



A DUKE, LOVE
AND SUNSHINE

MULTI-AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
TABETHA WAITE

A DUKE, LOVE AND SUNSHINE

#1 Seaside Society of Spinsters Series

BY

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TABETHA WAITE



CONTENTS

[Sign up!](#)

[Also by Tabetha Waite](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also by Tabetha Waite](#)

[About Tabetha Waite](#)

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ALSO BY TABETHA WAITE



The Seaside Society of Spinsters Series

In a world where dreams dance upon the shore, the Seaside Society emerged as a sanctuary for fiery, independent women yearning to turn their aspirations into reality. These ladies are aiming to kick society's rulebook to the curb and rewrite their own stories. Iona, Tassandra, and Vanessa, far from mere pretty faces, embody the relentless spirit of determination.

#1 A Duke, Love & Sunshine

#2 Between the Rogue and the Deep Blue Sea

#3 Drawing Hearts in the Sand

For my BFF, Lesha Beth. My roller skating, '70s-music-loving friend for the past twenty-something years. (As if I would admit our age!) Love you forever. You are my true sister. And for Pete Smith—my friend in the UK who inspired me with one of his favorite holiday towns.

PROLOGUE



Burnham-on-Sea, England

March 10, 1816

“**W**e’ve done it, Alexandria. At long last, our dream has come to fruition.”

To the casual onlooker, they were two middle-aged women standing in front of a building that looked like any other on the strand. A line of connecting, three-story houses were situated near the crashing waves of the beach. To Miss Alexandria Grantham and Miss Josephine Stratford, the unassuming mahogany door before them meant so much more. They clasped their hands tightly together because they had accomplished what no one thought they could do. As two spinsters, they had struggled and fought against the demands of their sex and their families, to see the sign proclaiming their achievement—The Seaside Society.

But this wasn’t just any establishment. It was a boarding house specifically for spinsters who wanted to make a name for themselves without the strictures placed upon them by society—but most importantly, by men. It was a way for single women to safely express themselves without fear of being cast out of their home. For many, like Alexandria and Josephine, their parents had long disapproved of their forward thinking. But no longer would they have to bow down to anyone. They had secured the necessary funding to finally start accepting tenants.

It truly was a lovely day.

Josephine glanced at Alexandria, and even though her brown hair was starting to show the signs of her age, along with the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, she was still as exuberant as any debutante fresh from the schoolroom. She had been the one to carry their hope when Josephine had become discouraged by one more door slammed in their face.

The reason they had succeeded now was mainly due to the patronage of Lady Eloise Lafontaine, the wife of the late Comte Beauvais, a French peer who had left her extremely wealthy. After his passing, Lady Beauvais had sided with the English during the war with Napoleon due to her late husband's ties to the monarchy. However, because of her loyalty to the British, she had been cast out of her extravagant manor on the outskirts of Paris by her husband's heirs and decided to make her home in the seaside village of Burnham-on-Sea. She had told Josephine that she chose the area because she saw promise in the flourishing fishing village and decided that it should become a popular resort. Perhaps even more so than Brighton or Bath. With that thought in mind, she had set about doing her best to bring in new interests to build up the town.

Thus far, she had done remarkably well. Restaurants and hotels were starting to appear along the strand, as well as fashionable homes such as the one Josephine and Alexandria had secured with Lady Beauvais's blessing. They had assisted her through most of the travails the lady had faced as a Frenchwoman living in England, who were still bitter toward some of the "frogs" that had followed Napoleon's rule. The problem was that these people believed that Lady Beauvais was just another traitor. Josephine and Alexandria had been there during these trying times, and together, they had finally found a way for some of their fellow peers to put aside their biased opinions and concentrate on the betterment of a fellow British community. It certainly didn't hurt matters that after making a trip to London to speak to the Prince Regent, he had taken a particular fancy to Lady Beauvais and her timeless, dark beauty, so she now had the backing of a very important benefactor. Now, no one dared to question her.

“Shall you do the honor, or should I?” Alexandria asked with bright brown eyes. Her smile was broad as she dangled the key in front of Josephine’s face, the temptation much like a carrot to a horse.

Josephine told herself that she should allow Alexandria the honor, but she couldn’t resist snatching the metal out of her companion’s hand. “Give it to me.” Rather than being irritated, Alexandria laughed as Josephine unlocked the door and took their first look inside No. 42 Place, the structure that was now their home.

Lady Beauvais had forbidden them any sort of glance inside as she had it decorated. As Josephine glanced around in awe, noticing that Alexandria was doing the same, they reached out and gave each other a joyous hug. When they separated, they both had tears in their eyes.

“It’s glorious,” Alexandria breathed.

“Indeed, it is,” Josephine concurred. Polished hardwood floors were laid throughout, and each room they entered boasted rich, velvet furnishings. From the drapes that covered the large windows to the furniture meant for comfort, it was all decorated in the same deep shades that paid homage to King Louis Philippe. Tables were rounded with curved edges, and touches of gold shimmered throughout, from the candlesticks on the marble mantel to the clocks and gilt-edged frames. The paintings were serene, neoclassical pieces that depicted French culture before the Revolution when everything had changed forever.

Josephine could feel the hand of Lady Beauvais in this place. Not only was it humbling to remember who had given them this chance at helping others, but Lady Beauvais had no further ties to her homeland, and her love for France was evident in this place.

“We shall have to do something special for Lady Beauvais for such a gift as this,” Alexandria breathed.

Josephine considered that, then she turned to her companion. “I think the best way we can honor her is to do what we promised. Lady Beauvais is like us. Although she

carries more weight with the status of a widow, she has to contend with her heritage and the gossip of being the Regent's mistress. Her situation is still precarious, as is ours. We must draw from that strength and prove that we are worthy of such an endeavor."

"You are right." Alexandria reached out for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We shall be the best Society that perhaps even London has yet to see."

Josephine smiled. "How I do like the sound of that."

CHAPTER I



May 17, 1816

Miss Iona Richards sat at her modest writing table in the second story of the boarding house at Burnham-on-Sea as her quill scratched across the large sheet of paper before her. Nearby, in a large vase, rather than holding an array of colorful flowers, several rolled-up sheets of parchment rose beneath the rim. They were all various sketches of garden designs that she had completed. A talent that her parents had wholly despised. As a good girl of breeding, such women should not be involved in trade, which was what Iona had long hoped to accomplish. Tired of watercolors and needlepoint, she wanted to make her mark upon the world with her own designs. Ever since she was a child, she had admired the works of Lancelot “Capability” Brown, who was credited for designing some of the most extravagant landscapes and pleasure gardens in all of England. His looked-upon successor, Humphry Repton, had a reputation all his own, although his designs weren’t quite on the same, massive scale.

Now, it was her turn.

After a serious carriage accident had left Mr. Repton without the full use of his mobility, reliant on a wheelchair most of the time, Iona had tried to break out into this world of landscape architecture reserved solely for men of character. It didn’t matter if she carried the same unblemished reputation. She was a female and beneath the notice of most. Of *all*, really.

Her tireless efforts in London had been ignored. Her parents had finally threatened to toss her out on her own if she didn't cease such "foolish endeavors" and concentrate her energies on finding a suitable husband.

That was when providence had finally appeared, and Iona had come across an advertisement at a ladies' salon regarding a boarding house specifically for spinsters wishing to break free from the strictures of society. It was as if the gates of heaven had opened up, and the angels had finally shone down upon her.

The problem was finding the necessary funds to travel all the way to Somerset on the coast. Making her way to Burnham-on-Sea was a cost that would be more than Iona could afford.

Or so she believed.

On a whim, she had written to the ladies of the boarding house with a request to join their Seaside Society. A few days later, she had been sent a reply with a warm welcome and the necessary funds to travel on the mail coach. She had nearly squealed with delight when she'd read the missive in the foyer, but Iona had just managed to silence her enthusiasm so the butler wouldn't give her one of his dour, disapproving expressions that resembled that of her father quite perfectly.

The next day, and past the age of majority at five and twenty, Iona had informed her parents that she was leaving and would not return. She prayed that, when she'd walked out the door amidst her father's demands and her mother's weeping cries of ruination, they would someday be happy for her decision in following her true heart's desire that, regrettably, didn't lead to a man.

"You're making a mistake," her mother said between the tears. "No one will have you after this rebellious display."

"Your mother is right," her father added stoically. He wasn't in the habit of hysterics like her mother, but his cool demeanor was nearly worse. "I will not plead with you, but neither will I condone this decision. Once you leave this house, don't expect any charity from me."

Iona's chest still ached at the memory of that day.

In the letter, Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham had promised they would help her to secure her first job, and they would not charge full room and board until she had gained her footing. They claimed to have a firm ear in the seaside village, and as Iona made the harrowing journey there, she couldn't help but hope that was true.

She started to doze as she neared her destination. Earlier, she had been hesitant to do so, not entirely trusting that her questionable traveling companions wouldn't steal her valise straight from her lap. Once she was alone, exhaustion had finally started to settle in and made her head bob. It wasn't until the carriage had lurched slightly that she started, and her eyes widened once more.

However, when she had glanced out the window and saw the endless span of golden beaches laid out before her, she couldn't contain a gasp. Her mouth had gone slack as she realized this was to be her new home. It had taken a moment for that to sink in, and the ideas for gardens to match their surroundings had started to swirl about in her mind.

Now, sitting at her writing desk, a full week after she'd arrived, she continued to work tirelessly on various sketches to show any prospective clients that Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham might procure for her. Thus far, their efforts had not proven to be very fruitful, but they assured her that the right one would come along, and the wait would be worth it.

Iona wasn't quite as confident, but in the interim, in case they were correct, she intended to do her best to be prepared. She would ensure that the ladies' generosity would not be in vain, thus far. With any luck, their hospitality would be rewarded by Iona's success in proving her worth. The thought of getting to transform a plain yard into something spectacular was thrilling. The best thing she might have ever imagined for her future. Some women might dream of a contented life as a wife and mother, but Iona wanted to design magnificent creations that would be admired for those same generations. It was her way of making her mark upon time, so that women could be meant for more than a figure in a nice dress.

Iona glanced down at the simple brown attire that she wore. She had never been one to have the latest fashion or frippery. If she were to be toiling in someone's garden, transforming it as God intended it to be, then she didn't need to concern herself with getting dirt on something that had cost nearly as much as a servant's monthly wages.

A knock at her door had her crossing the floor to answer the summons. She opened it to reveal the warm smile of Miss Stratford. With her faded red hair and sparkling green eyes, no one would have imagined that she was more than sixty years of age. But her exuberance with each of her tenants was evident, just as that of her cohort, Miss Grantham.

Iona had met the other three women who were in residence, all in various stages of spinsterhood, and she decided that she was probably the youngest of them all. At mealtime, they would all dine together unless there was a previous engagement. So far, that had only been an issue for Miss Tassandra Devenport, who was already flourishing when it came to her personal independence. A native of Cardiff, which lay just beyond the Bristol Channel in Wales, she was carrying on the fishing tradition passed down by her great-grandfather. In the weeks since Iona had arrived, "Tassy" had flaunted social convention by leaving her brown hair unbound and wearing men's breeches. She also didn't mind a bit of sun upon her skin or a smattering of freckles crossing the bridge of her nose. Iona hadn't asked her age, but she decided that Tassy was closest in age to her.

The other two women kept to themselves for the most part. The night Iona had arrived, her hostesses had them all introduce themselves to her, and tell what they hoped to gain by being a part of the Seaside Society. "We can only help ourselves by helping others," Miss Grantham had said pertly.

Tassy had been the first to pipe up, while Iona had followed a bit more sedately. The other two ladies, Millie and Rose, had offered their prospective hopes. It turned out that they had come from the same village, which is why, Iona decided, that they generally seemed to keep to themselves. They felt more comfortable together. It was their dream to

open their own seamstress shop and offer premade gowns at affordable prices to those who couldn't visit a modiste. Iona had commended their foresight and decided that it sounded like a shop she would love to frequent if they managed to secure the proper funding.

"I am confident that all of you are well suited to your positions, which is why you received an invitation to join the Society. Together, with the assistance of our benefactor, I feel confident that we can soon make those dreams a reality," Miss Stratford had said with a broad grin.

Iona didn't doubt the ladies' power of persuasion, even when it came to a modest house of spinsters, but some positions were difficult to obtain, even for someone of their prowess.

However, she soon found out how wrong she had been to ever doubt them.

"I have some wonderful news," Miss Stratford said. "I have shown your drawings to a nearby client, and he is most interested in hearing more."

Iona's ears had instantly perked up, but then she recalled one crucial detail. "Does he know I'm a woman?"

The smile never wavered. "He does not, but I am convinced that it shouldn't matter. He seemed quite taken with your various prospects."

Iona wasn't so sure, but she allowed it to slide for the time. When she met this gentleman in person, no doubt he would tell her his reasons for not hiring her. For now, she would appreciate the lady's efforts in trying to lift her spirits, which had started to flag. "He is a very prestigious man in society, and if you were to secure his gardens, you are sure to have a claim to fame."

Intrigued despite her misgivings, Iona asked, "Who is it?"

"Thorpe Covington, the Duke of Rosewood."

Immediately, her spirits were remarkably restored. "Surely you aren't speaking of *the* Rosewood Manor?" She nearly stumbled at the very thought of designing such a remarkable

estate. She had heard of it, of course. It had been one of Capability's masterpieces, but when the previous duke had gambled away most of his funds, he had allowed it to fall into decline. It was only through the recent efforts of his grandson, his heir, that the ducal fortune had been restored and vast improvements were being made to the estate and grounds. While Iona didn't follow social gossip as a rule, if there was the prospect of landscaping to be found, she paid close attention.

"Not precisely," her companion said, and some of the wind fell out of Iona's sails. "The estate lies near London, but the duke holds a charming cottage in Somerset, not far from Burnham-on-Sea. I am given to understand he is looking for someone of note to begin there, to see what can be done to revive it before they are given any further prospects." The lady smiled gently. "Even I cannot work miracles, my dear. Remember that we all must start somewhere. Rome was not built in a day. To gain a job like Rosewood Manor, you have to earn his respect."

Iona knew that the lady was right, and yet, she could feel some of her hope dim. Nevertheless, she squared her shoulders and said, "That may prove to be just as impossible, but I vow to do my best to convince him that I am the only one for him."

Miss Stratford patted her on the cheek in a motherly gesture. "That is all I needed to hear."



Thorpe Covington, the Duke of Rosewood, had the sketch of the garden plan laid out before him on the desk in his study. He adjusted his glasses and stared at it with a critical eye, but it didn't take a scholar to tell him that this drawing was a work of art. Considering all the designs he'd poured over in the past few days since he'd opened up Highbridge Cottage with the intent to restore it to its former glory, this particular one had caught his special interest. Since he was determined to revive the Rosewood title in the same manner, he wanted the grounds to not just be impressive. He wanted them to be resplendent.

He'd already started work on the exterior with fresh paint, and soon repairs would begin on the roof. Then he would concentrate his energies on the wallpaper, upholstery, and carpeting that were faded and horribly out-of-date.

Thankfully, money was no object. He had spent most of his youth studying various ways of turning a profit by poring over the ledgers that had been neglected by his father and his grandfather before him. They had both been carousing rakes in their day and cared more for drink and women than preserving their heritage. Thorpe was different. He had excelled at Harrow and then Oxford, taking a particular interest in history. Although horticulture was a foreign subject to him, he had to give credit where it was due, and the drawings he'd been sent by Lady Beauvais had been quite impressive. He was anxious to meet this paragon, who had such a keen eye when it came to the observation that had nearly been lost. Once Humphry Repton was gone, there would surely not be anyone as talented to carry on the landscape art—except, perhaps, for this man.

Anticipation raced through his veins as he glanced at the clock on the mantel. The time was quickly drawing near. He was due to meet with Mr. Richards at half past one. It was a quarter past now, but unless his hearing deceived him, it sounded as if a carriage was pulling into the drive.

He nearly rubbed his hands with glee, eager to start the process of gaining back his family's unblemished reputation at long last. It had been years of hard work and study, but at two and thirty, he was finally gaining the one thing he'd ever wanted. While the previous Covington men might not be around to enjoy the fruits of his labor, Thorpe could enjoy success on his own.

It was the one vow he'd made to his ailing mother on her deathbed. He closed his eyes. *I've nearly done it.*

Exhaling slowly, he opened his gaze when there was a brief knock at the open doorframe. He spied his butler, Beckham, standing there with a hesitant expression on his face. When Thorpe waited for him to speak, he finally lost patience and waved a hand before him. "Well, what are you waiting for? Don't keep Mr. Richards waiting. Send him in."

The servant cleared his throat, and Thorpe was quite sure that he would have shifted his feet if he hadn't been so formally British. "Your Grace. I think there has been a mistake —"

"Nonsense," Thorpe interrupted. "A carriage arrived, did it not? Lady Beauvais promised that we were due to meet today and that I wouldn't be disappointed." He grinned broadly. "I daresay I have several ideas of my own I wish to impart." He waved a hand again. "Send him in."

"Your Grace—"

Thorpe was running out of patience. Although he appreciated Beckham's somber and straightlaced attitude most of the time, right now it was only starting to annoy him. "Now, if you please."

As the servant bowed and made his way out of the room, Thorpe shook his head and returned to the sketch on his desk. Although it was practically perfect, there were a couple of things that he wished to add. He was confident that, together, they could build a seaside retreat like nothing else. And if they hurdled that, then they would discuss the possibility of Rosewood Manor. Of course with that sort of project, he might have to hire him on as part of the staff in order to properly devote the full amount of time needed to restore it to what Capability Brown had conceived, and then make it even better.

Thorpe heard a set of footsteps coming toward the door. "Miss Richards, Your Grace."

With a broad grin in place, Thorpe lifted his head to welcome the gentleman graciously. "Mr. Richards! It's a pleasure—" Suddenly, the butler's words struck his mind, and when he saw a plainly dressed female who looked suited to the position of a governess, he couldn't stop the frown from forming on his face. "I do apologize. There must be some mistake—"

He looked at Beckham, intent on dismissing her, but she boldly stepped forward and gave a light curtsy. "Pardon me, Your Grace. But there is no mistake. I am the architect, *Miss Iona Richards*."

Thorpe glared at her with narrowed eyes. He didn't miss the way she stressed her title. Nor, he believed, the smug expression on her face. Whatever game was afoot, he didn't appreciate it, nor the lies that Lady Beauvais had spouted. Someone was going to gain his sharp tongue, starting perhaps with this chit before him.

Without taking his eyes off *Miss Richards*, he said, "That will be all, Beckham." The servant melted away from the room, and Thorpe could only imagine that he would not live down this absurdity very soon. Crossing his arms, he attempted a stern countenance, but by the way this female regarded him so steadily with such big, brown eyes that matched her simple attire, and that dull blonde hair peeking out from beneath her plain straw bonnet, he was sure that he would be able to dissuade her rather easily.

However, before he had the chance, she opened that pert little mouth. "Before you order me out of your house, Your Grace, might I have the courtesy of speaking plainly?"

He lifted a brow, admitting that she had a certain pluck about her. "I believe you already did," he noted dryly.

She cleared her throat. "Yes, well, I was never very good at being subtle, especially when it comes to my art." She gestured to the drawing behind him. "And since they *are* my designs, I fear I cannot allow anyone else to use them, so if you would just hand it to me, I shall be on my way to seek out more interested clients."

Damn his eyes. Thorpe blinked as he straightened. He didn't know how she had managed it, but she'd actually manipulated him. The idea that she would remove such a gift from his use was unthinkable. He held out a hand. "Let's not be hasty, Miss Richards. I—"

She was already moving around him. "I understand it might not behoove you to work with a woman, and I shall spare you the embarrassment of doing so. I know you have your reputation to think of, as do I."

He watched, mouth agape, as she easily rolled up the print on his desk. He quite nearly mourned the loss.

“I had brought other ideas with me, of course.” She patted the brown satchel hanging from her arm, and his focus riveted there as he considered all the lovely prospects that it might contain. “But I’m sure you’re not interested in hearing them in the least.” She gave a slight curtsy. “Forgive me for the deception. I’m sorry to have wasted both of our time.”

She was halfway across the room before he managed to remove his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “Miss Richards! I implore you to please wait. I would like to hear more if you are willing to remain and discuss such matters.”

CHAPTER 2



Iona's lips curved upward in a smile. Her ploy had worked rather well, more so than she had hoped, actually. It was a trick she had learned long ago when it came to evading a gentleman's attention in society. She would act the opposite of what he imagined she should, and then he would be so confused, believing that he retained the upper hand when she had turned the tables with little effort.

Removing any evidence of her current victory, she turned around with a heavy sigh. "I suppose I can spare a few moments—"

"Yes, please." His demeanor had changed dramatically, and he practically ushered her into a chair before his desk. She would have laughed had she not been so desperate for this opportunity to showcase her talent. "Would you care for some refreshment?"

"No, thank you. I doubt I shall be staying that long."

Again, she noted that he appeared almost frazzled. This was really too easy. He cleared his throat. "Indeed. Well, if you are in a rush to get somewhere, I wouldn't want to keep you."

For a moment, Iona's heart ceased beating. Perhaps she'd pushed him too far?

He leaned against the front of his desk and then gestured to her satchel and the rolled-up sheet of parchment that was sticking out of it. "I am not one to mince words, Miss

Richards. I merely want to know how you came by such a vision for a garden.”

Some of her uneasiness subsided. “I have long been a devoted fan of Mr. Brown’s work—surrounding simplicity with an eye for improving the landscape—which envelops it while making it look as though it was created by nature. Mr. Repton, as you know, was equally admired for his continuation of the same style. I intend to be just as successful by adding the original touches that they made famous, while adding a bit of the glamorous effects that were found in the peerage gardens of the past.”

She waited for the scorn that was sure to follow, but instead, he merely looked at her curiously, as if she was some sort of specimen to be studied. Perhaps it was his spectacles that made him appear the scholarly type. More likely, it was the perplexing expression on his face.

It wasn’t until that moment that she realized it actually was a very pleasing face. A sharp jawline contrasted with the soft way his black hair fell across his forehead. He pushed the unruly locks away from the rim of his glasses, making her notice that they were an unusual, mossy green. She found herself intrigued despite herself. However, she quickly pushed any sort of interest to the side. Not only was this man a *duke*, far above her station as a simple member of the gentry, but she had no designs on wedded bliss if she wished to see her dream of architecture realized.

“I daresay you are a surprise, Miss Richards,” the duke murmured.

She smiled brightly while trying not to strut like a peacock preening its feathers in the hope of attracting such a magnificent client. “I hope that is a compliment.”

“Hmm.” He lifted a brow as he continued to regard her. “I suppose that still remains to be seen.” He pushed off the desk. “I suppose the first thing we need to do is take a walk about the grounds. While having something on paper is all well and good, I will need to know what sort of vision you have for the real thing.”

She inclined her head and then got to her feet. “Lead the way, Your Grace. I’m happy to oblige.”

He lifted a sardonic brow but said nothing as they left the study.

Once they were outside, Iona was relieved to see that the sunshine continued to hold out. It would have been a shame to try to portray a pond in the misery of the pouring rain.

He went as far as the bottom of the front steps and then waved a hand to encompass the large front yard. “Dazzle me, Miss Richards.”

Iona glanced about her with a critical eye, just as she had the moment Miss Stratford’s carriage had turned into the long drive. “I would say that it is currently rather dismal. I know this is a cottage and not a grand estate, but I feel as though it should be inviting. Since you are a duke, it stands to reason that you should wish to exhibit your position and wealth.”

She glanced at him, waiting to see if there was any sort of feedback. When he instructed her to go on, she started to explain the plans that had entered her mind the moment she’d arrived. She glanced out over the expanse as if it was already there and explained her idea. “I can envision two large statuary urns to mark the entrance. And since the cottage is so picturesque, we shouldn’t wish to have anything that might hamper that view for the visitor. They will want to feel welcome and impressed upon their arrival.” She turned to him. “I think a duck pond with a circular drive and a fountain in the middle shall do quite nicely.”

He looked out over the area and then inclined his head, but she didn’t know if that meant he approved or not. He continued walking, and Iona followed suit until they had made their way to the backyard.

He crossed his arms and glanced at her expectantly.

Since this was her first look, she took a bit more time to consider her words. She walked about the yard for a moment and peered back at the cottage, trying to picture what would work best for the shaded area with its copse of trees. “It seems

a bit too dark in places for my taste. If you might wish to entertain, I would remove some of these trees back here and build a lake, perhaps with a curved stone bridge over a section of it.” She waved her hands as she spoke, like an artist creating a canvas out of thin air. “I can picture a small path lined with a neatly trimmed hedge row that leads to a glass-enclosed gazebo at the crest of a hill, with more hedge framing the entrance. From that vantage point, you can appreciate the beauty of the valley below on one side and the charm of the cottage from the other.”

Iona looked at him for approval, but rather than wearing the same pensive look from before, his eyes were riveted on her with a different sort of expression that she wasn’t even going to try to interpret. She could only imagine what he might be thinking. Truly, she didn’t really care, just so long as he gave her this opportunity to transform this place into another masterpiece.



Thorpe wasn’t sure if he should be horrified that Miss Richards knew so much about landscaping—or if he should sweep her into his arms and kiss her because she had a talent for seeing the possibilities in nothing more than a few blades of grass. He had no doubt that she would be able to transform this place into the magnificent seaside retreat that he had been hoping to obtain, but would it be a good idea for them to work so closely with one another? That was certainly another question entirely.

Unfortunately, for the sake of her reputation, he decided that, no matter how much he might approve of her designs, his honor couldn’t allow her to take on this project. It would take weeks to complete, and Thorpe wasn’t sure that he could retain a respectable distance all that time.

It wasn’t as if she was a great beauty, but something in the way her brown eyes sparkled with such life when she spoke of her heart’s desire made her infinitely appealing. She might never be the diamond of society, but she shone with a

brilliance all her own when she described the transformation of his gardens.

He truly hated to break her heart.

“I admit that you have a wonderful vision, Miss Richards.”

Some of her merriment faded, and he could feel the pinch of guilt as it did. “But?” she prompted.

He clenched his jaw but forced himself to continue. “I have some other prospects in mind, but I do appreciate you making the journey here. I will be sure to inform you of my decision once I have a chance to speak to the other candidates.”

He gave her credit for adopting a brave face when he could see the disappointment in her gaze. “Of course, Your Grace. I appreciate you taking the time to see me, nevertheless. You could have ordered me to leave the moment I walked into your study, but you didn’t, and I am grateful just to have the chance to be heard.”

As she walked away from him, Thorpe forced himself to wait until he heard the sound of carriage wheels crunching down the drive. Only then did he expel the breath he’d been holding. What a conundrum he was suddenly faced with. He’d lied to her about any other prospects just because he hadn’t wanted to dismiss her outright, but it had been deuced hard to do so. He despised deceit in any form, especially when it was directed at a woman. He’d learned the perils of the pain it caused when he’d witnessed his father’s actions, not only toward Thorpe’s mother when she learned he’d gained a new mistress, but toward the previous lady who was tossed aside like yesterday’s rubbish. His father had always thought a fancy bauble would dry any tears, but he’d never stopped long enough to notice the anguish that was left in his wake.

From an early age, Thorpe vowed that he wouldn’t act the same. Although his father had tried to teach him the art of how to be a rake, he’d wanted nothing to do with that sort of lifestyle. In his mind, it was just as unsavory as being an inveterate gambler like his grandfather had been. At this point in his life, Thorpe wasn’t even sure if he would ever consider

marriage, just leave his estate to his cousin who would inherit. He might not be able to benefit from all his efforts, but at least someone competent would. If he did sway toward matrimony, it would have to be someone very special indeed, to make him consider giving up his independence. A needy wife who demanded the latest fashions, because of her status as a duchess, was not something he was willing to consider any time soon.

He walked around the front of the cottage, where there was still a slight dust trail from Miss Richards's carriage. He knew that she would be nothing like the women of his acquaintance. It surprised him that if she was well-bred, as he suspected, that they had never met. Perhaps the issue was that they had, but he'd just never bothered to take further notice.

Now he did.

Unfortunately, the timing was entirely wrong, and the situation was even more regrettable.

Removing his spectacles, Thorpe rubbed the bridge of his nose. There were times that he wished he was anyone else but the Duke of Rosewood, but like anyone else who was born, it was a roll of the dice as to what sort of existence they were given. In Thorpe's instance, his exterior life might appear to be grand, but on the inside, he wanted nothing more than to be free of the constant restrictions that weighed him down.

With a restorative sigh, he put his glasses back in place. Using them as the armor that he needed, he walked back into the cottage and headed for his study to make a list of the recommended architects to be found in London.



Iona told herself not to cry when she returned to the strand and the carriage stopped at the boarding house. However, the moment she opened the door and spied Miss Stratford, she burst into tears.

The older woman's face immediately fell in dismay. "Oh, my poor dear. I'd always heard the duke was a good man. Was

it that bad?"

Iona wiped at her eyes in annoyance and shook her head. "It wasn't the duke's demeanor at all. In truth, he was very kind, but I am starting to wonder if anyone will dare to believe in what I could accomplish given the opportunity to exhibit my work."

Miss Stratford led her over to a chair in the main parlor and sat beside her while Iona removed her bonnet. "A woman trying to make her way in a man's world is not easy. You knew that from the beginning, and yet, you came here determined to make a name for yourself."

"I'm starting to wonder if I made a mistake." She sniffed. "But I don't know if I would be allowed to return home, even should I beg my parents' forgiveness and vow to marry the first man who might dare to offer for me."

"Don't you dare," Miss Stratford admonished. "You have come too far to back down now. Well-behaved society women won't be the ones who change the world. It will be those like you who dare to prove their worth. Don't lose heart." She offered her a conspiratorial wink. "I'm not ready to give up, either."

Feeling a bit restored after her chat with her hostess, Iona climbed the stairs to her room. She shut the door and leaned against it heavily before she tossed her bonnet onto a nearby chair and walked over and slumped down on her bed. She lay back on the soft feather mattress and stared at the plain ceiling above her. She thought of her chamber in London at her parents' townhouse, then screwed her eyes shut tightly. She wouldn't get anywhere by looking to the past. Miss Stratford was right. This was only one setback. It might seem like a huge hurdle that she'd failed to jump, but there would be more opportunities. She might just have to lower her standards and start off on a smaller scale. At this point, anything would be better than nothing. The longer she stayed here without anything to show for it, the more she felt as though she was taking advantage of the Society's hospitality.

After giving herself a few more moments to soak in her own melancholy, she sat up. Iona had never been one to remain upset for long. She was the sort who searched for a solution when something went awry.

That's what she would do now.

Gathering her plain straw bonnet, she shoved it back on her head, and after ensuring that her face was free from any tear streaks, she headed downstairs. It was time she took a closer look about Burnham-on-Sea to see what might need a bit of cheering up. If she couldn't get anyone to pay her, then she would do the work for free, in order to show people what she was capable of doing. As Miss Stratford had said, she needed to start somewhere, and she had plenty of designs when the time came for people to start taking her seriously.

She set out for the main thoroughfare of the village, which lay farther inland from the strand and housed local residences that enjoyed the spray from the sea, as well as new developments that were starting to be constructed in the hopes of turning Burnham-on-Sea into a bustling seaside retreat. For now, it was still a quaint English settlement with a certain sophisticated charm.

As Iona walked along the various shopfronts, she took mental notes when it came to how she might approach some of the shopkeepers, regarding the ideas swirling about in her head.

She spied a woman in the millinery, organizing some of the bonnets in her shop windows. They were quite resplendent with their extravagant silk and velvet linings. One fashioned in deep purple caught her particular eye, but she had no place she might wear it.

Nevertheless, Iona would have liked nothing better than spending some coin on such a luxurious purchase, but she reminded herself that the days of needless fashion in the hopes of impressing a prospective suitor were behind her. She was looking to the future and her own independence. For someone who could hardly afford her lodgings at the boarding house,

her pin money steadily dwindling, she knew she couldn't wait much longer to secure some sort of respectable wage.

Iona decided that her first prospect in hoping to secure a duke's favor was aiming a bit too high. Perhaps she would have better luck at the millinery—and with a woman who ran a shop such as this. Surely, she would understand Iona's plight and be sympathetic to her cause.

Steeling her nerve, Iona walked into the store. A little bell above the frame signaled her entry. The woman who had been organizing the hats in the window looked over her shoulder expectantly. She was likely hoping to see a prospective client, but one glance at Iona's plain attire, and some of her joviality dimmed slightly. However, her greeting was still warm when she walked over. "How might I help you?"

"Good day," Iona said cheerfully. "My name is Miss Iona Richards. I recently moved into the Seaside Society boarding house on the Strand."

"Oh, yes," she murmured, but Iona couldn't tell if it was a welcome admission or not. "I recall something to that effect. It's run by two spinsters, I believe."

"Yes, that's right. Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham," Iona confirmed. Now that the pleasantries were out of the way, she decided that it would be best to explain what she was doing there. She glanced toward the stands showcasing various headwear in the window. "That is a lovely display."

The lady smiled. "Thank you. I enjoy my work very much."

Perfect. "Indeed. As do I." Iona turned back to her. "I am a designer myself, but with the art of landscaping. I couldn't help but notice that your storefront appeared a little bare. I could make it more appealing."

The lady offered a regretful shake of her head. "I appreciate the offer, Miss Richards, but I can't afford any extra expense at this time—"

"I won't charge anything," Iona was quick to assure her. "I'm sure you know how difficult it can be for a woman trying

to live her dream. I wish to do the same, but I can't do that unless someone will give me a chance to do so. If you let me design your front, you can offer me a few coins if it helps to gain you more sales. Otherwise, a referral to other shopkeepers along the street would be rather helpful as well."

Iona was regarded shrewdly for a moment, and then the woman gave a light bob of her head. "Very well, Miss Richards. I will trust your judgment when it comes to giving my store a bit of a lift, and should it drive in more customers, then I shall give you a portion of the proceeds. If you do very well, then I shall sing your praises throughout the town and beyond."

It was as if the sun was shining directly on her, warming her with the vision of opportunity. She was very glad that she hadn't spent such a lovely day moping about in her rooms, or she might not have had this wonderful chat. "Thank you very much. I promise that you will have the most attractive millinery shop outside of London!"

CHAPTER 3



Thorpe wasn't really sure what he was doing at Burnham-on-Sea. He normally sent one of his servants to collect whatever items he needed from the market thoroughfare at Highbridge, which was much closer. However, on this bright, sunny morning, for some reason, Thorpe found the need to check out the recent buzz that some of the nearby villagers had been talking about.

He wasn't one who was prone to adhere to idle gossip from his servants, but they claimed that the modest fishing village was being transformed into the seaside retreat that they had been hoping to build. When Thorpe had inquired as to what had made this remarkable difference, which was starting to draw new investors into the area, the housekeeper had murmured something about a local landscape artist.

Immediately, he began to wonder if it was Miss Richards, who had attempted to curry his favor and change Highbridge Cottage into something just as grand. While Thorpe had regrettably gone with a higher-priced architect from London, recommended to him by several of his peers, he had not been pleased with the designs he'd been shown. After only a brief acquaintance, Thorpe had dismissed him before work could begin, although he had already purchased most of the materials, so now he was back to the beginning, attempting to search for the right person for the job.

He knew who it was, of course. He was just too stubborn, or perhaps a bit prejudiced against the idea of a woman toiling in the soil, or perhaps preferred an option to help a man with a

family to support. He wasn't sure his gentlemanly honor would have allowed her to complete such a momentous task, especially when she'd not had the previous experience. Putting ideas down on paper was one thing, but bringing them to life in the same manner was quite another.

Nevertheless, he'd mourned the loss of such a great visionary. It had been nearly a month since he'd sent her on her way, her downtrodden look one of abject despair, although she had done her best to hide the bitter disappointment. He was curious how she had bounced back and managed to transform such a quaint English village into something so formal that it was being discussed in the next village and beyond. He decided it was his duty to check how things were progressing. And perhaps, if he was satisfied with what he saw, he might bring her into his employ after all.

Since Burnham-on-Sea wasn't more than an hour away from where he was staying at the cottage and exterior and interior repairs were starting to be made, Thorpe had ridden his gelding. Dropping his mount off at the local stable, he dismounted and took his first look about the wharf, where several boats were lined up, eager to set sail. At first glance, he thought he caught the glimpse of a woman standing on the deck and barking orders as if she were the captain. He shook his head, convinced that he was merely seeing things.

Beyond the bustling harbor was a long stretch of golden, sandy beaches that housed several bathing machines. He noticed the weather was starting to get a bit warmer, and the water was filled with children, splashing about and enjoying the day. Women were chatting together underneath large white tents and were taking tea together, while a few of the gentlemen were daring to engage in a ruthless cricket match upon the nearby bank.

It was decidedly different from what Thorpe recalled the last time he had been there some years ago. Before his father had died and his mother had perished from the years of abuse and neglect that she had suffered at the cruel treatment of her husband.

As Thorpe continued along the main street that went through the heart of town, his eyebrows lifted considerably. The crowd was decidedly altered from what he recalled. Thorpe recalled it used to be a modest village, but it looked like any other fashionable, seaside retreat. What was strange was that the entire street was blocked off.

The reason for the people coming out in droves could have had to do with the sun shining brightly in the sky, but that wasn't what everyone seemed to admire. Their attention was turned toward the boxes of colorful flowers that bordered nearly every store front. They were attached to the two front windows and offered a whiff of perfume for each potential customer who walked by. He paused for a moment and observed the scene before him. One thing he noticed was that nearly everywhere he looked, people had a smile upon their faces.

As he started to stroll casually down the street, he glanced in a few shop windows and realized they were filled with eager shoppers. It seemed odd to him that a Thursday afternoon would be so popular, but perhaps there was some sort of special festival taking place. He stopped a lady who had just exited the millinery. "Pardon me, madam, but is there a reason it's particularly busy today?"

She laughed as if he'd made some sort of jest, even though he hadn't said it in a teasing manner. "I suppose you could say that. Today is the day of the grand reveal!"

"The grand reveal?" he inquired with a lift of his brow.

"Indeed! Miss Richards has taken it upon herself to make our town more appealing. We all wished to support her efforts by turning out for what she claims is the *pièce de résistance*!"

She spoke in a nearly conspiratorial manner and then rushed off before Thorpe could say anything further. He wasn't sure if he was losing his mind, or if everyone around him was, but curiosity compelled him to move toward where a crowd was gathering at the farthest bend of the street where most of the shops began.

He told himself he was merely anxious to see this “grand reveal,” but it wasn’t completely true. Against his better judgment, he also wanted to see Miss Richards again.



“This is a remarkable turnout, my dear. You have quite turned this little village on its ear with your talents. It’s only a matter of time before word reaches all the way to London. It may not even take that long before offers start pouring in to secure your talents.”

