a fool to think those hunks of cold clay would bring them together. Because right now, they were miles apart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CADE STARED AT HIS WIFE, hunched in fear, and made several bits of mental calculations. Deep in his gut and to his dismay, her story made sense.

Was she just that smart or... “You’re telling me that you simply allowed a man you’d never met to kiss you in the garden that night? There was no plot?”

Behind him, Upton sucked in his breath. “You thought she was scheming against you?”

“I told you. I am one and twenty, about to be put on the shelf, and I’d never experienced anything like you.” Her voice wobbled. “I thought you might be my one chance for a kiss.”

Those words were spoken so softly, with such pain, that he cringed. Was it even possible that he’d had it wrong this whole time? And how could he ever know?

But something that had been tugging at the back of his thoughts moved forward. The connection between Mia and himself was real. His feelings were even more important than the games, and his path forward wasn’t in any of pursuits he’d thought vital before.

But the tethers of the past hadn't quite let him go, either. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I believe that I have." She shook her head, her mouth pinched and her face pained. "Trust has not been our strength, has it?"

"Truer words," he murmured as Upton pushed past him, going to his wife's side. Anna still had her arms about Mia and the three of them stood like a solid wall against him.

What was it about his family that they managed to destroy anything valuable? Here he was, following beautifully in their footsteps.

Upton glanced at the table behind him, his eyes wide when he saw the contents. Then he placed a hand behind his wife's back. "I think it's time for us to go."

"No." Anna shook her head. "Mia is afraid. I won't leave her."

"You hurt her?" Upton said, low and menacing, as he took a step forward.

Cade scoffed. He wasn't afraid of the duke, nor did he have any reason to be. At least not in this regard. "What kind of man do you take me for?"

"The kind that keeps secrets and lies," Anna cried. She looked at her husband. "I told you that night at the ball not to force the match. Look what you've condemned her to. He's just like his uncle."

The statement cut through him like a knife. "How dare you —"

“How dare you?” Anna let go of Mia, wagging her finger. “You should be nurturing her, not frightening her.” The duchess wrapped her arms about Mia again. “I don’t care what either of you say, Mia is coming home with us.”

“Anna.” Upton straightened. “This situation is complicated enough—”

“It’s simple, really.” Anna gave her husband a hard glare. “You made this mess, forcing Mr. Kingsley to marry Mia, and now you’re going to see it right.”

“I am not—”

“If you don’t, I will.”

Cade’s breath held in his lungs. What did she know?

“Anna,” Upton growled. “Don’t.”

“Your uncle presented himself to me in disguise, pretending to be Rath’s neighbor. He drugged my brother-in-law with laudanum and attempted to kidnap me.”

Mia gasped, air rushing from her lungs. The details rang with a truth that was undeniable.

So his uncle had attacked yet another innocent woman. How disappointingly like a Kingsley. He’d known his uncle was a villain, but this was just... “What happened?”

“What happened was that I protected my wife,” Upton growled out.

It was as close to an admission as Cade was going to get and sincerely more than he’d hoped for.

In this moment he'd won. He had the admission he needed, and Mia had been exactly the pawn he'd planned on that first night. She'd led him to the truth, but the victory rang hollow. There was no surge of triumph flowing through his veins, no elation.

He looked at Mia, her body still curled in on itself, and what he felt was a sharp pang of regret. "Commendable, I'm sure." He tore his eyes from his wife to look at the duke. "But I'd love to know how exactly you did so."

Upton gave him a fierce scowl. "And I'd love to know how you can be concerned about a scoundrel's death when your own wife is petrified of you."

Another hot poker of shame lanced through him.

"I'm not scared of him," Mia interjected. "He's not hurt me like that." Her voice was a new cut. There was a note of such despair to her words that he knew that he'd lost her, lost her respect or affection. "But I am not going to stay here and be manipulated any longer."

Her hand found Anna's and the two women seemed to share some understanding. Together, they began walking toward the door. His gut twisted. She was leaving? Now? She couldn't go. There was so much to say, now that some of the past was out in the open.

He was between them and the exit and, without thought, he stepped in front of Mia. "Where are you going?"

"She's coming with us," Anna answered, her face set in a scowl.

He stepped closer, holding out his hands to plead with her not to go. He'd made mistakes here. He could feel them deep inside, but if he held her in his arms, if they finally talked, perhaps...

Upton stood between Cade and his wife in a second, pushing Cade back. "Don't even think about it."

He recovered, charging back toward the duke, when Mia's voice rang out. "Cade. Don't."

He stopped, knowing that he walked on very tenuous ground with his wife. "I can't let you go. We need to talk."

Mia shook her head. "This was always a temporary arrangement, Cade. You said so yourself and I felt it deep in my gut. You are my shooting star. My one fleeting chance to know those feelings that some people get to keep for a lifetime."

Her voice broke and some piece inside him shattered with it.

She was right, of course. It had always been his plan to leave. "We made a deal that involved children and—"

A whimper filled the space between them and her hand rose to her mouth. "We did." But he could hear the tremble in her voice and he knew he'd inadvertently hurt her again. Should he tell her how he felt? But the words stuck in his throat. He felt so raw... He'd been wrong on so many fronts and he stood before the duke, the man he'd been trying to conquer, not to whom he would confess his sins and feelings.

Anna began pulling her toward the door once again.
“Come on.”

Upton stepped in front of him. “You managed to fuck that up right good.”

His lip curled as he snarled at the duke. “Stay out of it, would you?”

“I’ve been in it from the first.”

Truer words.

“Which is why I’m going to tell you that you are at a crossroads,” Upton said. “You can keep on the path you’ve been on for revenge, or you can choose a different one with hope and light and goodness. I’ll see that Mia’s at the Westmoreland gala the day after tomorrow. You should join us.”