Iona was all smiles as she turned to Miss Grantham. “I certainly hope it was all worth the effort—and most of my pin money.”

“I have no doubt it will be,” Miss Stratford said with a wink.

Iona was grateful for the vote of confidence from the Seaside Society’s founding matrons. She was pleased that the other boarders, Millie and Rose, had joined in on the merriment as well. Iona didn’t think it would be long before they had their own establishment up and running. The exterior of their seamstress shop was starting to cause some interest on its own, especially now that the current modiste in town was planning on relocating to Bath to be closer to her family.

Tassy was currently out at sea, but she had offered her firmest well wishes when she left and vowed to be a strong devotee to her hard work once she had returned. The only one they were missing now was Lady Beauvais, who would be cutting the ribbon for the official unveiling ceremony. Hopefully, what Iona had planned would prove to the rest of the villagers that they could succeed in turning this place into the retreat they had always wanted.

Iona glanced out over the sea of spectators eager to see something amazing, and she released a slow exhale. She spied the vicar making his way through the assemblage. Although he hadn’t initially approved of her designs for the village, he had

warmed up to her considerably since his congregation had started to grow.

“Lady Beauvais.” He addressed the widowed Countess first and then the two matrons of the Seaside Society. When he finally turned to her, he said, “I gained a glimpse of what you are going to reveal, and I must say I’m reluctantly impressed.”

Iona knew that was the biggest compliment that she would receive from him. Either way, it was enough because at least her work was being *noticed*. That was all she had ever wanted.

The distant bells from St. Andrew’s Church proclaimed the hour, and that’s when the vicar took his place upon the slightly raised podium in the center of the street. Next to him, along a grassy bit of land, was Iona’s vision, covered with a large white canvas and wrapped in a bright, red ribbon.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of Burnham-on-Sea!” His pronouncement was met with applause. “I know we are all eager to see what Miss Richards has created for us, but first, let us pray for the lovely day and the reason for this celebration, which is to honor God and His plan for us.” Every head bowed as he offered a slight benediction. Afterward, he turned to Lady Beauvais. “If you would do us the honor, my lady?”

She grabbed hold of one end of the large red ribbon holding the canvas and untied it to reveal Iona’s creation. The crowd collectively held their breath and then erupted in a round of cheers. Iona had designed a solitary planting wall made out of repurposed brown brick from the area. It had been a task that had taken her quite some time to complete, especially centering the various plants around the moon window in the center that offered a circular view directly to the sea beyond. Two topiaries had been carefully trimmed in the shape of sailboats and placed in large urns on either side.

She was relieved it was over at last, and she prayed this would be the start of her bustling career. However, as the well-wishers came forward and offered their congratulations on her designing brilliance, she was disheartened when that was all

she received. She had hoped that all her hours of toiling might have allowed for at least one potential client.

To add insult to injury, she spied a familiar dark head breaking apart from the rest of the dispersing crowd. She stiffened slightly when the Duke of Rosewood walked up to her and offered a slight bow. “Miss Richards. I commend you on your latest achievement. I daresay it is nothing less than I might have expected from you.”

Iona wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not, but she gave a curtsy in return. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Of course, the sound of a peer in their midst had made Lady Beauvais's ears perk up. She turned where she had been speaking with the butcher and offered the duke a winning smile. “It's good of you to join our humble celebration, Rosewood.”

Iona had always admired her lilting, French accent. It had garnered the attention of many men, including those in the Royal British household. But it wasn't as though that was a highly kept secret.

“Thank you, Lady Beauvais. The honor is mine,” returned that smooth baritone graciously.

The lady had known what had happened with the duke, of course, so now she gestured to Iona's masterpiece behind her. “Miss Richards is quite talented, is she not?” Iona saw the countess bat her eyes innocently. “Did you ever find someone to restore your cottage grounds to their original glory? Or perhaps you are wishing for something even finer than before?”

Iona had to commend the duke for the slight smile he offered. Not once did he appear discomfited, even though she was staring at him expectantly, eager to hear his reply to the countess. “I have looked into other alternatives, but I daresay they fall short of what Miss Richards had designed.”

When he turned those direct, green eyes in her direction, she was the one who was suddenly disconcerted.

“Perhaps I should let the two of you discuss a future partnership.” Lady Beauvais lifted a brow and offered Iona a sly wink as she slid away from them.

Although there were still plenty of people milling about, Iona felt as though she was quite alone with the duke. “In light of the lady’s not-so-subtle hint that I give you a second chance,” Rosewood murmured, “perhaps I was too hasty in denying your efforts before. I think I have changed my mind if you are still amenable.”

Iona hesitated. While she knew she should accept the duke’s offer, because she had yet to find any other prospects, she was torn. She had her pride, after all. It had never settled well with her that he had sent her on her way without even giving her a chance to prove herself. He was doing that now, but only because he likely felt honor bound to do so after Lady Beauvais had suggested it.

Nevertheless, she swallowed her denial because she had to think rationally. She had very few funds left to her name, and it would be the height of foolishness to refuse him. And it wasn’t as though he was asking for her hand in marriage. It was a job that she desperately needed, along with the referral that a duke’s name could give her.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I would be delighted to accept.”



Thorpe wondered about the slight uncertainty he saw in that dark gaze before she agreed to his offer. He doubted that anyone else was eager to employ a female for their grounds. Yet, he was willing to give Miss Richards a chance to broaden her talents, only to have her act as though she was reluctant to do so. Nevertheless, he knew he wasn’t making a mistake in taking her on. The mistake had solely been on his part by letting her go at the beginning. He’d seen her worth, and yet, he’d allowed himself to be persuaded by nothing more than her sex. He was trying to rectify that error now, and it would have been nice if she’d acted with a bit more appreciation.

However, as long as she appeared at the cottage with the same enthusiasm that she had exhibited the first time, then all would be well.

“I don’t suppose you designed any other areas in the village?” he asked.

“No.” She paused. “But if you wish, I have more designs at the boarding house should you like to look them over.”

He glanced at her with slightly narrowed eyes. “Without a chaperone?”

Thorpe had the distinct impression that she wanted to roll her eyes. “The cook is there, so it will be entirely proper, I assure you. Besides, it’s not as if I’m inviting you into my private rooms. There is a parlor for receiving guests.” She gestured toward the sea beyond. “It’s but a short walk along the strand.”

“Indeed,” he murmured. “In that case, lead the way, Miss Richards.”

They walked in silence for a time, Thorpe clasping his hands behind his back while his companion folded her hands together in front of her. For the first time, he noted that her bonnet wasn’t plain straw, but rather a luscious velvet in deep purple. Her gown was a simple, white muslin with a matching purple ribbon about the empire waist. Dare he think she looked almost... alluring? He had never thought her to be uncomely. The first day she’d arrived at the cottage, he had been struck with instant recognition, but wearing such serviceable clothing was not suited to her fair coloring. She needed to wear lighter colors that showcased her features, rather than washing them out. But perhaps it would be best if she did not, considering it made him more eager to entertain a stronger acquaintance that went beyond professional.

Deciding to be a gentleman and pay a lady a compliment, he said, “That’s a nice bonnet.”

She started to lift her hand, as if forgetting what it was she had donned that morning, and then slowly lowered it to her

side. "Thank you. It was a gift from Mrs. Adams at the millinery."

"Ah. That was generous of her."

She shrugged. "After I brightened up her store, her business doubled. It was her way of showing her appreciation."

"I imagine some monetary compensation might have been just as welcome," he noted.

She seemed to ponder her reply. "I agree that would have been nice, as well, but a lady must accept her boons whenever they are granted. If I find my funds are in dire need, I can always sell the bonnet."

Thorpe had to work to keep from appearing horrified at the very thought. "Let's hope such circumstances shall be unnecessary. It looks very fetching. It would be a shame if you were forced to part with it."

He was granted a slight blush upon her cheeks, and it made him wonder if she had often been complimented. Deciding to change the subject, he asked, "Whence do you hail, Miss Richards?"

There was a brief hesitation before she answered, "London, Your Grace."

"And what is it that drew you to Burnham-on-Sea?"

"The desire to seek out a dream." She glanced at him. "The ladies of the Seaside Society sent out a notice about their boarding house for independent women of a certain age. My parents expected me to marry, but I desired a different path." She laughed slightly, and he found the sound to be quite appealing. "I'm sure I must sound silly, considering you are a duke. No doubt anything you might wish for is at your fingertips."

Since Thorpe didn't have a ready argument, he said, "The great debate of any lady of a marriageable age. I personally find it commendable to dare to strike out on your own."

She glanced at him, and he could see the doubt shining in her brown eyes. “Do you?”

“I do.” He straightened. “I feel there are entirely too many restrictions placed upon ladies in society.”

She laughed again. “Then you would be one of the few. My father certainly doesn’t share your opinions. He despised my ‘forward thinking,’ as he called it.”

He looked at her steadily as they walked along the jetty that ran along the strip of golden, sandy beach. “I take that to mean you didn’t leave on favorable terms?”

She looked down at the ground. “No. I’ve been here for more than a month, and although I wrote home to let them know I arrived and I’m well, I have yet to hear any word in return.”

This didn’t settle well with Thorpe, but he knew that some families were broken under even less strenuous circumstances. “Perhaps the holiday season will see a change.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured, but he could tell by the bitter note in her voice that she doubted there would be any change.

CHAPTER 4



Iona wasn't sure why she felt it necessary to spill out her heart to the duke like that. She supposed it was because she didn't have anyone else that she was comfortable discussing such matters—which was odd. She hardly knew the man, but his demeanor was one of patience and understanding, and the words had trickled forth.

Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford were perfectly amenable, of course, but she didn't wish to burden them with her familial problems. They likely already knew there was strife with her parents because she had chosen a different path from the one they had set down for her. As for the rest of the boarders, Tassy was gone most of the time, and Millie and Rose kept to themselves. She had to remember not to allow the subject of her past to get too involved and intimate. She was to be under this man's employ. It was not as if they were courting. A firm line in the sand must be drawn.

When they arrived at the boarding house, Iona noticed that he glanced at the sign swinging above the door that proclaimed this as *The Seaside Society*. Iona had personally added a bit more, "The Seaside Society of Spinsters," since that is what they all were. But she had kept that part to herself, not wishing to injure either of the proprietresses of the house.

She removed her bonnet and set it on a nearby peg, and then she led the duke into the parlor. When Iona had first arrived, she decided that the dark tones were warm and inviting. Now, she found them almost overwhelming, combined with the tall, intimidating man at her side. She

turned to go, but then manners compelled her to pause and add, “Would you care for some tea or—?”

He was already shaking his head. “You don’t have to entertain me, Miss Richards. This is a business call.”

She released the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding and mentally thanked the duke for keeping to his side of the sand. “Of course. I’ll return in a moment.”

Iona headed up the stairs and gathered all her prints. Since she wasn’t sure if the duke still wanted the initial drawing she had done, she wanted to give him some other options. She had designed some specifically with the cottage in mind, on the off chance that he might change his mind.

She returned to the parlor, where he was standing by the fireplace mantel, and set the rolled-up parchment on the floor beside her. She took a seat on the settee and set the first item on the table in front of her. The duke took it upon himself to sit down beside her, and as she unrolled it, he held one side while she retained the other so that it wouldn’t return to its previous shape.

“Thank you,” she murmured, although there was a certain awareness with his body so close to hers. She was a woman, after all, and not immune to the charms of a handsome man. Especially one that smelled like soap and the evergreen trees on a crisp, summer day. But it wasn’t until he reached into an inner pocket of his waistcoat and withdrew a pair of spectacles did she truly start to admire him.

Directing his attention to the design, she started to explain about the layout. She did this with each one she presented. She glanced at the duke now and then to gain his reaction, but his focus was fixated on the various designs as a slight furrow touched his forehead. With each one she showed him, the expression never changed.

She wasn’t sure whether to be concerned or not.

By the time she’d rolled up the last design, he put his glasses away and adopted a casual pose. He set his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands loosely in front of him. “I

admit that, after seeing everything in your repertoire, there is but one problem.”

She tensed, ready for the blow to come.

Instead, he grinned broadly and said, “I shall have a devil of a time figuring out what to choose.”

Iona exhaled sharply. She put a hand over her heart as she laughed. “I’m relieved.”

Some of her merriment subsided when he sobered and looked at her somewhat strangely.

Clearing her throat she added more seriously, “It doesn’t have to be a difficult process, Your Grace.” *Good. Remind yourself of the difference in your station if not your circumstances.* “We can always pick your favorites from each design and work them into something completely different. In the end, you are the deciding factor about what I do with your land.”

“Indeed.” He got to his feet. “Thank you, Miss Richards. I will keep that in mind.”

She kept herself busy by gathering the prints rather than staring at him abashedly. “Would you like to take any of the designs with you to inspect further?”

“That won’t be necessary. I recall them in vivid detail.” He paused, his green eyes warming slightly as they lit on her. “They really are quite amazing.”

She inclined her head and lifted her chin slightly, as if she was speaking to any other client who she wished to offer an air of professionalism. “Thank you, Your Grace. I promise that I will work tirelessly to ensure you have the best gardens in all of England.”

He smiled once again. “I don’t think that will be necessary. Besides”—he turned to go but offered as a parting remark—“if I am to have the best gardens in all of England and I decide you would be a good fit for Rosewood Manor, however shall you top it?”

Iona's heart was thumping as he walked out the door. Any earlier annoyance she might have been feeling faded when the duke mentioned Rosewood Manor. That would be her crowning achievement, indeed. If she were to impress the duke where he gave her the opportunity to work on such a massive estate, surely all the doors to London and beyond would be open to her. Dare she even hope to imagine that she would be invited as a gardener in the Royal household?

She pressed her hands against her chest and gave a dreamy sigh.

If only.



Two days later, Thorpe was sitting in his chair. He adjusted slightly and laid his hands on either arm of the chair. He changed his mind and adopted a firmer pose, his hands steepled before him on the top of the mahogany desk.

He shook his head and muttered a curse, forgoing the chair entirely. He glanced about his study, as if he had never seen it before, because surely he wasn't having this much trouble deciding where to be when Miss Richards arrived. Should he stand by the mantel and appear intimidating? No, that wouldn't do. It would surely only unnerve her. Perhaps he ought to stand by the window, where there was a good view of the lawn?

Or it might be best if he just abandoned the entire affair and sat on the floor.

It certainly wouldn't be any less ridiculous than pacing the floor deciding the best way to greet his architect.

He resisted the urge to run a hand through his hair.

Why was it so impossible to look at her as nothing more than another servant, someone who was in his employ? He wasn't this discomfited when he spoke about mundane topics with the housemaids, who were just as female and comely as Miss Richards.

And yet, he found himself unnerved for no particular reason.

He wondered if some of his unease might have to do with the fact that she was about to disrupt his entire existence with this little venture. He told himself it was only anxiety over whether she was up to such a monumental task. It was one thing to add a few flower boxes in town and repurpose some old bricks into a wall, but to actually find a way to transform the landscape around this cottage on more than just paper—that remained to be seen.

Since he was a man of his word, he wasn't going to turn her away a second time, especially when he was the one who had sought her out with the commitment in the first place. Wondering about what might happen next surely explained his hesitation now, and nothing more.

He stopped in the midst of pacing and gave a snort. If he believed that some of his anxiety wasn't due to the fact that he was eager to see *her* again, then he was more delusional than he imagined.

There was a knock at the door, and Thorpe remained standing in the middle of the room. "Enter."

The butler walked inside and glanced at him with a slightly lifted brow but said nothing as he announced Miss Richards' arrival. She brushed past the servant as he departed, and although she hesitated when she saw Thorpe standing expectantly for her arrival, she said nothing more than a polite greeting. "Good day, Your Grace."

"Miss Richards," he murmured in return. He was disheartened to see that the purple bonnet had vanished, replaced by the plain straw. She had also donned that awful, dowdy brown dress that did nothing to bring out the sparkle in her dark eyes, nor accentuate her figure like the white muslin had.

Then again, she wasn't here to impress. She was here to do a job that he would pay her quite handsomely for, so there was no need for silks and satins when one was toiling in the dirt.

However, when he pictured how she might look in a light-blue gown, the image instantly had his fantasies working overtime. He quickly reminded himself that there was no time for mixing business with pleasure. There were some lines that were not meant to be crossed. He would have to find his satisfaction elsewhere.

“I brought all the prints with me again, so you can view—”

He waved a hand. “That won’t be necessary. I think I shall continue with the original idea you had on our first meeting. I found it to be rather charming.”

“Indeed,” she concurred. “A seaside cottage should be nothing less than a retreat from the congestion of Town. What sort of groundskeepers do you currently have?”

“At the moment, a sad lack of anyone. I was waiting to confer with you to see how many hands you would require to bring the grounds up to snuff. And I considered the prospect that you might wish to select your own men.”

She inclined her head. “I appreciate that, Your Grace. With something of this undertaking, I suspect it will take nothing short of the Royal Army to complete. I will be overseeing the process to make sure it is done correctly, of course.”

“Naturally,” he murmured. “How long do you anticipate it will take?”

She thought about that for a moment and then said, “With what I initially suggested, I would imagine it won’t take more than a few months if we are meticulous, and the rain doesn’t impede our progress. It could take much longer, depending on if more is added as well.” She went through her designs and picked out one, unrolling it for him. “I have considered the benefits of a ha-ha, should you bring some sheep in to keep the grass neatly trimmed around the duck pond in the front and the larger one in the back of the cottage.”

Thorpe hadn’t considered bringing sheep into the equation, but he had to admit she made a valid point. And when he wasn’t in residence, it would cut down on the cost of gardening. Although he had recouped his family’s losses, it

would be foolish not to continue employing solutions that made sense. “That sounds reasonable. Would it go about the entire property?”

“It would make lovely lines about the cottage if you did so. The object is to make everything look as though it was made by nature while bringing forth the beauty of the surrounding grounds, which in turn, also draws the eye to the house, making a statement to your residency as a duke.”

Thorpe had to admit he was quite impressed by her intelligence and matter-of-fact approach. He was relieved she wasn't some simpering female who fluttered her eyes in the hopes of becoming his duchess. Even some men of his acquaintance tripped over their own feet to please him, but he had the feeling that if he were to cross words with Miss Richards, she would have no such compunctions when it came to voicing her opinions. It was rather refreshing, to say the least. For the first time in his life, Thorpe felt as though he could be himself and not just a title. He could actually converse with someone on a direct level without mincing words.

“It sounds as if you have it all covered.” He regarded her steadily. “I trust your judgment. Do whatever you think is necessary and send the bill to me.”



Iona blinked. She hadn't been expecting his easy acquiescence. She thought he would have more of an input on what he wanted on his grounds. “Are you quite sure, Your Grace? This is your personal retreat. I want to ensure it has your full approval.”

“You have proven not just with your designs, but with your vision, that our thoughts are aligned. After today, you have my full confidence.”

It wasn't often that Iona wanted to hug someone on impulse, but she was thrilled that not only was she getting to design such a wonderful lawn, but she was given free rein to

do so. Was she dreaming? “Again, I appreciate that, Your Grace. I will head into the village this very afternoon to see what sort of men I can acquire for the project.”

She gathered her things and turned to go. About that time, there was the sound of heavy pounding on the backside of the house.

“I’m of a mind to join you, Miss Richards.”

She turned back to him curiously. “Are you sure? I would hate to keep you from any of your other duties. Unless you don’t believe I can handle the task?”

“That is not what concerns me,” he murmured sourly as he glanced upward. “I know these improvements are necessary, but they are about to drive me mad. I find the constant hammering day in and day out is starting to grind on my patience.”

She smiled in understanding. “I imagine it is quite a nuisance when you are trying to concentrate on estate matters.”

Since it was another pleasant, sunny day, Iona hadn’t donned a cloak. The duke must have thought the same because he decided to forgo his greatcoat, although he did don a hat. She climbed into the carriage that the proprietresses of the boarding house had given to her to use once again. However, now that she would be spending ample time at Highbridge Cottage, she knew she would have to find alternate transportation. It wouldn’t do to monopolize Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford’s generosity for much longer. They had already been extremely understanding and patient. She didn’t want to feel she was taking advantage of their hospitality.

“We must find you another mode of transport.”

Iona’s gaze shifted to the duke, who sat across from her. It was odd that he should speak of the very thing she had been woolgathering about. It was as if he had the ability to read her mind. That would be a very dangerous thing if so. She certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable sitting in such close confines with him knowing that she believed he was looking

particularly handsome today. In a pair of dark gray trousers, a silver-threaded and black waistcoat with matching jacket, white cambric shirt and crisp cravat, he looked positively enticing. Of course, the clothes only made part of the man. The true allure came from what lay beneath. Broad shoulders and muscular thighs were evident, although she told herself she shouldn't be noticing such things.

It was those devastating green eyes that peered at her as if he could see the very desires of her soul that unnerved her the most.

“Do you ride, Miss Richards?”

“Not very well, I'm afraid.” She smiled slightly. “My father despaired of my failure to learn and finally dispensed with my lessons. I could never feel genuinely comfortable around any horse.”

“It is convenient when needed, but it is not the most comfortable mode of transport.” He hesitated, and then said, “I shall send my coach to collect you if that is amenable?”

Iona wasn't sure how to respond. “That is very generous of you, Your Grace, but I'm sure I can find a local farmer who —”

“Nonsense. The matter is settled. I need you here to work for me, and you are in need of reliable transport. Consider it part of your wage if you please.”

In that regard, Iona decided that it wasn't terrible for her to accept. “Very well. Thank you.”

After that, they fell silent.

Iona glanced out the window, while the duke did the same, but in the opposite direction. She hardly dared to breathe because she had always hated these uncomfortable silences and didn't want to make any undue noise to draw further attention to herself. If he thought she sighed, he would undoubtedly wonder if something was wrong. It wasn't as though she could tell him that he disturbed her, but not in a bad way. In the manner of a woman who is aware of a man.

She was grateful when the carriage pulled into the stable yard of the neighboring village of Highbridge. The duke disembarked first and then offered a hand to help her down.

Neither of them wore gloves, and the moment their bare skin touched, a jolt shot up Iona's arm. She glanced at the duke to see if he had felt the same reaction, but his expression had not altered in the slightest. It would have been rather frustrating, should they have been courting. Since they weren't, she told herself it was a relief that he hadn't reacted in the same manner.

She spoke a few words to the stable master about where she might find some men willing to work, and he directed her to the local inn. It was reasonable that it was the best place to start.

With determined footsteps, she started to head in that direction. She didn't have to glance behind her to know the duke followed a short distance behind.

CHAPTER 5



His hand was on fire.

At least, it felt as though he had been burned, but when Thorpe glanced down at the offending appendage, it was perfectly normal. He flexed it a few times to make sure it was in proper working order, and although everything seemed to be accounted for, the sudden jolt that traveled up his arm when he'd touched Iona had been quite unexpected.

He wondered if Miss Richards had felt anything similar, but other than a brief flutter of her lashes, as if slightly discomfited, there was nothing else to clue him in to her inner thoughts. She was rather difficult for him to read at times. The only thing he knew for certain was her love for design and the desire to see her dreams succeed.

He wondered about her past, what her life had been like before she'd made her way to Burnham-on-Sea, but to delve too far into her personal life would be close to crossing that invisible barrier that he knew needed to remain firmly in place. It was none of his business what Miss Iona Richards had been like before now. Such intimate talks were reserved for those who were potentially courting or, at the very least, flirting in the midst of a ballroom.

Thorpe kept a steady pace slightly behind Miss Richards, and when they entered The Globe Inn, he retained that respectable distance. Not only was he curious if she might garner the support she needed on her own, but he decided it

was best to stand by and subtly observe from the corner of the room.

There were several, able-bodied men inside the taproom, and rather than walk up to the counter and ask the innkeeper if they might know of anyone willing to take on a job, she stopped in the middle of the room. She reached into her reticule and held a shilling up in the air. "I'm looking for hard men willing to work every day through the summer, and perhaps even into the autumn months, to earn ten shillings a week to work for the Duke of Rosewood. Knowledge of gardening would be preferred, but I will train any as needed."

Silence instantly fell after her bold pronouncement. Thorpe waited for the sneers to begin and found they came in the form of a middle-aged gentleman with bushy muttonchops. He leaned back in his chair and offered a decidedly rude belch. "Aye, and what would you know about landscape architecture?"

Thorpe's gaze shifted to Miss Richards, but rather than appear uncertain, she lowered her arm and walked over to the gentleman. Peering down at him in a direct manner, she countered with her own query. "Are you familiar with the proper way to wield a scythe? Or what a dibble is used for?"

Instantly, the man's smug expression cleared, his brows deepening. "Bah! What sort of useless nonsense is that? It sounds like a load of rubbish to me."

Miss Richards held out the shilling in her grasp. "It's not rubbish if it gains you coin." She turned around and readdressed the room. "I won't ask again. When I leave, I shall seek out others willing for an opportunity in another village."

Silence reigned a second time, but a chair scraped the wood as it was pushed back. A man got to his feet and said, "I have a family of six to feed. I'm not too proud to earn an honest wage."

"Even if you are led by a woman?" she countered boldly.

He shook his head. "Not if it puts food on my table."

She offered him a brilliant smile. “Welcome aboard, Mr...?”

“Evans,” he supplied.

Miss Richards turned her head and looked at each man in turn. “Is anyone else as brave as Mr. Evans?” She paused momentarily on the man who had dared to contradict her and lifted a challenging brow.

He grumbled something beneath his breath and crumpled up his hat, tossing it down on the table. “I won’t have anyone calling me a coward when I bloody well know how to use a scythe.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Mr...?”

“Parker,” he snapped irritably.

She flipped the coin in his direction. He caught it in midair. “Consider that an added bonus if you can get the rest of your men to join me at Highbridge Cottage tomorrow morning at eight o’clock sharp. I do not abide tardiness.”

With that, she turned on her heel and headed for the door. As she did so, she caught Thorpe’s eye, and he winked in a silent salute. She inclined her head, and after she left, he was a bit slower in following, curious to see what might be said about the lady when she was gone.

“That’s a right termagant, isn’t she?” Mr. Parker noted as he sat back down. There were several chuckles that rippled about the table. However, as he held the shining coin in his grasp rather thoughtfully, he added, “But it would be an easy way to earn some blunt. What say you, gentlemen? Should we appease the lady?”

There was a murmured assent, and Thorpe decided that was all he needed to hear as he slipped outside.



“You know this isn’t going to be easy.”

Iona glanced at the duke where they sat opposite each other in the carriage on the way back to the cottage. “I didn’t think it would,” she replied evenly. “Most men chafe at being told what to do, and when it’s a woman leading them, it’s even more so. It’s why we’re banned from most society clubs. The Horticultural Society in London is a prime example. It was agreed upon that my designs were worthy of note, but when there is the threat to a man’s superiority, that’s when it no longer matters.”

The duke gave a slight wince. “I would say that is a bit harsh, but I daresay it’s accurate. British men are quite proud of not just their heritage, but their proper way of thinking. I am not immune to the same when it comes to using my title to my advantage, although I do my best not to wave it about like a banner.”

She had to smile. “At least you’re honest about it.” She turned her gaze away, her voice turning slightly bitter. “My father was one of those men who stomped about and demanded that women know their rightful place. My mother was in full agreement. I suppose that is one of the reasons I left. I wanted to prove them wrong.”

There was a slight pause. “Do you feel you’ve succeeded thus far?”

She shrugged and looked at him evenly. “I suppose that still remains to be seen. I have secured your trust, and I consider that a victory in itself. Once this project has reached its conclusion, and I have earned the added respect of the men who are working for me, then I might be able to give you a complete and honest answer to that.”

“Well said, Miss Richards,” he returned quietly.

Again, that dreaded silence intruded. This time it wasn’t awkward but filled with an awareness that was a bit too familiar for her tastes. She turned her attention back out the window, but the fine hairs on the back of her neck lifted because she could feel his gaze upon her still.

As they stopped before the cottage, the door of the carriage opened. Rather than immediately say his farewells, the duke

lingered a moment. "I daresay I applaud your bold demeanor, Miss Richards. You are not the only one who held on to a dream that took some work for it to come to fruition." With that cryptic statement, he stepped down to the ground. He touched the brim of his hat. "Until tomorrow."

Iona pondered his words all the way back to the boarding house. The driver took the carriage and horses back to the stable behind the mews as she entered the front door. She spied Miss Stratford sitting in the parlor and reading the paper. She had a pair of reading spectacles perched on her nose. As always, her light red hair was pulled back into a neat chignon, her green eyes direct and unwavering as she glanced at her. "Ah, you have returned. How did it go?"

"Very well," Iona replied as she took a seat across from the lady. There was some tea on the table between them, and she helped herself to a cup. She was in need of something restorative after her journey, and the ladies had always said if there was a tray about, then it was available to their tenants with their compliments. "The duke told me that he would send a carriage for me each day, so I wouldn't have to monopolize your means of transportation."

"Did he?" the lady murmured. "That was very kind, considering you are to be one of his employees."

"I said the same, but he claimed he preferred to ride. Since he intends to remain on at the cottage until the ongoing repairs were completed, it didn't sound as though it was a hardship."

"I'm sure it isn't," her companion nodded. "He chose the perfect time to stay on at Highbridge. Since he is in such close proximity to the sea, and with the list of events we are planning this summer, it is sure to be a delightful time to enjoy a brief retreat from the congestion of London."

There was a slight break in the conversation as Iona stirred the sugar in her tea. Finally, she set aside her spoon and asked, "Might I ask you something, Miss Stratford?"

The lady smiled. "Of course."

Iona wondered the best way to broach the subject of the duke without making it sound as though they were more than mere business acquaintances. In the end, she decided there was no help for it but to ask directly. “Has the duke suffered any... difficulties in the past?”

Miss Stratford tilted her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

She cleared her throat. “He mentioned something about me not being the only one who had a dream that took some time to come to fruition. I had the distinct impression that he was referring to himself.”

“Oh, I see,” her companion murmured. “I don’t like to gossip, but I suppose you would find out soon enough.” She set aside her tea and clasped her hands in her lap. “The current duke’s grandfather was a terrible spendthrift. He nearly sank the family into ruin more than once with his gaming debts. He didn’t have much of a care for his reputation, and sadly, that trait was passed down to his son. The previous Duke of Rosewood was a libertine that spent what money he had on carousing.” She lifted her brows in disapproval. “When he passed, it didn’t take long for his wife to do the same. Likely perishing from the ill treatment of her husband. Thorpe was the only child who resulted from the union, and when he inherited the estate, he was still in school. But it didn’t take long for him to start devoting all his time to restoring the family fortune. By some miracle, he managed to do that and more, with good investments and a level head on his shoulders that his predecessors had failed to obtain.” She offered a slight smile. “If you are wondering if the duke is a good man, I can assure you I have only heard good things about his demeanor. No doubt, he is readying all his estates to prepare for a future duchess.”

“Undoubtedly.” It seemed like such an inconsequential thing to say after everything that Miss Stratford had revealed. But then, other than the knowledge that he would treat her with all fairness, she really needn’t concern herself with anything else.

Even if Iona might have entertained the thought of marriage in the past, the duke was entirely unsuitable. She was only part of the lower gentry, while a duke was much higher in station. If that wasn't enough of a hindrance, she wanted to *work* for a living. That was certainly not something that would be expected of a duchess. Society would be horrified if that occurred, and all the trouble the duke had gone through to restore his family's good name would be in shambles yet again.

It was certainly a good thing she wasn't hoping for anything more than a referral from the duke for a job well done.

Miss Stratford got to her feet. "I should be getting dressed. Alexandria and I are planning to dine with Lady Beauvais this evening. We are going to discuss the future of Burnham-on-Sea, so I'm sure it will be quite interesting." She offered a parting wink at Iona as she departed the room.

Finishing her tea, Iona decided that she would turn in early as well. She had a big day planned tomorrow, and if she didn't have much success in convincing the men at The Globe Inn and their fellow countrymen to join her, most of the day would be spent rushing back to Burnham-on-Sea to see if she would have better luck there.

Hopefully, that wouldn't be the case. She wanted to start work on the grounds as soon as possible because something told her that the less time she spent in the duke's company, the better off she would be.



Just after dawn the next morning, Thorpe reined his gelding in at the top of a ridge overlooking the cottage from a brief distance. From here, he had a good vantage point to see his coach returning from collecting Miss Richards.

He knew he should nip this interest in the bud before it began, but she was just too compelling to ignore. She was unlike any woman of his acquaintance. The drive she had to

succeed mirrored his own when he was doing all he could think of to restore the ducal funds. He had managed to recoup those losses and more. The pride he had felt when that day had arrived had been worth celebrating. It was the one time he'd allowed himself to imbibe since the days he'd been at school and had a bit of fun with his fellow university comrades.

He seldom touched any alcohol these days because he'd seen the damage it could cause, and he didn't want to repeat those same mistakes now that he was finally standing on top. Rather than spend his money in brothels and gaming hells, he'd focused his attention on repairing the faltering Rosewood estates. Once Rosewood Manor had been revived to its original brilliance, he had focused his energy on his mother's favorite retreat. It was the only place he could ever recall her with a smile on her face, likely because most of the temptations to be had were found in London. Here, they weren't as easily accessible, although he remembered his father had done his best to try to ferret them out.

If he wanted to, Thorpe could be really bitter toward his sire when it came to a brittle childhood. Then he would recall most of the stories that had been shared at school, and he'd realized he wasn't alone. Scandals and betrayal were commonplace in most society households.

In spite of this knowledge, it was likely the reason Thorpe hadn't actively tried to pursue any particular lady. He had told himself that it was because he didn't have anything to offer a prospective duchess, and yet, he ensured that he kept any liaisons brief and shallow, a union of mutual pleasure and nothing more. He didn't allow his heart the opportunity to attach to anyone in particular because he didn't want to suffer a fate like his mother, by gaining a companion who would birth an heir and then seek to go their separate way.

If he were to marry, it would be to someone he could trust.

As his coach pulled into the drive, Thorpe's heart began to beat rapidly against his ribcage. He shouldn't be this excited to see Miss Richards again, but these unusual feelings were there, nonetheless. It was the same anticipation he'd had when he'd

received his first pony as a child. He couldn't wait to go out every morning and take a ride.

What he felt toward Miss Richards wasn't much different. He found he was eager to see what new ideas she had dreamed of the night before. He knew his gardens would be resplendent, but what impressed him most of all was her desire to ensure they were perfect. It upset him greatly that her parents weren't more supportive of her dreams, but he was realistic enough to comprehend that women had very little say in this world.

Thorpe clenched his jaw. He would see to it that the next time Parliament was in session, he would back any new legislature that offered women more of a voice. He wasn't so naïve to believe that change would happen overnight, but he was determined to speak for those like his mother—and Miss Richards—who had no say on their own merit. He wished he would have had the power to grant his mother a divorce all those years ago on the grounds of adultery, but unfortunately, that would have been an impossible feat to accomplish without his father's blessing and the money necessary to obtain it.

Kicking his gelding into motion, he made his way back to the cottage in just enough time to see Miss Richards alight from the coach. He gestured to the vehicle. "How did you like the ride?"

"Very nice." She nodded. "I don't think I've ridden in another that is equal to the quality."

He dismounted, and a stable hand was there to lead the animal away. He removed his riding gloves and slapped them against his thigh. "When I am traveling a long distance, I prefer to have the best that I can manage."

She regarded him directly. "You are fortunate to enjoy such comforts. My father had a nice curricle that we often took to various affairs, but if I had to return to that lifestyle, I would rather just walk."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Be cautious, Miss Richards. That savors strongly of cynicism."

Her lips quirked. “Be that as it may, I speak only the truth. There is nothing to be gained from lies.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he murmured in assent. Their eyes met and held for a moment that was both endless and not nearly long enough, and then the sound of more wheels coming up the gravel drive met his ears. “Ah. It seems the cavalry has arrived.”

He could hear her relieved sigh, although she lifted her chin with determination. “I would rather hope so. You are offering a tidy sum to complete this task. They would be foolish to turn it down, even if they are going to be instructed by a woman.”

His brow lifted slightly. “My dear Miss Richards. Dare I believe you just made a jest?”

She didn’t look at him, but he could see the struggle as she tried not to laugh. “Not at all, Your Grace.” This time her dark eyes shifted to him, and he was temporarily struck by the sparkle of mischief that lit up her gaze. “I’m much too cynical for that.”

She walked away to greet the bevy of workers who had descended onto the grounds.

CHAPTER 6



Tona had never been adept at flirting. *Never*. It had made her more uncomfortable than words could express when she was forced to attend any society function. After countless hours of learning to dance, she still had two left feet, and she tripped over her own tongue when it came to polite conversation. It bored her to tears to speak of topics like fashion and the weather. She would rather speak about plants and landscaping when all the gentlemen of her acquaintance had wanted to do was stare at her bodice.

However, she found it rather easy to converse with the duke on a casual level. It was almost—dare she think it—fun to do so?

The problem was the attraction that had struck her as she'd glanced up and nearly lost her footing when he'd ridden into view. With his wind-tousled hair and those mesmerizing green eyes fixed on her, she was quite flustered. Then, when he'd dismounted and removed his gloves, slapping them against those snug-fitting breeches, she was nearly overcome. The only thing that had saved her was the arrival of the village men and the swift recollection that she was here to work, *not* to flirt.

Three wagons full of burly men started to pile out, but Mr. Parker was in the lead. He took off his hat, rubbed a hand down those bushy, gray muttonchops, and then spread his arms wide as he saw her. “We’re here as requested, Miss Richards, and ready to do the duke’s bidding.”

“Lovely,” she said evenly. “I’m glad to hear it because so am I.” She gestured to the duke who had joined her. “Gentlemen, allow me to present the owner of Highbridge Cottage, and our employer, the Duke of Rosewood.”

After the acknowledgements were made, Mr. Parker addressed the duke. “Are you sure you’re willing to trust a lady to organize your land, Your Grace?”

The duke smiled in a tolerant manner. “I have every confidence in Miss Richards. Her designs are some of the best I’ve ever seen. Dare I go so far as to say they compare greatly to Capability Brown’s drawings. They might even supersede them.”

There were a few scoffs in that regard, but when Iona withdrew the original plans she’d envisioned for the gardens, the group went oddly silent.

A few men muttered their reluctant approval, and one even gave a low whistle. Even Mr. Parker gave his grudging assent. “I suppose you have some artistic talent.”

Iona rolled up the print and handed it to the duke. “I have more than that. It’s the willingness to do the labor it takes to transform a plain lawn into something magnificent.” She glanced at them all in turn. “I assume some of you came prepared with scythes or various other gardening implements?”

There were a few murmurs, so she inclined her head. “Good. Then let’s get to work.”