“Or I could go to the authorities and have you arrested for my uncle’s murder.”

“You heard what he did. You really want to side with him?”

Was it that simple? “I’m siding with myself.”

“A good man sides with his wife.” Upton stepped around him.

Their shoulders collided but Cade gave a good shove back, sending the duke off to the side. A solid check. But not a mate. And the victory had never felt less like a win. In fact, he was fairly certain he was losing the game.

Losing everything that mattered.

MIA HAD SPENT the past two days either crying or pacing. She missed her clay, she missed her new home, and most of all, she missed her husband.

The cad.

She'd known there had been a disconnect between them, and she'd known that Cade planned to return to London without her at some point, but the fact that he had all those motivations he'd never shared, that she'd understood so little...

Then again, she hadn't shared one of the major pieces of herself, her art. Or her own plans for the future.

But the question that kept her from returning to Cade's side was this: ...Had he ever cared for her at all?

She feared the answer was *no*.

Should she have stayed to find out? Or had she left before her heart could be broken even further?

She sat at the vanity while Mary dressed her hair. Cade had a footman deliver a ball gown perfect for the eve of Christmastide, and her hands smoothed down the red velvet of the dress hugging her curves. Would she see him tonight?

She knew Upton had asked him to come. If he did, somehow in her mind it meant that he cared. That he wished to make amends.

Was it enough to dare to hope that he might want to stay?

Or would their arrangement always be temporary? He'd mentioned at least two children. That might take years...

But it would also mean her holding on, attempting to enjoy the moment and pretending that he wasn't planning on leaving her. Her chest tightened and she brought her hand up over her heart.

"Try not to worry," Mary soothed. "It will all work out."

"How do you know?"

"A man does not look at a woman the way he does you and just abandon the pursuit."

Mia wished she had Mary's confidence.

Anna entered a few minutes later. "You look stunning."

Mia rose from her seat, then made her way toward Anna's voice. Reaching for the other woman's hands, they held on to each other. "Thank you." And then bending close, she kissed Anna's cheek. "For everything."

Anna squeezed her fingers. "It has been my pleasure."

Mia felt Anna's hesitation in the way her fingers stiffened in Mia's grasp. "What are you thinking?"

"Do you think he'll come?"

Mia drew in a ragged breath as she considered her answer. It was obvious her new friend didn't care for her husband very much. "I hope so."

Anna gave her fingers the smallest shake of affirmation. "At least you know where you stand on the subject."

No matter what happened with Cade, whether he wished to continue their relationship or not, they had to talk. Really talk. He'd been right about that.

She linked her arms through Anna's and the two of them left the room and started down the stairs.

But she'd not even made it halfway down when she became aware that Cade was there.

She sensed him and then, pausing, she caught his scent in the air.

A cry fell from her lips as his footsteps started up the stairs. His hand slipped into her free one. "Miss me, Wife?"

"Yes," she said honestly. Normally, she'd never ask the reciprocating question, but it was time to stop avoiding conflict. "Did you miss me?"

His fingers laced through hers. "You know I did."

A bit of satisfaction shivered down her spine. "I didn't know if you'd come."

"You think I'd let you go out like this alone?" The words warmed her with pleasure, though she caught the tiniest tightening of displeasure in his.

"Is something wrong?"

"Why do you ask that?" Anna said from next to her.

Upton said from the bottom of the stairs, "I'm curious too."

Cade wrapped an arm about her waist, helping her the rest of the way down the stairs. "A voice always betrays a person's

feelings,” Mia said. “It tightens, drops, rises.”

“So is she right? Is something wrong?” Anna moved away from them, toward her husband.

“Nothing is really wrong. It’s just that...” Upton cleared his throat.

“My uncle had a partner,” Cade offered. “He’d fled England, but Upton received word that the villain has been spotted in London and may be moving north.”

Mia’s brow furrowed in confusion. Cade’s voice had been hard with irritation as he’d spoken the second half of his sentence. “Are you concerned?”

“No,” Upton answered. “Even if he is on the move, this night is an opportunity to make it clear that your husband and I are on good terms.”

Mia’s mouth tightened in realization. Cade had come tonight as part of his investigation and not because of her. She should have known.

She moved to pull her arm out of his grasp, but he held tight. And leaning over, he whispered, “You stay close to me tonight. I don’t care what Upton says about this event being safe, I don’t like it.” He stood taller, partially turning toward Upton. “And you should have told me in the missive you sent earlier that Gyla was in play.”

“Why?”

“We should not take the women out tonight.”

“You don’t want to go with me?” That hurt.

“I’m not certain it’s safe. If you weren’t already here with the Uptons, I’d never have taken you to this ball. I want you at home where I know you are safe.”

Her throat closed with emotion. Was he concerned for her? Perhaps there was hope after all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CADE'S ARM tightened about Mia's waist. The last few days had been a revelation.

In reality, the first few minutes she'd been gone had been life-changing. He'd stood in the studio he'd not even known existed and what he'd found was...himself.

First in her art. His hand—perfectly rendered—his face, his arm. The details were uncanny in a way that made him ache. And that's when he knew. She saw him, knew precisely what he looked like, but he also knew just how she felt about him. Because in every piece there was...love.

How he could feel that from cold clay, he couldn't say. But he did. The likeness was so flawless that she must have studied him with perfect attention.

Then he'd gone back to his room and into hers and...the sight of the cold, empty bed had filled him with anguish. She ought to be in that bed, wrapped in his arms, draped across him, warm and safe and...

It was in that moment that he fully understood...his job was no longer to investigate his uncle's death. And it wasn't to hasten his transition to marquess. That would come eventually.

Because its importance paled in comparison to protecting Mia. His wife. The future mother of his children. The fragile beauty who would give herself to him without question if he'd allow her.

She was more vulnerable than many, but that only meant that his job was more important.

How had he been such a fool? The way she'd made love to him spoke of a woman willing to fearlessly love him.

He tightened his arm about her waist. He'd arrived tonight because Upton had implored him to come earlier today. The duke claimed that Cade's presence would help draw out the last criminal. But that wasn't why Cade had decided to attend.

He needed to hold his wife in his arms and make sure that she was safe.

And it was a good thing he'd come. Cade had only found out about Gyla after he'd arrived here tonight. To think of Mia going out without his protection... "We ought to stay here. It could be dangerous."

Upton shook his head. "Gyla is nowhere near Cumberland. We don't even know if he's traveling here or somewhere else. Which is why we're going tonight—to make our presence known and draw him out."

Cade shook his head in frustration. "Trust me when I say traps rarely go as planned. You have no idea what moves your opponent has set in place."

Upton cocked his head to the side. "Have you got a better idea?"

“Yes. I take my wife home.”

“Home,” Mia sighed.

He looked over at her, that dress clinging to every subtle curve. If he got her back into his house and into their bed, he wasn't letting her out for a week. Maybe longer.

How could no man have stolen her heart before him? How had he managed to be the man who got to hold her in his arms?

“We are stronger if we show up as a united front, create a plan together.”

Cade considered those words. “Fair point, though we did not create this plan together. You created it and made me your unwilling participant.”

Upton winced. “True.”

Cade drew in a deep breath. “Though I do see the merit of us joining forces against my uncle's partner. I want no part of that man's business.” He looked at the duchess. “Nor can I begrudge a man who acted to protect his wife.”

Upton gave a quick nod of gratitude.

But Cade's plotting wheels had begun turning. “Who knows how long Gyla has been in the country?”

“Only my partner, Lord Northville,” Upton said.

Cade scrubbed his chin, thinking fast. “Is it possible to blur the timeline enough that with your testimony and mine, we could claim that Gyla is responsible for my uncle's death?”

Upton's eyes lit with understanding, a slow smile pulling at his face. "I knew we'd do better together."

Cade took that answer as a yes. "Good. Why not take the man who is already the villain here, and make him the villain of one more highly punishable crime and solve all our problems with one sweep?"

Mia's hand came to his stomach, her tentative touch all that was needed to divert his attention. He wanted her hands on him, all over him.

"Are you worried about this?" she asked. "As you said, you never know how a plan might develop."

He winced, pulling her closer. "I hope giving the authorities additional incentive will mean that we need never interact with him at all."

Mia gave a hesitant nod into his shoulder.

"We can use the carriage ride to further the plan. In the meantime, let's continue with the one we've got. Draw Gyla out by appearing together."

Cade hated this plan. Mia was even more vulnerable than most women. "We ought to reconsider having our wives with us."

Upton shook his head. "I told you—Gyla is nowhere near Cumberland. We're simply ensuring that he knows to travel to Cumberland."

Cade grimaced. Was this his own poor judgment at play? As the two couples made their way to the carriages, he leaned

down to whisper in Mia's ear, "I think we ought to go home instead."

She looked up at him, cocking her head to the side, mouth turning down in a frown. "You're worried."

He touched her face. "I am. We've too much to say to each other to have anything bad happen now."

She agreed. "If you think it best."

Did she really trust him, after the way he'd hidden the truth? "I know I don't deserve your trust, but please know that I'd never put you in physical danger."

"I believe you." She leaned close again, a soft smile on her lips.

He took a moment to lean down and steal a quick, hard kiss. "While I hate for you not to be seen in that dress..."

"We'll go home," she answered. "There is much to discuss."

"And to do," he added. And all the things they needed talk about and participate in could be done from the comfort of their bed.

MIA LOST track of the miles as the carriage passed through the night. What had begun with kissing had managed to progress. The bodice of her gown was now slumped down her front, Cade's mouth kissing all over her chest and corseted cleavage.

“I want you naked, Mia,” he murmured against her flesh.
“Naked and in bed.”

She gave a breathless laugh, tipping her head back to give him better access. “That’s the real reason we’re not going to the ball, isn’t it?”

He rumbled out a protest, lifting his head up, which made her utter a complaint in return. “No. The reason is that your safety is more important than anything else.”

The warming brick only did so much, but his words, coupled with his skin against hers, was heating her from the inside out. “Truly? You feel that way?”

“I thought to talk when I had you safely tucked next to a warm fire.”

She held her face in his hands. “I’m sorry I left. I should have stayed so we could have worked all this out two days ago.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth. Upton and I were deadlocked and when he insisted we wed, I sincerely thought you were in league together.”

She pressed her forehead to his, their breath mingling as she tried to make him understand. “I am in league with you. Only you.”

His cheeks tightened with his smile. “Thank you. But I think the larger issue is that I don’t trust myself to ever make the right decision. Look at my uncle. And my father, he wasn’t much better. How would I know the path to being a good man?”

Her heart thumped painfully in her chest as she kissed him. “Tonight, when you chose my safety over Upton’s scheme to draw this to a close...”

He held her tight against him. “You’re right. That does feel like the actions of a good man.”

Was he worried he wasn’t one? She slid her hands from his face into his hair. “I’m sorry I reacted so fearfully. I need to learn to be brave and not cower like a child.”

His lips found hers then, the kiss long and lingering, their tongues tangling together. When he raised his head, they were both out of breath. “You don’t need to change a thing. You’re perfect exactly as you are.”

Laughter bubbled up her throat. “No one would call me perfect, Cade. Far from it. I’m very defective.”

“You are not,” he growled out. “Your lack of sight has only made you more sensitive, more intuitive, and more intelligent. We should all be so lucky.”