Without waiting for an answer, she headed toward the side of the house where various tools and materials were already waiting. Iona hadn’t asked how the duke had come by so much in such a short span of time, but it wasn’t her place to question it, either. No doubt he’d already procured most of it when he’d intended for someone else to work the land, before changing his mind and giving her the opportunity.

The back gardens would take the longest to complete. The pond would need to be constructed, but with the restoration going on outside of the cottage at the moment, it would make

things a bit more complex to work around. So, she had decided they would begin in the front with the duck pond.

She pointed to the various items lying about. “As you can see, we already have brick to make the ha-ha wall around the front of the property, along with plenty of shovels to dig the ditch and duck pond. The lawn roller is to flatten out uneven surfaces and shears for pruning the surrounding trees and wilderness. We shouldn’t have the need to transplant many trees at this point, if any, as the park area is rather symmetrical. The goal is to show the appeal of the land without disturbing the overall beauty of the nature surrounding it.” She glanced at each of the men in turn. “Does anyone have any questions?”



Thorpe realized he could watch her speak all day long. She was fascinating, not just with her knowledge, but her willingness to push up her sleeves and toil alongside the men. She grabbed a shovel and prepared to dig into the ground where needed.

The gentleman in him wanted to stop her from doing such menial labor, but he knew if he suggested she simply overlook the proceedings, rather than take part, he would only be setting her apart even more than she already was. To earn the regard of these men, no matter the pay, she had to get them to listen to her. The only way to do that was to play by the rules she was setting down for them. It was a game that Thorpe had witnessed many times but never had to actually take part in because of his position. As a duke, he seldom had to deal with anyone daring to cross his word. He knew the only reason these men were here now was because he was the silent, driving force behind Miss Richards. They were anxious to tug on a peer’s purse strings, but how long they would do so yet remained to be seen.

Thorpe reluctantly left them to their work, forcing himself to return to his study. There was plenty of work that required his attention, but with the continued hammering above on the

roof, it was deuced difficult when it came to concentrating on much of anything. He enjoyed reading, but again, that was quite out of the question.

Without anywhere else to go, he retreated to the kitchens, where Cook always greeted him with a broad smile on her rounded face. “Mrs. Fines,” he acknowledged the lady, who was kneading some bread on a flour-covered counter.

She didn’t even bat an eyelash when he took a seat, but lifted a brow. “Shouldn’t you be working, Your Grace? Or is your sweet tooth acting up again?”

His lips quirked. “I believe it is the latter.”

She laughed heartily. “I thought that might be the case.” She wiped her hands to clear away most of the flour and then walked over to gather a tray filled with sweet biscuits. “I had an intuition you might be down to visit today, so I baked this shortbread just a short time ago. They’re still warm.”

Thorpe put a hand to his heart. “You are my saving grace, Mrs. Fines.” He grabbed one of the treats and bit into it. “Delicious, as always. But then, you have never disappointed, even when I was a child.”

She returned to the bread and snorted as she continued to knead the dough. “You’re going to make me feel old, Your Grace, if I start recalling all the days you rushed through here and scared me out of my wits.”

He offered a crooked grin. “I was quite a scamp in my youth, wasn’t I?”

“Terribly.” She shook her head in dismay, although her eyes twinkled with merriment. “I was hoping I might be baking for your offspring by now.”

He shrugged as he snatched another biscuit from the tray. She sent him an admonishing glance but said nothing. “I’m afraid I’m not in any rush to fill my nursery. I have extensive repairs that need to be done to my estates as of yet.”

She nodded. “I know that is important to you, but are you sure it’s not just an excuse to drag your feet when it comes to the altar?”

He crossed his arms. “And who might I be marrying?” If it was anyone else other than Cook, he might have taken offense to such bold questioning, but considering the torment he’d put her through during his boyhood, he supposed she had the right to be direct now.

She waved a hand and a flurry of flour sprinkled on the floor like white fairy dust. “You might believe it’s important to fix up this ramshackle cottage, but you have a fine estate in London that is perfectly acceptable for a duchess. You have been intent on personally seeing to it that this place was restored. I know you feel it’s your duty, some grand gesture you must partake in to secure your mother’s regard and lay the past to rest, but this is only a dwelling. The dowager is gone. It’s time for you to move on as well.”

Thorpe stiffened slightly with each word that she spoke. “I admire your ease in speaking to me, but there are times when you are too comfortable with your words.”

She paused in her task and looked at him directly. “I have always been loyal to you, Your Grace. I only wish for your happiness to be secured. If I speak plainly, my intention is not to upset you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and prayed for his ire to cease. Exhaling slowly, he said, “Of course, I am aware of that, Mrs. Fines. I think the continual noise around me is starting to wear on my nerves.”

Her face eased into one of motherly concern. If anyone had taken on the role after his mother had left, it had been Mrs. Fines. “It was wrong of me to forget my place. I still see the boy in front of me. But you are a man grown with his own mind.” She reached out and handed him another biscuit. “You deserve this for continuing to put up with an old woman for so many years.”

He declined her offer and wrapped her hand around it. “You enjoy this one. It’s only right that you should partake of the fruits of your labor without giving it all to me.”

With a parting wink to prove he wasn’t sour, he turned on his heel and left.



Iona lifted her arm and wiped at her sweat-coated brow. No doubt she'd left behind a smear of dirt in her wake, but she was grateful to see the amount of work that had been accomplished by the time midafternoon had arrived. The other men had chosen to take a quick break to eat the lunch they had packed for the day, but before she sat down to rest, she wanted to finish up a project she'd been working on.

She'd left most of the digging to the men, but she hadn't gone all day without lifting a shovel as well. But now, as the sun was shining high in the sky, she realized it was time for some restorative tea and perhaps a bite to eat.

However, when she started to take a step forward, spots danced before her eyes, and she lost her equilibrium. She collapsed to the ground with a sharp gasp.

"Miss Richards!"

She heard the shout as some of the dizziness started to fade. She looked up at the clear blue sky, at the sun that was as round as a button and glowing with purpose. It was abruptly blocked out by the appearance of the duke. Rosewood's face was directly in her line of vision.

"I saw you fall. Are you well? Does anything hurt?"

Iona blinked, having trouble comprehending what he was actually saying to her. Her mind was still a bit fuzzy. She finally found a way to open her mouth to speak. "Perhaps... I should have... some water."

He assisted her to her feet, and she wavered slightly. He put his arm around her and held her close to his side. The men from the village, who had been taking a short repast, came over with concern etched on their features. "I'm... fine." She waved them away.

"I'm taking her inside to lie down for a moment. Continue with what you were doing," the duke instructed on her behalf.

Iona wanted to protest that she was well, but she decided that perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea if she took a moment to clear her head of the sudden cobwebs.

The duke led her to a comfortable chair in the front parlor and instructed someone to bring in a tea tray and some refreshments, and then he knelt down in front of her. "When did you last eat?"

She tried to remember but couldn't readily recall. "I suppose sometime yesterday. I was quite... overcome with the festival and planning today's... activities."

The grim look on his face made her think this revelation wouldn't bode well, but she couldn't think about that right now. She needed to return to her duties outside before the men—or the duke—thought she was incapable of following through on this project.

"You shouldn't neglect your welfare in such a way, no matter the circumstances," he scolded.

Iona withheld a sigh and said nothing until the tea tray arrived. The maid hesitated, but the duke waved her away. Iona reached for a cup and saucer, but the duke sent her a dark look, and she sat back reluctantly while he served her. She generally took cream and sugar, and he ensured she had plenty of both. She accepted the offering with a murmured thanks, as well as the tray of shortbread biscuits that he handed to her. After her second cup of tea and some food in her stomach, she decided she was feeling much more revived.

She set her empty cup in her saucer and set them both on the tray. With a pleasant sigh, she turned to the duke, who had sat with her the entire time, obviously ready to assist if needed, and said, "I appreciate your kind hospitality, Your Grace." She started to rise. "It's time I rejoined the others."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

She slowly sat back down. Something told her this might be a discussion. "Of course. All I needed was a bit of a reprieve. I will ensure it doesn't happen again."

“I’m relieved to hear that,” he murmured, his green eyes roaming over her face and then narrowing suddenly. “You’ve acquired some freckles.”

“Have I?” Iona lifted her hand to her cheek, and then realizing the action seemed quite ridiculous because freckles weren’t something she could actually *feel*, she lowered her hand to her lap. She cleared her throat. “I suppose I should wear a bonnet to keep the sun off my face and maintain that coveted English complexion.”

“No.” She glanced at him curiously, and he leveled his tone slightly. “I didn’t mean it in a derogatory way. They are... appealing on you.”

“Are they?” she whispered, wondering why her voice had softened. She hastily glanced away, lest the conversation turn too intimate. Her lips twisted slightly. “My mother always despised any sort of marks on a lady’s face.”

A hand lifted her chin, bringing her focus back around to him. “Then she didn’t understand what true beauty was.”

Iona’s breath abruptly ceased, her heart stuttering to a halt in her chest. Being this close to the duke, being able to see every sharp contour of his masculine jaw with its smooth-shaven lines, the lips that were just inches from hers—it made for very enticing temptation, indeed.

“I’m afraid you have me confused with someone else, Your Grace. I never had any suitors in London. They were quite willing to pass me over for a porcelain English rose. I was the dowdy wallflower.”

“Then they were blind as well as foolish,” he said firmly. “But their loss is my gain.”

Iona didn’t even dare try to comprehend such a statement. However, when his gaze slipped to her mouth, she began to wonder if he might actually *kiss* her.

Panic settled in her chest, and she scrambled to her feet so quickly that she nearly saw spots dancing in front of her gaze yet again. “Thank you for your consideration, Your Grace, but I shouldn’t be taking up any more of your time.”

She nearly offered a curtsy but refrained as she headed out the door.

CHAPTER 7



Thorpe sat back in disbelief as Miss Richards scurried out of the room. If he didn't know better, he might have thought he was about to kiss her senseless. He shoved a hand through his hair and mumbled something under his breath about the possibility that he might be going mad as he returned to his study. Once he was there, he made the mistake of glancing out the window. He saw Miss Richards striding across the lawn. It appeared she was a bit flustered—with good reason. He kept her in his sight until she turned a corner of the house and disappeared.

He walked over to the fireplace and set his hands on the mantel. He grasped the cool marble and lowered his head to stare into the empty grate. The nights had been warmer than usual, so there wasn't a need for a fire. At the moment, he would have stayed plenty hot with the fire burning through his veins. It was starting to become something of a habit when he thought of Miss Richards. He had to find a way to calm this obsession before it got out of hand and his baser instincts started to take over. Perhaps he should find a reason to return to London for a few days. No doubt it wouldn't be that difficult to do so. It was definitely something to contemplate because not only did Thorpe wish to keep a respectable distance from Miss Richards, but it was obvious she desired the same.

And yet...

There was *something* there, a subtle awareness that neither of them wished to acknowledge, but it was present,

nonetheless.

Pushing away from the mantel, he sat down in his chair behind the desk and withdrew a sheet of vellum and donned his spectacles. Dipping his quill in the inkwell on his desk, he penned a letter to his housekeeper, Mrs. Hamley, who had remained behind at Rosewood. He decided there was no need for her to come to the cottage when the estate needed her kind attention. There was nothing to keep in place here when it was in chaos from the continual repairs being made. It was why Thorpe had brought only a handful of staff when he'd left London.

Now, as he wrote to the loyal servant who had also served his father faithfully, Thorpe mentioned he would be returning to London for a few days to speak to his solicitor. What he really intended to do was meet up with some of his friends and hide out at his club for a brief time. He hadn't intended on leaving yet, especially now that the summer was almost in full swing, but he couldn't resist an entanglement that he couldn't shake easily.

Once the letter was written, he called for his butler. When Beckham appeared in the frame, Thorpe held up the missive. "See that this is delivered to London at once. I shall be heading back for a few days to take care of some personal matters. Work shall continue in my absence on the house and grounds. That will not change." He lifted a brow. "I assume I can count on you to oversee things until my return?"

"Of course, Your Grace," he replied solemnly.

He nodded. "Good. I shouldn't be gone for more than a fortnight, at most."

Beckham nodded in return, then quit the room while Thorpe kept telling himself that he wasn't a coward. He *needed* to do this. He would keep the carriage here for Miss Richards' use, even though it would make for some grueling travel solely on horseback. But he wasn't about to go back on his word when he'd just given her the use of his conveyance. He was still a gentleman who kept his promises.

He groaned when the noise overhead began again. He got to his feet and headed toward his chambers upstairs. Even though it was closer to the disturbing racket, at least he could take heart in knowing he would soon be free of the commotion. There was a small blessing to be had in that regard, at least.

In his chamber, he started to gather a few things that he would need for the journey. He wouldn't have to take much since he had everything he needed in London. Just a few personal belongings until he made it there.

A movement out of the corner of his eye gained his attention, and he glanced out the window to see work had fully commenced outside. Miss Richards was pointing and giving orders to the men, who appeared to be listening. He hoped the trend would continue. If not, there would be some accountability when he returned.

After one last, lingering glance at the current object of his fascination, Thorpe returned to the task at hand.



Iona didn't see the duke when she left for the day, and all the way back to the boarding house, she told herself that she had only imagined he had nearly leaned forward and kissed her. There was nothing enticing about her serviceable gowns, her plain chignon, or her lack of sparkling jewelry and face tint to make her look appealing to the opposite sex. She was a simple woman who cared more for digging in the dirt than playing the coquette.

She closed her eyes and told herself to blot out the unfortunate events of the day. She told herself that, no matter how busy she might get from now on, she would ensure she made time to stop and have some tea to ensure her lightheadedness didn't return.

Nor the sudden loss of her senses.

She refused to allow herself to ponder what it might have been like to allow the duke's kiss. She'd never been kissed

before, and the prospect had always made her curious, even if there hadn't been anyone of her acquaintance who she might have enjoyed the attempt with. Rosewood, however, was another matter altogether. He was handsome and charismatic and made her feel things that she shouldn't be thinking about, especially since she was in his employ. She was at his residence to do a job—nothing more.

At least, she could look at today with a positive note, in that the men from the village had actually seemed concerned over her welfare when she had returned. They likely expected her to remain in the house for the rest of the afternoon, but she could see the respect in their gazes as she'd rolled up her sleeves and went back to work right next to them.

By the time they'd parted ways later that day, she had every confidence that they would return the next morning. Now that they knew what to expect from her, that she wasn't all talk, it would make a big difference when it came to their success.

When she walked in the door of the boarding house, both Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford were there to check on her progress. "How did it go today? Did anyone show up?" They almost asked in unison.

Iona had to smile because their interest was heartwarming. She wished her parents had the same sort of concern about her life. But perhaps they would in time if this situation with the duke proved to be lucrative. "It was a very pleasant day," she noted. "I wasn't sure how the men would respond at the beginning, but by the afternoon, we were of one accord. I don't have any doubt that they will return tomorrow."

Miss Stratford clasped her hands together, her green eyes shining. "How lovely! I knew you would make a formidable foe for any man! All you needed was the chance to express yourself."

"We're proud of you, dear," Miss Grantham said with a warm smile and a kind sparkle in her brown eyes. "I trust the duke was still amenable as well?"

Iona decided it was best not to reveal her slight episode, or what might, or might not, have followed afterward. “He was a perfect gentleman,” she replied evasively. “I would chat further, but I daresay I’m exhausted after such a long day.”

“Naturally. It was a lot to deal with. Tomorrow will hopefully be better,” Miss Stratford said. “I’ll have some water sent to your chamber for a bath, as well as a supper tray.”

Iona was about to tell them not to go to so much trouble on her behalf, but she decided that both sounded rather heavenly. And since she didn’t want to have any problems feeling faint tomorrow, it would do her good to have a filling meal tonight. “Thank you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

Two hours later, Iona was clean, and her stomach was full. She was also starting to grow weary, but before she fell into bed, she dragged out the journal she’d started the day she’d left London. She had intended for it to be a chronicle of her landscaping journey, but it had turned into more of a personal diary. She might not allow herself to think about the duke in public, but she wrote down her thoughts here, where she could be assured they would remain a secret.

Today I began working at the Duke of Rosewood’s cottage in Highbridge. It’s a lovely place, and I’m excited to start the plans that have only fluttered throughout my mind. It shall be nice when I can glance out across the grassy fields, with the wilderness beyond, and see the duck pond take shape, as well as the ha-ha wall. There was a slight hiccup today in progress. I failed to take proper care of myself and became a bit faint. I was escorted into the parlor by the duke himself, and after taking some tea and refreshments, I felt much restored. We were conversing easily enough, but then something shifted, changed, and I was quite sure that he was about to kiss me. It was only through my forbearance of mind that I was able to resist temptation and leave the room before catastrophe could strike.

She paused, considering what else to write, but she decided that was all she needed to say about the duke. To add anything further, to imagine there was more developing between them

than a mere business arrangement, would be akin to courting disaster.

She carefully slid the journal beneath her mattress and blew out the candle by the bed where exhaustion finally claimed her.



Sitting near the infamous bow window at White's in London, Thorpe held a drink in his grasp, but it was sadly neglected. He told himself that this was where he needed to be, but he was quickly finding out that it wasn't where he *wanted* to be.

More than once, he'd found himself contemplating what Miss Richards might be doing at any given time. He smiled because he could imagine she was standing with her hands on her hips, daring to give one of the village men a piece of her mind when they dared to contradict her. Nearly a week had passed, and although Beckham had given him an update on the progress regarding the house and the grounds, it was only words on paper. It wasn't the same as being there and witnessing it for himself.

And yet, he knew he couldn't go back. Not until this obsession had started to fade. At this point, he was starting to wonder if he would be plagued with the memory of Miss Richards forever.

"That brandy won't drink itself."

Thorpe slid a dry glance at the man who slid into a seat opposite his. "By all means, make yourself at home. It isn't as though I looked like I wanted to be alone."

Fraser Castwell, the Earl of Stanton snorted as he waved off the duke's statement. "When I saw you earlier this week, you were in high spirits, eager to have a good time. We had some drinks and enjoyed a few rounds at the gaming tables, but when I suggested the fun we could have at one of my favorite brothels, you scattered like a leaf on the autumn wind. I thought that was rather odd, even for you, but now here you sit and brood as though you learned you were about to be leg

shackled.” He narrowed his gaze. “Please don’t say that’s what’s ailing you, for I daresay I have someplace else I need to be.”

Thorpe had to chuckle despite himself. His former Oxford colleague was quite full of nonsense. It was nice to see some things hadn’t changed with time. “No, that isn’t the problem.” He straightened. “I don’t have any such qualms, although I was pondering the future.”

“That sounds suspiciously like wanting to settle down,” Stanton murmured with a grimace. “Lord, save me from the chit who has to spend the rest of her life with me. She will be quite miserable with her choice, I assure you.”

Thorpe lifted a brow. “You are quite eloquent with words. You should put some of your phrases into verse.”

Stanton barked out a laugh. “I don’t think the up-and-coming Keats would care to condone some of the things I might say about love or anything relating to it.”

Although Thorpe had nowhere else to be, he decided he wasn’t willing to sit there and listen to the earl talk down about an emotion that Thorpe, and he was quite sure Fraser, knew absolutely nothing about. It was easy to dismiss love when you had never been bitten by the bug.

He got to his feet and tossed some coins down on the table. “Feel free to drink my brandy. I didn’t touch a drop after I’d ordered it, and frankly, I’m not inclined to do so any longer.”

Stanton lifted his brows but said nothing as Thorpe turned around to leave. Unfortunately, his reprieve wouldn’t last long because the earl jumped to his feet and started to follow, but not without pausing and downing the brandy first. “I should be angry with you for daring to leave something so precious behind,” he muttered. “Thankfully, I saved you from making a dreadful folly.”

“Did you have a purpose in being my shadow?” Thorpe drawled.

“As a matter of fact—” The earl waited until they were outside on the street, and Thorpe had turned to him. “I was

finding it rather... tedious to remain in Town when all the diversions have hied off to the countryside. Might you be persuaded to join some of the entertainment for a few days at the seaside?"

Thorpe glared at him. "You despise the water."

Stanton sniffed, his blue eyes full of mocking humor. "Only because it makes my hair look dreadful." With a roll of his eyes, Thorpe was prepared to leave him without a second glance, but the earl stepped in front of him. "Fine. If you want the truth, I've heard that Burnham-on-Sea is becoming quite fashionable, and that is where all the ladies are going."

"But you aren't looking for someone to settle down with," he pointed out.

"No," Stanton agreed, then lifted a finger in order to make a point. "However, that doesn't mean I don't enjoy some harmless flirtation in the interim. Besides"—he held up the same finger—"weren't you just saying you were contemplating the future? I feel it's my civic duty to assist in that regard."

Thorpe's eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure I can trust you."

The earl groaned. "Come now, Rosewood. Surely, you don't wish to see me beg in the middle of the street?" His blue eyes flashed in horror, as if Thorpe might request he do just that. The earl held up his hands in entreaty. "I swear that I shall not be a bother. I just need some relief from this horrible lack of engaging women."

Thorpe crossed his arms. "You seem to be missing one minor detail," he drawled. "The entire structure is undergoing extensive renovations, starting with the roof and the grounds. I can assure you the noise is not pleasant. I can't guarantee I would be able to accommodate you."

"How long has the work been going on?"

After a brief recollection, Thorpe replied, "A little over a month."

Stanton waved a hand, unconcerned. "Most of the roof will be nearing completion by the time I arrive, and I'm sure you

could delay the rest for a short time to appease an old school chap.”

Thorpe resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose, although he did sigh heavily. “You’re not going to let this go until I say yes, are you?”

His companion grinned broadly. “Probably not.”

Faced with such a conundrum, Thorpe weighed his options. He could either return to Highbridge alone and face Miss Richards’ quiet beauty day in and day out and continue to be tempted, or he could agree to this asinine plan of Stanton’s and find relief in a diversion. “Fine.”

Stanton gave a satisfied guffaw and clapped Thorpe on the shoulder. “You won’t regret this!”

He rushed off, presumably to spread the word, and Thorpe decided he would most certainly regret this decision.

CHAPTER 8



Fifteen days, eleven hours, seven minutes—that’s how long it had been before Iona arrived at the cottage and spied the duke’s mount in the stable. But then, who was counting the days he’d been away from Highbridge?

Certainly not her. Iona had better things to do with her time than to pine for a member of the peerage, who was nothing more to her than the gentleman who paid her for tearing up his lawn.

She winced when she glanced about at the chaos—clumps of dirt and grass in haphazard piles around a large hole with shovels and various other tools strewn about, combined with stacks of brick and wheelbarrows filled with sand and limestone set out in various locations. She wondered what the duke had thought about the state of his lawn when he’d arrived. It would have been late last night after they had all left, or early this morning, because she had yet to set eyes on him.

Since Iona hadn’t known when he would return, she had made sure they all worked tirelessly every day but Sundays in an effort to make the fastest progress. But even though the days were long, and making the most of each hour was even longer, what they had done was still far from anywhere near completion. At first glance, it looked as though they made a mess of things. In reality, everything was coming along just as she might have expected with the manual labor that they had. She had been hoping she would be able to organize more men for the task, but after taking an afternoon to try to recruit some

workers from Burnham-on-Sea, other than a few stragglers that appeared, they were still running rather shorthanded. Iona was starting to wonder if they would be done by autumn.

Nevertheless, she had taken it upon herself to arrive before everyone else and leave last. The men from Highbridge had grown to appreciate her knowledge of the landscape, and when she was approached with an issue, she was quick in fixing it. Because of it, the environment was no longer strained. Even Mr. Parker had started to loosen up and joke around with her.

“Miss Richards.”

As soon as she exited the duke’s coach, she was confronted by Beckham. He had ensured when the sun was high in the sky that he appeared with cool glasses of fresh water and a few treats from the cook. Everyone, Iona included, was grateful for his consideration.

“Yes?” she answered in return.

“The master wishes for you to join him in his study.”

Iona’s pulse started to hammer in her breast. She feared he was upset by the state of his grounds, so she was prepared for a thorough lecture. She said nothing in return, just headed for the cottage behind the butler. She waited patiently while he announced her and then walked inside.

She told herself that when she looked up, her heart wasn’t going to leap in her chest at the sight of him, but she failed miserably. If nothing else, he looked even more handsome than when he’d left, or perhaps it was that she had been deprived of his appearance that she believed it to be true.

She stood there and waited for him to speak, but when he merely looked at her steadily from his seat behind that massive desk, she prompted, “You wished to see me?”

“Yes.”

She waited for him to elaborate. When he didn’t, she cleared her throat. “If you wish to inquire about the lawn—”

He waved a hand, and she fell silent. “That isn’t a concern. I expect there to be some damage to the current state, or else

how would it change?” Although he went far to ease her concerns, his expression appeared to darken even further. “You appear thinner.”

Iona glanced down at her gown, and although she had noticed it had started to become loose in recent days, she hadn’t given it much consideration. Her mother had always told her that she could withstand dropping a stone or two, and now she had the opportunity to live up to her expectations.

He regarded her a moment longer, and then he stood abruptly. He moved closer to her, and although Iona resisted the urge to take a step backward, she stood her ground. “Let me see your hands.”

The command took her aback, but he must have taken it as reluctance to comply.

He reached out and grabbed each of her wrists and turned the palms upward. “Just as I thought,” he murmured.

Iona knew what he saw. The first few days she’d been toiling, her hands had pained her terribly with the blisters that she’d gotten for her efforts. Now, she hardly noticed the annoyance, although her palms were still raw. She tried to remove her hands from his grasp, but he held tight, so she consoled herself—and saved her pride—by curling her fingers and concealing the evidence of her labor from his view. “It’s nothing unusual. It happens when you garden.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard,” he chided. He finally released her and walked over to the window overlooking the front of the house.

She lifted her chin slightly, and even though he couldn’t see her determination, hopefully he could hear it in her voice. “It’s my job to work.”

“At the cost of your health?” he snapped. He turned back to her, and those green eyes were flashing dangerously.

She knew he was thinking of the day she’d felt a bit faint. “My health is not a concern. I haven’t had any more... unfortunate episodes. Other than my hands, I can assure you I’m perfectly well.”



Thorpe didn't know why he was so disturbed, but knowing those soft hands were now covered with callused skin bothered him more than he could say. It was bad enough that she had visibly lost weight and was still wearing those dreadful, coarse dresses. He knew he had no right to dictate her life or forbid her to do a job that he was paying her to complete, but surely she didn't have to do so much of the physical aspect.

“How have the men been treating you?”

She inclined her head, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “Very well. They have been respectful and very easy to work with.”

He nodded his head. “Good. Then they won't have a problem if I take you off the lawn for a time to work on another project for me.”

The crease between her brows deepened, and he had the sudden urge to kiss it away until it was smooth again. “What sort of project?”

Rather than being tempted to act on his impulses, he returned to the chair behind his desk and waved for her to do the same on the opposite side. She hesitated and then walked over and sat down, folding her hands in her lap.

He resisted the urge to tap his quill or do anything else that might keep his mind preoccupied with something other than the woman before him. In the end, he gave up the fight and leaned on his desk to converse freely, so he could look his fill of her modest beauty. “I shall be having a guest near the end of the week.” He hesitated. “Perhaps more than one if the earl has anything to say about it.”

He waited for her to express some sort of emotion at the announcement. At the very least, surprise, but she remained perfectly neutral.

“I spoke with Beckham when I arrived this morning, and he assured me that the roof was nearing completion. Before I

engage in further construction on the interior, I'm going to give myself a break by enjoying some of this rare solitude away from the city." He leaned back in his chair. "This is where I need your kind assistance. As you know, the rest of the property is not as extravagant as it used to be and the reason for the necessary repairs. However, I would like to see what might be possible to bring in as a welcoming sight to the interior. Since you are familiar with landscaping, I assume your knowledge might also extend to interior design, such as what sort of floral arrangements may be needed to make it more appealing."

"Indeed," she concurred. "I enjoy flowers very much and have been known to brighten a room with my abilities."

He got to his feet. "Since I see no reason to delay, we should make a journey to Highbridge as soon as possible. I will inform your crew that you will be spending tomorrow with me."

He saw Miss Richards open her mouth to speak, but he was already headed out the door, where he could see the familiar wagons start to pull up the drive. He grinned because the timing couldn't have been more perfect. "Your Grace," she said from behind him. "You have a greenhouse here. What purpose would we have to travel to the village?"

He turned to her with a lifted brow. "For shopping, of course." He leaned forward slightly. "I daresay this cottage has a terrible lack of vases or other adornments that you might require."

She blinked those wide, brown eyes. How he had ever imagined her as "dowdy" was beyond his understanding because she was quite the opposite. "But—" Words appeared to fail her for a moment, and then she quickly added, "I'm not sure I'm the right choice for—"

He laughed. "There is no other I would choose for such a task. You have the expertise that I require." He glanced at her dress. "But perhaps a change of gowns might be in order? Perhaps the white dress you wore to the ribbon cutting ceremony?"

Her cheeks colored slightly. "I fear that was a loan from one of the other tenants, as most of the gowns I brought with me to Burnham-on-Sea were for the sole purpose of toiling in the dirt, but I'm sure I could come up with something."

He grinned. "Capital. It's all settled then."

By the grim look she wore, it was as if she were going to face the gallows rather than enjoy an outing. He had every hope that he would be able to bring a smile to her face.

He couldn't wait. The hours would surely drag until the morning.



"If you keep pacing like that, you're bound to wear a path through the floor."

Iona stopped and glanced at Miss Stratford, who was sitting in the parlor and working on some needlepoint. Her faded red hair was pulled back into a tidy bun, her clothes of the highest fashion, but it was those sharp green eyes that seemed to see more than Iona might wish that were unnerving.

She tried not to fidget as she sat on the edge of the settee. "I'm sorry, Miss Stratford. I suppose I'm a bit restless."

"Naturally," she murmured. "You're going to be with a handsome duke all day. No doubt the butterflies in your stomach are being quite contrary."

Iona barely withheld a groan. "What if I make a misstep?"

"I'm not concerned about that at all." The lady waved a dismissive hand. "You were raised properly in a good household, and Agatha will be acting as your chaperone for the day. I have no fear that all will be well."

Iona exhaled steadily. She wished she might be able to say the same. For some reason, seeing the duke every day was not nearly as bothersome when she was wearing her plain attire because it reminded her of the difference in their situations.

However, wearing a soft light-blue gown sparked the memory of a former life. One she would rather leave behind.

Nevertheless, Rosewood was her employer, and if he asked her to accompany him, it was difficult to refuse, for fear he would dismiss her completely.

It wouldn't be so bad if she didn't think about him continuously, if her journal wasn't starting to fill with several entries about him each night. She had told herself that any sort of fascination she might have held toward him had faded when he'd taken off to London for a few days, but it seemed as if absence had made the heart grow fonder. She was starting to fear too much intimate time in his company would cause her firm demeanor to falter.

She subtly gave her arm a slight pinch. It was one thing if she was alone with the duke day in and day out, but this was one afternoon. She was making too much out of something that shouldn't be worrisome at all.

Nevertheless, when the duke was announced, she jumped slightly. Miss Stratford raised her eyebrows at her reaction but said nothing as she turned her attention back to her task. "I'll see you later this evening," Iona noted.

The lady glanced up with a smile. "Have a nice time."

Iona was certain that she was about to be sick but, rather than greet Rosewood with a grimace, she forced a smile on her face as she met him in the foyer. He was looking at a random picture, and when she approached, he turned to her with a smile. "Ah, Miss Richards. It's nice to see you are punctual at all times, not just when it comes to my gardens."

The easy greeting soothed some of her apprehension. *Keep your focus on flowers and nothing more*, she reminded herself. "I have always prided myself on being prompt."

He inclined his head and then offered her his arm. She hesitated, wondering if she should accept, but since she didn't wish to be rude, she threaded her arm through his as he escorted her outside. "Agatha will be joining us," she added. "She's the housemaid."

“Capital.” He inclined his head. By the time Iona was comfortably seated in the familiar vehicle, she saw Agatha exit the house. The duke spoke a few words to her, and she nodded and climbed up next to the driver as Rosewood joined Iona.

She could feel the blood recede from her face. “Isn’t she riding inside?”

“I told her that a chaperone wasn’t necessary since we aren’t courting, and she mentioned how she appreciates the fresh air.” He winked at her as he shut the door and the carriage jerked into motion.

He settled himself across from her without a care to be had. Iona wanted to point out that, courting or not, her reputation could be taken into question since they were alone together in the interior, but she decided it was best not to press the issue. She certainly didn’t want to sound like a prude, and it wasn’t as though the duke was about to ravish her.

Unfortunately, the very image of him doing just that had her cheeks heating by degrees.

“Are you well?”

Iona’s focus jerked to him. “What?”

He smiled in an easy manner. “I asked if you were well. Your cheeks are slightly red.”

She lifted her hands and pressed them against her face. “Er... no. I suppose I am just a little warm.”

“You should take off your bonnet,” he suggested. “There’s no need to stand on ceremony at the moment. You need to be comfortable.”

That’s impossible with you so close, she thought to herself. But she decided she would do as he advised and remove the offending straw. She reached up to take out the hat pin, but when she attempted to pull the bonnet free, it caught on a stray strand of her hair. It came off with a painful pull that caused a few of the pins that were holding her hair back to break free and ping to the floor of the carriage. As a result, the long length of her hair came tumbling about her shoulders.

“Oh!” Her hand immediately went to her head as her cheeks went from warm to scalding. She reached out her arm and tried to gather the pins that were rolling about just out of reach at her feet, in a desperate attempt to salvage the embarrassing situation.

Could it possibly get any worse?

“Allow me.”

The duke easily gathered the pins in his grasp. She exhaled in relief, but when she glanced up, she found his face just inches from her own. Time instantly stood still as her lips parted in an unconscious invitation.

CHAPTER 9



Several things spun through Thorpe's mind as he looked at Miss Richards. One of which was, should he take advantage of a precarious situation and react on the impulse to kiss her? It's not as though it was the first time he considered doing so. The reason he hesitated now was he wasn't sure how *she* might react. No doubt she would be horrified and dare to call him every crude name she could think of to say.

Or...

He looked into those deep, brown eyes that haunted nearly every moment of his waking hours and decided her ire might be worth the risk for a taste of those delectable lips.

He leaned closer, and her lids fluttered closed. He heard the slight hitch in her breathing. It was enough of a positive sign that he dared to lift his hand and slide it into her hair. It shone with a brilliance he could seldom recall, like spun gold. He groaned at the contact of those silky strands moving through his fingers, and then he slowly touched his mouth to hers. His body immediately began to heat when he felt the soft, hesitant pressure of her response. The innocence, combined with her tentative approval, was a heady sensation. Even better than the finest brandy he might have consumed.

He made sure he was patient and gentle as he deepened the kiss, his tongue darting out to lick along the seam of her mouth. With a gasp, her lips parted, and he slipped inside for a deeper intensity. He could feel the moment she reached out and grasped his forearms. He was afraid she was about to push

him away, but instead, her fingers clutched him, curving into his jacket. He rewarded her by wrapping an arm around her back, pulling her even closer to him, until nothing separated them but the clothes they wore. What a damn nuisance. Thorpe didn't want a single stitch between them. Not now. Not ever.

There was a sudden jerk of the carriage, and they split apart.

Thorpe didn't move. She didn't move. They remained as they were, with their limbs intertwined about each other, but not a single word was spoken.

However, when her eyes widened slightly, he knew that the tirade was coming. He could almost see the tears in her eyes as she broke out into hysterics. He anticipated it because that was what any other debutante of his acquaintance would have done. They would have played the shy female who had been used by the evil man when, in reality, they were just as depraved. He wished he could spare them both the horror, but he was pleasantly surprised when she did nothing of the sort. She merely sat back and said, "The road seems to be a bit rough."

That was it.

Thorpe stared at her, waiting for the breakdown to ensue, but there was nothing more. She offered him a normal smile and then turned her attention out the window, as if they had been speaking of the weather or any other mundane topic, and now there was a lull in the conversation. When she glanced back at him, he tensed, wondering if this was where she berated him for his crude behavior. Instead, she said, "Do you still have my pins? I would like to redo my hair before we reach Highbridge."

He opened the hand that had been at his side, useless until that point, and held it out to her, palm open. She grasped the items from him and said politely, "Thank you."

As she began to twirl her hair into a bun and secure it, all he could do was sit back in his seat. He wasn't sure whether he ought to be grateful that he was spared any theatrics or be

worried she was the type to let her emotions simmer until they exploded in a fiery burst.

Whatever the reason, he was grateful for the reprieve. It gave him more time to fantasize about the next time he might find the opportunity to kiss her again—because he fully intended to do so.



Stay calm. Don't panic. The words rushed through Iona's head, but it was difficult to do. She didn't want to be calm. She wanted to panic because the Duke of Rosewood had just kissed her. *Her*—the woman who was in his employ. She wasn't a diamond of the first water, no one of consequence who might have turned his head, and yet somehow, she had found herself in an intimate embrace with him. It made no sense, but she couldn't deny it had happened. As much as she wished to sweep the episode under the rug, her lips were still tingling in the aftermath.

She wanted to close her eyes and revel in the moment for just a time, but she didn't dare. She had to act composed, unaffected, or else he might get the wrong idea and assume it was acceptable to do it again. That would be a terrible mistake. She had liked the first encounter entirely too much to allow a repeat. All a woman had was her reputation. If that were ever in question, it could easily destroy everything that she was trying to build. She had already been cast out of her parents' home when she'd left to pursue a dream that didn't meet their standards. She couldn't allow the same to happen at the boarding house. Without anywhere to go, she would be forced to survive by alternate means. Just the thought of what that would entail made her sick.

When the carriage finally halted, she couldn't have been more relieved. She carefully avoided any eye contact with the duke until they were securely on the ground, and she could put some distance between them. "Where would you like to begin?" she asked brightly. She glanced at him before her gaze shifted to the marketplace beyond.

“You’re the expert,” he murmured. “I shall merely follow your lead.”

“Very well.” She straightened her shoulders and began to move forward, determined she would keep the conversation strictly on the business at hand. “Is there any particular theme you were wishing to portray?”

“Not precisely.”

“I see,” she returned promptly. “I understand the Orient has been all the rage in London of late, or we can certainly go with something a bit more traditional. I have always admired the Queen Anne style of décor, but that may not be what appeals to you. Without knowing for certain, I can’t confidently choose something that you would be pleased with.”

Stop rambling, Iona chided herself because she knew that was what she was doing. In an attempt to keep the divide between her and the duke, she was so intent on speaking about neutral matters that she had forgotten less was more.

“I really don’t care. I’m not that concerned with the latest fashions,” he remarked dryly. “I trust your judgment implicitly, especially if your design is as adept as your landscaping abilities, but if it’s that horrendous, I’m certain I can make my sentiments known.”

Iona murmured something noncommittal and told herself to keep silent henceforth. She didn’t need to talk to take the awkwardness out of the situation. Silence was much better than mindless chatter.

They passed several vendors with vegetables and fruit for sale, but Iona kept going. Unless there was a pineapple available, which was highly unlikely considering how rare it was to obtain one, she was going to continue searching for the right adornments for the cottage. She soon turned her attention from the duke to her surroundings, and the hunt for the perfect items began to move through her veins. She had always loved design of any kind, even interior, so she was starting to slide into her element.

She paused near a flower seller's stall and, thinking of what the cottage represented—a quaint, charming house not far from the sea—she decided to go with that aspect. Thinking of seashells and the floating waves of the sea, she picked things that reminded her of the shore. Brown pottery vases were a perfect combination for the florals of rich indigo forget-me-nots and emerald green ivy, with a few lilies of the valley scattered throughout.

There were a few times she hesitated over what to purchase, getting into the rhythm of her expertise, but the duke never did, merely stood back and observed before handing over the requisite payment.

As the coach boot was filled with their purchases, some even spilling over into the interior of the coach with more scheduled to be delivered the following day, the duke turned to her with an easy, relaxed manner. “I think after such a productive day that you ought to be hungry. I certainly am.”

Iona nodded. “I could do with something to eat.”

“Indeed.” He spoke a few murmured words to the driver and the maid who had been sent along with her, then returned to hold his arm out to her. Together they made their way to a local inn.



Thorpe couldn't remember a time that he'd enjoyed himself quite so much. It was so nice to push his cares away for a time, to forget that he was a peer—as London liked to continuously remind him—and simply spend the day as a man with a lovely woman.

He had enjoyed watching Miss Richards move about and select various items that she thought would be suitable for the cottage. If he dared to fantasize about it, he might even imagine she was doing the same to every room in his house. Perhaps he might suggest that very thing to her once the exterior work was completed. Although she loved toiling in the dirt, the sight of her callused hands and her sweat-stained

brow pierced him with sorrow. Such beauty shouldn't have to work in those conditions. She should wear fine clothes and move about the house as if she were the duchess there.

Unfortunately, that was where he started to veer into dangerous territory.

He had no plans to marry any time soon, and he knew for certain that Miss Richards felt the same. But that didn't mean he didn't like having her at his side, nor that he wished to sever their connection in the near future. The idea that they would be parted in a few short months, when the work on his lawn was complete, made him rather unsettled. At this point, he was seriously considering hiring her on as the head gardener for Rosewood Manor. However, once he drew that line in the sand between master and servant, it was difficult to turn back.

Such things would have to be given further consideration. For now, he would content himself with being in her company.

As they entered the Globe Inn, their companions taking the rear entrance, they were seated by a friendly serving maid who batted her lashes quite openly at him. Miss Richards acted as though she didn't notice her flirtatious manner, but Thorpe thought he observed a bit of displeasing demeanor toward her, a clipped tone when she ordered her fare.

She sipped on a cup of tea while Thorpe preferred a refreshing spirit. "What shall we do next, Miss Richards?"

She removed her bonnet and tilted her head to the side. "What do you mean? We accomplished what we set out to do."

"Indeed, but it's such a lovely day that I hate not taking advantage of our time together."

She laughed, a light sound that slid over his body like a gentle caress. "You speak as if we are courting when the opposite holds true."

He lifted a brow. "Is there something wrong with wanting to have a bit of fun when we have been released from our responsibilities for a day such as this?" He could see her start to waver, so he added with a soft cajoling tone, "Come now. I

bet you haven't even been to the beach yet. Or played in the sand."

"I'm not a child," she returned dryly.

"No. On that, we are in perfect accord," he agreed, his gaze taking in the fullness of her bosom and then back to her face. "But don't you want to partake in the freedoms life has to offer before reality intrudes on the morrow?"

Her focus turned distant. "Reality is my constant companion. At least, it is for me, a gently bred woman who wishes to earn her way through life rather than appease a man to gain her worth."

His chest swelled with pride. Although he wanted nothing more than her regard to be on him, it was that determination of spirit that he admired so greatly because it was like no one else he'd ever met. Most of the debutantes in London were eager to please any gentleman of his acquaintance in order to gain that coveted title and birth the requisite heir. But Miss Richards cared nothing for those things. She wanted to live life on her own terms. In truth, Thorpe found himself envious of her bravery to take on the world that would shut her inside of a box of its own making.

"Reality can return tomorrow. Remove your inhibitions and revel in this day, Miss Richards." He tilted his head to the side and added softly, "With me."

She said nothing for a moment, but at least she didn't disagree with him completely.

When their meal arrived, they ate in companionable silence, each lost to their own thoughts. When they were finished, she dabbed at her mouth with her serviette and said, "Very well, Your Grace. You have convinced me. Let's have some fun."

Thorpe couldn't have been more pleased if she would have agreed to run away with him to Gretna Green, and that was a thought he'd rather not have at the moment because he might just urge her to do just that. That's how important this small victory was to him.

He drained the last of his ale and then pushed back his chair. Tossing a few coins on the table, he held his hand out to her. He grinned when she accepted the offering.



This was madness. There was no other word for it.

Iona knew she was playing with fire by agreeing to the duke's crazy suggestion, but she found she couldn't abide the disappointment that she would see on his face if she declined the offer. And to be honest, she had been anxiously awaiting the day she would have the opportunity to feel the warm sand beneath her toes.

They walked a short distance down to the local shoreline, just north of the mouth of the River Brue that emptied into the Bristol Channel. After a time, she thought to glance about for the coachman and the maid. As if reading her mind, the duke winked at her and said, "I imagine they will be along shortly."

She decided she would have to content herself with his reassurance as she kept her arm threaded through his.

As they passed a few stragglers upon the strand at this late afternoon hour, she dared to wonder how it might be should they act as a betrothed couple out for a stroll. Men touched their hats in an unspoken greeting, and ladies offered a slight smile. It was the most Iona had been recognized in the village, even during the festival when her work had been the center of attention. There were still some who looked down upon her for daring to chase her dreams, but now, on the arm of a handsome, sophisticated man, she was their equal once again.

She wanted to release a heavy sigh, but she was intelligent enough to realize an entire society wouldn't change overnight. It would take time and considerable effort to be a single woman who chose to live by her own merit. At least she had the support of Miss Stratford, Miss Grantham, their benefactor, Lady Beauvais, and the man at her side. If it wasn't for the duke, she would still be struggling to find her

first foothold. She was grateful for the opportunity that he had given her when no one else would.

“That looks like a nice expanse of sand to stretch our legs.”

She looked at the area he mentioned and slid a side-glance in his direction. “Doesn’t it seem a bit secluded?”

“Not at all. Merely deserted.”

The grin he offered made her lips twitch. She knew she should refuse to be led somewhere so private, but at the moment, she didn’t really care. Some of his enthusiasm for adventure had struck her, and she was eager to finally sink her bare feet into the water lapping against the shore.

Just as they stepped onto the sand, she removed her shoes. Holding them in her grasp, along with her discarded bonnet that she had yet to don, she looked at him with mischief likely written all over her face. “Care to race me there?”

With that, she took off running.

“You got a head start!” he shouted after her. “That’s quite unsporting of you!”

Iona laughed as she gave her feet wings to fly across the warm sand, with a slight coating of mud across the area closer to the water. With the strong earth beneath, she was able to maintain a firm traction and not sink into the ground.

Some of the pins had already fallen out of her hair, but again, she didn’t have the wherewithal to mind. In truth, it was wonderful to feel the wind whipping through the long strands. It wasn’t until she heard the decided pounding of footsteps behind her that she whipped her head around to see the duke had his shoes and stockings in his grasp and was quickly moving closer.

With a squeal, Iona picked up her pace and started to run faster. She was almost to her destination when the breeze from the duke brushed past her. He raised his arms up in the air in victory, and she stopped and tried to catch her breath. “That doesn’t count!” she said in between gulps of air. “I’m wearing constricting undergarments!”

He barked out a laugh. “But you had a decent length on me to begin with. I would think that makes us even.”

Iona leaned her head back and laughed until her stomach hurt. It had been so long since she had found a reason to smile, let alone allow such merriment to touch her, but now it came freely. The duke was right. Sometimes it was nice to release her inhibitions and just enjoy the day.

Suddenly, his laughter faltered, and his face turned solemn as he looked at her.

With a lingering smile, she asked, “What is it?”

He leaned back against a large rock jutting out of the side of the grassy embankment. “I wish I had the ability to paint because this would be a portrait I would cherish for the rest of my days.” He held up his hands and made a rectangle with his fingers. “With the sun behind you and the clouds coming in off the horizon, your golden hair flying out behind you—it looks positively... enchanting.”

Her smile vanished as she glanced away. She set her slippers down. “Don’t say things like that.” She was about to put her bonnet back in place, but he grasped her wrist before she could do so.

“Why not?” he demanded. “It’s nothing less than the truth.” Those mossy green eyes narrowed. “Don’t say you can’t feel the connection between us as well.”

She ripped out of his embrace. “It doesn’t matter if I do or not. It goes no further than this. You may not have a care for your future reputation, but it would be devastating to mine should I not heed the warnings of my actions.”

It was as if she hadn’t even spoken. “But you *do* feel something.”

She shook her head. Rather than continuing to engage in this conversation, she said firmly, “I should be getting back.” Iona turned to go, tears stinging her eyes for some reason. She shoved her bonnet on her head and tucked what strands she could beneath it.

However, when she started to go, a soft touch of his hand on her shoulder made her pause. It wasn't demanding or persuasive. It was just... there. "Please, stay with me. I vow to keep a respectable distance. I'm just not ready for the day to end yet."

She turned her head to the side. "We shall see each other tomorrow," she whispered.

"Yes, but you know things will be different when we are back at the cottage." He paused and she exhaled a deep breath. It was the last, softly spoken plea that dissolved the last of her will. "Please, Iona."

CHAPTER 10



There was nothing Thorpe liked better than the sound of her name crossing his lips, unless, of course, it would be her mouth pressed against his. He knew that he'd pushed her too far by saying what he had, but the only excuse he could offer was temporary insanity. Although madness wasn't prevalent in his family, he was starting to think he was the first to become afflicted. But with a woman like Miss Iona Richards there to tempt him at every turn without even trying to do so, it was difficult to remember their relationship was meant to be strictly professional.

For years, he had been hunted down like a fox because of his age-old title, but with Iona, he didn't have to worry about that. She didn't care who or what he was. She was there to do a service, and he kept trying to make it into something more. First the kiss, and now shoving his foot into his mouth.

And yet...

He couldn't seem to stop this yearning for her. He'd gone to London hoping to suppress these growing feelings, but it had only made him want her that much more.

"Iona." He whispered her name a second time, realizing it would be almost impossible to call her Miss Richards after today.

He could feel her tense, but she turned back around to face him. He reluctantly let his hand slip away and took a step back. "Shall we walk upon the strand and talk? Surely you can't find fault in that?"

“Very well.” She abandoned her shoes, and he did the same as they walked in silence for a time.

He made sure to keep his hands clasped behind his back, lest he was tempted to touch her again. At this rate, he was quite sure he would spend a lot of time with his hands occupied with other things. “Tell me about your family.”

He glanced at her and saw her focus was on the dipping sun on the horizon. It was still some time before dusk fell, and he was grateful for it. “My father is the younger son of a baron. My mother is gentry as well, but until my eldest brother married an American heiress, we were no one of particular note in society. After he wed, my two other brothers followed suit. They were the gems in my parents’ crowns, having done what was expected of them. I was the youngest, and the sole daughter, and the only one who failed to gain their regard.”

“Perhaps for now,” Thorpe pointed out, “but not for long. Word will reach them soon enough, and they will undoubtedly be proud of your achievements.”

Her lips twisted. “I doubt that. My mother is a force to be reckoned with and entirely old-fashioned. She believes that a woman’s place is preparing dinner parties to make her husband shine even brighter. I daresay I could not abide such a future looming ahead of me, no matter how much I tried to fit into her perspective. It was like setting a round peg into a square hole.”

“You grew up with three older brothers,” he murmured. “What did she expect?”

She slid a glance at him. “It’s exactly what I attempted to explain to her, but she refused to listen.” She sighed heavily. “She *always* refused to listen. So, I decided I wouldn’t waste my breath any longer. They cut off all support and correspondence to me, although it hasn’t been for any lack of trying on my part. I’m grateful that Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham have been so kind. They have done everything in their power to try to find me suitable work, and they do not charge full rent for the rooms until you are properly settled. They said the boarding house was their way of assisting

women who were looking to become independent. I came across the advertisement in a London ladies' paper and decided I would take a chance." She shrugged. "Here I am." She laughed lightly and offered him a gentle shove with her arm, letting him know that things were easy between them once more. "What about you? Do you have a tale of woe to share?"

Thorpe smiled. "Not really. Unlike you, I have had to struggle in vain to find my place, but we both know it is infinitely easier when you are born male. However, when I went in search of a way to recover the funds that my grandfather gambled away, it was challenging to find an investment that would be profitable, with the dreaded idea that I shouldn't roll up my sleeves to do it." He shook his head and lowered his voice. "But between you and me, there were times I did just that to gain an investor's notice. We are in the growing age of technology, whether some people care to acknowledge it or not. I decided that the best way to put my foot forward was to prove that machines are one of those rare inventions that can make life much easier."

"I daresay you are right in that regard." She nodded her head. "London is growing every day, and there has to be a better means of survival, a way to earn an honest wage. Factories have been proven to be useful, but still, some people can't understand the benefits of a noisy, crowded building."

"Precisely," he concurred. "Look at how far we have come since the invention of the cotton gin and steam-powered engines? Imagine what could be done if the country was connected by rail? Or how much labor could be saved by finding a way to cut fields in less time?"

She stopped walking and abruptly turned to him. "I daresay you and I are of a like mind, Your Grace. I wish the rest of the world would pause and see the benefits rather than the restrictions such inventions might add to our daily lifestyles."

Thorpe's hand reached out and cupped her cheek before he could think better of it. Then again, it was her fault for looking up at him in such a lovely manner. "Thorpe."

“What?”

He smiled. “It’s my name. I wish for you to use it. In private, at least.”

He could see her heart wavering, even if her mind wanted to remain firm. It wasn’t until she breathed his name on the wind that he knew true splendor. “Thorpe.”

“That’s all I needed to hear to make this day complete.” He wanted nothing more than to kiss her in the waning light, but he decided it was time that he escorted her to the boarding house, or else he might never let her go at all.



Iona had trouble going to sleep that night. Her mind was filled with thoughts of the duke—*Thorpe*. She knew it was wrong to think of him in such an intimate manner, but she was powerless to do so now, especially after the wonderful day they had shared. It had been a long time since she had been able to speak so openly and freely about any subject, especially that of her parents, a matter that was still uppermost in her mind. She was starting to wonder if the rift between them would ever be repaired. It had been months, and she had yet to receive word from her mother. It was as if Iona hadn’t just been cut off, but dismissed entirely. It hurt terribly, but she had already made her decision, and there was no turning back.

The more time she spent with the duke, the more Iona was realizing just how glad she was that she had put her dreams first rather than follow her mother’s suggestion and marry an aged earl to act as a proper broodmare to fill his nursery. Such a bleak future had filled her with dread whenever she thought about it. She couldn’t abide the prospect and, rather than live the rest of her days as a spinster, the only child who had disappointed the family and sullied their name, she had left, hoping to earn their respect on her own merit.

Perhaps, if she was successful with the duke’s cottage, she would finally gain that recognition she coveted. Or if nothing else, be able to build a bridge back to her family. Whenever

she thought of her young nieces and nephews, she was filled with melancholy, but instead of allowing the tears to fall, she wrote her heart in her journal.

She tossed the covers aside and lit the lamp on her bedside table. Perhaps if she wrote down what she was feeling now, she might be able to get some rest at last.

Dipping her quill in the ink, the nib hovered over the page, and then the words started to flow.

I find that my mind is too restless to sleep this night. I already mentioned the duke in my earlier passage and the spectacular day we shared on the shore, but now his image continues to haunt me. I wonder if I have started to cling to him recently because I am mourning the loss of my family. I knew this would be the result when I decided to pursue my dreams, and I have done rather well in dismissing my emotions, but it is quite difficult this night. My heart is bruised but joyous at the same time. I wonder if that is the true malady to my current melancholy. I know that the duke and I shall never be more than acquaintances, and my heart aches because of it. He is a wonderful conversationalist and makes me laugh. He compliments me, and I feel beautiful in his presence. But most of all, he sees me as I am, as the woman I want to be. He holds no judgment against me for my desires, and that is more appealing than I should like to admit. I tell myself daily that I need to remain aloof, to keep my distance, but then he looks at me with those mesmerizing green eyes, and I am quite lost to his charm.

I still feel his mouth upon mine, his hand holding mine, and a warmth steals over me that I can't explain. It's as if I'm warm from the inside out. It's a strange feeling, but one I know would be devastating to pursue. I don't want to be a fallen woman. I came to Burnham-on-Sea to forge a path for a new generation, and if I act on those baser urges, I shall only destroy my cause for women to be heard, to be seen as something other than a broodmare.

And yet...

My heart continues to beat furiously toward him. Thorpe. Thorpe... I close my eyes and can picture him with the sun glinting off his dark hair, the smug smile upon his lips, and I can see the spiral of destruction before me. But try as I might, I can't avoid the vortex. I fear it is inevitable. I can feel myself falling... falling...

Iona set down her pen and stared at the words she had just written. Whatever she was feeling at the time, she allowed the words to flow freely. She didn't try to censor any of it because she wanted a way to look back at a passage that might help her through a particularly trying time. What she had written now was nothing short of a heart that was in danger of becoming engaged.

Her heart started to pound, but rather than from desire, this time it was from pure fear.

She closed her eyes and slowly shut the journal. But it was still a long time before she was able to calm her mind enough to sleep.



The carriage stopped, and Iona jerked awake. She had been dozing on the way to Highbridge, finding that her late-night musings were catching up to her in the light of day. It was the first day she wasn't eager to start working on the landscape, and when she stepped to the ground and saw that the sky threatened rain in the distance, she nearly prayed for a reprieve so that she could return home and recover the sleep she'd lost.

It was the duke's voice that made her eyes fully open for the first time that morning. "Good morning, Miss Richards. A lovely day, is it not?"

She glanced at the heavy, gray clouds and wondered if he'd even noticed them. "Indeed, Your Grace," she murmured.

He paused, some of his joviality slipping. "Is something amiss?"

It took her brain a moment to realize he was speaking to her. “I admit that I had trouble sleeping last night, but I can assure you I’m up to the task ahead today.”

His grin returned. “I daresay I’m anxious to see how you arrange the house with your meticulous style.”

Iona nearly groaned. With stars dancing in her eyes regarding the duke, she had nearly forgotten the importance of why they had spent the day together. She wasn’t sure her energy level was up to snuff for spending a quiet day arranging flowers and décor inside the cottage, but she would do her best. “I’m eager as well,” she returned with a smile she hoped was sincere.

As the wagons began to roll in, Iona instructed the men on what they needed to work on that day, and then she joined the duke in the front parlor, where all the purchases from the day before had been laid out in neat piles. “I trust this is a sufficient place to begin?”

She nodded. “Quite ideal.”

He hesitated. “Do you require my assistance?”

A frisson of yearning crawled up her spine, but she shoved it firmly aside. “I think I can manage.”

If she didn’t know better, he almost looked a bit crestfallen. He started to walk toward the door. “If you change your mind, I shall be in my study.”

She knew it would have been easy to gain his companionship for the second day in a row, but she also knew the repercussions of doing so—more pages in her journal would be devoted solely to him. At this point, he was starting to fill the pages more than her landscaping. “Very well. Thank you.”

He turned on his heel and left, and Iona released a slow breath. She looked at the monumental task ahead, knowing it would take the better part of the day to properly arrange all the flowers and ensure the cottage was prepared for a welcoming house party. She glanced outside and yearned to join the men toiling in the dirt. It would do her good to remember her place,

the divide between her and the master of the house. As it was, she felt as though she was taking on the role of reluctant mistress rather than the hired help.

Nevertheless, after today, she wouldn't have to concern herself with whatever happened inside the cottage, as there would be no further reason to remain inside near the duke.

As she set to her task, she had to give the duke credit for ensuring that anything she might require was close at hand. She took up a pair of shears and started to trim the ends of the flowers, arranging them in the vases that they had purchased. She did that for the rest, five in total, and then sat back and surveyed her work. Satisfied it was how she wanted, she set to work on the rest of the décor. Rosewood had mentioned he believed the interior was rather bland, so Iona had continued with the seaside theme. From rugs in seafoam green to nautical accessories, she started to place things in various places about the room.

“As usual, you don't disappoint.”

She spun around to see the duke leaning in the doorframe. Instantly, her heart fluttered in her chest, and she put a hand over her breast.

“I apologize. I didn't mean to startle you.”

Iona nodded lightly, grateful that he interpreted her reaction as shock and not what it truly was, the response to seeing him again. Perhaps it was her weary eyes, but he looked even more handsome than usual. It might have been the casual way he was looking at her, or the slight smile on his lips, but she had to glance away in order to gain control over herself. “It's quite all right,” she assured. “I was nearly finished here.”

“Then my timing is fortuitous, as I thought to give you a tour of the rest of the cottage so you would know the other rooms that needed a bit of freshening up.”

Iona set down the shears and walked forward to join him. She was grateful that he didn't hold out his arm to her, where she would be honor bound to accept. The barrier was back in place. She gave an inward sigh of relief.

“The foyer, of course, could use one of those fabulous vases that you selected,” he noted as he led the way down the hall. “The music room is next, and although it hasn’t been used in some time, I thought a few things might go in here.” Iona made mental notes as they went along. He led her up the stairs and opened various doors along the way. “The guest rooms. I’m not exactly sure what to expect, but I have no doubt that the earl has things well in hand.” He offered a slight grimace, and she had to smile.

“Will this strictly be a gentlemen’s party, or will ladies also be in attendance?” As the duke looked at her, Iona nearly kicked herself for asking such a bold question. However, curiosity had prompted it, and before she could retract her mouth from speaking, the words had already spilled forth. She cleared her throat and added, “I would like to know in order to decide what flowers to put in each room.”

He lifted a brow. “I thought everything was the same?”

Blast. “Similar, of course,” she returned smoothly, hoping he didn’t know enough about flowers to catch the error. “But there is always a feminine and masculine way of setting them in their vases.” *Good lord.* Was that the best she could come up with? It sounded like a rather tepid explanation, even to her.

“I see.” He seemed to consider her words, but his eyes sparkled with something akin to merriment. “I regret that I can’t verify what the earl has planned, but since we certainly can’t have a masculine vase of flowers in a lady’s room, is there a way to ensure they are neutrally placed?”

Iona smiled tightly. “I’m sure I could adjust them accordingly.”

“Very good, then. Shall we continue the tour?”

CHAPTER 11



Thorpe wanted to laugh. It took everything he had not to do so. *Masculine and feminine arrangements?* Surely, she didn't think he was that naïve when it came to flowers? Although it did warm his heart to imagine she was uncomfortable with the idea that other women might be present at the cottage and vying for his attention. He would like to assure her of that last fact, but he could tell she was more distant today, having felt her hesitation the moment she'd stepped down from the carriage with a cool greeting.

It was a pity that she had reverted back to their original formality, but he wasn't surprised in the least. He might wish for something more between them, but she was making it clear that there wouldn't be. As much as he might hate that, he couldn't blame her. She was taking all the risks. If they started to engage in an affair and it came to light, she would be the one to suffer the consequences. He knew this, and yet, he couldn't stop the way his body responded when she was near.

Once she seemed confident about what she would do with the rest of the items in the parlor, Thorpe decided to leave her again and headed outside to check on the progress that was being made to the rest of the cottage. He was glad to see the repair to the roof was nearing completion. The constant hammering would soon cease, and he couldn't be more grateful.

The landscape, although still a work in progress in the front of the house, was starting to take shape. After weeks of digging and setting bricks in piles, tools strewn about in

haphazard fashion, he could see the realization of what Iona had only hinted at in her drawings. The fantasy was starting to come to life, and he was already amazed. He could easily imagine what it might look like when it was complete. He was grateful for the village men, who had dared to listen to a lady's advice, because it was going to be one of the best yards in England.

One of the men noticed him and removed his cap. Wiping the sweat from his brow with his arm, he bowed respectfully. "Your Grace."

Thorpe noticed his large, muttonchop whiskers. It was difficult to mistake him for anyone other than the original antagonist in the inn when they had been trying to recruit men willing to take on some extra labor. "Parker, isn't it?"

The man grinned broadly. "It is, Your Grace. You have a good memory."

Thorpe chuckled. "I was taught to recall many things, from books to verse, so someone's name doesn't seem like that much of a hardship." He glanced around them. "It's starting to take shape." He nodded toward a large hole that was steadily being filled with water. "Especially the duck pond. Let's just hope we gain some visitors."

Mr. Parker nodded. "I admit I had my doubts about this entire project when I started. I would have done things a lot differently than Miss Richards, but I have to say I've learned a lot from her. Who would have imagined a woman might have such a logical mind when it comes to such things?"

"Yes. Who, indeed?" Thorpe murmured in return. It wasn't the first time he had been impressed by Iona's intelligence. He was starting to wish other ladies of his acquaintance might have the same thought process, but then there were some gentlemen who would undoubtedly be threatened by a woman with such knowledge and fortitude. They would rather laze about in a brothel or gaming hell and sip from a brandy. It wasn't so long ago he used to be the same, but once he realized there were more important things in life that demanded his time, such as recouping the family coffers, he

had made some permanent changes, and now he was glad he'd done so. It was an alteration that he wasn't sure his friend, the Earl of Stanton, might ever realize. He seemed quite content to be the consummate rake for the rest of his days.

A sudden clap of thunder rumbled behind them, and Thorpe turned to see the heavens were about to open up on them all. He turned to Mr. Parker. "Are you the one in charge of this rowdy crew?"

"I suppose I am," he concurred.

"In that regard, let me offer you the rest of the afternoon off with pay. We're all about to be drenched, and I am one of the first to say what a miserable feeling that is."

Mr. Parker's eyes widened. "We would appreciate that, Your Grace." He inclined his head. "Thank you for your kind consideration."

As Thorpe returned to the house with a light heart from doing a good deed, he sought out Iona. The parlor was empty of any further décor, which meant she was likely nearing the end of her indoor project. Once this was done, Thorpe pondered what he might think of for her to do next that didn't involve her appearance in the gardens. He didn't want to look upon those soft white hands and find those terrible calluses ever again.

He noted the music room was already decorated, as were most of the guest rooms—except for one. He paused in the doorway and stared at the lovely, sleeping woman that reminded him of a story that he had heard about in the popular Grimm's fairy tale book, *Little Briar-Rose*.

With a grin slowly spreading over his face, he knew exactly how he would wake his lovely guest.



Iona had nearly been finished with decorating when a weariness stole over her that caused her eyes to droop. She gazed longingly at the inviting bed behind her and told herself

not to give in to temptation. However, when her head actually jerked forward, she started to fear that she would knock one of the vases over when she was trying to arrange the flowers. She dared to risk another lingering glance behind her. Since no one was around, she decided she would just take a quick repose. She wasn't generally in the habit of taking naps, so she wasn't sure if she could even sleep. Just a brief moment to close her eyes. That's all she needed to be refreshed.

Iona lay down on the bed, and that was the last thing she recalled—until she started to have the most enchanting dream. She was standing in the midst of a ballroom in a gown spun from gold.

The sea of guests suddenly parted, and a man in black and white formal attire walked toward her. His face was in shadow, but as he held out his hand, without a word to her, she accepted his offer to dance.

They were the sole occupants on the floor, as the other guests remained along the sidelines in order to admire the lovely couple that they made as they spun around in a magnificent waltz. They locked eyes with each other, the green hue of his starting to take shape. They hardly even noticed the rest of the people in attendance. A feeling of complete adoration passed between them, and Iona realized she couldn't have dared to hope for anything more. This moment was perfect—it was for them.

When the dance completed, she allowed him to lead her off the floor and out to the open terrace. The air was cool, a perfect complement to the heat that had surrounded them as they had danced. He said nothing as he gently lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes.

With a sigh, Iona lifted her head to his. It was in that moment that his face finally came into view. It was Thorpe. He lifted her arms and wound them about his neck, and she held on to him as their lips met.

Iona moaned in the state somewhere between consciousness and dreams. She could have sworn that the embrace seemed so real, but surely, that was impossible. But

even as she denied the truth, the kiss deepened, and she was powerless to resist the urge to kiss him back.

“Iona...”

It was the whispered benediction that caused her mind to snap to reality. She opened her eyes and saw the image of the duke above her. With a gasp, she scrambled to a sitting position. He slowly straightened as well. “What are you doing in here?” she demanded.

“It’s my house,” he pointed out. “And you were the one who was sleeping in my guest chamber.”

She hesitated for a moment as chagrin washed over her, but her ire returned in full force. “That doesn’t give you the right to... to... *assault* me as you did!”

He held up his hands in entreaty. “All I did was discover a gentle way to wake you. Would you have preferred I entered the room shouting? Or perhaps frightened you by shaking you awake?”

Iona frowned. “Of course not,” she sputtered. “But neither do I think it was proper of you to kiss me.” *Because now I don’t want it to end.*

He put a hand over his heart, any sort of merriment that might have been evident in his gaze quickly vanishing. “If you are offended, I do apologize. It was not my intention to upset you.”

Iona was struck by the sincerity in his tone. She could find no trace of mockery, so she began to relent. “Forgive me. I don’t generally get so upset.” *Unless you kiss me, and then I’m flustered beyond reason.*

“Does this mean I’m forgiven?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Yes. As long as I am, for daring to give in to the urge to rest a spell.”

“Granted.” He offered her a wink, but before he got up to leave, he sobered once again. “If I were to try to kiss you again, would you deny me the privilege?”

She glanced away. It was easier than meeting his gaze directly, where he would be able to ascertain the lie more easily. "I told you that it wouldn't be a good idea."

"That doesn't answer my question."

She forced herself to turn back to him. "It should be enough."

Time stood still as they regarded one another. Iona was sure her heart was beating loud enough that he would be able to hear it. Finally, he got to his feet.

"Then I shall bid you farewell, Miss Richards."

Iona should have let him go, should not have dared to react as she had, but once the words were out of her mouth, they were impossible to retract. She stood. "Wait."

He stopped, his back stiffening. He turned his head to the side, his face in profile. "Yes, Miss Richards?"

She didn't know whether it was the remnants of the dream still in her mind, or her own yearning, but she said softly, "I changed my mind."

He didn't move. "About what?"

"I want you to kiss me." She exhaled sharply. "I'm *asking* you to."

"Are you sure? I don't wish there to be any doubt."

"Yes."

At last, he turned around, but rather than letting the moment build up anticipation, he strode toward her. Before she could speak, he'd captured her face in his hands and lowered his head.

Iona's head instantly started to spin. She wasn't sure what to do except lift her arms and wind them around his neck. It was as if they were in her dream again. Although everything within her warned this was dangerous, that it was madness to allow herself this one moment of bliss, she couldn't refrain from the sweet enticing charm drawing her to his side.

Her journal would have a long entry this night.



Thorpe had never been a very religious man, but he knew if there was a heaven, this was surely what it felt like. To have Iona's full engagement was like nothing he ever had dared to hope for. She was always so determined to resist the attraction simmering between them that it had come as a surprise when she'd asked him to kiss her. He had been longing for a deeper connection, but he respected her enough not to push things any further than she wanted, regardless of his disappointment. If this was the only instance where she dared to open herself up to him, he was determined to make sure it was an encounter she would never forget.

Holding her face in his grasp, he slowly allowed his arms to fall down to her shoulders. Gripping her arms, he pulled her firmly against him until nothing separated them but their clothes. He wanted more, and he intended to push those boundaries to see how far she would let him go. Licking along the seam of her closed lips, he parted them slightly and slid his tongue inside her mouth to engage in a sensual dance with hers. As he mimicked the act of lovemaking, he could feel her start to melt against him.

Sliding one hand behind her back, he let the other one drift along her exposed collarbone. With a fingertip meant to tease as their kiss steadily deepened, he dared to slip a finger along the edge of her bodice until the tip brushed along the tops of her creamy breasts. There was a hitch in her breathing, and he could tell she was affected by it.

Putting his palm over one of her taut nipples, he rubbed in a gentle circle. She moaned against his mouth, and he had to fight the urge to fill with masculine pride. He had fantasized about how responsive she might be, how passionate, and now he knew. She would be remarkable if he ever got the chance to bed her. Not that it would ever happen. He was quite stunned she was allowing this moment to drag on as much as it had. However, as an intelligent man, he wasn't about to complain about his good fortune.

Thorpe dared to take things one step further. He let his hand trail from the curve of her breast and down her ribcage, where he started to gather her dress. He reached the hem and trailed his hand up her bare leg. She jerked and he paused, waiting for her to push him away, but the only thing she did was clutch his shoulders even tighter. Thorpe inwardly cheered at the small victory and moved his hand closer to the heart of her desire.

He slid a finger along the seam of her wet core and flicked the sensitive bud between her folds.

With a gasp, she ripped her mouth away from his. “What are you... doing?” she panted.

“I am only trying to pleasure you.” He halted his movements. “Do you want me to stop?”

She seemed to consider this, but then she shook her head. “No.”

He rewarded her acquiescence by repeating the earlier motion, but this time, he increased the pace slightly. Her head lolled back, her eyelids closing as her white teeth bit her lower lip. It was so erotic that Thorpe’s cock immediately started to pulse with energy. It had been stirring before now, but that small action had his erection fully responsive.

He reminded himself that this encounter wasn’t for him. His focus was solely on pleasing her. He continued to tease her, faster and faster, until he could tell she was close to her release, but then he would start to cease his movements. Her cheeks were flushed red at this point, her frustration evident in the furrow between her brows when he would slow.

“What are you... doing to me?”

“I’m heightening the moment where your passions will be unleashed.”

“Oh.” He was quite certain she didn’t comprehend. Her eyes were hooded, filled with longing that she didn’t fully understand, although it was enough for her to say, “Do you mind going a bit faster?”

He would have chuckled had the intensity not nearly driven him over the edge as well. “Your wish is my command—if you say my name.”

She visibly swallowed. “Thorpe,” she whispered.

This time his hand moved relentlessly, and within seconds, she was shattering in his arms. He absorbed every tremor that passed through her body, memorized every expression that passed over her face. Later, when he took himself in hand, he would recall every small detail about this moment as he orgasmed. He would imagine she was sucking on his cock when he closed his eyes. He would feel her hand gripping him as he shouted his release.

With his cock aching desperately, he removed his hand from beneath her skirts and gave her a slight kiss on the lips before he took a step back. Her expression still looked like a woman who had been loved rather well, so he glanced away, lest he be tempted to sink his cock into her wet heat. If he had been the Earl of Stanton, he would have likely done just that, but he wasn’t the sort of libertine who couldn’t control his baser urges. At one point, he might have been the type to ruin a respectable lady, but he wouldn’t do that to Iona.

A flash of lightning came through the window, followed by a rumble of thunder that nearly shook the house on its foundation. Her eyes abruptly widened. “The workers!” She started to head for the door in a panic, but he grasped her arm before she could go far.

“I sent them home earlier,” he murmured. “I was going to suggest you do the same, but then I found you asleep.”

The red on her cheeks brightened considerably. “I do apologize about that—”

“All is already forgiven,” he reminded her. “But I cannot, in good conscience, allow you to travel home in this storm. I will see that a guest room is prepared for you.” He glanced at the bed and told himself that he was doing this for her own safety because it certainly wasn’t for his peace of mind. Having her so near would be akin to torture. He was undoubtedly not going to get much sleep this night.

Nevertheless, he offered a charming grin as he gritted his teeth and said, “Perhaps this chamber will suit since you seemed to find comfort in it already.”

CHAPTER 12



Iona froze. She knew it wasn't a good idea to spend the night anywhere near Thorpe, but if she were to demand to return to the boarding house, she took the risk that the carriage might lose purchase in the mud, or worse, that the horses might injure themselves and become lame. She wouldn't be able to rest well should that happen. She might not like to ride, but she couldn't abide the thought of an animal being in pain.

She knew what she must do.

"I think you might be right, Your Grace."

He inclined his head. "I will ensure that some clothes are procured for you, as well as a bath. You certainly can't sleep in that dress."

She glanced down at the brown material and noted it was smudged with dirt and slightly stained from her efforts. As far as a nightdress, she nearly said she would just sleep without one, as the heat that was still humming inside of her from her interlude with Thorpe would keep her plenty warm. "That would be lovely. Thank you."

It wasn't until he left the room that Iona sank down onto the bed. It had been a struggle to contain herself, but she couldn't very well go into hysterics with the duke present. The sole reason she resisted the urge now was because she was in shock that she had let things go that far.

How many times had she told herself that it wasn't a good idea for her to get too close to Thorpe? Hadn't she reminded

herself of that very fact just that morning? And yet, what had she done? She wished she could claim that it had been a terrible mistake, but it had felt so *right* to be in his arms that she couldn't say it was so with the full confidence she required.

At least she knew she was still a virgin. Her mother had given her plenty of lectures on what was required of a lady when she married. She had explained what happened between a man and woman, in that she was supposed to lie there and allow him access to her body until he filled her with his seed. She knew that hadn't happened, but neither did she understand how *good* it had been for him to touch her. Her mother made it sound as though it was a terrible chore that must be endured, like her courses each month.

What she'd experienced in Thorpe's arms was certainly not tedious in the least. It was quite... She wasn't even sure she could put a name to the ecstasy that had poured through her veins, a sensation like no other, where time suspended and earth and space became one entity.

It would be rather easy to engage in such activity again, but then it would be the height of folly to do so. She was still under his employ and had a duty to fulfill. She might be decorating the interior of this house, but she wasn't the mistress. Someday, he would be honor bound to find a wife for the security of his lineage, and it wouldn't be her. Iona didn't even want the role of duchess. She had left everything in London behind to ensure she escaped that very path. She was a determined woman who had a dream that she wished to see come to fruition. If she settled down with a husband and children, this opportunity would be the only one she would ever have. Any others that may come would never take place because a woman's place was in the home. It was a certainty that had been drummed into her head ever since she was a child. She was meant to birth the requisite heir and host meaningless dinner parties for the *ton*. The most difficult task she would ever have to undertake as a society wife was to ensure her name was never besmirched by rumor or scandal. It was impossible because there was always someone willing to

spread an untruth, just for the sake of something to discuss over afternoon tea.