His words soothed some hurt inside her, the one that always worried her father would have loved her if she’d been whole. Was it true that someone could find her better for being sightless? It hardly seemed possible. “You really think so?”

“I do.”

She opened her mouth to tell him how much that meant when the shouts of the driver interrupted the moment. “Who goes there?”

Cade’s arms tightened into iron bands about her, spreading out his hands on her back and neck like he intended to cover

her entire body with his.

The answer to the driver's question was the loud crack of a pistol.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CADE CURSED under his breath and he tucked Mia deeper under his body. Mia was his to protect and she was in danger...

Inwardly, he roared, ready for whatever battle lay ahead. No one was hurting his wife.

Mia trembled in his arms, burrowed deep to his chest. “What was that?”

“Don’t worry, my love. Whatever it is, I’ll see you home safely.” Reluctantly, he let her go. “I want you to crouch down between the seats.” He helped her into the position and then loaded his pistols.

The carriage barreled on, neither slowing nor speeding up, which gave Cade hope that the driver was uninjured. He opened the carriage door and, using it as a shield, leaned out of the vehicle to see what was happening.

Ahead of them, three riders blocked the road.

Another shot rang out, from one of the men on horseback firing. Both he and the driver ducked down, the ball sailing wide.

“Going to rush them,” the driver yelled over his shoulder. “There’s no place to stop and I won’t slow and let them overtake us.”

“Good man,” Cade called back. “I’ve got two shots and I’m dead on.”

The driver, still hunched, pushed the horses faster, the crack of the whip ringing out over the rush of the wind.

Cade climbed out of the carriage and up to the roof. He’d have to hit the men before they passed.

He wasn’t afraid they would shoot him, but instead his horses.... The animals were the larger target and if one of them went down, the carriage would be forced to stop.

Which, if he were honest, was likely to happen. But he and the driver would have to take on one man, maybe two...even odds. But not three. It was Cade’s job now to make sure they weren’t outnumbered.

He lay on the roof, where it provided the most stability and made him near impossible to hit, and then he lined up his shot.

Firing, he heard the first man’s cry before he slipped off his horse. Triumph surged through Cade a moment before another shot from the men was fired off and his driver slumped to the side.

He let out a string of curses. “Hold on,” he yelled to Mia, lining up his second shot.

Another hit.

The carriage held the speed on the rutted road as the driver, still on the seat, kept the reins taut. He said a silent prayer for all their sakes that the man was all right, and then he reloaded.

The last villain skittered to the side of the road. Was he going to let them pass only to fire as they did?

He surely hadn't given up...

It was a race now so Cade, clearing his mind, focused on the task, reloading his pistols. Inwardly, he spoke to Mia.... Stay down, stay safe.

The first gun loaded, he levelled his aim to take the shot when the whinny of a horse split the night, a fourth rider galloping at breakneck speed toward them.

Cade snarled. Were there reinforcements? His pistol swung toward the new man, only to see several riders charging behind him.

His stomach dropped and his mind raced. How was he going to defend Mia? Worry swelled like the tide in his chest.

But the man on the horse, the one who had blocked the road, turned toward the riders and then, spinning, disappeared into the woods. Cade blinked in surprise, lifting up to get a better look.

“Ho!” the lead rider called, waving his hand into the night. “I’m a friend of Upton’s.”

“Sir?” the driver called back to Cade.

“Slow the carriage,” he said, relieved to hear the driver speak and hopeful that he really had run into reinforcements.

“State your name,” he called out to the rider.

“Lord Northville,” he called back, slowing his horse. Cade started, and then relief made his shoulders relax. Northville was Upton’s friend and partner. The man pulled up his horse just in front of the carriage as it too slowed to a stop. “And you are...”

“Cade Kingsley.”

Northville’s head reared back. “Gyla attacked you?”

“Gyla.” He pushed further up, while the other riders joined Northville. “Upton just told me that Gyla was far from here. He’d assumed the man was still near London.”

Northville grimaced. “Took a ship north. I didn’t have time to send word...” The man removed his hat and raked a hand through his hair. “Is Gyla here for you or Upton?”

“Bollocks,” Cade cursed. “Who he came for is anyone’s guess. Though I’m worried for Upton, after the way he tangled with my uncle. The duke and his wife are on their way to the Westmoreland Christmastide gala as we speak.”

Northville was about to put his hat back on when he paused. “So...you and Upton?”

“Unwilling compatriots,” he returned, his jaw clenching. “He’s convinced that our banding together would flush out Gyla. Perhaps he was right.”

Northville gave a quick nod. “Welcome to this side of the fight.” And then he put his hat back on. “And make sure to negotiate for shares in the club. If you’re going to join the war, you may as well make the profit.”

Cade gave him a genuine smile. Considering the state of his marquessate, it was a deal he'd willingly make. "Hell of an idea."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a ball to attend. Can't leave Upton to take all the glory."

The man kicked his horse, taking off. "Stay safe."

MIA LISTENED to the driver's labored breathing where he lay across the seat. "Are you all right?"

He'd suffered a graze to the arm. Cade said that the man would likely live, but her husband had decided to drive the carriage himself and leave the driver to rest on the remainder of the trip.

Privately, Mia thought her husband might just wish to keep guard himself.

"I'm fine, Miss, the bumps..."

Cade had the carriage going at a good clip. "I'm sorry. I can ask him to slow—"

"Don't even think it. We all need to get back home as quickly as possible."

Home. She could hardly wait.

The carriage took a steep turn at a good clip and both she and the driver slid to the side, the driver grunting in pain while Mia winced. Poor man.

“We’re here,” he said on a large exhale, relief filling his voice.

“Thank goodness,” she said, her own voice catching. She’d been so frightened as bullets had been flying. What if something happened to Cade? She hadn’t even told him how she felt.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and not a moment later, the door flew open. “Mia.”