Iona couldn't abide tearing down others for the sake of entertainment. But that's what she would have become should she have remained with her parents and decided not to embark on this journey. To live a life full of such deceit and betrayal was not what she had wished for her future. But neither did she want to become a fallen woman. She must curb this insatiable desire for the duke before it was too late, and more than her reputation was destroyed.

She could very well lose her heart as well.

Iona lifted her chin and continued with her earlier task. By the time one of the house maids entered with a pile of clothes in hand, followed by a trail of footmen with steaming buckets of water for the copper tub in the corner, Iona was waiting patiently. "The duke has invited you to dine with him when you are ready," the serving girl noted. "I am here to help you change after your bath."

With a frown, Iona took note of the ice-blue, satin evening gown. She hadn't thought this was going to be part of her bargain with the duke. She assumed she would take a tray in her room. She might be a reluctant guest here, but it was only due to the storm. Otherwise, she didn't expect special treatment. "Where did he acquire that dress?"

The maid blinked. "I'm sure I can't say, miss. I don't question the master. I merely take orders."

Iona barely withheld a sigh as she started to disrobe. "I shan't need assistance. I am capable of dressing myself."

The girl hesitated. "It might be difficult as this is a back-lacing gown."

Again, Iona found that frustration poured through her. "I see. Very well, then."

Once the flurry of servants had taken their leave, Iona patiently waited as the maid took her soiled gown, then sank down into the steaming, scented water. As she scrubbed her skin, she recalled how lovely such luxuries were. She yearned

to linger, but since time wasn't on her side, she stepped out and dried off. Then she reluctantly stood still as the maid helped her into the gown. As she was lacing the back, Iona's eyes stung with moisture. She could remember a time, not so long ago, when she'd gone to various social functions and she had to undergo the same patience. It had made her feel like a child at the time, who was incapable of doing the simplest task on her own, but now she was only further reminded of the life she'd left behind.

However, with an iron will, she turned her attention to the various décor in the room. With the few personal touches she had placed about the room, she had to admit it brightened the faded wallpaper and outdated furnishings quite considerably. She straightened her shoulders because it was exactly what she needed to recall her true purpose for her life.

“Shall I freshen up your hair, miss?”

Iona shook her head and decided the simple chignon she always wore would suffice. “No, thank you.”

She nodded. “As you like, miss. Shall I direct you to the dining hall?”

“I can manage,” Iona said with a twist of her lips. It was earlier that day she had been arranging vases of flowers and adding them to the large oak table.

“I will turn down your bed and start a small fire in the grate while you're gone. It might be warmer during the day, but the nights can still carry a slight chill.”

Iona wanted to tell her not to bother going to so much trouble, but in the end, she just smiled and inclined her head. She didn't want to be rude to the girl, but she knew she would have to have a talk with her employer. If he started to blur the line of their relationship from hired help to esteemed guest, that is what would cause the servants to talk.

And that was never good.



Thorpe was standing at the head of the table, but he refused to sit until Iona appeared. He had taken extra care with his appearance, wearing silver breeches, white stockings, and a dark-blue coat. He had wanted to look his best, although he wasn't quite sure why. It wasn't as if they were newlywed or even held the possibility of a betrothal. They weren't courting, but earlier, when she'd allowed him to breach her defenses and become the first to introduce her to carnal pleasures, he decided she was deserving of a memento to her past.

At times, he thought he caught a glimpse of melancholy, and so he wanted to make this evening extra special for her. He knew it had been difficult for her to lose her family, everything that she'd ever known, in order to make a difference in this world. He continued to admire her resolve when most women would have given up and begged their family's forgiveness after the first week. It had been months, and she was still just as resilient as when she'd started out on this endeavor.

That, he knew for a certainty.

Two footmen were in the room with Thorpe when Iona made an appearance. He straightened his posture as she entered in all her loveliness. He knew the gown he'd requested from the local village modiste was going to be a perfect fit. He'd spied the premade garment in the window the day before, and all he could think of was how perfect she would look in the light-blue shade. After seeing her in a similar muslin the day before, he couldn't wait for the opportunity to witness this one on her. It was infinitely preferable to those dreadful brown, serviceable dresses she always wore. To his mind, she should be attired this way at all times.

"Good evening, Your Grace," she murmured as one of the footmen held a chair for her. Thorpe nearly shoved him out of the way for the honor to seat her himself, but he refrained.

Once she was settled, Thorpe sat down in his chair. The wine was poured for both of them, but he noticed that, although he took a sip of his, hers remained untouched. "Are you not fond of wine? I can have one of the footmen switch it out for sherry if you prefer."

She held up a hand, her expression neutral. “It’s perfectly acceptable, Your Grace, but don’t you think this is a bit too much of an extravagance for someone who is in your employ?”

He smiled tightly, understanding now the reason for her cool demeanor. “Ah, I see. If it shall ease your pride, I can ration your wages to account for the meal.”

Her gaze was steady, a hard glint in those dark, fathomless depths. “That shouldn’t be necessary, Your Grace. Of course, I am grateful for your kind consideration. I shall consider it a charity.”

She flipped her serviette, and Thorpe had to clench his jaw to keep silent. *Charity*. She might as well have attempted to jump on the table and dance a jig, the idea was just as absurd. However, if that’s how she wished to view this evening, then he would accommodate her. To a point.

The first course was served—watercress soup. They ate in silence for a time, and although Thorpe tried not to wonder what Iona was thinking, he could tell by the proper way she held her spoon, the erect way she held herself, that she was trying to portray a firm distance between them. He had rather hoped their earlier encounter might have softened her demeanor toward him, but apparently, he was wrong.

The second course was beef Wellington with steamed asparagus and carrots. Again, the disquiet in the room continued. All that could be heard was the scrape of silverware against the china and the occasional clunk of the glass as it was returned to the table.

By the time the dessert arrived—a cheese soufflé that Cook had taken particular pains to create, since she knew it was his favorite—Thorpe was clenching his fists on either side of his dinner service. He had been patient through the majority of the meal, but her refusal to converse freely was starting to shred his endurance.

Nevertheless, he continued this ridiculous affair until the end. When the dessert was cleared away, she emptied the rest

of her wine and slid back her chair. “I fear I’m quite weary, Your Grace. If you would excuse—”

He rose before she had the chance. “Would you mind coming to my study with me before you retire, Miss Richards?” He might have phrased it like a question, but by the way she stiffly inclined her head, he could tell he’d made his point rather plainly that she wasn’t dismissed just yet.

He was standing by the window when she entered the study. The moment she crossed the threshold, he said, “Please shut the door.” She hesitated but did as he asked and then remained where she was, hands clasped in front of her.

“Did something happen after I left you earlier?”

She frowned lightly. “No.”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “You’re quite sure?”

“Yes.”

He appeared to consider this. “Then might you explain why you were so withdrawn this evening? I thought you would be pleased with the meal.”

“Pleased?” Her tone was firm, unyielding, and he knew the storm outside would be nothing compared to the one that was about to be unleashed in this room. “How might you think I would be *pleased* to be set apart from the rest of the servants in your employ? Or have you forgotten I’m only here to tend to your gardens?”

“I have not forgotten,” he returned evenly. “But neither do I like you doing such menial labor that threatens injury.”

She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Your hands, Miss Richards,” he replied stoically.

She snorted. “I’m afraid it comes with the territory of my profession.”

“That may be, but when you are working for me, I want less of a direct, hands-on approach.”

She put her hands on her hips. “That’s impossible. How might I continue to earn the respect of the village men if I

don't dare to sully my hands alongside them?"

"You are a well-bred lady," he pointed out.

"I *was* a well-bred lady. That ended the moment I left my parents' house and moved to Burnham-on-Sea."

Thorpe held up a hand. "I beg to differ. You are still the same woman, whether your circumstances have changed or not."

"And what if I should decide to become a lady of the night?" she countered almost bitterly. "Would you still consider me to be a gentlewoman?"

His brows lowered. "You're being nonsensical." He moved to his desk, but rather than sit down behind it, he strode back to the window in an attempt to think.

"No, you are the one doing that." She took a step closer to him. "I am trying to keep the divide between our status so that I can salvage what little I have of my reputation, and yet you keep acting as though you aren't concerned with my good name. It is all I have left."

Thorpe shoved a hand through his hair. "It doesn't have to be."

She narrowed her gaze warily. "What do you mean? I told you—"

"I know what you said, but I'm not referring to your family in London," he snapped. With a heavy breath, he knew he was saying all the wrong things, but he had never been in the position to express himself before. Since he didn't really know what it was he needed to express, it made things even more difficult. "I find that, against my better judgment and your current circumstances, my desire for you will not abate. I have tried to abolish this yearning in my veins, but it has been futile. As a duke, I have always had my every need fulfilled. I was a consummate rake in my youth, and I am trying not to revert back to the man that I was, but you have my mind so... befuddled that I cannot think of anything else—but you."

He dared to take a step toward her. And another, and another. With each word that he spoke, he moved closer. "So

please, if you can find a solution to what ails me, then by all means, I am willing to listen. Otherwise, I must say you will have to contend with my regard because I have no idea how to rid myself of your allure.”

CHAPTER 13



ona truly didn't know what to say. Truth be told, she was speechless. Thorpe said he couldn't rid her from his thoughts, but she'd never been approached by a gentleman with anything remotely similar to the same ailment. Was this what it felt like to be a diamond of the first water? To suffer the adoration of countless men falling at one's feet?

But this wasn't all men. It was *one* man. A man who she also liked against all the odds. He was the single person that she ought to retain a distance from, and yet, he was the one man she kept gravitating toward.

With Thorpe standing so close, she found it particularly difficult to breathe but, more importantly, to think. She closed her eyes in a temporary grasp to hold on to her sanity. "Your Grace, please forgive me if I ever gave the impression that I would be open to more than our current arrangement—"

"I do not blame you in the least," he assured her softly. She looked at him plainly. "I blame myself for wanting the one thing I shall never be granted. You are my forbidden fruit." His mouth kicked up in the corner. "It's rather ironic. Because of my title, I used to have ladies drop their handkerchiefs at my feet in an attempt to gain my notice. Sometimes I would indulge them, and sometimes I stepped over the linen. Debutantes and widows alike fluttered their lashes behind their fans, vying for my attention, and still I was not interested in their flirtations.

"I never believed I could find anyone who

I could converse with on a mutual level. No one ever met the high standards I had set for myself because I was content to live life on my own terms. As to whether I would beget an heir, I decided that, since my father and grandfather were both cruel taskmasters in their own way, it might be best to let the direct line die with me.” He reached out and ran a light fingertip down her face. “Then you appeared with your determined way of thinking and your remarkable designs—”

She took a step back. Clenching her fists at her sides, Iona lifted her chin and said, “I admit that I am flattered by the esteem in which you hold my intelligence when most have scorned any such foresight if it belongs to a woman. I have dealt with the superiority of men in the past, my father included, who believed that a woman’s rightful place is by her husband’s side.” She swallowed hard. “But you were the first who dared to see the talents I had to offer. I pray it will open more doors for me and for women who wish to encourage the same attention.” She exhaled slowly. “I will not deny I feel the stirrings of something within me when you are near, but I shall not allow it to go so far as to ruin the small bit of precious reputation that I yet possess. If so, everything I have already lost will be for naught. I shall be moving one step forward, only to take three steps back.”

“But you are here now,” he whispered. “Wouldn’t it be a shame if we were to ignore this single opportunity to quench this restless desire that is sparking within both of us? Perhaps if we succumbed to one night, we might be able to move forward as we did previously.” He paused. “If you don’t intend to marry in the future, then surely you shall want to know what you are leaving behind before you make a final decision on the matter?”

Iona was starting to falter. What he was suggesting was tempting in the extreme. One night to satisfy the curiosity that had always burned inside her, with the only man she could ever consider taking to her bed. As long as they were discreet... “What of children? Isn’t there the possibility that I might become with child?”

“There are preventative measures I can take, sheaths that cover a man to prevent an accidental conception.” There was a pause, and the silence in the room was almost deafening. “Does this mean you agree to my proposition? Or shall I withdraw from you henceforth?”

Iona knew this was the moment where she turned and walked away—or walked into his arms. If she did the former, she would be left with her full modesty. Her undoubted virtue would be intact, and she had no doubt that the duke would cease to pursue her. If she chose the latter, she might have a fond memory to cherish and hold deep within her heart for years to come.

Torn between her heart and her rational thought, Iona slowly unclenched her fists and made a decision. She stepped in front of Thorpe and lifted her chin. “I cannot give you more than one night, so you cannot ask it of me.”

He nodded his head. “I would not disrespect you in that regard.”

Satisfied that he was telling the truth, she put her hands on his chest and rose up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his. For the first time, she allowed her body to accept the trembling flutters that followed in the aftermath of his kiss. It felt so freeing not having to hold anything back. “Then, I agree to your proposition, Your Grace.”

The moment the words left her mouth, it was as if a weight was lifted from her.

He reached out and pressed her flush against his body. She could feel the hard strain of his erection pressing against her lower abdomen, and her blood ran faster through her veins. She wondered if she should be feeling some sort of maidenly nerves, but she did not. All she could think of was his hands upon her skin and his mouth upon hers. Everything else was inconsequential.

“You’ve made me a very happy man this night, my lovely, independent Iona.”

She lifted a brow. “You might alter your opinion once the evening is concluded.”

He chuckled lightly. “I find that impossible to imagine because you are giving me the gift of your body, which no other man shall have. I am honored to be chosen as the recipient. I vow I will not abuse the trust you are placing in me.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Your Grace,” she murmured.

Few words were spoken after because his mouth descended on hers.



There was a moment when Thorpe considered letting her go and dealing with his unrequited lust on his own time. Unfortunately, he knew if he dismissed her tonight, tomorrow would be more of the same desperate yearning. He had never been drawn to any other woman the way he was drawn to Iona. She was everything that he had ever wanted—and what he could never have.

She had granted him this solitary evening, and he had never been more thankful for a thunderstorm in all his days. The torrent of rain outside had made the roads dangerous and possible to keep her with him.

One night. And then they would continue as before, eventually going their separate ways.

He ripped his mouth from hers, his lungs exhaling heavily, his voice husky. “Come with me to my chambers.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” she asked, her breathing just as erratic. “Perhaps my room is better?”

Thorpe tried to make his head work properly, but there was only one wanting to operate at the moment, and it wasn’t his brain. He glanced at the settee in his study and decided it was entirely too short for his large frame. And then he spied the rug in front of the fire. A smile started to spread across his

face. With enough pillows and blankets about the room, he was confident he could make it work.

But what of a sheath? If he left her, he feared she would change her mind, and then all would be lost. He was not one to rely on deceit, but perhaps this once...

He shook his head and bent down to offer her a chaste kiss on the lips. "I have to go to my chambers for a moment. I will return as hastily as possible."

She looked at him with those perfect, wide brown eyes and said, "I'll be here."

Thorpe took one last, lingering look at her, and then he left the room as if the devil himself were in pursuit. He climbed the stairs to his chamber two at a time and nearly ripped one of the drawers off its hinges in his urgency. Finding what he was looking for, he held it tightly in his grasp, then made his way back down the stairs in the same fashion. He caught sight of Beckham when his hand was almost upon the handle to the study.

The butler looked at him in an inquiring manner, and Thorpe forced himself to stand tall and act like a proper duke. "I will not have need of your services for the rest of the evening."

"Very good, Your Grace."

Thinking of Iona, he added, "And the same goes for Miss Richards. No one will need to tend to her as I believe she has already turned in for the evening."

Again, the servant nodded. It wasn't until he turned and left that Thorpe released the breath he'd been holding. And then he opened the study door.

At first glance, he didn't see Iona anywhere about—but then he spied the discarded dress draped over the settee. His throat instantly went dry, and he found he couldn't make his feet move. His gaze darted about the room, and that's when she appeared. Attired only in her underclothes, she made such an alluring sight that her beauty was like a punch to the

midsection. His cock was impressed as well, as it began to pulse with an urgent need to possess her.

Mine.

“You didn’t have to rush on my account,” she said in a sultry tone. He blinked, wondering how the student had suddenly surpassed the master.

He dared to swallow, but it was as if his throat was filled with sandpaper. “Are you quite sure you’ve never done this before?”

She smiled, her lips tilting upward with all the precision of an experienced courtesan. “Not at all. I am untried. I assure you.” The first flicker of hesitation passed across her face. “Am I doing something wrong?”

“God, no.” His voice pitched, and he cleared his throat. “You’re wonderful.”

She liked this, and the confident smile appeared. “I’m glad to hear that, Your Grace.” She turned around and offered him her back. “And what if you were to help me remove this binding garment and add it to the pile with my dress? Would you be pleased with that?”

He nodded and eagerly untied the laces.

As her stays loosened, she slid the garment off her shoulders and tossed it lightly over the gown. “What next?”

Dear God. Was she truly going to strip away *everything*? “The... er...” He couldn’t even say *stockings*, but pointed at her legs.

“As you wish, Your Grace.” She lifted her leg and set it on the arm of the settee. Then, she took the top of her stockings, rolled them down her shapely calf, and slid it off her foot. It landed in a soft puddle of silk on top of the other pile. “The other?” she asked.

Another nod.

She repeated the same tortuous motion, and Thorpe feared he might ruin the moment by arriving in his breeches long before it was time. It had been years, since the first blush of

his manhood, that he'd been quite so overcome with lust. And yet, he couldn't seem to stop this sexual show that he'd been granted.

With her shift the only thing to conceal her body, she moved toward him like an angel descended from the heavens. The firelight cast her body in silhouette, highlighting every blessed curve and the slightly darker patch of hair at the juncture of her legs. What he wouldn't give for the opportunity to bury his head there and pleasure her until she was screaming his name.

He licked his lips at the thought.

"It's your turn now, I think." She lifted a coy brow. "It's only fair that before I fully reveal myself that I get a taste of what I shall receive."

Thorpe thought of the shears that were in the right drawer of his desk and considered skimming them up the side of his body and removing all the material in one easy slide, but then he decided it would be just as satisfying to tease her in the same manner. He knew his body was pleasing, perhaps more so than some of the other men of the *ton*, because he enjoyed physical labor. And since he did so much of the time without his shirt, the golden glow from the sun had highlighted the hard planes and muscles of his torso and arms.

He started work on his cravat and shed each item without breaking eye contact with her. It wasn't until he reached the flap of his breeches and slid them over his narrow hips that her gaze fell to his jutting manhood. Her eyes widened slightly, and he wondered if she was starting to feel that maidenly fear.

And then she licked her lips, and he nearly fell to his knees.



Iona should have felt something other than this rushing sensation of madness pouring through her blood, but when Thorpe fully revealed himself to her, all she could think of was how his cock would work to her advantage. It was curious

how it seemed to be flaccid one moment and stiff and ready to burst with energy the next. A curious organ, to be sure, but one that fascinated rather than frightened her.

She was glad that the idea of disrobing before he had returned had been a success. It had been rather difficult to maneuver, but her efforts had been worth it because he'd certainly seemed impressed when he'd walked in the room and spied the discarded gown. The flare of hypnotic interest in his eyes when she'd moved toward him had made the rest of her hesitation melt away. She felt... powerful, as if she could conquer the world—or just conquer *him*.

Growing up with a strict father and a life filled with decorum, she hadn't realized how potent her own femininity could be when it came to the opposite sex. Then again, she was finding there were a lot of things that she would have never dreamt of doing with anyone else but the man directly in front of her. She had never felt seductive in the least, but the way his nostrils flared as she'd drawn near, and the look of unadulterated lust in his gaze, had made her dizzy with the knowledge that she held the trump card. She could ask him to do anything in that moment, and she knew he would grant it. But the only thing she wanted—was him.

Now that she'd finally succumbed to her basic nature, her womanly instincts, she realized that it was quite... freeing. She was alive, as surely as if she was digging outside in the soil.

“You're breathtaking,” Thorpe murmured as he reached for her. She thought he was going to draw her into his arms, but instead, he grabbed her shift and lifted it up and over her head, tossing it aside before she had the chance to worry about covering herself. He held her at arm's length and let his gaze trail slowly down her frame, then just as slowly back up again. “Absolute perfection.”

Iona had never been naked in front of anyone before, not even her maid at her parents' house. There was always something covering her, whether it be the shift that she removed on her own before she stepped into the tub, or the scented water in her bath that provided a few strategically placed bubbles, or the strip of linen that was immediately put

in place to shield her when she was finished. Never had she allowed herself to be so... bare in front of another person.

However, in light of his approval, she released the breath she'd been holding. He must have noted the action because he set a finger gently beneath her chin. "I hope that was a good sigh?"

"Indeed," she said breathlessly. "I was afraid I might be a disappointment."

He dared to smile. "There's not a chance of that."

She returned her own smile as he drew her into his arms and lowered his head for a devastating kiss that made her blood heat. She moaned against his mouth as she encircled his shoulders and clutched him to her. It was a foreign sensation to be so close to anyone, especially without the benefit of clothes. Her breasts were crushed against his chest with that light spattering of crisp, dark hair. She yearned to run her fingers over that strong chest, down his abdomen, and slide her hand over that pulsing member, so she did just that.

Moving away just slightly, she brought her hands up between them and ran her nails along his pectorals and down along the strong midsection of his torso. He moved his mouth away from her as she started to move down farther. "What are you doing?" he rasped.

Her gaze fluttered back to him. "I was considering touching you, but if you'd rather I didn't..."

"God, Iona, you're going to unman me, but I can't refuse such a lovely offer." He grasped her wrist and guided her to his cock. "Wrap your hand around it and caress it with long strokes like this." He wrapped his hand around hers, and it didn't take long before he was groaning. "You're a natural," he added huskily.

"Am I?" she whispered. She was impressed by the girth of the jutting erection, and how soft it was when she imagined it would be the opposite. "It's... wonderful."

He chuckled, but it turned into another groan. "I'm glad you approve."

She glanced into his eyes that were hooded with passion. “Absolute perfection.”

Something dangerous sparked in those mossy green eyes, and without any notice, he set an arm under her knees and lifted her into his arms. “It’s my turn to tease you to madness.”

She lifted a brow. “Weren’t you doing that already?”

“Minx,” he growled.



Originally, Thorpe had imagined the floor in front of the fire would be the best place to make love to Iona, but he was entirely too impatient to take the time to design a makeshift bed, so he decided that the settee would have to do. Either way, he was focused entirely on the lovely woman in his arms.

He wasn’t sure how he had managed to gain her approval, but he was intensely grateful for it, even if there was a part of him that feared he would never forget her after this night. Fortunately, tomorrow would have to wait.

He laid her down on the velvet cushion and covered her body with his. He grasped her quivering breasts, took one taut nipple into his mouth, and then he turned his attention to the second. She arched her back, her cheeks turning a delicate shade of pink as her eyes drifted closed. Thorpe was in awe of her response. He bent his head and nuzzled her neck, and she moaned. He had to grit his teeth, forcing himself to be patient when he wanted nothing more than to sink his cock into her wet heat. But he wasn’t so much of a scoundrel that he wouldn’t ensure she was prepared for the intrusion.

With one arm cradling the side of her head, his other slid down the side of her body, along the indentation of her waist, past the flare of her hip, and across her smooth thigh. When his finger brushed the seam of her sex, he groaned. Slipping a finger into her core, he added a second when she didn’t tense at the initial contact. Her hips lifted, and she whispered his name, and he knew she was already close to her peak. It wouldn’t take much to send her tumbling over the edge.

He removed his hand and used her natural lubricant to flick the bud in the center of her folds. She instantly grasped his shoulders.

“Did you like that?” he teased.

“Yes,” she breathed.

His movements stilled. “Do you want more?”

“Yes.”

“Look at me, Iona.” She complied, her eyes opening slightly. “Keep them on me.” With that, he continued the onslaught. With each stroke, her breathing turned even heavier. He smiled as she kept her focus on him the entire time. When she started to orgasm, he bent down and kissed her deeply as her entire body trembled with the release.

After he was assured he had brought every bit of pleasure from her, he positioned himself at her entrance. Before she had fully recovered from the haze of passion, he started to slide inside. Inch by torturous inch, he wanted to make sure that she was used to the feel of his cock. When she didn't complain, only watched him in a curious manner, he exhaled heavily and then pushed forward. As he breached the barrier of her maidenhead, she tensed slightly. He held still, waiting, but when she started to move restlessly beneath him once again, he knew she was ready for more.

The rhythm was slow and steady at first, but he started to pick up speed when her breathing became uneven again. He wanted to offer her a second release, but his body was desperate for its own. He couldn't understand why he had been with practiced women, widows, and courtesans who knew every way imaginable about pleasing a man, and yet, he couldn't control himself when it came to Iona.

He could feel his body start to tighten, and just as he could feel his cock start to tingle with the explosion to come, he had a moment of clarity where he remembered the sheath. It had fallen out of his grasp when he'd picked Iona up and carried her to the settee. The very thought of leaving her to retrieve it was almost unbearable, but he had promised her he wouldn't

go that far. One night of ecstasy without any regrets. If it turned into more, she might never forgive him—or herself. It was a thought he didn't dare to imagine. He wanted her to look back on her time with him as a magical, wondrous experience.

He started to move, but she grasped on to his shoulders. “Where... are you... going?” she panted.

He gestured over his shoulder. “The sheath. I need...”

Rather than let him go so that he could retrieve it, she held him even more tightly. “Don't stop now. I couldn't withstand it.”

He closed his eyes. “You're not making this easy on me, Iona. We need to ensure there are no consequences.”

She bit her lip and then reluctantly removed her hands.

Thorpe didn't waste time in finding the wrapper on the floor and sliding it over his cock. He hissed at the contact, his body on the brink of madness. He returned to Iona and slid inside of her once more. It took fewer than a handful of thrusts before his cock jerked with the force of his release.

He lowered his head, setting his forehead on hers. Their breath mingled with one another, and he allowed himself this moment to bask in the glory of their coupling. But it wasn't long before he lifted his head and offered her a slight smile. “I feel rather chagrined.”

She laughed outright. “I don't see how. That was... remarkable.” The sigh she offered helped to soothe some of his male pride. “I daresay I understand what all the fuss is about.”

“Yes, well, I was hoping to bring you to the brink a second time, but I fear you were too much for me to handle.”

“Me?” She gave a rather indelicate snort. “I fear that honor goes to you, Your Grace. I never imagined it could be so...” She sighed again, as if she couldn't even find the proper adjective to describe their encounter. “It was certainly nothing remotely similar to what my mother told me to do.”

His smile grew. “Is that right?” he murmured.

“Yes.” She frowned slightly. “Why do you appear amused by that?”

He shrugged. “It seems to be the failing of all mothers to tell their daughters to lie still like a stiff board. I was quite impressed by the fact you did not.”

This time, it was her lips that twitched. “You should know by now that I’m not very good at taking orders, Your Grace.”

He laughed. “Indeed, I am. And I thank God for it every day.”

CHAPTER 14



Tona parted from the duke shortly after their conversation had concluded. They had dressed in silence, and after a lingering kiss upon her departure and a murmured good night, he said nothing more.

She tried not to think too much about what tomorrow would bring as she quietly ascended the stairs to the guest chamber she was using. When she shut the door behind her, she glanced at the window and saw it had finally stopped raining outside. It was odd how she hadn't even noticed the storm passing until now. Then again, she had been rather preoccupied with other matters.

Her cheeks heated as she thought of what she had just done. She imagined she would feel instant regret, but strangely enough, there was nothing but a calm, warming flutter in the pit of her stomach, as if everything was right in the world.

She noticed the washstand was filled with water. Thankfully, it was still lukewarm, and as she disrobed, she wet a nearby strip of linen and gently washed the area between her thighs that was oddly sore. When she withdrew the white cloth, she realized there was a small smear of blood there. She froze, fearing that she had started her courses early, but then it dawned on her exactly what she had sacrificed for the Duke of Rosewood. She was no longer virtuous, no longer a virgin. She would never be able to marry now because she couldn't keep this sort of information a secret from a prospective beau.

As she stood there and stared at the reality of her actions, again the guilt that should have swamped her didn't come. She

realized she wouldn't even want to lie with another man in the same way she'd allowed Thorpe the use of her body. It was entirely too intimate, too seductive, to imagine sharing with anyone else. Tonight was a memory that she would hold close to her heart until her hair turned gray and she had to use a cane to steady her movements.

Iona walked over to the bed, where a fresh nightdress was waiting for her. She held it up and frowned. Just like the gown she had worn to dinner, it looked brand new, as if it had never been worn before. She wondered, not for the first time, whose clothes she was donning, but since she was eager to get some rest for another busy day toiling in the gardens, she was grateful for it, nonetheless.

She turned down the counterpane and slipped beneath. She admired the four posters surrounding her and was reminded of her modest lodgings at the boarding house. It would be easy to lament the luxury of her former life and attempt to beg her parents' forgiveness, but it would never happen. No matter how bleak things might get, she was determined to forge ahead and fight with everything that she had. At least with Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham, she could be assured she always had a roof over her head. So long as she was doing everything possible to make her way as an independent woman, she had no doubt they would support her until their last breath.

However, if they were to find out about her indiscretion with the duke, her situation might alter dramatically. She knew Thorpe would keep their affair a secret, but if one of the servants started to spread gossip, it could be her ruin.

She asked herself if it had been worth it, to possibly cause everything she'd been working toward to crumble at her feet. She wanted to claim *yes* immediately, but when she closed her eyes and pictured Thorpe looking down at her so tenderly, stroking her body so gently with every care to her pleasure, she had to hesitate. It would be devastating if the servants took it upon themselves to gossip, but she had every confidence that they were loyal to their master and held enough respect for her, at this point, that they would retain their silence.

With her thoughts calm, her worries subsided for the moment. Iona closed her eyes and dreamed of what could never be.



A loud bang woke Iona from a sound slumber. At first, her heart lodged in her throat as she pictured her irate father storming into her room and dragging her out of the cottage by her ear. However, she would kindly remind him that she was five and twenty, no longer under his rule, nor relying on his support, and she could do as she pleased.

She got out of bed and walked over to peer at the clock on the mantel. Her eyes didn't want to focus, so she rubbed them and finally she was able to read the time. It was half past four in the morning.

“Keep your voice down, you drunken sod. You'll wake the entire house.”

Iona overheard some sort of incoherent reply, followed by masculine laughter. Curious, she padded over to the door and opened it just enough to peer out into the hallway. There, she saw Thorpe barefoot in his breeches, a shirt tossed over his torso and hanging loose, as if he'd been disturbed rather hastily. For an instant, staring at his chiseled chest, she quite forgot what she was doing up.

However, when the man he was escorting caught sight of her, he ground to a halt and offered a lopsided grin. When he spoke, his voice was directed at Thorpe. “You ol' devil! Starting th' fun without me! How rude.”

Iona decided he wasn't terrible to look at, with his light-colored hair and dark eyes that captivated the recipient of his gaze and held. But it was his direct and high-handed manner that she abruptly took offense to.

“My dear lady.” He broke away from Thorpe and stumbled toward her. Thankfully, the doorjamb kept him from falling on top of her. With an arm to support himself, he leaned toward her. She blinked at the strong scent of brandy on his breath.

“Where ‘as my comrade been hiding a sweet thing like you?” He narrowed his gaze and stared even harder at her. “You look familiar. Do I know you?”

A firm hand appeared on his shoulder, followed by a dark warning. “I would consider your next actions very wisely. I don’t care to have my guests assaulted.”

“I’m your guest, too.” The man almost pouted, but he gave a reluctant sigh as he started to depart, but not after he’d offered Iona a devilish wink as the duke escorted him away.

“I’ll be right back,” Thorpe mouthed to her as he disappeared farther down the hall.

Iona closed the door and waited for him to return. It was nearly a quarter hour later when he returned with a soft knock. She opened it immediately, and he strode inside with a grim look on his face. “I apologize for the Earl of Stanton’s behavior. I wasn’t expecting him to arrive this soon, nor quite so inebriated, but I fear he has a terrible time saying no.” He shook his head with a sigh and then reached out to cup her cheek. “I hope you can forgive his behavior, and me for making the mistake of inviting him here, although he rather invited himself.”

Iona offered him an easy smile. “All is well.”

He abruptly frowned. “Are you sure there isn’t something amiss? I heard him claim he thought you looked familiar, but he’s in his cups, so I’m not sure he actually meant it.”

Iona returned slowly, “I can’t immediately place him, so it could be he is confusing me with someone else.”

The furrow between his brows dissipated. “We shall hope that is the case. Either way, I shall make it perfectly clear that your presence here is not to be noted unless you are toiling outside. I won’t allow your name to become besmirched because of me and my inability to keep my hands off you.”

She reached up and covered his hand with hers. “I’m finding it difficult to do the same.”

He groaned. “Don’t say things like that unless you’re willing to follow through.”

A spark of awareness passed between them, and as much as Iona wanted nothing more than to lead him to her bed, she forced herself to take a step back.

His expression fell with disappointment. "Pity. But no doubt it is for the best." He turned to go, but when he reached the door, he turned back and said softly, "Shall I see you at breakfast?"

He sounded so hopeful that she couldn't dash the sudden brightness on his face. "I'll be there."



Thorpe was busy trying not to tap his foot impatiently as he waited for Iona to appear the next morning. Although he was dreading the simple brown dress that she would be forced to don to assume her duties on the lawn, that didn't mean he despised her usual attire. She should be wearing gowns like she'd had on the night before every single day. Unfortunately, it wasn't his place to demand she do so. He had no rights to her, and even if he was her husband, he wouldn't try to change her into someone else. He respected her just as she was.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and started to rise, but when he spied the earl walking into the room and holding his head, he resumed his seat. Crossing his arms, he waited for Stanton to take a seat. "How are you feeling?" he said in a tone that was a bit louder than normal.

As suspected, the other man clutched his head and gave a terrible grimace. "For the love of God, Rosewood, must you be so damned inconsiderate?"

Thorpe's lips twitched, but he lowered his voice when he spoke. "I suppose that depends on whether I can expect this sort of lewd behavior for the next week."

"You should know me by now," the earl muttered. "A leopard is not known to change its spots."

Thorpe tilted his head to the side. "That is true, but I would think by now you might have curbed some of your habits. We

are of the same age, two and thirty. Don't you think it's time you considered settling down and starting a family?"

The earl peered at him in the strangest manner. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Rosewood? Has this time spent in isolation on the coast dulled your wits?"

Thorpe rolled his eyes. "Don't be nonsensical."

"You have *never* spoken to me in this manner. It's the one reason I knew I could always depend upon your friendship. You aren't like my mother, who tried to follow me around London, dragging any eligible debutante behind her as she did so."

"That doesn't mean people can't change," Thorpe pointed out.

"Yes, well, you certainly have," the earl muttered. He glanced down at his empty plate, as if suddenly realizing it was empty. "Don't you have any capable staff? Where are the eggs and ham?"

Thorpe lifted a brow. "I hope you're not claiming I'm an incompetent host." He straightened in his chair. "I was waiting for someone."

"I'm here," Stanton grumbled, but then his face cleared, and he sat back in his seat, his earlier ills apparently forgotten. "Ah. It wouldn't have something to do with that chit I spied last night, would it?"

"She is none of your concern," Thorpe returned evenly. "But if you must know, yes. I was hoping she might join us."

As if on cue, a footman walked forward and handed him a sealed missive. Before he even opened it, he knew what he would find. As suspected, it was short and to the point.

I regret I am not able to join you this morning. I had to leave the house at dawn to meet the men from the village and plan the day. Thank you for your kind hospitality and the shelter from the storm.

Cordially,

Miss Richards

He resisted the urge to crumple it up in his fist. It was so perfectly polite, so detached, that he wanted to march out to the gardens and kiss her in front of God and his fellow countrymen. He didn't, of course, because it would cause the gossiping tongues to wag in full force, but that didn't mean he wasn't tempted to do it, anyway.

"Bad news?" the earl inquired.

Thorpe refolded the note and put it in his jacket pocket. "No. Everything is fine." He gestured to one of the footmen standing at the edge of the room. "We are ready to break our fast."

As the servant inclined his head and walked away, the earl said, "The lady has sent her regrets. Interesting."

"I shall remind you only once more that the lady is not your concern," Thorpe warned. He wasn't in the mood to humor the infuriating man.

Stanton put a hand over his heart. "You have my undying word."



"Miss Richards, is it?"

Iona stiffened at the sound of her name. She didn't want to turn around and address the Earl of Stanton, but politeness demanded it of her, nonetheless.

She hadn't wanted to tell Thorpe that the earl was quite known to her. He had been one of her eldest brother's friends. He had been to her parents' townhouse numerous times when she'd still been in pinafores. She knew she must retain her distance from him as much as possible, lest he recall who she was. While she shared the same last name as the rest of her family, it wasn't as though Richards wasn't a common surname in England. If she was lucky, perhaps he still suffered from the aftereffects of the drink and—

"You're Ralph's sister, are you not?"

Iona tried not to grimace. She considered lying but then realized that would prove her guilt even more. Nevertheless, she would have to tread lightly. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I knew I wasn’t seeing things last night,” he murmured. “I might have had a bit too much brandy on the way here, but I never forget a face, most especially that of a lovely woman.” He offered a teasing wink.

She rolled her eyes. “I can see you are still as charming as ever, my lord.”

“Naturally.” He acted as though he was affronted. “It is part of my allure with the opposite sex.” His eyes sharpened slightly. “Although I wonder if, no matter what I attempted, your interest would be swayed from Rosewood.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” She turned her gaze away and tried to busy herself with her latest task—placing rocks strategically around the fish pond in the front yard. The rains from the night before had managed to fill up the hole that had been dug nearly all the way. Although the rest of the yard was a bit soggy, this gave them the opportunity for the village men to concentrate their efforts in the backyard, where they would work on the larger pond.

“Don’t you?” he noted dryly. “Exactly why did you stay here last evening, Miss Richards?”

She swallowed hard but forced her tone to be neutral when she replied, “I was under the impression that the roads were impassable.”

“And yet,” he prodded. “I made it here without incident. Granted, there were a few times that my curricule wanted to sway rather precariously, but I fear most of that had to do with the driver and not the deplorable conditions that you claim were a hindrance.”

“Regardless, it wasn’t my decision to make,” she said firmly. She placed a rock down in frustration and turned back to him with her hands on her hips. “The duke claimed I should not make the journey all the way to Burnham-on-Sea, and

since I am currently dependent upon the use of his coach for transport, it's not as though I could argue."

"But you actually *could* have."

Iona narrowed her eyes. "I'm not very good with subtlety, my lord. If you are trying to infer something unseemly, I would like to hear your opinion outright, so that I might defend myself or my actions that you are so quick to judge."

His brows lifted. "The lady has claws." He grinned broadly. "I daresay that would have proven you were Ralph's sister if nothing else. Although our friendship has waned in recent years, I recall his firm character."

Iona wasn't amused, nor was she ready to trot down memory lane. "Might you get to the point, Lord Stanton? I have work to do."

He moved closer to her, but only to lower his voice. "I merely wish to offer a cautionary word if you don't wish your reputation to become sullied to the point of no return."

She pursed her lips. "Offering kindly advice?" she snapped. "For what purpose? What do you have to gain?"

"I stand to gain nothing." He shrugged. "I merely mention it because it is evident to anyone with eyes that this little arrangement you share with the duke is more than what it appears. If I didn't know better, I might suggest you were in love with him."

Iona's heart skipped a beat. "Don't be absurd." She shook her head and brushed past him to collect another stone. "The only thing I wish to do is complete the duke's gardens and gain notice for being something other than a helpless female."

He sighed heavily. "You mistake me if it seems I don't commend you for what you're trying to do. I can recall many times when you were a child, while I was visiting from school on holiday with Ralph, how you were always outside with an easel and watercolors, even then. I think it quite unfair that women don't get to live their dreams, that they are looked upon as a broodmare or hostess to the rest of society."

She blinked. She hadn't known the earl to be so progressive in his views. "Thank you, my lord," she noted warily as she returned to the pond and set down the rock. "That is greatly appreciated."

He snorted. "Don't look so surprised or horrified. I can't readily tell which. I approached you with genuine regard." He shrugged. "And to congratulate you on making Thorpe squirm a bit."

For the first time since the earl's arrival, a slight smile touched her lips. "What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know?" He gasped, as if imparting a great secret. "He was quite overset that you were not in the dining room this morning. Could it have something to do with me?"

She worried her bottom lip. "I admit I was a bit reluctant to see you again, in case you might recall who I am."

"And now that I do?" he asked. "What is your opinion now?"

She regarded him for a moment, then gave a sharp incline of her head as she returned to the pile of limestone. "I'm not exactly sure, but I'm not prepared to treat you as a villain just yet."

He grinned broadly. "I'm not sure whether to be insulted or complimented."

She set down the rock and brushed off her hands. "Take it however you wish. It's your right to do so as a gentleman."

He winced. "Ouch." He offered her a light bow. "On that note, I shall take my leave of you, Miss Richards. I do hope you will heed my counsel, however unwillingly it might have been received."

Iona paused to consider the warning because she now knew it was done with her interests in mind. "I will, Lord Stanton. Thank you."

"Good." He gave a brief nod. "I do hope you won't stay away too long afterward. I would rather enjoy the discomfiture

on Thorpe's face as you continue to send him on a merry chase after his own tail." With a scandalous wink, he strode off.

CHAPTER 15



As Iona headed back to the boarding house in the duke's carriage that night, she considered what the earl had told her. If, as the earl claimed, it was obvious that there was something deeper going on between her and the duke, then it could be rather detrimental for her to remain at the cottage when there were visitors to the residence.

Although she wanted to be known for her labors, worrying about several prying eyes on her encounters with the duke wouldn't assist her cause. It would only hinder the progress she'd made thus far. And if she were completely honest with herself, it wouldn't hurt for her to take a break from the duke. Something else that the earl had said also stuck with her—the fact he'd claimed she was in danger of falling in love with Thorpe. She had come to the realization that if this attraction continued to grow as it had, she was in actual danger of losing her heart. She already admired him far too much as it was. She couldn't say for sure how Thorpe had felt in the bright light of day because she had taken care to distance herself from him, but something told her that the intended purge of their combined lust hadn't been sated as they had both hoped.

With a sigh, she set her head back against the squabs and attempted to rest her eyes as she headed back to the boardinghouse.

When she stepped down from the coach a short time later, she told the driver that she wouldn't need his services for the next few days. Before she'd left that afternoon, she'd taken Mr. Parker aside and explained the situation. She told him that

she'd stayed at the cottage due to the ferocity of the storm, and with the arrival of the earl, it might be best if her presence wasn't overly noted. Since she didn't want to be the target of gossip, she asked if he would take over the developments until she'd returned. He had readily agreed, and she was thankful for his loyalty. She certainly hadn't imagined the man who had challenged her at the beginning would become one of her most devoted followers. Thus far, all the village men had said they would work for her any time because she knew how to transform a plain field into a glorious landscape. They could all see her vision starting to take shape and were impressed by her efforts. It certainly filled Iona with pride.

"Our dear girl!" Miss Stratford beamed as Iona walked in the door and hung up her cloak. "I daresay Alexandria and I were overset with worry when you didn't return last night. We were grateful to receive the duke's message early this morning, which put our minds at ease. Were the roads so terrible?"

"I imagine I could have made the journey," she hedged. "But the duke didn't want to take any unnecessary risks."

"And right he was to take a care for your safety. I always said he was a good and just man, unlike his predecessors." She lifted a brow in a disapproving manner. "Would you care for something to eat?"

Iona's stomach grumbled, and she smiled. "I would like that very much. Thank you. But do you mind if I take a tray in my room? I'm quite weary from my travels and sleeping in strange surroundings."

"Of course! I shall have something sent up right away."

She was about to leave when she had a thought. "I shall be away from Highbridge Cottage for a few days. The duke has a guest in residence, and I don't wish to intrude upon any of their entertainments."

The lady inclined her head. "That is very insightful of you. I'm sure it won't take you long to get caught up with your work after they are gone. And it shall give you the opportunity

to join us for the parade that shall take place in Burnham-on-Sea this week!”

Iona was grateful that she had such thoughtful patrons at the Seaside Society. It was truly a remarkable establishment that Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham had built in Burnham-on-Sea, and she was fortunate to have found them.

Once she was in her chamber, she changed into her familiar nightdress and set her dress aside for the wash. The kitchen maid appeared a short time later with a steaming cup of tea and some delicious fare. It wasn't the same as what the duke had provided for her, but neither were they under usual circumstances.

As she ate, she withdrew her journal from her hiding place and opened it to write. Her pen hovered for a moment, and then she set it to the page.

I hardly know where to begin. It has been two days filled with surprises but so much more than that. The weather was deplorable last night, and the duke didn't wish for me to have trouble returning to the boarding house. Part of me wished I wouldn't have heeded his warning, that I would have just returned to Burnham-on-Sea and accepted the consequences, but since I am beholden to his generosity with the use of his coach, I decided I would accept the offer to remain at the cottage. This is where I am torn. I hadn't expected to lose my virginity to him last night, but neither can I feel regret for doing so. It was the most magical experience that I could have imagined, and I cannot summon the proper guilt for giving myself to him.

The problem is that Rosewood is hosting a house party this week, and I must stay away. Not only because I am in real danger of caring for Thorpe even more deeply than I already do, but because when one of his guests arrived early this morning, he recognized me. It was the Earl of Stanton, whom I saw a lot as a child. It was he who cautioned me against returning, as there could be more people who would know me. The threat isn't that, of course, as I'm sure my absence from my parents' townhouse has been noted, but what he said next. He told me that my feelings were easily written upon my

sleeve. That terrifies me in more ways than I can imagine. If he was able to ascertain there was more between me and the duke, then others might easily start to wonder, and the gossip shall begin. I have the very real chance of being ruined. If that happened, all my hard work and dedication to landscaping would be lost.

And yet...

I am finding that my desire for the duke is equally compelling. Although I know our affair cannot continue, it doesn't cease the pounding in my heart, nor the passion that blooms within me when he is near. It is quite a conundrum I am currently facing and, no doubt, will continue to face every day I see him henceforth. I pray I can keep any further yearnings to myself, but at the moment, I am not very confident that I shall succeed.

During the days I shall remain at the boarding house, I will take some long walks along the beach, careful to avoid the area we shared, and consider the best way to overcome this fascination...

Iona set down her quill and exhaled heavily as she reread what she'd just written. She had allowed her emotions to pour forth, and as she closed the cover on the journal, she realized the truth she'd been avoiding. Not only was her heart in jeopardy, but her entire future.

Needless to say, she was in serious trouble.



“I daresay you’ve been a dreadful bore the past couple of days.”

Thorpe resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he turned from his study window and turned to meet the dry glance of the earl. “That’s because you’ve done quite enough entertaining for the both of us to fill the void.” He thought of how they had gone into Highbridge, and how Thorpe had spied Iona wherever they’d gone. From the marketplace to the strand beside the

river, she was a continual, ghostly presence at his side—a reminder of that one night of bliss.

Stanton grinned broadly and offered Thorpe a wink. “I do try my best.” He flopped down on the settee in the study at Highbridge Cottage, and Thorpe’s chest gave a decided twinge of longing. He recalled the last time he’d gone near that piece of furniture—when he’d laid Iona down so gently and made love to her. It was difficult to look at it now and know that was the only time he might ever hold her in his arms.

Since she had taken it upon herself to retain her absence of late, Thorpe knew he should be grateful, that she wasn’t going to be some clingy chit who demanded more of him than he might wish to give. Ironically, it was turning out to be quite the opposite. He mourned her loss, and yet, he knew it would be of no use to beg for more from her.

But he would like to know the reasons why she had decided to stay away. Had their interlude been so upsetting that she couldn’t even face him? Or perhaps she was unnerved by the earl’s presence?

He supposed she had her pride and honor, the same as he. He would just have to force himself to move on.

And yet, as he told himself to do just that, he recalled a parade that was taking place at Burnham-on-Sea just that afternoon. With any luck, Iona would be there, and he might catch a glimpse of her.

Good God, how had he ever sunk this low?

“Since I would hate to be a disappointment to you, Stanton, might I suggest an excursion to—”

“Let’s go.” The earl was already headed for the door.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say,” Thorpe called after him.

Stanton turned to face him. “I don’t really care. If it will get you out of this room, then I consider that a success.”

Thorpe shook his head, but when he would have called for his coach to be brought around, Stanton immediately

dismissed the idea. “How shall we be seen in that mausoleum on wheels? We shall take my curricle.”

“Very well,” Thorpe agreed. “But only if I drive. I would like to make it to our destination.”

The earl tried to appear affronted. “What are you daring to say, Rosewood? That I’m not capable with the ribbons?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m saying,” Thorpe said unabashedly, but he had to grin when the earl started to grumble.

At times, Stanton was the brother that he’d never had. At others, he was a positive nuisance.

It didn’t take long for them to pull into the outskirts of the neighboring village. When Thorpe regarded the crowded thoroughfare of onlookers eager for the upcoming festivities, some of his enthusiasm also dimmed somewhat. The likelihood that he would catch a glimpse of Iona anywhere on these crowded streets was particularly slim.

He hardly even noticed it when the earl practically swung completely around on the seat beside him. “I daresay, Rosewood, I told you all the ladies in London are here! I just spied Lady Hatpin. Did you fail to see the way she was looking at you? I bet it wouldn’t take much to get her to agree to your hand.”

Thorpe lifted a brow. “Don’t you mean *Harpin*? And who is to say I would even offer for her?”

The earl shrugged. “Hatpin—Harpin. It sounds the same to me. And one lady is as good as another, isn’t she?”

Thorpe called Iona to mind and gave a snort. “To your way of thinking, perhaps that is true, but she’s not really my type.”

“Not your type?” the earl reasoned. “You were the one who told me that you were considering settling down. This is your opportunity to engage a bevy of hopeful debutantes vying for your hand. Currently, you have been of little assistance, while I am the one sifting through the mire in order to pluck the best one for you.”

“While I do appreciate your sacrifices on my behalf,” Thorpe returned dryly, “it is not necessary to strain yourself to that extent. I am more than capable of choosing my future duchess. Besides,” he wondered aloud, “I thought you were here for the entertainment to be had, rather than a chance for you to play matchmaker?”

“Can’t it be possible to do both?” the earl said with a sniff. “As your friend, I feel compelled to repay your generosity in some way. However, I am starting to think any efforts I might make should be in vain. You would, no doubt, ignore any suggestion I made except, perhaps, for one lady in particular.”

Thorpe clenched his jaw. “I don’t know what you mean.” He tried to shut down any further chatter from the earl, but he should have known it wouldn’t be so easy.

“I think you know *exactly* what I mean,” the earl countered, using Thorpe’s own words against him. “Why don’t you just ask Miss Richards for *her* hand and end whatever charade is going on between the two of you?”

Thorpe decided he couldn’t drive and have this in-depth conversation, so he found a place to maneuver that would be out of the way and set the brake. “Because the lady wouldn’t have me,” he snapped as he looked hard at his companion. “Miss Richards has other plans for her future that do not include marriage or children. Since I have begun to realize I want to have both, and the decision continues to lie with me, perhaps I shall pick Lady Leia Harpin to satisfy both you and my duty.” He paused, drawing a blank on what the chit even looked like. “Is she dark-haired?”

The earl’s lips twitched. “Perhaps it would be best to speak to the woman before you start tossing family rings in her direction.”

“Very well, then.” He grabbed the reins and jumped down to the ground. He tied them to a nearby branch, allowing the horses enough of an area to munch happily on some grass in the shade. “Let’s go on the bride hunt.”

“A word to the wise,” the earl said dryly as he joined Thorpe. “When you approach Lady *Leia*, you might do so with

a bit of a smile rather than the brooding grimace you're currently wearing." With a pat of encouragement to his shoulder, Stanton sauntered ahead.

Thorpe closed his eyes to gain some momentum, and then he pushed forward. Whatever he had shared with Iona had to be pushed aside. It was a summer romance, something that Byron might have written about. It would also come to a tragic end.

Her path differed from his. He couldn't change her mind about her future, any more than he could change what his duty required of him.

It was just the way things were.

That didn't mean he had to like it, but it did make a difference in what he had to do.



Iona decided to watch the parade from a respectable distance. For the past few days, she hadn't been in a very festive mood, and she didn't want to ruin it for the rest of the occupants of the boarding house with her melancholy.

She had taken to quite a bit of reflection by taking long walks on the beach each day. And every time she returned, it was the same result.

She missed toiling in the soil. She missed the cottage. But more than that, she missed the duke—quite dreadfully. Iona had actually thought about writing to him to see how he was doing but refrained from doing so before she'd made a complete cake out of herself for giving in to the impulse.

With her thoughts far away, she wasn't paying attention where she was going and nearly ran into a red-haired lady standing in the middle of the pavement. "Oh, I beg your pardon," Iona said with a light laugh. "I fear I was woolgathering."

"'Tis quite all right," the lady replied in a small voice.

Iona noticed she had turned her attention on the sign hanging above the boarding house, which proclaimed it to be the Seaside Society. Considering the woman held a single valise in her grasp and wore a simple blue muslin, Iona decided she must be the new resident she'd heard about in passing. "Are you here for the Society?" she asked politely.

The lady's haunting, blue gaze flicked to her, and then she lowered it to the ground. "I am."

"How wonderful! We shall be seeing more of each other then. My name is Miss Iona Richards, and I rent rooms here as well." Iona attempted to bestow a smile on her that was barely received. There was such a sadness surrounding this woman that made Iona wonder about her life before now. But since she wasn't one to generally pry into the personal lives of others, she asked in a kind tone, "Shall I show you around?"

Her only reply was a light nod.

Again, that sense of melancholy swamped Iona, and she wondered what sort of employment this lady was hoping to gain. Whatever it was, she was going to have to get a bit more familiar with people if she wanted to see those dreams realized.

As they walked into the boarding house together, they found Miss Grantham sitting in the parlor having afternoon tea with Lady Beauvais, their benefactor. As Iona appeared, both ladies smiled, but when Miss Grantham caught sight of the woman at her side, she positively beamed. "How lovely that we weren't out when you arrived! You are Miss Vanessa Carter, I presume?"

The reddish-blond head nodded, although she managed to speak in the affirmative as well. "Yes, that's right."

The co-founder of the boarding house moved to their side, and with a warmth in her brown eyes, she clasped her hands before her. "I'm glad to finally meet you in person. I'm Miss Alexandria Grantham."

"Me, too. Er... the same for me as well, Miss Grantham."

Alexandria gestured to Iona. "I see you've already met one of our residents. She's a landscape architect who is currently working with the Duke of Rosewood to enhance the allure of his seaside cottage in Highbridge." She lifted a dark brow. "Perhaps some of your talents might be showcased there as well."

Iona turned to Miss Carter. "What is it that you like to do, Miss Carter?"

"I'm not sure, really." Her narrow shoulders shrugged lightly. "I just like to paint."

Miss Grantham laughed lightly. "Don't be so modest. You have a divine talent! I have no doubt you will gain notoriety in no time." She turned to her companion, who had slowly risen and now joined them. "Lady Beauvais, do you remember me showing you some of Miss Carter's work that she sent to me?"

"Indeed. Those watercolors were quite spectacular. I'm eager to see what else you might create," the countess noted in her lovely French accent. "If you will forgive me for rushing off, I have another appointment."

"Of course, my lady," Alexandria stated. "Shall I walk you out?"

As Miss Grantham departed with the lady, Iona said, "Let me take you to your rooms. No doubt you're quite weary after your travels." She started to climb the stairs, with Miss Carter following at a sedate pace. "Where are you joining us from?"

"Liverpool."

Iona waited for a moment to see if she would add anything else. When she didn't, she said, "I've never been that far north. No doubt you will find the sea air a bit more appealing in the winter months."

"Perhaps."

Iona decided Miss Carter wasn't much for chatting. As she reached the room at the end of the hall, the one next to hers, she opened it and said, "This is where you'll be staying."

She moved forward, and with the valise still in her grasp, she glanced about the chamber. Iona wondered what she thought of it. If she was like Iona and came from a good family, it was likely a step down from what she'd been used to. She said nothing, however, only looked back at Iona as if giving an unspoken request that she be left alone.

Curious about the enigmatic woman, Iona decided to respect her wishes. In time, she might become more comfortable in her new surroundings and decide to open up. Until then, she would give her the necessary space to breathe. "I'll let you get settled. Let me know if you need anything. Supper is served at seven o'clock in the dining room, but if you are in need of something before then, Cook is very accommodating to our needs."

She gave a slight smile. "I'm fine. Thank you."

Iona inclined her head and shut the door on her way out. As she returned to her rooms, she wondered if she had been so unsure and withdrawn when she'd first arrived at the Seaside Society. Miss Vanessa Carter was a bundle of nerves, to be sure, but something told her it was more than anxiety of being in a new place that held the new boarder back.

Nevertheless, Iona knew if there was one place that might give a single lady a chance to start anew, it was the Society.

CHAPTER 16



The last evening that the earl was to be in residence at the cottage, Stanton convinced Thorpe to host a dinner and invite Lady Leia and her mother Lady Harpin, as well as a few other members of the peerage that they had reconnected with during the parade.

Thorpe mentioned that he would like to call upon Lady Leia when he returned to Town, and her mother quite literally beamed from ear to ear at the prospect. No doubt she was thinking a betrothal was right around the corner. Her daughter, on the other hand, appeared honored but not quite so eager to gain the title of duchess.

Nevertheless, it was the perfect solution for all involved. With any luck, there might even be an heir on the way by Christmas.

Thorpe kept a tight smile on his face, nodding when he was supposed to and murmuring a word here and there when it was the same. In truth, the entire affair made him quite nauseated.

When the ladies took their leave at the end of the evening, leaving Thorpe alone with Stanton, he finally released the breath he'd been holding.

"You act as though you've narrowly escaped having your neck in a noose," the earl noted dryly. "Surely the lady wasn't that distasteful. Personally, she's almost too good for you. It's not as though you have my appeal, after all."

Thorpe snorted at the poor attempt Stanton made to cheer him up. He waved over one of the footmen and requested a brandy. He considered asking him to leave the whole bottle, but he decided that probably wasn't a good idea, as he would likely drink it all and live to regret it the next day. Not only that, but he vowed he would never become a drunkard like his father. As he stared at the dark liquid in his glass, his brows drew together in a thoughtful frown as he contemplated the current future laid out before him. "I wonder if this was how my sire felt."

Stanton had been adjusting one of his jacket cuffs, but now he turned to Thorpe with a curious expression. "Pardon?"

"My father. He was a worthless spendthrift who preferred to squander his days with whores than his own family." He lifted the glass. "But perhaps I can finally understand why he did the terrible things he did. If he was forced to wed my mother due to social standing, or wealth, or something completely different from the reasons why they should have married. I think I might be able to comprehend why he searched for happiness outside the manor." He glanced at the earl. "We weren't the family that he envisioned for himself." He looked back at the glass. "I wonder if, after all this time, I will share the same fate because it seems as though I can sense what he was feeling."

Stanton was silent for a time, and then he said softly, "I don't think that's why your father did the things he did."

Thorpe shrugged as he downed the liquid in one smooth gulp. It burned a path from his throat, all the way to his stomach, but he embraced it. He wanted to feel something other than this awful numbness inside of him. "Then why? Surely, there has to be a reason why people react so dramatically to their certain situations."

"I'm sure there is." Stanton leaned forward in his chair. "But I fear the only problem with you is that you yearn for one woman and yet will be forced to wed another."

Thorpe regarded the ducal ring he wore on his right pinky finger. It caught the light from the candles and shone with a

particular brilliance he had always despised, mainly because it had graced the hands of two men who had made his life rather arduous in the past.

At the moment, he was the only one who was making it difficult for the future.

Again, his thoughts turned to Iona and how she might feel if he told her he planned to court another woman, that he had dragged his feet entirely too long.

And yet, all he could think of was that Iona had sent word that she would need the coach in order to return to the cottage in the morning, and how he was desperate for the morning to come.



Iona tried to breathe easily in the coach on the way to Highbridge Cottage at dawn the next morning, but she was finding her lungs were so tight that it was difficult to draw enough air into them. It was like the very first time she'd met the duke with the hope that he might hire her as his architect.

It was amazing how much could happen in such a short amount of time, and yet, she found her nerves were exactly the same.

She closed her eyes and told herself that she would merely engage him politely and then concentrate her efforts on the lawn. It sounded so simple, so cool and detached, that she knew it would be impossible. The entry in her journal the night before had been filled with her anguish, her heartbreak over the duke when Tassy had told her that she'd spied him in the village with an attractive brunette on his arm.

Iona had been devastated, but what should she expect? She knew she would survive without Thorpe because she had to, but it would not be easy to remove the feelings from her heart that had already taken root. She refused to label them, to call it more than attraction, because she knew there would be no going back if she did. The damage would be done.

As the coach turned into the familiar drive, she turned her attention to the progress that had been made in her absence. Her jaw went slack at the finished pond out front and the brick ha-ha wall that surrounded the front of the property. Once a few sheep dotted the landscape, it would be just as she had envisioned the first time she'd come here. She had seen the possibility, and tears sprang to her eyes to see it was finally starting to take shape.

She told herself that was the only reason tears threatened to fall.

When the coach stopped, it was all she could do to wait for the steps to be lowered. She was eager to see the back of the house and what Mr. Parker and the rest of the men had begun there, now that work on the front of the house was completed.

However, the moment her feet touched the ground, and she looked up, her vision was filled with that of the duke. *Thorpe*. Her heart stuttered in her chest when she spied him leaning against the doorframe to the cottage. The growing sun bathed him in a soft, orange glow that brightened his gaze and shone on that dark hair. He was wearing tan breeches and a bottle-green waistcoat and jacket that she knew would bring out the emerald in his eyes.

He was absolutely, devastatingly handsome—and would someday belong to someone else.

Iona swallowed the lump of regret in her throat and forced a smile. “Good day, Your Grace.”

“Welcome back, Miss Richards.” His voice was soft, almost husky, and his regard was open and focused, not just on her face, but the rest of her body as he trailed his gaze down the length of her simple brown dress, and back up again. But it wasn't as if he had to use his imagination to guess what lay beneath the layers of her clothes. He knew her form all too well.

Iona could feel her cheeks heat as she lifted her chin a notch. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

His eyes seemed to bore right through her before the silence that followed, which fell between them like a stone in the middle of a pond. The ripples of awareness shot out from the middle of it with enough force that she had to glance away.

It wasn't until she heard the sound of the wagons rattling up the drive that his hold over her finally faded away.

“I should consult with Mr. Parker about the back lawn—”

She stuttered to a halt as the duke reached out and grasped her wrist when she would have moved away. “Miss Richards —” His voice was husky when he said her name. “I was rather hoping I could gain your advice on a project in the cottage before you went about your day.”

Iona told herself that she should refuse, that spending any sort of time alone in the duke's company henceforth would be a grave error, and yet, the acquiescence fell out before she had the wherewithal to stop it. “Of course.”

With an inward curse, Iona desperately tried to find the determination that had abruptly faltered as she walked toward Mr. Parker. “Good day,” she greeted him. “The duke has asked my opinion about the recent décor. I will be but a moment before I join you.”

With that, she turned back and joined Thorpe—correction, the *Duke of Rosewood*. It wouldn't do for her to even think of him in such a familiar way anymore. Even her journal should be spared any intimate thoughts of him. “Lead the way, Your Grace.”

He said nothing as he led the way inside. He climbed the stairs and headed down the hallway. He walked inside an open door that appeared to be a quaint ballroom. However, Iona wasn't spared more than a brief glance before he'd set her against the wall with his body and covered her mouth with his.

The moan that escaped her was one of longing and yearning passion. Now that the gates of her desires had been opened, it was as if they would forever be thus.

But then she abruptly recalled one very important fact, which made her push away from him. “You must stop!” She

put a hand to her forehead. “This is madness. You know it as well as I, and it cannot continue.”

He shoved a hand through his hair and spun away from her. “Forgive me, I don’t know what overcame—” He halted and then turned back to face her. “The only excuse I can offer is that you make it impossible for me to think clearly. I believed I had my emotions under control, and then you stepped down from the coach and—” He shook his head.

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “If you are this distraught being around me, perhaps it’s best if I take my leave —”

“No, please.” He moved forward, as if he wanted to grasp her arms, but he stopped himself before he reached her. “I would like you to stay.”

Iona shook her head, her voice somber. “I’m not sure that’s wise, Your Grace. In truth, I wonder if I should have returned at all.”

He closed his eyes as if praying for purchase, and then he said, “You are still the finest architect that I know. I don’t want to lose you—” He broke off, as if something had occurred to him. “What if I gave you leave to construct Rosewood Manor?”



Thorpe could tell the moment Iona went from disheartened to hopeful. She practically held her breath when she said, “Are you being serious right now?”

He would have laughed at her expression if his chest wasn’t being squeezed so tight right then. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just...” Her voice trailed off, and then she seemed to gather herself once again. “It’s the one place I had long admired and never dared to dream I could ever have a chance to design.”

Had his suggestion started out as a jest, this would be the moment he would have turned it into a reality. “Then it’s yours,” he whispered. “I know it’s the one thing I can offer you that you will accept and will secure your happiness.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. “We had our night together. I was under no illusions that it would ever become more, nor was it something I would have ever asked for. You know what I will always hold in my heart. I left everything to pursue the dream of being the next landscape architect that would set England on its ear.” She walked forward and took his hand in hers. “You have given me all I ever wanted. I can’t be upset with the way things turned out between us. It transpired the way it was meant to be.”

Thorpe exhaled slowly. It was a bit of a blow to his pride when Iona didn’t fall into devastating tears at his feet that they were parting, but she was right. Perhaps this was the way things were meant to be.

He squeezed her hand in return. “You are truly a gem among women, Miss Richards. I shall always treasure our business arrangement and, dare I suggest, our friendship?”

“Of course, Your Grace. I am honored to be your friend, and I hope you might come to me at any time.”

He knew it was merely her good nature that was replying on her behalf, and that after this day, they would slowly start to drift apart. But there was a part of him that hoped she was sincere, at least. “It’s been a pleasure to know you, Miss Richards. Shall you start on Rosewood Manor this fall?”

“Actually, I thought to return to London as early as next week. No doubt you will wish to have it ready so that when it’s time to select your... bride, you might have no hesitation in doing so.” She seemed proud of herself for not stumbling over the idea of his future duchess.

Thorpe’s chest clenched once more at the idea that he would lose her so soon. This past week had been hellish without her there, but perhaps it was for the best if they parted now. There was less chance that his emotions would become more entangled than they already were. “As you wish. Let me

know what day you choose to go, and I will ensure the staff can make all the arrangements for your stay.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I am in your debt.”

He smiled. “Considering you are still working for me, I would say that statement is in reverse, and I am yet beholden to you.”

She laughed, and there was a twinge in the center of his heart. He would miss the sound of her voice like nothing else. “I suppose you are correct in that regard.”

The following moment seemed to hold, as if time itself paused. Thorpe wanted to grasp on to this memory for as long as he possibly could, but he knew it would eventually fade, just as she would slowly slide out of his life. Like a spirit that haunted a place that they could never be free, so would Miss Richards’ face surround him like a ghost for the rest of his days. She was the one woman he had ever wanted, but the one he could never obtain any longer than a single night.

She was slipping through his fingers, and there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it.

“I should get back to work.”

She offered him a slight smile and then headed for the door. Thorpe could do no more than watch her leave and lament the fact he had no choice but to let her go.

CHAPTER 17



The following week passed in such a blur of activity that Iona wasn't sure how she'd managed to make it through. Then again, each evening when she returned from Highbridge, she would collapse upon her bed at the boarding house from pure exhaustion. The day the duke had offered her the commission on Rosewood Manor, she had told Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford with tears stinging her eyes, partly because she was overjoyed and partly because she hated to leave Thorpe. She tried to tell herself that he would always be special to her because he was her first—and likely only—lover, but she knew it was much more than that. However, since she refused to acknowledge that section of her heart, she blamed her high emotions on the former, and the fact she would have no choice but to leave the Society, at least while she worked in London.

“I shall be forever grateful to the help you offered me when my own family turned their backs on me,” Iona had whispered with a tight throat.

“That is what we are here for. It was why the Society was established,” Miss Grantham had said firmly.

“We wish you nothing but the best, but something tells me luck isn't what will guide you now, but your ability to prove your worth,” Miss Stratford had added.

After that, Iona got up just before dawn each day. She threw herself into the tasks to be done at the cottage, knowing the work that would begin at the duke's estate was looming ahead of her. For seven days, she focused on nothing more

than getting the rear of the cottage prepared so the men from the village would be able to finish things without her continual supervision, just as they had done for the front lawn, which had turned out even better than she'd hoped. In truth, it was immaculate, and she could tell the duke was pleased because he mentioned it at least once a day when he strolled outside to check on the progress being made in the back of the house. The interior was going to be paused for a time because he said he was still trying to determine what décor he was going to choose.

He had glanced at Iona more than once during this suggestion, to which she had replied that perhaps he should wait until the lady of the house had a chance to give her input. She wasn't about to tell him that she would continue the seaside theme to match the overall concept of the cottage, knowing that was what had been originally intended, as an escape from the chaos of the city. She might not have known for certain, but considering the way the duke had spoken of his mother and her unhappy residence at the estate, no doubt she had looked upon this place as her personal haven.

Iona knew she would look back on her time here—that one special night with the duke—and feel the same. Not only that, but Burnham-on-Sea would always be close to her heart because it was where she had lost hers.

She no longer had to pretend as though Thorpe meant nothing to her. She was quite sure her heart had been given to him weeks ago, perhaps the day he'd arrived at the festival and told her he'd changed his mind about employing her.

It would take some time before she would allow the pain of their parting to wash over her, but she knew there would be nights when she was lying alone in her bed, yearning for his kiss, his touch, that she would remember.

For now, it was all she could do to keep her emotions intact as she bid farewell to Mr. Parker and the rest of the village men who had dared to take a chance on a lady architect. She stood with her hands on her hips, tears stinging her eyes as she glanced out over the back of the house where her second vision was starting to take shape. There was still

much to do, but enough groundwork had been laid that they could continue without her constant supervision.

Mr. Parker stood with his hat in his hands, his bushy sideburns twitching slightly. If Iona didn't know better, she might have thought he was having a hard time saying farewell, too. "I know I speak for all the men here when I say it has been a pleasure, Miss Richards." There was a murmured assent that went around the assembled group on the final evening at the cottage. "I know we might not have started out on the friendliest of terms, but you have taught me more than just how to properly construct a garden. You taught me humility." He inclined his head with respect, and she smiled when his cheeks reddened slightly. "It's been an honor to work with you, Miss Richards."

Iona couldn't resist the urge and embraced him instead. "And this is how I do it in England," she whispered. When she pulled back, his face was wavy, and she had to blink back the moisture. "Thank you for everything, Mr. Parker." She stepped back and addressed the rest of the workers. "I appreciate all of you, and I'm sure I speak for the duke as well."

"I definitely concur." Iona stiffened slightly when the duke walked up behind her and stopped at her side, as if they were together rather than separated by their current stations. He glanced at everyone in turn. "I know you will continue to enhance Miss Richards' vision, and perhaps when it is completed, she will come back to celebrate her achievements." He glanced at her then, and those mossy green eyes were so soft and adoring that it nearly made her breath catch.

As the crowd eventually dispersed, Iona walked toward the coach. Thorpe walked with her. He waved off a footman when he would have opened the door and assisted Iona in himself. Once she was settled, he stood there with his sculpted, masculine lips lifted in a slight smile. "I would ride with you back to Burnham-on-Sea, but I'm afraid it wouldn't be a good idea. I might try to talk you out of leaving."

Iona's heart clenched because he looked so handsome standing there and looking so unsure of his reception. She wanted nothing more than to grab on to his lapels and drag

him to her for a kiss that left them both breathless and eager for more. But fate had chosen to toss even more obstacles in their path than the ones they had already set down for themselves.

“Thank you. For everything,” she whispered. “I will always be grateful for your kindness when I was in dire need of a change in my circumstances. You were there when my future loomed rather bleak.”

His eyes warmed even further as they roamed over her face. “I would do it a hundred times again.” He kicked up one side of his mouth in an attempt to lighten the mood. “My only regret is not taking you up on your offer the very day you boldly waltzed into my study.”

Iona laughed. “Bold, was I? And here I recall being quite the opposite.”

He sobered. “You were remarkable.”



Thorpe wanted to drag Iona out of that blasted carriage seat and carry her to the cottage—over his shoulder if necessary. His heart was aching in his chest just knowing he wouldn’t see her the next day, or the day after that. Endless weeks with no sight of her at all was almost unbearable. This past week had been bad enough. He’d spied her outside his window with a shovel in her hand, and he knew those dreadful calluses would soon return. He’d had to clench his fists at his sides to keep from stalking outside and ordering her to cease immediately.

The single thing that stopped him was the reminder that she was doing what she wanted most in the world.

There was also the small issue of his impending courtship at the end of the summer.

He still wasn’t sure if he should ever forgive Stanton for forcing his hand like that. Granted, he had mentioned his desire to wed for the sake of duty when he’d been in London,

but he hadn't actually been *literal*. Of course, that was the one time the earl had taken him at his word.

Thorpe didn't realize an awkward silence had fallen between them until he looked up and saw Iona's shuttered expression following his last statement. But he spoke nothing less than the truth. She *was* remarkable. And he was starting to wonder if he was a fool for not fighting harder for her, but then who was he to stand in the way of her dreams? If she wanted to be the next Capability Brown, then he would do everything in his power to see she achieved all she desired.

He shut the door and swallowed the lump in his throat. "Goodbye, Miss Richards."

She blinked several times in quick succession, and he wondered if she was trying to hold back her emotion as well. "Goodbye, Your Grace."

He dared to step back and rap lightly on the side of the carriage. With one last glance at him, Iona's head turned as the coach started to ramble down the drive. A light trail of dust kicked up behind the wheels, and it finally occurred to Thorpe that it hadn't rained since that fateful storm the night she'd stayed at the cottage. It was rare that England saw such little precipitation at any time of the year. Surely it had to be symbolic.

He continued to stand there, rooted to the same spot, until the coach disappeared from view. Even then, his gaze lingered, as if he might spy her running back to the cottage after him. He imagined a scenario where he caught her up in his arms and they kissed hungrily, and then he would take her to his chamber, where he would love her in a proper bed this time.

The drive remained deserted.

With a heavy breath, Thorpe turned and walked inside.

A few hours later, the heavens abruptly opened. Gray clouds rolled in off the sea as the rain that had held off for the past two weeks finally unleashed its fury.

Thorpe stood in his study, staring out the darkened window, lit only when the lightning made an appearance. The

thunder rolled, and the house shook with the force of it.

For four days, it was the same. The rivulets of rain coursed along the back lawn and made it impossible for Mr. Parker and the villagers to return to continue their work. It was as if the moment Iona left everything came to a halt, as if the earth was weeping for her loss as well.

When the fifth day dawned with a glimmer of hope for sun that was desperately short-lived, Thorpe decided that he'd had enough of this dreaded gloom.

He instructed that his horse be saddled and headed into Highbridge. Even if he managed to get soaked on the way back, it was worth it to escape those same four walls for a time. Everywhere he looked, he was reminded of Iona's presence. From the flowers they had gathered together in the market that were finally starting to wilt and die, to the study, where his focus was riveted on the settee, she was all around him. There were even times he was sure that he could sense her lingering presence. He had originally thought to restore Highbridge Cottage to honor his mother, but now, all he could see was Iona in every room.

It was crazy to believe Iona had made such an impact on him in such a short span of time when other women had tried and failed to gain his notice. It had only been a handful of weeks that he'd known her, but he was at a loss to forget the smallest things—the curve of her smile, the sparkle in her brown eyes that day in the marketplace, the breathy sighs when he'd made love to her.

He pinched the bridge of his nose as he gave his horse his head for a time. He was just restless. He hadn't given their separation long enough.

And yet...

That one night was supposed to purge her from his system, but instead, it had filled his entire being with her intimate awareness.

He straightened in his saddle. With any luck, he would find the diversion he needed in short order. Even though he wasn't

feeling very confident at the moment, he had to do something to rid Iona from his mind.



From the moment Iona stepped foot onto Rosewood Manor, it was difficult to do anything but stare at the magnificent edifice before her. Four stories of pure limestone sprawled out before her in a mansion so sublime that it could have been a personal retreat for King George III and his wife, Queen Charlotte. The inside was just as spectacular, with each piece like something that might have once been housed at the British Museum. The floors were checkered marble and polished to perfection. The wooden balustrade along the second story was the same. It was a wonder to just be walking the halls, but it wasn't until Iona was shown the grounds that she realized what a marvel this estate truly was.

For years, she had imagined what it might be like to have the chance to design such a magnificent landscape, and now it was here, ready for her kind attention.

All thanks to the master of the house.

She had to force herself to take a steady inhale because any thought of Thorpe made her lungs tight, as if there was a weight on her chest.

Nevertheless, she forced herself to push him aside and concentrate fully on her work. Now that she had a visual in front of her, she started to sketch some designs that she could show to the duke. She spent most of her time in the master's study, as there was a large desk and plenty of room for her to spread out. She was thankful that the servants had been polite and accommodating, if not a bit standoffish toward a lady of the gentry who would rather toil in the dirt like a servant instead of finding a proper husband like she was meant to do.