She pushed up and stumbled toward Cade’s voice, his arms finding her waist and hauling her to his chest.

She’d barely had a moment to settle when he swung her up into his arms before sprinting up the stairs and into the house. “Gather every footman,” he bellowed. “And get the driver. He’s injured.”

“My goodness,” Mrs. Grafton said. “It’s been endless excitement these days.”

Mia pressed her face into Cade’s shoulder, hiding a smile. She had to agree. She’d half expected Cade to set her down but he kept going, up the stairs and into her room. Only then did he set her on her feet. “Stay here,” he ordered, kissing her forehead. “I’ll be back in just a few minutes.”

“All right,” she answered, having no desire to contradict him. She’d never been so happy to be safely tucked into her room.

Cade left, leaving her to fumble toward the grate, where only a few embers burned. She did her best to add a few logs,

but she'd hardly had to time to assess her work when the door opened again.

Cade crossed the room and silently adjusted the wood so that within moments, flames licked up the side, casting more heat and enough glow that she could make out some hazy outlines.

She opened her mouth to say something to her husband. Anything. She just had to start talking so the rest of the words would come out.

Thank you for saving my life. I'll love you for as long as I live. But before she mumbled a word, his mouth was covering hers.

The kiss was hard and commanding, his arms bands of iron about her. She'd never felt more safe.

When he finally lifted his head, his breath was ragged as he whispered. "Promise to never leave me again."

"I promise."

"Good."

She worked her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. "Will you promise to sleep in bed with me? I don't like it when you're not there."

"I can certainly promise that."

"And do you promise..." She took a breath, knowing it was time to start asking for what she wished. It was time to put that scared little girl where she belonged—in her past. "Not to leave for London without me?"

He made a noise deep in his throat before he kissed her again. "I promise."

The air rushed from her lungs. "Good. Because I think I might die from a broken heart if you do."

"Would you?" and then he was lifting her off the ground. "A broken heart?"

"I love you, Cade Kingsley."

"I love you too," he answered. "So much."

Her heart swelled in her chest. "No more secrets?"

"No more." He lightly set her down again, and then turned her around. "Ask anything and I shall tell you. For example, do you wish to know what kind of man I am? My uncle was the man who tried to kidnap a duchess. My father was a drunk and a debaucher." In clipped words he told her about how he'd been consumed with the desire to erase his uncle's past, make Upton suffer. How he'd planned and plotted until... "I'm afraid I'm exactly like them."

"You are not like either of them," she said, spinning about to hold his face in her hands. He needed to understand. "You are my hero."

"Hero..." he whispered against her neck. "Is that right?"

"You chose to work with the duke today, instead of against him," she said quickly, the words pouring out of her. "You chose to save me today instead of chase revenge. That's what a good man does."

She felt the understanding that rippled through him. “I did. And then very quickly was offered a partnership and a path to claiming the marquessate.”

“You’re a better man than either of them might ever have dreamed,” she said against his mouth now, their voices and breaths mingling together. “I’ve felt you from the first moment I met you. I would have never trusted you if I didn’t feel goodness.”

“Goodness.” He held her tightly for a moment before he let her go again. “Turn around, I need to take this dress off.”

“Now?”

“It’s divine. I’d like to preserve it if I can. I might be good, but when it comes to my wife, I am still a lustful beast.”

She laughed at that, turning so he might undo the row of tiny buttons. “I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Good. Because I’m about to devour you.”

Her breath caught as her body lit on fire. She could hardly wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DRESS CAME OFF CAREFULLY, Cade clearly wishing to preserve the garment, but the rest of her clothing landed in a frantic heap on the floor.

And his clothes... Cade ripped more than one item off his body.

When the seams of his shirt gave, Mia let out a giggle. “I’m a much better sculptor than I am a seamstress.”

Cade shucked first one boot and then the other. “I have a valet. I don’t need you to sew.”

He watched her curl into herself as she stood next to the bed. “Will you always feel that way?”

“What?” He stopped yanking on his breeches long enough to look up into her worried features.

“I promised myself to stop shying away from the hard questions, so here is the one I have to ask. My lack of sight...it makes me less effective as your wife. I worry you’ll grow tired of me—”

“I will never grow tired of you.” He stood then, wrapping her in his arms.

“You might,” she answered worrying her lip as she brought her hands to his biceps. “I will always need extra care. I...”

“Why is this coming up now?”

“Because...” She swallowed. “It didn’t matter so much when this was a temporary arrangement, but now...”

He suddenly understood. “Listen to me. You are doing something far more valuable than sewing my ripped seams. You are teaching me to be a better man. You’ve given me direction, purpose, and a clear goal—to protect you. My life will be serving yours. Do you understand?”

“I...” Her breath came out broken and wispy. “You can’t mean that.”

“I mean every word.”

He still wore his breeches and stockings. Taking a quick step back, he yanked at the falls, sending buttons to the floor.

“Your valet is certainly going to dislike me. That’s the second time—”

But the moment the fabric had made it down his hips, he had her back in his arms. Lifting her, they crashed onto the bed, her legs wrapping about him.

He was inside her before their lips had even come together and they both cried out in satisfaction.

Rolling her onto her back, he pumped in and out of her, setting a pace that had them both breathlessly climbing the heights of passion.

Mia's fingers dug into his back, her back arched so that their hips came together. Once again, words cascaded from her mouth, cries of love and passion, commitment and joy, and he took every one of them into his heart.

This was the woman he loved. The one with whom he planned to spend the rest of his life. He held her forever in his arms, and he was never letting go.

They climaxed together, their cries only drowned out by the beating of Cade's heart. Made stronger by the love they shared.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER, the eve of Christmastide...