Iona hoped they would thaw toward her in time, but as long as they continued to abide by the duke's wishes, then all would be well.

It probably didn't help matters that Thorpe had put her in one of the guest rooms rather than sending her to the top floor with the rest of the servants. This likely made for a confusing situation with the rest of the household because they didn't know whether to treat her as an equal or a superior. She would have written to the duke to request a change in her current sleeping arrangements, but the downy mattress was too pleasant to give up just yet. And since she was the main architect who would be overseeing the work being done, surely that made her more of a glorified servant, like a companion or governess, who had more freedoms than the rest of the staff. If she was like Capability Brown, she might be considered quite successful and able to stand as one of the gentry by her own merit, but since she was a woman, that respect was much more difficult to earn. She hoped once people started to see what she was capable of, she could finally return to see her parents with the pride she had been denied, and they would finally accept her abilities as the gifts they were.

With several more designs in place, Iona sent a footman on to Highbridge Cottage so the duke could look them over and choose his favorite. She rather hoped he approved of the hedge maze with the fountain in the midst of it as much as she did. But there was so much more she planned to do. A gazebo, a planting wall similar to the one she had designed at Burnham-on-Sea but on a much larger scale, and so many other ideas were pouring through her mind.

While she waited for the duke to reply to her, she often took long walks along the property. It was quite extensive, and her imagination whirled with what it would look like when it was finished. It would take several months for it to be completed, no matter what was chosen, and although she ached to remain and see it reach its full glory, she knew she would have no choice but to vacate the premises when the duke eventually married. No doubt the Duchess of Rosewood wouldn't want a former lover living on the property. Even if the lady never knew about her history with Thorpe, Iona would know, and that was enough of a deterrent.

When she'd received a reply from the duke a few days later, Iona's heart faltered slightly. She had nearly expected Thorpe to deliver the request himself. Instead, she had to swallow the bitter taste of regret that their time had come and gone, knowing it was for the best.

After that, with a handful of gardeners already in place at Rosewood Manor, Iona was able to hire several more in quick succession since she was speaking on behalf of the duke. She was impressed that no one flat out refused to work under a woman. Most were simply glad for the work. But then, London was a large city with people who were able to put aside their prejudices to earn a modest, proper wage.

The work began in earnest, and as the landscape began to take shape once more, she told herself that she was starting to get over the duke. Deep down, she knew it was a lie so that she could make it through each day, but it was enough. She was already pleased with how everything was starting to take shape.

She'd been in residence at the estate for nearly three weeks when Iona was told there was a visitor to see her. She had just finished eating her breakfast, dressed in her plain, brown serviceable gown, and wondered if she ought to change before she received the caller but decided against it. It wasn't as though she was the lady of the house.

Her heart did jump into her throat, however, thinking Thorpe had decided to return to London after all, but when she was told the guest was in the parlor, she knew that wasn't the case. The duke wouldn't wait in the receiving area of his own home.

With curiosity getting the better of her, mixed with a bit of trepidation, Iona walked into the parlor and saw the side profile of a well-dressed gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair standing by the window. She paused, thinking that he looked familiar, but it wasn't until he turned to face her fully that she gasped aloud.

“Ralph? What on earth are you doing here?”

CHAPTER 18



“Tona,” her eldest brother replied tightly. His smile was more of a grimace than the warm greeting she might have been hoping for after months of estrangement from the family. “Surely you can’t say you’re surprised to see me.”

She blinked. “Actually, I am quite shocked. I didn’t even know you knew where—” She paused as everything abruptly clicked into place. She exhaled heavily. “It was Fraser, wasn’t it?”

He frowned, a perfect imitation of their father when he was cross. “It’s improper to refer to the Earl of Stanton in such an informal manner, as you well know.” When she bowed her head slightly as if properly chastised, he added, “But yes, you are correct. He came to visit me a few days ago and told me where you’ve been spending your time—” He lifted his brow this time, but it was no less intimidating in its censure. “—*unchaperoned*, as it were.”

She raised her chin in defiance. She might have allowed her strict upbringing to make her feel ashamed of her recent activity, but then she recalled she was a woman grown, capable of making her own decisions, and she was quick to rally. “I have not acted in a manner that would cast shadow upon the family if that is what concerns you, nor have I been improper in any way.” *Most of the time*, she silently added, forcing herself not to cross her fingers behind her back in the face of the small white lie. “The earl should have also told you that I have been working on a commission for the Duke of

Rosewood at Highbridge Cottage. I daresay it is coming along quite nicely, I might add.”

“If that’s so, then what are you doing waiting for the duke here, like a dotting mistress?”

Iona jerked at her brother’s words. She clenched her fists at her sides. “No doubt you would like to think that of me, as well as Mama, but I can assure you I am only here to complete another task. I have been alone the whole time I’ve been in residence, and I would have already broken ground on my latest vision here, but I’m waiting for the final approval from the duke, who is *still* at Highbridge.”

“Be that as it may,” he sniffed in a haughty manner that she disliked immensely. “You have your family to consider, and your rebellious nature is starting to cause some... *talk* in London. Surely you would wish to spare us any harm or scandal and cease this ridiculous venture of yours and do your duty to find a suitable husband.”

For a moment, Iona merely stared at her brother. After all this time, there wasn’t a kind word to fall from his lips. Nor did he have the good grace to pretend as though he championed her cause the way Thorpe had. Instead, he was nothing but glowering and condescending, a self-important, pompous arse who she had never seen—before now. She knew he had taken his responsibilities to heart, even when they’d been children, but when he’d scolded her all those years ago, she didn’t even believe it was because he was embarrassed of her. She had always thought her family loved her beyond her “reckless nature,” but she was starting to wonder if that was true at all.

Deciding to ignore his current tirade, she crossed her arms and said, “How are Belinda and the children? You haven’t said anything about them.”

He hesitated, as if her query had taken him off guard. “They are well.”

He didn’t elaborate, so she prodded, “And Jeffrey? Charles?”

He eyed her warily. “They seem to be well, but I haven’t heard otherwise.”

“What of Mama? Or Papa?”

He exhaled heavily. “Everyone is doing their part, Iona. Is that what you want me to say?”

She glared at him. “No. I would like to know that my family still *cares* about me. It is obviously too much to ask for you all to support me in my endeavors, although I have managed to secure one of the grandest houses in England. But no doubt I could take over the gardens at Kew Palace, and it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy you.”

When silence fell, Iona wondered if she might have gotten through to him, but instead, Ralph’s face turned a mottled shade of red. “You dare to speak to me in this way?” He shook his head. “Your behavior is worse than I might have imagined. I will speak to Father to see that something is done.”

For the first time since Iona had left her parents’ house to seek out a new life, she was starting to feel the true sensation of fear. There were any number of ways that a family member could rid themselves of a tiresome female. Worst of which was sending her to an asylum. She couldn’t imagine her father would agree to such horrid treatment, but her brother was rather livid. She wasn’t sure she could trust him not to lie to their father, just to dispose of her. It was quite an unpleasant situation to consider.

Thinking it might be best to try to soothe his ruffled feathers, she stepped toward him and gentled her tone. “Ralph, please. I don’t mean any disrespect toward you or anyone else. I just want to live life on my own terms, the same as you, and Jeffrey, and Charles have done—”

Ralph snorted. “If you believe I have acted in any manner other than what was expected of me, then you are more naïve than I believed. The only thing we have done is our *duty* to our family and to our country. You think marrying an American heiress made me happy? I did it out of necessity to save our monetary welfare. I was in love with my mistress, but I knew where I had to place my loyalties. The same holds true for our

brothers. They are not content in their unions, but they have made their choices for the good of everyone else. You should be doing the same.”

“And live a life of misery as well? You would truly subject me to marriage to someone who might treat me unkindly or as his broodmare?” Iona laughed without humor. “I’m sorry, Ralph, but I would not have asked any of you to subject yourselves to such torment. I would want you to fulfill your heart’s desire—”

“You know as well as I do that it is not how things are done,” he snapped. He set his hands on his hips and stared at the floor for a time. When he lifted his head, it was as if he had aged ten years. The lines around his mouth were more pronounced, the furrow on his forehead deeper than before. “I do not ask you to sacrifice any more than the rest of us have done. I do not like that you have broken from the rest of us. It hurts me to see the divide—” He inhaled heavily, and it touched Iona more than anything else that he’d said thus far because it proved to her that he did possess some sort of emotion, even if just deep down inside where he kept it buried. “If this was a different world, I would support you wholeheartedly, but I cannot abide your willfulness. My honor will not allow it because I know what I have been taught all my life, and that is you should have a family of your own, that your place is by your husband’s side.”

He finally stepped forward and stood in front of her. “All I ask is that you consider what I’ve said. I would prefer things return to how they are meant to be, rather than take a harsher course where you will never forgive our actions.” He looked away. “I shall await word from you by the end of the month, but I cannot, in good conscience, wait any longer to take action, and I know Father will support my decision. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what that means.”

He walked out of the room.

Iona stood there in the silence following his departure. It wasn’t until she heard the front door shut, did she sink down onto one of the nearby settees. She put a hand to her stomach, fearing she might be sick.

Closing her eyes, Iona didn't know how hard her journey would truly be, but then, she hadn't expected the choice would be ripped out from under her by her own brother.

She would get through this.

Somehow, she must find a way.



Thorpe stood in front of the planting wall at the edge of the main thoroughfare at Burnham-on-Sea and stared at the flowers that were blooming. He admired the sailboat topiaries, then walked around the side of the brick structure, and bent down slightly to peer through the hole that gave one a picturesque view of the sea. He straightened and thought of Iona. It wasn't the first time he'd done so in recent days.

It had all started that fateful, gloomy day restlessness had taken hold of Thorpe and sent him in search of a diversion. He had intended to ride to Highbridge to seek out alternate entertainment. Instead, he'd found his way here, standing on this very spot and staring at Iona's first great accomplishment as an architect. Pride rushed through his veins every time he saw it because it was more than just a work of art—it was her personal mark upon the world. She was determined to pave the way for women who wanted to break free from their social confines, who eschewed tradition in favor of something more, something greater than becoming a wife and mother.

Granted, he had noticed the wistfulness upon her face when she spoke about children, but she had given up that hope in favor of another dream—the one that didn't discern between gender or social status. Daring to live life on her own terms wasn't just about being rebellious and flaunting convention. She wanted to help others. It was a noble cause if he'd ever heard of one, which is why he'd decided to hire her for the cottage. The first time he'd met her, he could see the light shining in her eyes when she had spoken of the plans she'd had and the excitement that poured forth into him. And she truly was a remarkable designer.

“That’s a rather melancholy sigh, Your Grace.” He turned at the sound of the female speaker. He hadn’t even realized he’d made any sort of noise.

“I beg your pardon, Lady Beauvais, if I disturbed your peace. I fear I was woolgathering and didn’t realize I wasn’t alone.”

“That was evident.” She lifted a knowing brow. “Dare I ask the reason for your upset? I’ve found it helps to discuss one’s problems with someone who has a listening ear.”

“And you have one?” he teased, although there was a part of him that yearned to unburden his feelings.

“I do, indeed,” she said with the utmost confidence. “Two of them, in fact.”

Thorpe laughed. He didn’t know much about this widow’s history, but most everyone knew of her current status as one of the Regent’s favorite mistresses. She was often called to London to court. It was the reason her heritage as a Frenchwoman had gone virtually unnoticed, regardless of the brutal war the country had just endured. If there was anyone who might be feeling this sensation of loss that was clawing at him, then surely it would be her.

“Might I be bold, my lady?”

“Of course.” She inclined her head. “I actually prefer it.”

He took a steady, deep inhale. “How do you know if you are in love?”

“Ah.” There was a decided twinkle in her gaze. “That is the question for the ages, is it not?” She hesitated, glancing out over the seashore in the distance. Thorpe studied her profile, and although age was starting to show in the gentle lines around her eyes and mouth, she was still a rather handsome woman. “People always have their own opinion on matters of the heart, but for me, I feel like love is not always an emotion or deed, but our treatment of those we profess to care about. If you truly love someone, you will not try to change them or alter their opinions. You will do whatever is in your power to make them a better person, to secure their happiness.”

Thorpe thought about that statement and decided he surely had to feel something more than just lust for Iona because he had never tried to challenge her to be someone other than herself, to follow her dreams.

There was a brief silence, and then Lady Beauvais turned her gaze on him. “Are we speaking of a certain lady in particular?”

His mouth kicked up at the corner. “You’re rather perceptive, my lady. I think you can figure out who it might be without me speaking the name.”

“I believe I can.” She paused. “If you don’t mind me being bold in return, I would tell you something, but you would have to accept this information with the gravest discretion.” She exhaled slowly. “I’m honestly torn about whether I should say anything at all.”

Thorpe was instantly on alert, especially if there was the possibility that it had anything to do with Iona. “Has something happened?”

She pressed her lips together but must have decided he could be trusted because she turned to him and said, “The ladies at the boarding house received a letter a few days ago from Miss Richards claiming that she was in need of assistance. Apparently, she had received a visit from her estranged elder brother who is threatening to take action against her rebelliousness, and if she doesn’t do her duty by the family, he shall be compelled to take further action.” She shook her head. “Unfortunately, this is a risk that we knew might come about with women seeking their independence. It is easier to obtain if one is a commoner, but the gentry it is a bit more complicated because status is rather important in society.”

Thorpe ground his teeth. He had a thought to pay this gentleman a visit. Perhaps if a duke were to threaten his actions in return, he might release some of his aggression toward Iona. But since he didn’t wish to cause further turmoil for Iona within her family, he had to think of another way to

assist her. "I'm not sure what I could do to help, Lady Beauvais."

She glanced out over the sea once more, but he knew better than to imagine she didn't already have a solution in place. This was a woman who got things accomplished. "You might offer for the lady and solve the problem."

He nearly snorted. "Miss Richards has made her thoughts on matrimony quite clear." He lifted a curious brow. "I thought you might be the last person to come up with that suggestion, considering you are a champion for ladies' rights."

"I am a fervent activist, it's true, but even I am aware of choosing my battles. In Miss Richards' case, I feel she would be better served to fight another day," she pointed out with a sad sort of smile. "She might even have more backing as a duchess rather than an unmarried lady. You have already given her the power to continue her dreams. So long as you don't try to contain them, I have no doubt you shall have a harmonious life together."

Thorpe realized he wanted nothing more than to make Iona his wife, but he always imagined it would be a fool's errand to hope for such an outcome. "The last thing I would ever do is try to change her," he said sincerely. "I admire her tenacity and the devotion to her talents. I would never take that away."

She smiled slowly. "I knew you were an honorable man, Your Grace. It's the reason I chose your charming cottage to begin with."

At that, Thorpe's brows lifted. "Did you now?"

"Of course." She winked at him. "There is little that happens in all of Somerset that I am not aware of."

Thorpe chuckled as she ambled away. If there was ever a force to be reckoned with, it was Lady Beauvais.

CHAPTER 19



A fortnight had passed since she'd written to Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford. At this point, Iona was starting to fear what sort of fate might befall her. She had less than a week before Ralph would follow through on his promise. Considering he was stern and unrelenting like their father, and likely spoke on behalf of the rest of the family, she had no doubt that he would return if she didn't crawl to him on her hands and knees, begging for forgiveness.

As much as she knew she ought to do just that, with a landscape that was promptly in turmoil from her efforts at making something grand at Rosewood Manor, she couldn't, in all good conscience, just drop everything and leave it all behind. Her pride alone would never allow it. Ralph would have to drag her away from this place before she would leave of her own accord. At least that way she would have an excuse as to why she couldn't complete the work she'd been hired to do.

Why did life have to be so unfair? Why couldn't she just do what she enjoyed without such harsh consequences? Did society truly believe women were only good for marriage and children? Was it so threatening to believe women were more than capable of woodworking or landscaping, that they had to be cowed into submission by their male relatives? Iona might have thought at the age of five and twenty she would have more freedom. She was a woman grown, but without the proper funds to sustain her, it was difficult to fight back against an injustice.

Being unwed, it was even more difficult.

Iona clenched her fists at her sides and decided she would worry about Ralph tomorrow. Today, she had more pressing matters to attend to outside.

With her hair pulled back and her brown dress firmly in place, she started to head downstairs, having taken a breakfast tray in her room, when she was intercepted by one of the footmen. “The duke is requesting your presence in his study, Miss Richards.”

Iona put a hand to her stomach to cease the sudden fluttering there. “He’s returned?”

“Yes.” He seemed to notice her sudden discomfiture because he added, “None of the staff were aware of his plans to return to the estate.”

“I see.” Iona attempted to compose herself, but she couldn’t imagine why Thorpe had suddenly come back to London. Unless, of course, there was a problem with his betrothed. Perhaps they were planning to hold a more extravagant ball to announce their impending nuptials. Although most of society was still in the country for the summer, there were some who preferred to stay on in London all throughout the year.

Nevertheless, that didn’t stop her anticipation from mounting as she descended the stairs and walked down the hall. She paused just outside the open door to the study and forced her fists to unclench. She exhaled slowly and lifted her chin a notch. She glanced down at her dress and recalled how he hated the coarse material and wanted to see her in silks and satins. Unfortunately, she might be wearing rags by the time Ralph was finished with her.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she turned the corner and would have offered a slight knock on the frame to announce the courtesy of her arrival, but when she saw the duke wasn’t alone, she gasped.

The two men turned at the sound, and although Thorpe wore a grim expression on his face, her father did not. At least,

he didn't until he turned and spied his errant daughter.

“I shall take my leave, Your Grace, and see you at the end of the week once things are settled.”

As her father drew closer to Iona, she stiffened, prepared to deal with an unsavory encounter. When they had parted last, harsh words had been spoken, mostly toward her when her parents realized she wasn't going to be following the path they had laid out for her, but pursuing her own.

Instead of a confrontation, her father walked past her without a glance, as if he had already forgotten her presence in the room.

It was difficult for her to bear, especially since Thorpe was there to witness his scorn. She would lament her father's disappointment later, but for now, she was curious to know what they had discussed.

Before she could open her mouth, Thorpe waved her to the seat in front of his desk. She obediently walked forward and sat down, but he did not do the same. He remained leaning on the edge of the desk, his face furrowed into a thoughtful frown. “I have some news that you will likely not care to hear.”

Iona's mouth fell open slightly. “I see,” she murmured because she knew it was what politeness expected of her. However, considering her father had just been present, she likely knew what he might reveal. She clutched the chair arms on either side of her, steeling herself for what was to come.

His gaze lifted and those mossy green eyes she had been missing so desperately bored straight into her very soul. “I have approached your father with a proposition, and he has accepted the terms of our agreement.” He paused. “We shall be married in three days.”

Iona's head started to buzz. “What?”

“I think you heard me clearly enough.”

“Yes, I suppose... I did, but...” She hated stammering. She took a breath and tried again. “I don't recall agreeing to anything.”

“Perhaps not, and I know you are not pleased by the prospect, but it is for the best.” She could see a muscle clench in his jaw, and it made her wonder if he was upset by the notion. “I was recently approached by Lady Beauvais, who told me about your altercation with your brother, as well as the ultimatum that he laid down for you.”

Iona broke contact and closed her eyes with a shake of her head. “I regret that you were burdened by this. It is not yours to carry. I had hope that I might plead my case to the lady herself. I can’t imagine why she sought you out.”

“Because she knew it was the only way to save not only your reputation, but that of your welfare.” She opened her eyes to regard him once more. His eyes were still direct and unyielding as before. “A single woman from a good family has little option but to do as instructed. You have reached your majority, but your brother could have a strong case when it comes to having you married to someone of his choosing, or even worse, committed to Bedlam. You know as well as I do that women have been sent to asylums for much less than the freedoms you are enjoying now. But that time has run out. If you wish to truly be free and make a difference for other women like you, the only choice you have now is to marry me and be my duchess.”



Thorpe couldn’t imagine what was going on in that lovely head of hers right then, but he could tell she wasn’t overjoyed at the prospect of marrying him. Since he knew she wasn’t the type to enjoy flowery praise, he had decided to approach her in a direct manner. If she considered their union as more of a business arrangement for the good of society, then perhaps she wouldn’t be so resistant. He was starting to think it wouldn’t matter one way or another because she looked quite reluctant. Or rather, mutinous was a more apt description.

She got to her feet abruptly and walked over to the window on the farthest side of the room. He allowed her the space because he was in need of a reprieve as well. From the

moment she'd walked into the room, he'd hungrily drunk in her form. Had he not recalled so vividly the delights that lay beneath that miserable gown, he might not have struggled with his reaction to her. As it was, whatever Mr. Richards had been saying to her was lost the moment she appeared. He hadn't thought a few weeks apart would have caused his heart to beat so rapidly, but he was wrong. Unfortunately, his cock was just as eager to see her.

His gaze flicked to the settee in the room, but he didn't think she would be as thrilled at the prospect of renewing their sexual acquaintance so soon. With any luck, they would resume their affair within a few days if she agreed to his proposal. That still remained to be seen. He wasn't going to force her to accept him. She would have to do it on her own, but he hoped she might choose him rather than Bedlam.

When she turned to face him again, he could tell she'd come to a decision. "I will say I'm not pleased with the direction things have gone. Ralph is wrong for putting me in this situation, and the same for Lady Beauvais for doing this to you." She pinched the bridge of her nose, as if she was getting a megrim. It wouldn't have come as a surprise if she was. "Since it appears both of our hands are tied, I see there is little else that can be done. Your honor and my pride have brought us to this moment." She appeared to have a sudden thought. "If we marry, will I still get to finish designing the estate?"

He inclined his head. "I would expect it." He narrowed his gaze in turn. "Just because we marry, it doesn't mean I shall change my demeanor toward you. I still think you are worthy of being an architect in your own right. I will still do whatever I can to assist you in that endeavor."

"That might be difficult, considering how long I am expected to work somewhere." She paused. "What of an heir?"

He squared his shoulders. "I am a duke, and it is expected of me to procreate. I hope that prospect isn't too distasteful to you?"

She had the grace to color slightly. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to sound as though I despised the thought of children. I

suppose I'm just curious what might be expected of me."

"You shan't have to worry about hosting dozens of house parties if that's what you mean," he drawled. "I'm sure a ball or two during the height of the Season will be expected, but if you don't wish to hold a ladies' salon every week, I shall leave that up to you. I am not going to be your master, Iona. I will be your husband. There *is* a difference. You should know by now I'm not like most men. I am quite progressive in my way of thinking, and the Crown is fully aware of where I stand. Most of the King's offspring are in perfect accord with me."

Some of the tension left her shoulders. "I am grateful you are so modern in your views. It will certainly make things easier and relieve my uncertainty by degrees." She clasped her hands in front of her. "In light of what we've just discussed, I shall be glad to accept your proposal, Your Grace."

Relief flooded Thorpe's veins. "Thank God," he mumbled and then crossed the room to her. He gathered her up in his arms, where her eyes widened perceptively. "It's only right that we should seal our commitment with a kiss, don't you agree?"

"Certainly," she said somewhat breathlessly as her gaze dropped to his mouth.

It was all the confirmation Thorpe needed to lower his head to hers.

He kissed her with a passion that could no longer be denied. He had missed this. He'd missed *her*. His stomach turned at the idea of lying with anyone else. She had spoiled his prowess with any other woman, and he was grateful for it because nothing tasted as sweet as her. He now knew he would have never been able to go through with an engagement with Lady Leia because his heart was already lost to Iona.

He pulled her closer to him, his cock instantly responding. He wanted nothing more than to drag her upstairs and lock the door for the rest of the day, but he told himself that nothing further would transpire between them until it was official. Now that they were back in the city, word would spread much more easily. Although his servants were loyal, it would be

easy to let something slip. That's all it would take before Iona's reputation was in tatters.

He reluctantly pulled back, but he noticed he wasn't the only one who was breathing heavily. Iona's cheeks were flushed, her eyes filled with desire. He nearly groaned aloud. Instead, he reluctantly set her away from him. "I have some errands to run, and since it might not be a good idea for us to be in the same vicinity until after the vows are exchanged, I shall have some of my things sent to Stanton's residence. I would think he owes me after I allowed him to hide out in Highbridge for a time."

It wasn't until he had reached the door that she called out after him, "I'm glad you're here, Your Grace."

The soft tone of her voice was almost his undoing. He struggled to clear his mind from the passion threatening to drag him to his knees as he turned back to face her. "As am I."



Iona was disheartened when Thorpe left, but he was right. If he stayed, they likely wouldn't make it far from his chamber, and she still had work to oversee.

Nevertheless, knowing their wedding was swiftly upcoming, her attention was sadly distracted the rest of the day. She probably should be upset that her independence would soon be at an end, but she had pondered that very little. Instead, she was lost in the daydream of Thorpe's kiss. Her lips still tingled at the memory. More than once she had found her focus drifting until one of the workers dared to break through the sensual haze and drag her back to the present.

When they took a break for lunch, Iona carried a tray in the duke's study under the assumption that she was going to work on some more prints for the gardens, but instead, she moved the food around on her plate and let her mind wander.

It was still so unbelievable to picture herself as Thorpe's wife in just a matter of days. Most women would be starry-

eyed at the thought of being a duchess, but her only excitement was due to the man himself and not his title.

Until she'd walked into the room and spied him, she had nearly forgotten just how much she'd been yearning for a mere glimpse of him. She would have probably rushed into his arms and covered him with kisses if her father hadn't been present. As it was, his stony expression had been enough to dampen the most genuine ardor.

Although she didn't wish to traverse this path, she knew it was time that she tried to smooth things over with her family. It might be in vain, considering the bridge she'd left behind had already been burned beyond repair, but if there was a chance to make amends with her parents, she had to make the attempt.

Swallowing her pride, she removed some paper from the duke's desk. She would have been chagrined to do so before now, but considering they were now engaged, she didn't see the harm in using a sheet of vellum to write to her mother. She expected her mother to ignore her letter again, but considering she was going to behave in the manner in which her parents approved, she thought perhaps there might be a reply. After all, her marriage to a wealthy duke would open several doors that might have been otherwise unobtainable.

The quill hovered over the paper for a time, but before the ink dripped, she dared to set it down. She scribbled a quick note that was short and to the point. She said she would like to meet for tea if that was amenable. There was nothing more, nothing less. No desperate entreaties or begging for forgiveness. She hadn't done that when she'd left. She'd only mentioned how she was regretful that they hadn't been able to support her in her decisions, and someday, she prayed they might come to care for her as she was, flaws and all.

Iona folded the missive, sealed it, and then handed it off to a footman as she headed outside to begin the day.

She didn't mention her change in circumstances to the rest of the workers, feeling it would change how they viewed her. She wanted them to see her as their equal for as long as

possible. Otherwise, they wouldn't feel as though they could speak freely in her presence. And she certainly didn't want them to bow when she was near.

Rolling up her sleeves, Iona grabbed a shovel and took her place in the line. She shoved the iron into the dirt and began to toil alongside the people she had grown to respect in the few weeks she'd been at the estate. She was quite sure they regarded her in the same light, and that was worth more than any accident of her birth. It was something she couldn't control, which no one could. But when it came to what she loved to do most in all the world, she found the joy was insurmountable, more than wearing the finest gown to a society ball would ever be.

CHAPTER 20



“The Duke of Rosewood has arrived, my lord.”

The Earl of Stanton was reclining in the front parlor of his townhouse, flipping through the latest gossip sheet, when the butler announced Thorpe’s presence. Rather than wait for the earl to acknowledge him, he strode into the room as if it was his own residence. He plopped onto the settee and ignored the commotion that followed in his wake as his things were taken to one of the earl’s guest chambers.

Stanton didn’t bat an eyebrow as several trunks were brought inside. “Moving in?” he drawled. “And here I thought you had a perfectly good estate *and* cottage to inhabit?”

“It wouldn’t behoove me to return to Highbridge when I’m to be married by the end of the week, and since my future bride in question is currently at Rosewood Manor, it wouldn’t be wise to remain and chance tarnishing her reputation any further. Her relationship with her family is already strained enough.” He lifted a brow as if to punctuate his statement.

“Hmm. Understandable,” Stanton muttered in return. “But do you have to look so comfortable when you’re only going to be here a handful of days?”

“I don’t see why not? You were quite at your leisure at Highbridge. Mrs. Fines continues to sing your praises.” He rolled his eyes in a dramatic fashion.

Stanton grinned and then finally set aside the paper. He folded his hands over his bent knee and said, “I can’t help it

that her biscuits are the best in England and you refuse to part with her. Besides, it all worked out for the best. You're getting a wife, thanks to me."

"I nearly married the wrong woman," Thorpe pointed out.

The earl shrugged. "I didn't tell you to offer for Lady Hatpin." Thorpe snorted because the man was insufferable. He refused to call Lady Leia Harpin by her correct name. He only mispronounced it because he knew it annoyed Thorpe. "That was your idea. I tried to convince you to ask Miss Richards. Since you have, I'm eager to hear all about your happily ever after."

Thorpe glared at him. "You seem to forget we are marrying under duress. At least on her part." As a sudden thought occurred to him, he narrowed his eyes. "I do find myself wondering why you rushed back to London to tell her brother Ralph what his sister was doing. He might not have been persuaded to act had you not suggested it."

Stanton looked particularly uncomfortable with where the conversation had abruptly veered, making Thorpe more suspicious than before. "I've known Ralph for ages. It would have been wrong for me to keep such important facts from him."

"Which prompted him to call on Miss Richards," Thorpe added. He shook his head. "I can't believe I was such a fool to believe you would keep the matter discreet."

"I was perfectly discreet," the earl sniffed, affronted. "But I don't see what you're so angry about. Ralph played his part, just as I knew he would, and so did the rest of you."

"Our lives aren't meant to be your personal entertainment," Thorpe returned firmly. "But I do find it difficult to point a finger at your meddling when I gained Miss Richards from the chaos. You might not be the usual sort of matchmaker, but she shall be my wife, so I suppose you did succeed."

"There now," Stanton said with a pleased expression gracing his face once more. "That's more like it."

Thorpe folded his arms over his chest. “What I have yet to comprehend, is why you continue to engage with someone like Ralph Richards.”

“Well, I daresay our days are numbered.” He looked thoughtful. “I used to enjoy our exploits, but I suppose I’ve started to become cognizant of his failings rather than his strengths. Apparently, some of your recent good nature is starting to rub off on me.”

“How dreadful,” Thorpe said dryly. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. Leaning his head back against the cushions, he added, “Like you, it took awhile for me to gain a conscience, and I certainly never dreamed I would find myself in such a predicament.”

“What is that? Marrying the woman you adore? Yes, I can see where that is quite a conundrum.”

Again, Thorpe sighed. He lifted his head and regarded his companion. “The problem isn’t what I feel for her, but rather the uncertainty of what she feels for me.”

“Don’t you have some sort of opinion on that?” the earl asked.

Thorpe considered that. He thought back to her reaction upon seeing him today, and the way she’d breathed so heavily when they had parted from their kiss. “I have no doubt that the attraction is mutual, but whether it goes beyond that...” He shrugged. “I can’t say. All I know is she never wanted to wed, and now she’s being forced to do so or else suffer the retaliation of her male relations.”

“Family can be quite a thorn in one’s side,” Stanton muttered. “My younger sisters are proof enough of that. At least they are settled now, thank God, so I don’t have to spend any more of my inheritance on them. I was starting to wonder how many ribbons that one woman truly needed to walk in the park. Apparently, it’s a new color for each afternoon.”

Thorpe lifted a brow. “You will find out about this misery soon enough, I’m sure, when you find your future countess.”

“Heaven forbid!” Stanton gave a mock shudder. “I might consider the prospect in about twenty years when I’m in need of someone to take care of me, but until then, I’m content just as I am.” He waved his hand at Thorpe. “Just watching you sitting there and pining for some chit is enough to make me run for the chamber pot and empty the contents of my stomach.”

Thorpe snorted. “And you claim your sisters are dramatic.”

That comment earned him a glare, but Thorpe wasn’t of a mind to really care. His thoughts had already returned to Iona. He imagined what she might be doing at that very moment. He smiled. It wouldn’t be long before he would know every move she made because he intended to keep her occupied in the bedchamber for much of the time.



Two days before the wedding was to take place at the estate, a woman came to the manor. She introduced herself as Madame Louvere, celebrated modiste, and apparently, Iona’s personal seamstress for the next forty-eight hours.

“You have a lovely figure, Miss Richards. It shall be no hardship at all to outfit you in the best garments.”

Iona frowned lightly. “I’m afraid there has been some mistake. I didn’t—”

“Of course not!” The lady tittered as she circled her like a hawk inspecting its prey. “It was the duke who paid me a visit just yesterday and chose these fabrics.” She nodded in approval as she peered at Iona’s face. “Your future husband has a particular eye for fashion. The shades he selected will go perfectly with your coloring.”

As the lady continued to drone on about her attributes, Iona found it difficult to imagine pushing about a wheelbarrow in a satin gown with delicate lace trim. Of course, she would be expected to entertain at some point as the wife of a duke, and she had to admit that Thorpe’s foresight was rather kind if not a bit too generous. She wasn’t prepared to fully give up all

her serviceable gowns just yet. Thorpe claimed he wasn't going to try to change her, so she intended to remind him of his promise, or there would be no need for all this extra fuss.

When the lady took her leave, it was already midday, so Iona quickly headed outdoors to continue her daily routine. Work on the gazebo was already underway, and she was eager to see how much progress had been made since that morning. She would have to explain the reason for her absence this morning, but she was still torn on what she might say. She had been hoping to keep her impending marriage quiet, but when she walked outside, she could immediately tell the difference in the way the men acted toward her. Their demeanor was more solemn, more subdued than before, and every question was responded to with the utmost humility.

Iona sighed and decided it was time to address the issue. "I assume you have all learned of the upcoming union between the Duke of Rosewood and myself." As a round of murmured assent went about the group, Iona looked at each of them in turn. "I shall say this once. My name will change to reflect my tie to the duke as his wife, but I can assure you I shall still be out here, as I have always been thus far. Nothing will change in that regard."

"But, what of your... honeymoon?" one man dared to ask.

She blinked, and although it took her a moment to respond, she did so in the same, firm tone. "Granted, there will be a brief transition period as I adjust to my new role in the household, but I have the duke's promise that I can continue with my current activities on the lawn."

"You'll keep... working?" another man asked in confusion. "But you'll be a duchess."

She shrugged. "Why should that signify anything? Yes, I will need to be present in society a bit more than I am now, but while some women prefer to take to the arts or perhaps join various charities, I feel my talents are best served out here among nature."

Iona continued to labor until the sun was shining high in the sky. She had missed luncheon and would have skipped tea

if one of the footmen hadn't been sent out to collect her. She wiped at her brow and wondered if she'd left a smudge of dirt in her wake. She wore old gloves to protect her hands, but that didn't mean they kept her clean.

She had to ask the servant to repeat what he'd said as her ears were starting to buzz.

"There is a lady in the parlor waiting for you."

"Oh." Now that her brain had caught up, she was surprised at this news. She thought of her mother and a shot of panic trailed up her spine. If she saw her daughter in such a fashion, no doubt she would have plenty to say. She removed her gloves and set them aside extra cautiously. "Did the caller give a name?"

He hesitated and then said, "Lady Leia Harpin."

This time, a completely different sensation struck her, but it wasn't panic so much as curiosity. What could the lady want with her? She clenched her jaw because she had a feeling she might already know. "I see. I don't wish to keep her waiting overlong, so I will just freshen up a bit and change and be right down." She paused. "Please have a maid send some tea and refreshments while she's waiting. I find I'm rather famished as well."

Iona's stomach started to roll with nerves as she considered the ramifications of meeting Thorpe's former betrothed, but she refused to be cowed by anyone if that was the lady's intention. She had heard a rumor when she'd arrived at Rosewood Manor that Thorpe might be calling on the lady. Could it be she was upset at being denied a possible courtship and intended to take out her frustrations on Iona?

Iona took the back stairs so she wouldn't dirty the main foyer and lifted her skirts as she headed up to her chambers. Inside, one of the maids was already waiting anxiously for her. As soon as the duke had made her revised circumstances known, she had been treated much differently.

As the maid helped Iona to peel off her soiled clothes, she held up a light-blue gown. "What do you think of this one?"

Iona's heart clenched because she recalled the gown as the same one that she had worn on the beach with Thorpe, the day they had first kissed upon the sand. It had originally been a loan from Rose, one of the ladies at the boarding house who wished to own a seamstress shop with her friend, Millie. Iona distinctly remembered trying to give the dress back to her, but the lady had shaken her head with a soft smile. "A dress is meant to conform to the person wearing it. This one was meant for you."

As she cleaned up the best that she could with the pitcher of cool water and then donned the gown, Iona glanced in the mirror and started to attend to her hair. "Sit down, miss, and allow me to assist."

Iona almost waved off her offer, but she realized she would have to get accustomed to people waiting on her again. This time, however, it would be on a much larger scale. Her family was gentry, as much as her mother might wish otherwise. She'd always dared to imagine herself as part of the upper echelon, which is why she had pushed Iona so hard to marry a man of her choosing. When Iona had refused to bend to her mother's will, that was when she knew she had to make the choice to leave. To stay would have been condemning herself to a lifetime of misery, not because she couldn't enjoy the things she loved, but because she couldn't abide the thought of marrying someone she did not love.

Her heart started to pound.

She hadn't agreed to the duke's proposal because of the threat from her brother. Although it was very real, she would have stood up to him until the bitter end. It was *love*, however, that had coerced her to say yes.

Iona nearly groaned aloud, except she wouldn't have any idea what to say to the maid when she asked her what was amiss.

Once she was presentable, Iona got to her feet and strode toward the door. Whatever this woman had to say to her downstairs, she would merely remember her heart's desire—

and although she loved landscaping, it was slowly starting to turn in the direction of Thorpe.



Thorpe tugged down the cuffs on his jacket and stretched his neck to remove the kinks that he imagined were there. He couldn't imagine there wouldn't be, considering he was about to confront his future brother-in-law. He wasn't looking forward to the task, but he told himself that Mr. Richards would suffer the brunt of the consequences.

As his carriage stopped in front of the house on Charles Street near St. James Square, he decided the house looked rather respectable, with its whitewashed limestone exterior. As Thorpe examined the rest of the homes lining the street on either side, he also decided it wasn't much different from any of the other homes he might have visited in the same area.

When the butler opened the door and led him inside the front parlor to wait for his master, Thorpe didn't sit down on the furniture. Everything was neat and well upholstered and placed exactly like any other English residence. It was as if they had torn a page from one of the most popular houses in the vicinity and copied it down to the last candlestick on the mantel. The painting above the fireplace was a typical fox hunt, and the logs that popped in the grate were not there to heat so much as showcase the occupants' wealth.