MIA AND ANNA sat to one side of the music room, softly speaking as Cade and Rath stared at the chess board on the table between them.

All about them, candles glowed and decorative greens draped across the mantels and dangled from the doors.

Not that Cade paid the festivities much mind. As usual, he and the duke were in a deadlock.

“Your move,” Upton said, managing to sound both irritated and bored at the same time.

The tactic had irritated Cade before, but now that he was in business with the man, it was a devilishly useful skill. Men began talking when Upton levelled them with his hostile indifference and all sorts of valuable information bubbled out of their mouths.

The gaming hells had made Cade money like he’d never dreamed. No wonder his uncle had wanted them so badly.

But Cade had learned a lesson this past year that his uncle and his father had never managed. Working with people, with good intentions in your heart, brought good into your life.

The only exception had been Mia's father. He'd had nothing but bad intentions in mind when he'd given that man a few hard slaps across the face. He deserved far worse, but Mia had made Cade promise he'd not hit her father again. She was truly good.

Cade made his move, knowing that in this game, he was gaining the upper hand. "Tell me the truth," he said, low enough to not be overheard by the women. "Why did you really press me to court Mia?"

Upton's gaze flicked up from the board and then over at the women before he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "I didn't think I was worth much before Anna."

That sounded familiar.

"But when she came into my life, the attraction I felt, the good she brought..." Upton looked down at the board. "I needed to have a reason to find the light. She is that reason."

"The light?" Cade asked, sensing that the answer was going to be much deeper than he'd ever imagined.

"For a man to find the good in life, he has to have something good for which to fight. Anna taught me that, and that's why I helped you find Mia." The duke met his gaze again. "From the moment you looked at her, I could see the raw want in your eyes. That's the pull that will save a man when it's directed at a woman like her."

Cade's eyes widened in surprise. Mia had brought so much into his life. "You are jesting. You didn't think she'd be the great love of my life that would turn everything around."

"Didn't I?" Upton asked, using that damned tone again.

Cade sat forward too, giving his friend a hard glare. "When I soundly thrash you, you're going to tell me the truth."

Upton chuckled. "I already did, but we've more important subjects to discuss."

"More important than the trajectory of my life?"

Upton chuckled. "I've news on Northville and Gyla."

Cade forgot about the game as he shifted forward in his seat. "I'm riveted. Tell me everything."

But Mia chose that exact moment to stand and stretch.

Cade's gaze instantly swung to her, his eyes levelling on her slightly rounded stomach. To most, it wasn't noticeable at all, but he knew come this spring, their family would be growing by one.

He rose from his chair and Upton chuckled. "You're riveted, all right. But not by my story."

He tossed a glare at Upton as he walked to Mia's side. "All right, my love?"

"Good. Just tired. I think I'll lie down."

Lying down next to Mia was his favorite. "I'll join you."

"What about my story?" Upton called with another laugh. "And our game. You're going to abandon a win?"

“It can wait,” he said, wrapping an arm about her waist.

Mia laughed too. “You don’t wish to finish?”

He grazed her temple with his lips. “Upton will thank you. It was embarrassing how badly he was about to lose.”

“You exaggerate,” Upton answered, but he’d already taken his spot next to Anna. “But Mia is right. Best to retire.”

SIGH! Cade and Mia stole my heart and I’m a bit sad their story is done... But don’t worry. Northville is up next, and boy, is he going to be a challenge to tame. That man has been hunting criminals for the crown for a long time and he’s fairly certain there isn’t a bit of softness left. Find out how he falls in *A Vendetta with a Viscount!*

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A VENGEFUL VISCOUNT

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Tammy Andresen

“I’VE JUST MADE a deal with the devil...”

NELLIE WAS the sort of good that other mothers liked to use as an example. Not hers, of course.

BUT WHEN AN ILLNESS ravages her lungs and she's not sure how she'll ever lead a normal life, or how long she'll even be alive, she decides it's time to really live, her mother be damned. Or perhaps, that's Nellie herself.

BECAUSE THE MOMENT Viscount Northville enters her life, tempted doesn't begin to describe how she feels. He is everything that Nellie is not. Older, mysterious, handsome as sin, and he hides the sorts of secrets that give her the chills.

WHICH MAKES HIM PERFECT. Why shouldn't she taste what is deliciously dark and dangerous before she steps into the light?

BUT THE PROBLEM with making a deal with the devil is that there is always a price to be paid.

THE QUESTION IS ONLY how much...

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Lords of Temptation

Tammy Andresen

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PROLOGUE

THE HOOVES of Ran's horse pounded underneath him as the animal blew another snorting breath. The poor beast was likely exhausted, the entire night had been a race. One, win or lose, Ran was determined to see through to the bitter end.

Ran was on the hunt and after ten long years, he'd finally cornered his prey. This time, the villain Gyla was not getting away.

Catching this man was his life's work, and he was so close, he could taste the victory.

Ran, the second son of a viscount. His father had purchased a commission for him within the British Armed Forces at the age of eighteen. His elder brother, from his father's first marriage, was well trained for the title and Ran was considered unlikely to ever hold the seat. Which had suited him just fine.

He was a man of action. Always had been.

His half-brother was already married and expecting his first child, so it was natural for Ran to be placed in another role.

And so Ran had thrown himself whole heartedly into the position of an officer and found that he liked the purpose and structure of military life. But even more than that, he enjoyed teasing out secrets. Utilizing his intellect and his cunning nature to hunt down villains against the crown. And he didn't mind a fair bit of danger either.

Which was how he'd managed, over the next few years, to become one of the King's top spies. Placed on the trail of an eastern count, Ran understood the importance of the case.

The east had been infiltrating English businesses and English land. Suspicion among the people was high and Gyla, one of the worst offenders, would be a major victory for the crown and for the people. But only if Ran could apprehend him.

He'd been about to catch the man too, when two years prior the unthinkable happened. His brother had died.

And worse still, he'd never managed to have a son that might take over as viscount. Instead, his older brother had fathered two daughters, leaving Ran to do the job himself.

He'd tried to settle into the viscounty. But he'd left his first job undone, one of the upmost importance. Ran had never been a man who left anything unfinished.

He should be the man who hunted and caught Gyla.

The crown had refused his request to be put back on the case. His role was now as a member of the peerage, and his first duty would be creating a male heir.

And so Ran had seen his nieces settled, ill content but resigned to life in the countryside. He'd have to marry, father a son, settle into domesticity. The idea rankled, ill fitted like another man's boots. But then, a most miraculous event had occurred.

His neighbor, Lord Smith, had confessed that Gyla, the very man Northville had spent eight years of his life trying to capture, had attempted to take the other man's London based business.

Ran saw this for the opportunity it was, a second chance to catch the criminal he'd spent years chasing.

He'd not hesitated.

This second hunt had taken him across Europe, and now to the far reaches of England in Cumberland. And for once, Ran knew exactly why the villain was here. Ran's associate, the Duke of Upton had killed Gyla's partner, the Marquess of Kingsley. Gyla surely had come for revenge.

Upton and his wife were currently attending the Westmoreland's Winter Gala, which was the perfect spot for Upton to be taken unawares by the villain.

Ran was so close. Once he captured Gyla, he could consider his military work complete and then...

That was a worry for later.

Right now, he scented the prey. He kicked his horse faster.

Northville was about to get his man...

CHAPTER 1

Nellie sat quietly next to her mother, giving the dancers at the Westmoreland's Winter Gala a longing stare as they swirled by her seat along the edge of the ballroom. She missed dancing.

It was one of the sanctioned events for cultured ladies that she truly enjoyed, and she'd missed the activity greatly this past year.

She supposed she'd missed a great deal this past year, and if the doctors were correct, she'd miss a great deal more of life.

Most of it, in fact.

"Darling," her mother whispered, her voice brittle. "Sit up straight. A distinguished gentleman approaches."

A gentleman? What did it matter? She wasn't likely to marry no matter what her mother wished. An infection of the lungs had left her far too weak to ever have children and according to the doctors, the ailment only grew worse, the coughing fits increasing.

She'd overheard them tell her mother that Nellie was unlikely to survive the winter.

Nellie secretly thought that if she were dying anyway, she might as well do as she wished. Walk outside, smell flowers, flirt with men...maybe even more than innocent flirting.

But her mother would never allow any of that behavior.

The baroness had always prided herself on being the perfect lady and she'd expected nothing less from her daughter. And with Nellie's father gone, it was as though her mother had become manic about accomplishing her greatest goal. Seeing Nellie well matched.

Nellie had always been expected to excel at every feminine pursuit, from embroidery to pianoforte, to dancing, that was until she became ill. And Nellie had always applied herself to pleasing. But now the pursuit seemed so pointless...

Her mother rose, signaling for Nellie to do the same. She did, glad for even the smallest bit of movement, but also confused. Normally, her mother kept Nellie as still as possible.

Her mother dipped into a curtsey as their hostess introduced the Count of something or other, Nellie wasn't really listening.

She didn't see why she had to keep up a pretense of a perfect debutante or of courting for that matter.

Did her mother think the doctor wrong? Unlikely, her mother had always had an unfailing faith in men of power and position.

"Lord Gyla," her mother gushed. "We are thrilled to make your acquaintance."

An elbow to her side alerted Nellie her attention was required.

“May I introduce you to my daughter, Miss Eleanor Highgrove.”

Nellie sank into a curtsey, her gaze casting down before she looked up into the man’s face. A shiver, and not a good one, ran through her. His dark hair was slicked back and pulled tight to his head. Lord Gyla’s nose was hawkish, and his eyes had the penetrating feel of a snake’s.

Her gaze cast down to the floor once again. “A pleasure, my lord.”

“The pleasure is mine.” She felt his appraising stare, his gaze touching her skin until she wished to shrink in on herself to avoid the look.

The conversation continued about her, her mother artfully extolling her virtues in a such a way that Nellie understood Lord Gyla was a man being considered for her hand. Why?

Her lips pressed closed as she half listened. Didn’t it matter to her mother that she didn’t wish to wed and certainly not to this man? But she remained silent.

“Miss Highgrove.” Gyla stepped closer to her. “I must admire the embroidery upon the neckline of your dress. It’s divine.” His English was excellent, though his voice was still thick with an accent as his gaze narrowed in on her chest.

She brought her shoulders down, curling in on herself in an attempt to appear smaller, her hand coming up to cover any cleavage her gown might have placed on display.

But she was spared speaking, her mother talking for her. “She did the work herself. Her skill is exceptional.”

Nellie cringed, hating the words. Would they put that on the stone above her grave? *Here lies a girl who could embroider exceptionally well.*

She turned her face toward the dancers, watching the swirl of twirling colors pass her by.

“Of course, she would,” her mother gushed, and Nellie’s chin snapped toward her mother once again. Drat, she shouldn’t have drifted from the conversation again.

Gyla gave a bow, his eyes holding hers as she dipped into another curtsey.

“This is it,” her mother whispered, pushing Nellie forward.

“This is what?”

“Your opportunity,” her mother huffed, her hand growing more insistent.

She frowned, not liking those words one bit. “My opportunity for what?”

Her mother let out a long breath of air, her eyes casting up to the ceiling. “He’s offered to take you for a turnabout the ballroom, my dear. Off you go.”

Nellie blinked at her mother, at a loss for words. Under normal circumstances her mother hardly allowed her to move, let alone go for a stroll. For months she’d been so still, she’d almost forgotten what it felt like to walk with any purpose.

What if she had an attack of the lungs?

Cold dread washed over her, both at the idea of being alone with this man, and at what might happen if she exerted herself.

But with a nudge from her mother, she accepted his arm, swallowing down a lump as they began to move about the edge of the room.

Apparently, the only thing her mother was more afraid of than her lungs failing was of Nellie dying without a husband.

They moved slowly staying in the shadows of the candles, both a relief to Nellie. She didn't much wish to be seen and the pace kept her breathing even.

"Are you feeling well?" He finally spoke, breaking the silence between them.

"Fine," she answered, looking at him and then quickly glancing away again. There was something so harsh about his face or his expression. It disconcerted her.

"Your mother claims you've been ill."

Her mouth opened and then closed. Her mother had mentioned that? She really should have been listening more closely to their opening discussion. "I am feeling better. I..." What was she doing? Why would she attempt to console this man about her health and by extension, her marriageability? She had to stop doing such things. Her mother wasn't even here to appease.

"It's all right." He gave her a smile that made him look even less likable and more sinister and she found herself pulling away a bit to try and put some measure of distance

between them. He didn't seem to notice as he continued. "I have a problem. You have a problem. We might be able to help one another."

"You can help me with weak lungs?" she asked completely perplexed. And what problem did he need solved?

His gaze narrowed, the smile disappearing. His expression turned sour and annoyed as a deep crease appeared between his brows. "No. I can help you with your marriage prospects."

They'd reach the doors that led to the veranda, the cool night air wafting in. She slowed, not wishing to step outside with this man. Did she ask him about his issue, make sure he understood she had no intention of marrying? Especially not him.

Indecision made her pause, her gaze straying off into the darkness as she attempted to decide. But her gaze caught a figure in the darkness. Standing just outside, his eyes pierced into hers.

She gasped, her hand dropping from Gyla's arm to cover her mouth. Several details tried to register at the same moment creating a haze in her thoughts that she attempted to sort.

Slowly, details came into focus.

The man outside wasn't wearing formal attire, he didn't look like a guest at all. And yet his stance so tall and straight, his legs wide and strong, his whole bearing distinguished enough that he still looked as though he belonged.

And lord above, he was handsome. A square chiseled jaw framed sharp cheekbones and dark piercing eyes. The kind

that might make a girl wonder just how it would feel to be bad. To allow herself to become swept away by desire rather than laden down with duty.

Gyla heard her gasp and his eyes followed hers. Every one of his muscles tightened. "I must go," he whispered harshly and then before she could murmur another word, Gyla was gone, leaving her standing alone.

Well, not completely alone.

Because the mystery man moved, and it was clear that he was coming right for her.

Ran had a moment of indecision.

Not only was Gyla here, just as Ran had suspected, he was escorting a young woman about the ballroom. Like he hadn't just tried to kill one of Ran's associates and his wife.

He walked toward the doors, Gyla disappearing into the crowd.

Damn it all to bloody hell. He could go in and search for the man, but he wasn't dressed for it, and it was sure to cause a scene. Which was far more attention than he wanted. A proper spy blended in...they did not make a spectacle of themselves.

Still, he needed to warn the Duke of Upton that Gyla was here.

He yanked off his bowler and ran a frustrated hand through his hair. The young woman, whoever she was, continued to

stare at him through the glass door.

Placing his hat back on his head, he made a decision and approached. Opening the door, he held her gaze. Blast, she was pretty.

More than pretty, her thick blonde hair was barely contained by the pins that held it in an elaborate coif.

Her eyes were large and, even in the dim light, he could see that they were a bright shade of blue.

Full lush lips were softly parted as she continued to stare, her hands pressing to her stomach.

Which only highlighted her ample round breasts and the hint of cleavage above.

His jaw hardened as he stopped in the doorway. He glanced about to see if anyone had noticed him.

“Excuse me, miss.” He met her gaze again. “May I have a word?”

She gave her head a soft shake. “I don’t think so.”

His brows lifted. Smart. “I need to tell you that your escort...”

Her head turned about, her gaze sweeping over the crowd. “Are you here for him?”

He didn’t answer. He was supposed to be getting information from her, not the other way around.

“Odd that he just left me when he saw you.” She looked back at him again. “Is he trouble or are you?”

The question took him so completely off guard, that for a moment, he just stared. Why couldn't she have been a normal giggling girl who blushed at his attention? He gave his head a small shake. At least they were getting to the heart of the entire situation very quickly. Made this conversation much easier. "He is."

"Interesting." She took the smallest step closer then. "He's rather loathsome, but I suppose marrying a criminal would help me accomplish some of my goals."

Marriage? This was getting interesting. "Explain."

She cocked her head. "I don't think so."

Bloody hell, this woman was irritating to say the least. "I need—"

"To introduce yourself, sir. We are strangers after all."

Introduce himself? His jaw tightened. Spies did not go around just revealing their identity and neither did viscounts, though he should have considered that before he'd spoken to her at all. "No."

Her brows lifted and then she took a decided step back. "If you change your mind, my mother is Baroness Highgrove and our calling hours begin at eleven. Not tomorrow, of course, since it's the holiday, but any day after." Then she turned, and in the most unhurried fashion, melted into the crowd, leaving him to stare after her.

Had he just been played by a young debutante? He believed that he had.

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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.

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Laird of Longing

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Marquess of Diamonds

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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

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His White Wager

Her White Wedding

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When only an Indecent Duke Will Do

How to Catch an Elusive Earl

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When a Marauding Marquess is Best

What a Vulgar Viscount Needs

Who Wants a Brawling Baron

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Too Wicked to Woo

Too Wicked to Wed

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Wicked Lords of London

Earl of Sussex

My Duke's Seduction

My Duke's Deception

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