That's when he realized how similar this place was in comparison to what he'd lived amongst as a child. This place wasn't a *home*. It was a museum prepared specifically to prove those who lived inside these walls were equal to their neighbors. They were purposefully exhibiting every bit of snobbery that they could manage, from the skilled replica of the Portland vase to the Sèvres china plate next to it. Everywhere Thorpe looked, he was reminded of how his father used to try to impress his fellow peers, caring more for their opinion than that of his own family.

He was starting to build his opinion of Ralph Richards' character in a similar fashion.

"Your Grace. You honor me with this impromptu visit."

Thorpe turned to look at the man who had tried to injure Iona with his calculated threats. He nearly snorted at the highly starched cravat, the trim waistline, and the haughty twist to his lips that proclaimed his importance. "A pleasure, I'm sure," he drawled in return, although he didn't mean a word of it.

"Do sit and I shall order some tea brought 'round at once."

Thorpe held up a hand as he remained standing. "Don't trouble yourself on my behalf. I doubt I shall be staying long."

The other man's eyes nearly rose to his hairline. "Indeed. You sound as though you are a man who is direct and to the point. I appreciate that in a fellow gentleman."

Thorpe did not agree. "I assume your father told you about my impending union to your sister."

He inclined his head. "He did." He removed a box of snuff from the inside of his vest and inhaled a hearty pinch. Thorpe's stomach rolled, but he didn't know if it was because of the man standing before him, or the tobacco he'd just inhaled. He had never been able to abide the vile stuff. It certainly wasn't the same as smoking a cheroot now and then. "I commend you on your willingness to safeguard our family's reputation by wedding the chit. I hope you will be able to use a firm hand to keep her in check. I always told Father that he didn't do enough to curb her rebellious nature before, and it nearly destroyed us."

Thorpe's hand clenched at his side. He had the sudden urge to punch the cretin in the face. Rather than trade barbs with him, he asked directly, "Are you aware of the talent that your sister possesses?"

"Talent?" He guffawed and inhaled another pinch. "I would hardly call digging in the dirt something that anyone might be proud to do, and most certainly not a woman."

“Why not?” Thorpe countered. “She has designs that are just as equal to Capability Brown as any I’ve witnessed before or since.”

“Nonsense. I won’t dare to call you a liar to your face, Your Grace, but I can’t believe the Iona I know would be capable of doing much more than causing her family additional scorn within the *ton*.”

This time, Thorpe’s jaw popped with the force of holding himself back. “Then you didn’t really know her at all.”

“Believe what you will, but you will soon learn how selfish and self-absorbed she is. I pity you for sacrificing yourself in such a manner, but it is the choice you must live with. Just as I have done in marrying a woman for her money.” He shrugged. “But I suppose her family got what they wanted, a bridge into English society, whereas I have the necessary means to find an escape from her dreadful, shrewish tongue.”

Thorpe narrowed his gaze, but he told himself not to engage. The days of lunging at someone because they weren’t worthy of the air they breathed wasn’t who he was anymore.

Ralph abruptly glanced at the clock and said, “I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I have to be somewhere. Some ladies don’t care to be left waiting.”

He turned to depart, and Thorpe nearly reminded him that he was dismissing a duke. As much as he didn’t care for this fellow, he wanted to keep peace for the sake of Iona, so he got up and started to follow his host out. However, he paused when he spied the silent figure on the stairs. It was a young woman with light brown hair and a swollen belly, evidence that she was with child. As the sound of a cry came from farther above, it told Thorpe that this wasn’t her first.

It wasn’t so much the fact that her husband was going to meet his mistress in a very blatant and disrespectful manner with no care for his wife’s feelings, but that she had to suffer while watching him depart.

With a heavy sigh, Thorpe decided that sort of slight couldn’t stand. His honor wouldn’t stand for it. Since he was

already quite irritated with him for speaking of Iona in such a way, now he understood the scoundrel was every bit as disreputable as Thorpe's father ever was. If there was one thing that Thorpe wouldn't abide, it was a man who disrespected his family.

Lifting his arm, he spoke up, and when Ralph turned around, Thorpe's fist landed with perfect precision in the middle of his face. After a howl of pain, blood began to spurt from between his fingers when he lifted his hands to whine that his nose was broken.

Thorpe tried to tell himself that he was remorseful as he took his leave, but when he glanced back at Mrs. Richards and saw the satisfied smile on her face, he couldn't quite summon the proper guilt.

CHAPTER 21



Iona walked into the parlor with a bright smile on her face. Although she wasn't sure what sort of reception she might receive when she arrived, she wasn't prepared for the girl who was sobbing on the settee.

She stopped short upon entering and wondered what she ought to do. Should she comfort the lady? Or perhaps ask one of the servants for help? In the end, she took the matters into her own hands, took a step forward, and tentatively said her name. "Lady Leia?"

The girl jumped in surprise, causing Iona to do the same. She put a hand to her heart and laughed a bit breathlessly. "I apologize. I did not intend to startle you. I just didn't think it would be right for me to stand there and not say anything when you were so clearly upset."

Lady Leia's blonde curls danced, her blue eyes bright with moisture as she held a handkerchief to her nose and blew rather *indelicately*. Iona sat down next to her, although she gave the girl plenty of space as she waited for her to talk. "I didn't know where else to go," she sniffed miserably.

When it appeared she wasn't going to elaborate, Iona shored up her courage and dared to ask, "Is this about the duke and our recent engagement?"

The head opposite her nodded almost helplessly.

Iona withheld a sigh. "I am very sorry about that. I—"

"You don't understand." Lady Leia sniffed again. "I didn't *want* to marry him. I care nothing for titles or being a duchess.

That was my mother's goal, not mine." She waved a hand in the air. "Do you know how discouraging it is to have such a stern parent guiding everything you do? From the clothes I wear, to the food I eat, and the way I fix my hair, she doesn't give me leave to decide anything for myself. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

Iona had to snort. While she knew the girl was speaking in a rhetorical manner, she inclined her head. "As a matter of fact, I am quite familiar with the sensation of not being able to express yourself in the manner you wish. My dream was to be a landscape architect. I could see my name on the headlines, celebrated as the first female artist." She held her hands up as if picturing just that, then they dropped back to her sides. "My mother would hear of none of it. She was determined I do my duty and marry an earl that was older than my own father and live life in secluded misery. I refused."

The blue eyes widened. "How did you survive?" she gasped.

"I answered an advertisement in the paper." She smiled at the memory now when at the time she'd been terrified. "There is a boarding house in Burnham-on-Sea that takes in young women who wish to be independent. It's called the Seaside Society, and two spinsters, as well as their benefactor, are in charge of finding suitable situations for those of us who wish to make a name for ourselves."

She blinked in apparent fascination. "But aren't you afraid of being ostracized from society?"

Iona shrugged. "I didn't really care at the time." She pursed her lips together and then added, "It was only after gossip started to swirl that I was in danger." She paused, wondering how much she ought to reveal to this stranger, but considering she was the reason for the failed betrothal, she decided to be candid. "My brother approached me at this very estate and threatened to take 'corrective' action if I didn't stop this nonsense. For an unmarried lady, I'm sure you know how dire those consequences could be." The girl slowly nodded. "The duke was already known to me, as I had been

landscaping his cottage in Highbridge. I suppose he felt honor bound to save me.”

Lady Leia frowned lightly. “I find that dashingly romantic, just like a knight of old.” She gave a dreamy sigh, and Iona withheld a smile. Glancing curiously at Iona, she asked, “Who did you say the ladies were at this Seaside Society?”

Iona pasted on a friendly smile, although her mind was racing with what she had been told. “Let me jot down their direction for you. Perhaps you might wish to take another seaside holiday soon.”

Lady Leia offered a smile in return. “I might just do that.” On impulse, she reached out and embraced Iona. “Thank you for listening.”

“Of course,” Iona said when they parted. Iona might have regretted getting married to the duke if she didn’t like him so much. This girl would have been a perfect match for him.

The girl stood to go, but she hesitated at the frame. “Since you were so kind to me, I feel it’s important that you know something about your future husband.”

Iona froze. She wasn’t sure she was going to like what she was about to hear, but she steeled herself for what was to come. “What’s that?”

She leaned forward slightly as if to impart a secret. “I hear he’s insatiable in the bedchamber.”

Immediately, Iona’s face colored. Not in spite of what Lady Leia had said, but because she already knew that. “Thank you for the... cautionary, my lady. I will ensure I take a pin with me to my rooms each night in case he gets overzealous.”

Lady Leia giggled. “I would think that is very wise.”

As she left, Iona held a hand to her stomach. Not because she was nervous about the upcoming nuptials, but because she was quite looking forward to them.



The next morning, Iona was awoken with a kiss.

At first, she wasn't sure if she was dreaming or not, but when her eyes fluttered open and she spied Thorpe's charming face, her heart began to thump with anticipation.

"Too much of that and we might never leave this room," he murmured. Lifting a brow, he added coyly, "After tomorrow, that shall be my endeavor."

Overzealous, indeed. "Will it?" she breathed, quite looking forward to the prospect.

He grinned and got up from the side of the bed where he'd been sitting. As he did so, she spied a strip of white linen over the top of his right knuckles. She sat up in bed. "Were you injured?"

He blinked, as if he didn't know what she was referring to, and then he glanced down at his hand. "I... er... had a slight altercation." When she gasped, he held out his good hand and said, "Rest assured, I went to the doctor and nothing appears to be broken." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Not that I can say the same for my opponent."

There was something rather peculiar about the way he refused to meet her gaze that made her skeptical that he was holding some vital piece of information back. "Thorpe, how did you hurt yourself?" She wasn't even going to bother with the formalities at this point.

She could see a muscle tick in his jaw, but he finally muttered, "I might have paid a call to Ralph."

If Iona was feeling any aftereffects of sleep, they vanished. "What?" When his confession started to sink in, she gasped. "You *assaulted* my brother? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

At this point, he straightened his shoulders. "The man is an imbecile. I can't say he didn't deserve it."

Iona wasn't going to dispute that point because she agreed wholeheartedly, especially after the last interaction she'd had with him. "Ralph is not my favorite person, by any means, but you can't just go around engaging in fisticuffs!"

She could tell the moment his demeanor changed, when it went from chagrined to defensive. "What was I supposed to do? He was being blatant about visiting his mistress when his wife was standing there watching him leave with a child on the way." He shook his head. "Such a slight cannot be borne, regardless of who it is. Combined with the way he was speaking ill of you, I couldn't possibly stand by and allow my future wife—"

His tirade was cut off as Iona got up and walked forward. She put a hand on either side of his face. She lifted up on her toes and pressed her lips against him. It was the most effective way to silence him.

When he might have taken things a bit further, she pulled back and gazed into those mossy green eyes that never failed to thrill her. She was quite looking forward to seeing them every night before she closed her eyes to sleep and every morning after she awoke. "I am not upset that you gave Ralph what he deserved. I agree he has long needed to be taught a lesson. I have always mourned the poor hand that his wife was dealt. Not only did she cross the Atlantic, so far from her home, but she is chained to him for the rest of her days. I wouldn't wish such a fate on anyone." She hesitated, lowering her voice slightly. "But neither can word be spread that you are so consumed by your wife that you have turned into a violent madman. They would surely do away with both of us if that were the case."

"They can try," he said with a hard glint in his eye. "I haven't worked this hard to repair everything that my predecessors destroyed just to be taken down by someone I don't even respect."

She smiled. "That, Your Grace, is what makes you so fabulously amazing. You might not wish to show the kind heart that you possess, but it is there." She put her hand on his

chest. “It pounds fiercely for justice. It will be men like you who will change the view of the world someday.”

He reached out and cupped her cheek. “I could face anything, so long as you were by my side.”

Iona’s breath caught, and she wondered if perhaps Lady Leia had told the truth about his feelings for her. It would be wonderful, indeed, if his heart was as engaged as hers.

Although she didn’t want to spoil this moment, she knew she had to tell him about the lady’s visit. “I had an unexpected guest yesterday.” He lifted a brow, and she murmured, “It was Lady Leia.”

He groaned. “Don’t tell me that she was here to cause additional trouble for you. I would hate to confront a woman in the same manner as your brother.” When she gasped, he chuckled. “Don’t look so abhorred. I’m hurt that you could think me capable of laying my hands on any woman, especially in anger.” His brow lifted enticingly as he grasped her upper arms and slowly slid them down their length. “Laying hands on you, however, is a completely different matter altogether.”

She gave him a look meant to chide, but she had the feeling she lacked the proper conviction. “Your Grace, we are not yet wed, and until then, I must decline your offer, no matter how much I am tempted otherwise.” She sobered. “As to Lady Leia’s visit, I can assure you that she was relieved the courtship didn’t actually take place. She is upset about her current situation, so I might have given her the direction of Miss Stratford and Miss Grantham.”

He snorted. “I’m not surprised you did so. I have the feeling that, as my duchess, you will do everything possible to set society on its ear and enjoy every moment of it.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I can’t change who I am.”

He ran his thumb gently over her bottom lip. “I wouldn’t wish for a single hair on your head to be different.”

Iona held her breath, wondering if he was about to make a declaration, but instead, he broke eye contact and moved

away. "Since tomorrow is an important day, I thought we might pay a visit to your parents this afternoon."

She couldn't think of anything she might like to do less, but she couldn't escape the unavoidable forever. There was bound to be a time she would cross paths with her mother as the Duchess of Rosewood. The problem was she had yet to reply to the letter Iona had sent earlier in the week. Yet another rejection that had further shattered a piece of her heart. "I'm beginning to wonder if I will ever be accepted there again," she murmured.

"Oh, I doubt that will be a problem," he returned firmly. "I may have had a disagreement with Ralph, but I'm still a duke who has the Regent's ear. They will know better than to turn me away if status is so important to them, and since you are to be my wife, the same goes for you."

Iona gave a reluctant nod. "Very well. Give me time to change and I shall meet you downstairs." She slid him a coy glance. "And since the modiste was kind enough to send over a few things yesterday afternoon, I shall don one of those silks and satins you are so adamant that I wear."

His smile grew. "I will be waiting with eager anticipation." He glanced down at the front of his breeches, where his bulging cock was straining to make an appearance behind the fabric. "*Both* of us."

Iona's face heated, and she had to resist the urge to stroke him. "Indeed, Your Grace. I find that I am quite upset thinking about tomorrow night." She smiled coyly. "Did you know Lady Leia warned me about your carnal nature? Apparently, you are infamous for your pursuits in the bedchamber."

"I can't wait to show you how adept I am in *every* regard." He kissed her soundly once more, and she moaned when he pulled away from her. "You might just be the death of me, Miss Richards." He leaned forward, but just before he kissed her again, he whispered, "But what a perfect way to meet my end." Iona leaned toward him, but he pulled back with a reluctant sigh. "If this continues, we might never leave this

room, and we have things to do today.” He moved toward the door but paused before he exited. “I’ll await you downstairs.”

Iona watched him go with an acute desperation.

Tomorrow suddenly couldn’t get here quickly enough.



Thorpe was trying to breathe steadily as he waited for Iona to join him. Unfortunately, his cock was thrumming with the energy coursing through the rest of his veins. If he was insatiable these days, it had everything to do with his future duchess. She had changed his life in more ways than he could say. She’d taught him humility, respect, and most definitely patience.

By the time he was able to get his raging body under control, she was striding down the stairs toward him. Immediately, his cock was back at attention. The modiste had overdone herself, to be sure. The white gown with its silver trim shimmered with Iona’s every movement and turned her light hair into a platinum waterfall. Arranged in an elegant chignon, a single large curl fell over her shoulder and teased his senses as it bounced against her breast. Thorpe wondered if she shouldn’t have changed into one of her serviceable gowns because he would have a devil of a time keeping his hands to himself.

As she stopped in front of him, he put a hand to his heart to ensure it hadn’t fallen out of his chest and landed at her feet. It thumped steadily beneath his palm. “You are exquisite.”

Her gaze flicked down the length of his form, where his black trousers fit him to perfection. The waistcoat was nearly a mirror image of her gown—white with silver trim—and the black jacket and crisp white cravat he wore complemented it perfectly. “I daresay you are rather handsome as well, Your Grace.”

He licked his lips, eager for the moment when he might peel off her clothes and taste her once again. There was an instant when he wondered if they shouldn’t wait and call

another time, but he was determined Iona might have some family that she might be able to reconnect with.

Forcing his desires to the side, he held out his arm to her, and she threaded hers within the half circle. He led her to his coach, and they headed out into the slightly overcast afternoon.

Once they were in motion, Thorpe found it difficult to glance away from Iona. He had been denied her for entirely too long, and although they would be wed tomorrow and spend the rest of their lives together, it was still difficult to wait one more minute.

She must have been feeling the same because he noticed her brown eyes darkened even further when she glanced at him. It wasn't until she bit her lower lip, and he could see the pulse beat at the side of her neck speed up, that he found it impossible to restrain himself any longer.

It was mutual. They reached for each other at the same time, hands roaming everywhere and lips engaging in a frenzy of need. "God, Iona, forgive me—"

In reply, she reached between them and rubbed her hand along his aching erection. He groaned and cupped her breasts through the gown. The combination of satin and her taut nipples had the material of his trousers straining to hold him back even more.

He was hardly cognizant of when she unbuttoned the front of his trousers, but when she reached between them and started to stroke his bare cock, he ripped his mouth from hers with a deep, guttural moan. She took advantage of his surprise by bending down and taking him in her mouth. The feeling of her hot, lovely lips encircling him made his hips buck eagerly. He wanted to reach out and grasp her hair, to keep her in place as she pleased him, but instead, he clenched his fists on either side of him on the carriage seat and watched as she drove him mad with desire.

When she dared to glance up and meet his gaze, he nearly spilled himself right then. The head of his cock popped out of her mouth, and he nearly pleaded for her to return. Instead, he

found himself asking in a raspy voice, “Where did you learn ___”

“You have an extensive library, Your Grace. I had to keep myself busy in the evenings somehow.” She licked along the ring of his erection, and he could feel his body tighten in response. The release he craved was so close.

“Iona...” He said her name hoarsely, and she licked her lips, and then set back to work. Her movements were relentless, her head bobbing with each motion as she took him to the brink. As his body tightened in preparation, he blindly grabbed for a handkerchief to have at the ready. However, she was determined not to disappoint, and although he tried to warn her that he was starting to climax, she didn’t hesitate. She continued to torment him until the end when he ejaculated into her mouth. He saw her throat work as she accepted his release, making the passion complete and everlasting.

Afterward, he leaned his head back against the squabs of his carriage while she offered a last, chaste kiss on the tip of his spent cock. “I’m impressed, Your Grace.”

“You’re impressed?” He would have laughed had he had the energy to do so. “My dear, you have put any rumor you might have heard about me to shame. I am your endearing servant, forever at your mercy.”

She smiled and wiped a finger around the side of her mouth. Although Thorpe couldn’t believe he had anything left in him, his cock was interested in exploring more. As the carriage started to come to a halt, he quickly put himself to rights, bemoaning the unfortunate circumstances.

He noticed Iona was patting her hair, her actions abruptly nervous. The door opened, but he kept her in place with a light hand on her chin. “You look beautiful, Iona. I will be with you every step of the way, no matter what happens this afternoon.”

Some of her anxiety seemed to ease, and she gave a nod.

“Good.” He led her up the stone steps to the Richards’ townhouse in Soho.

CHAPTER 22



Iona had been trying to think of something to ease her nervousness, and when she'd spied the duke looking at her in such a heated manner, she knew what it was. At first, she'd been shocked to find such descriptive journals in the duke's library, but the more she'd read, the more intrigued she'd become. Although her body had suffered greatly from the fire that she couldn't seem to tame whenever she had read the detailed instructions, she was glad she had done so. As Thorpe had done so much for her to this point, she'd wanted to pay him back in some small way.

She smiled because he'd seemed to approve of her choice.

However, now that the moment had passed, she was a bundle of uncertainty once more. She still recalled, with vivid clarity, the way her father had passed her by without a word when he'd been at the estate. She feared he would do the same once they crossed this threshold, too, and she wasn't sure she could bear his continued animosity, to remain as the prodigal daughter, unworthy of his notice.

They were received graciously and told to wait in the parlor. Although it hadn't been so terribly long since Iona had left this place, she noted the servants were not familiar to her, but the furnishings and décor were exactly the same. Her heart ached in her chest when she spied her mother's favorite canary in the hanging birdcage. It chattered when they entered, and although Iona thought to engage with it, she forced herself to remain seated by the duke.

He shot her an encouraging glance, followed by a charming wink, and she was grateful for his presence beside her. She wasn't sure she might have been able to face her mother and father again without his calm assurance.

The tea arrived before her parents, and although Iona held a cup in her hands, it was virtually untouched. The minutes ticked by, but Iona told herself there was no reason to panic. They would be received soon enough.

After a quarter hour had passed, her father strode into the room. His expression was just as stony and unforgiving as it was before, but this time, his gaze finally shifted to her. Iona's breath caught and held as he considered what to say. "Your mother is not feeling well," he said curtly. "She sends her regards to the duke."

Iona swallowed the bitter taste of regret. That was a kind way of saying she was still upset with her daughter and wasn't yet inclined to forgive her. "I see."

Her father stared at her, as if he wanted to say something further. Finally, he released a heavy breath. "The duke has been rather understanding with this entire affair. I hope you will do your best to make him proud as the Duchess of Rosewood."

She nodded her head and was suddenly the young girl she'd been before she'd left, so eager to please him. "I shall, Papa."

"Your daughter has a remarkable character," Thorpe said firmly at her side. "Her dedication to her craft makes me very proud, indeed."

Her father frowned. "Surely you don't intend to encourage her once you are wed?"

"Naturally," Thorpe said with a tight smile. "You would find that she is quite gifted if you would but take the time to visit Rosewood Manor and see what she has already accomplished."

"I'm not sure I'll have the time," he murmured in return.

Iona carefully watched her father, and the disgust she saw upon his face was not lost on her. Her heart shattered. “Why do you have such a problem accepting me as I am?” Iona whispered in misery. “I’m still a proper lady. It’s just that my preferences run to soil and design, rather than watercolors or needlepoint.”

Her father glared hard at her. “It would be best if we didn’t rehash the matter in front of the duke. He has been kind enough to salvage our family name, to save it from ruin and, for some reason, allow you to continue this foolishness you insist upon. I can’t understand why you won’t just let it go.”

Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “It’s the same reason you turn aside to Ralph’s behavior. Or Charles. Or Jeffrey. You know they are ne’er-do-wells, and yet, you act as though they are without any flaws. They have done your bidding and are in miserable circumstances. Did you truly wish me to follow the same path? Or allow me a bit of happiness?”

“Happiness.” Her father snorted in derision. “Such an emotion does not factor into the world we live in. We are born to do a duty.”

“Then perhaps that needs to change,” she returned softly. She dared to reach out for him, but he kept his hands firmly in place. A tear escaped to trickle down her cheek. “My only regret is that you and Mama cannot find it in yourselves to offer more than just your approval on our match. I want your *love*, too.”

He was still unyielding. “We gave you everything, and you decided to slam the door in our face. It will take some time before that slight is forgotten.”

Or forgiven. He didn’t say the words because he didn’t need to.

Iona could feel Thorpe tensing beside her. She couldn’t imagine what he might be thinking at the moment, but something told her that he wasn’t pleased, that it was all he could do to remain where he was and stay silent.

She swiped at her cheeks and dared to turn to Thorpe. “I would like to go now. I fear we have worn out our welcome.”

He said nothing but stood and offered her his arm. Iona considered saying something to her father, but he remained sitting and not inclined to speak, so she let Thorpe lead her from the room. He paused at the door.

“You should know that until you start accepting Iona for who she is, and for the duchess she will be, I cannot in good conscience do the same for you and your other offspring. It is something you might consider if you wish to have more doors open to you in society without allowing the gossips to create a scandal from their own wagging tongues.”



Thorpe was worried about Iona on the way back to the estate. She was so quiet and withdrawn that he didn't feel comfortable leaving her this night. What would it matter if he remained at the manor tonight? They were to be married in the morning, and it wasn't as if he gave a damn what people thought about him. He just didn't wish to see Iona injured more than she was. The pain was clearly writ upon her pale face.

They didn't talk until they pulled to a stop in front of the estate. Once they were there, Iona spoke up. “I can't do this, Thorpe.”

He paused, leaning back in the carriage seat. When a footman would have opened the door for them, he waved the servant away, leaving them in privacy once more. “What can't you do, Iona?”

Her eyes were full of moisture when she looked at him. “I can't drag you down and make you ashamed of me. I could not bear it if you were to look in my direction like my father does, as if he can't stand the sight of me.”

“That will not happen,” he said adamantly.

“Perhaps not at first,” she whispered. “But in time, you will come to despise me for the same thing that has driven a wedge between me and my family.”

He shook his head. “I disagree. You can have your dreams *and* your honor.”

“But do you really want someone like me? Who is so flawed? I shall bring nothing to our union—”

He grasped her upper arms. “You will bring yourself, Iona, and that is all I want. All I need from you. We will work everything else out along the way, but for now, that is enough.”

She shook her head. “I don’t deserve you. I should leave and return to Burnham-on-Sea and forget you ever existed.”

“That would be the worst thing you could possibly do.” Fear clogged his throat until he could hardly speak. There was no way that he could consider leaving her now when she was in such a distraught state. He cupped her cheek. “Let me stay with you tonight, Iona. Let me love you and prove you are making the right choice. That you’ve always made the right choice because you were courageous enough to do so. There will be people, even those closest to us, who will never understand the deep, true desires of our hearts, but you have never faltered in your desires.” He made sure he had her full attention when he added, “You will understand the depth of my devotion to you after tonight.”

He could tell she wavered, that she wanted to believe in him, but when her own parents couldn’t be trusted to rally behind her, he understood how it was difficult for her to believe in what he said. He nearly told her how he really felt, but he knew words would be inconsequential.

He had to *show* her how much she meant to him.

She nodded her head. “Yes, Thorpe. I want that. Very much.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. “Stay with me tonight.”

He ran a finger along the length of her jaw, and she gave a breathy sigh. “I’ll stay with you. Always.”

He escorted her out of the carriage, and before the sun started to set on the horizon, he was leading her into the manor with only one destination in mind.

They passed curious servants on the way, but they were all careful to avert their gaze as they walked on, pretending to mind their own affairs. They turned a blind eye to the fact that their master was taking the landscape architect—and future duchess—to the upper floors, where they were most likely preparing to engage in activities of a scandalous and carnal nature.

Neither did Thorpe, nor the lady who grasped his hand, seem to care.

Thorpe had read poets write about an all-consuming passion, about how stars would dance in their gaze when they looked longingly into their lover's eyes. He'd always thought it was a load of drivel before now—before Iona.

As he opened the door to her chamber and led the way inside, shutting the door behind them, he remembered the way she had pleased him so perfectly in the coach. Now it was his turn to ensure the same calm assurance was given to her. After tonight, he intended to make sure she never doubted the way he felt about her.



It was odd that Iona should be more anxious about this night with Thorpe than the first time they had lain together. But there was something altogether different in his mannerisms, his actions—those mesmerizing green eyes. He was allowing her to see how special she was, how she looked through his eyes. It was as if he were proving that no one else mattered but the two of them in that moment.

She wanted to kiss him, but rather than take her in a heated embrace, he moved behind her, where he started to work on the lacings of her dress. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the sensation of his light fingers as they deftly worked his way

downward. When the dress gaped, he gently slid it down her hips.

Iona prayed he would touch her then, but he did not. He started to untie her stays next and then the fastenings of her underskirts. Her breathing deepened as the anticipation started to fill her. She recalled all the nights she'd gone to bed, wishing it were Thorpe's hands on her body instead of her own. She would cry out, desperate for the release that only he had been able to give her, her failed attempts a miserable interpretation of his expertise.

When she was standing before him in nothing but her shift, stockings, and slippers, the rest of her attire a discarded pile of material on the floor, he still didn't touch her any longer than it took to remove the pins holding up her hair. He removed them all until her hair cascaded about her shoulders in a golden waterfall. He slid his palms through the length, and her lungs hitched as he gave her scalp a gentle massage.

When he finally moved around to face her, she looked at him through hooded eyes. She reached for him, but he lowered himself to his knees, gathered the edge of her shift in his left hand, and slid it upward until the lower half of her body was revealed to his hungry gaze. His nostrils flared as he glanced up at her, and then he slid his right hand downward to grasp her calf. He lifted her leg and set it over his shoulder and then leaned forward.

The moment his tongue slid across the area that pulsed with need for him, her head fell back, and she clutched his shoulders to support herself. Her hips began to undulate with his torturous movements. She dared to glance down, and the sight of his dark head between her legs, pleasuring her so intimately, was enough to send her spiraling over the edge of oblivion.

The pounding in her body was so loud she could almost hear it all around her.

“Blast.”

When she overheard the muttered curse from Thorpe, she realized that the noise wasn't coming from her imagination,

but from his chamber door. She gasped as he straightened and headed for the door with a stiff set to his shoulders.

He wrenched the door open and uttered an impatient demand to the person on the other side. At least he was still fully clothed.

Iona was still trying to come back to her senses when she flattened herself against the closest wall. She needed it for the support and to ensure she wasn't seen in such a state of dishabille.

“Are you certain?”

Again, that clipped demand, but this time, there was a different edge to Thorpe's tone. It caused a sense of alarm to trail slowly up her spine. Whatever he was being told didn't sound as though it was positive news.

When he shut the door, Iona looked at him anxiously. He looked as if he was in pain, but the bulge in the front of his trousers was quite evident. However, he didn't approach her with a heated glance but more of a regretful expression.

The alarm that had intruded now turned into panic. She took a hesitant step toward him. “What's happened?” He acted as though he was struggling with the best way to say whatever it was. She reached out and grasped the lapels of his jacket. “Thorpe, *tell* me.”

He scrubbed hand down his face and then eyed her steadily. “There was an accident.” Iona could see his throat work as he swallowed. “One of the villagers working at the cottage suffered an apoplexy. It doesn't sound very good.”



Instead of the passion-filled night that Thorpe had envisioned, he found himself torn between his betrothed and the honor bound need to return to Highbridge. He scrubbed a hand down his face because he knew what Iona would want. “I'm sorry. I wanted tonight to be perfect. After the upset you suffered earlier—”

She put a hand on his cheek. “It may take years before the rift with my parents is fully healed, or it might never be repaired. I might regret the way things are at the moment, but if I had the chance to do it all again, I would because it gave me the chance to see what it was like to live for myself. Not only did it give me the opportunity to be independent, it brought me to you.”

He smiled in a crooked manner. “Are you sure you don’t regret that?”

“No.” She leaned forward and kissed him, making him mourn the direction things were going even more. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to join you. Whoever it is, I would like to show my support. Perhaps there is even something I could do for his family.”

Thorpe couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was there a woman who was more selfless and considerate? “Indeed, I would like that. I’ll make the necessary preparations while you make yourself ready. It would be best if we could leave as soon as possible.”

After Thorpe left Iona, he called for Beckham. The servant appeared as if by magic, but he generally always knew when he was needed. “See that the coach is readied. I am returning to Highbridge immediately. Miss Richards is also accompanying me, so we will both need a few provisions for the journey. I can’t say how long we will be in residence, but I suspect it will be brief.”

The butler set to work, and he returned to tell Thorpe that everything was ready at about the same time Iona joined them in the foyer. She had changed into a traveling dress of a dusky pink hue, and Thorpe made a mental note to give the modiste a sizable donation to her shop for the masterpieces she had created for his future wife. But then, Thorpe decided Iona would look resplendent in anything that she wore.

Thorpe led Iona to his coach, and they set out.

It took two and a half days of grueling travel, stopping only to change horses at one of the local inns along the way. Thankfully, Beckham had ensured several refreshments had

been sent along to keep them satisfied until they'd reached their destination.

When they finally pulled into the drive leading to the cottage, Thorpe saw the wagons out front, proving that the villagers were still continuing work, even if tragedy might have set back their morale.

As they came to a stop, Mr. Parker came around the front of the cottage and greeted them fondly if not with a bit of a sad countenance. With his hat in his hands, he looked at both of them. "I'm sorry to say that our Freddie passed on yesterday afternoon. I know he would have been honored that you came back all this way to pay your respects."

Thorpe was weary, and he knew the same went for Iona, but she walked over and embraced the foreman. "I'm very sorry for his loss. He was a good man, to be sure. One of the hardest workers I have known." Her voice cracked slightly toward the end.

"He was that, Miss Richards." He paused and then said, "Or should I be calling you, *Your Grace*?" His gaze shifted back and forth between them.

"It's still Miss Richards," Iona said, but then she turned to Thorpe. "But I suspect that could change by the end of the day?"

For the first time since they'd received the regrettable news of Freddie's accident, a grin started to spread on his face. "I still have the special license I was granted in my possession, and I think a seaside vow exchange might be just the thing."

Iona offered him a wink of approval, and then she looped her arm through Mr. Parker's. "I am anxious to see how far you've come on the landscape, and then perhaps we might go into the village to call upon Freddie's family."

CHAPTER 23



Iona's spirits were lifted as she walked into the front door of the Seaside Society of Spinsters the next morning. She'd had a pleasant visit, if not bittersweet, when she had spoken to Freddie's family the previous afternoon. His loss was still terribly acute, but they were grateful to Iona and the duke for coming by. When Thorpe offered a sizable donation to help cover the cost of the funeral expenses, including the wage he would have paid Freddie for completing his part of the work at the cottage, tears of gratitude had shone in their eyes. It warmed Iona's heart that her future husband was so thoughtful. She knew in that moment, if her heart hadn't already told her, that she had made the right choice in accepting his hand. It might not have been a conventional courtship, but the result was going to end up with the same outcome.

It was also going to hold true for their union. Tonight, as the sun set upon the shore in Burnham-on-Sea, she was going to give herself to Thorpe. She would become Iona Covington, the Duchess of Rosewood, for better or for worse.

Thorpe had already gotten the sanction from the local vicar to perform the ceremony, and they had invited most of Highbridge to join in the celebration. Iona was here to do the same for the women who had become just as close as family to her in the time she'd darkened these doors. Although she wouldn't be living here, she was determined to make a difference.

When she entered the front parlor, she was greeted warmly by Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford. When she explained what would be transpiring later that day, Alexandria clasped her hands together and immediately went upstairs to alert the other residents, so they might join in the merriment as well.

Miss Stratford looked at Iona kindly, her red hair pulled back into a fashionable chignon. "I knew you were going to do great things, Miss Richards." She shrugged. "While it might not have been the independence you had been expecting, I am proud of you, nonetheless."

Iona's eyes stung with respect for this woman. "Thank you. That means a lot, considering my own family is having a difficult time accepting my olive branch."

She gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Give it time. Not everyone prays the same, so they shall not forgive the same. Just remember that is their cross to bear, not yours."

Iona took a deep breath. "Because I am a firm supporter of what you are doing here in Burnham-on-Sea, I would like to offer a proposal." She paused and then forged ahead. "Since I shall be a duchess, I want to give my support as a secondary benefactor."

Miss Stratford's green eyes widened. "Are you quite sure? Have you spoken to the duke about this?"

Iona nodded. "I discussed it with him on our way back to Somerset. He seems to think it's a fine idea. He is also willing to let me continue with my landscaping, so long as I do my best to beget an heir."

The lady smiled knowingly. "No doubt that will be no hardship for you. The duke is a fine-looking gentleman. And quite progressive in his views as well. You have made a fine catch."

"I am one of the lucky ones," she agreed.

As the rest of the occupants joined them in the parlor, amid a flurry of excitement and well wishes, Iona was glad to hear all about their latest successes. Millie and Rose nearly had the funds to open their seamstress shop, and so Iona decided they

shouldn't need to wait. She offered to give them the rest of what they might be lacking.

"But, Miss Richards, we couldn't possibly accept charity from a newly married lady!" Millie gasped.

"Please, accept it on my behalf, from the funds I acquired as an architect. I am more than willing to share my earnings with you both." She offered them a coy smile. "And I believe I still owe you for two gowns."

Rose wiped away a drop of moisture with her finger. "One was a loan, and the other fit you too perfectly to take back. It was a gift."

"Nevertheless," Iona said firmly. "The funds are yours."

Amid a flurry of gratitude, Tassy walked over to them. She rolled her eyes in a dramatic fashion as she set her hands on her trouser-clad hips. "I suppose this means I shall have to wear a dress for this joyous occasion."

"If you wore a dress, I daresay I might faint from pure shock."

Tassy laughed. "I would hate to be blamed for that."

Iona turned to glance at the other woman with reddish-brown hair who was standing silently to the side. Iona was saddened to see her demeanor hadn't seemed to revive much since the day Iona had spied her staring at the sign above the boarding house. "Miss Carter? How are things with you?" she asked gently.

She offered Iona a tentative smile. "Lady Beauvais has been my largest client thus far, but she has told me that there are more people clamoring for my work in London." She shrugged. "I suppose we'll see what happens. It is the only thing that I truly enjoy." With that, her gaze shifted to the side, as if she'd revealed too much about herself.

Iona hoped she would be able to break out of her shell soon. She had no doubt that Miss Grantham and Miss Stratford would do everything in their power to see that she was transformed.



The sun was nearly at the perfect location on the horizon. It cast the sea beyond the shore in a brilliant shade of pink and orange, while the sand beneath Thorpe's polished black boots sparkled like yellow gold. The rest of his attire, however, was perfectly casual. Buff trousers and a flowing, white cambric shirt were all he'd donned because it had been Iona's wish.

Everything was different from what they might have done in London, where the rules were infinitely stricter, such as marrying before noon, and the requisite breakfast that would be held, and so many other rules that would have spoiled such a perfect day.

None of it, however, could have ever prepared him for the sight of the woman who was slowly walking toward him to take her place at his side. His heart stuttered to a halt in his chest when he first beheld Iona. She'd spent all afternoon at the boarding house while he'd run about the city like a madman, getting everything perfect for this moment when they would finally become man and wife.

The tragedy in Highbridge with Freddie had delayed their original proceedings at the estate, but he decided this was much more fitting. If it hadn't been for Somerset, he never would have met Iona. This was the place where her dreams had come true, and where the dreams he didn't know he'd forgone had reached their pinnacle. She was all he ever wanted, and in just a short time, she would finally be his. The wait was over, and the picturesque scenery around them was the perfect conclusion to their story.

As he watched Iona walk toward him, he realized she had chosen the perfect dress for the occasion. It was light blue with silver lace about the bodice and hem. She'd also done the unthinkable and left her hair to flow behind her in a shimmering wave of its own. No doubt if word reached her family in London, they would think them both mad to allow such a shocking thing, but Thorpe didn't care. No one else mattered, but he knew the people that were around them

wouldn't cast any sort of judgment. Most of them were common folk, villagers, and shopkeepers from Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea, there out of a mutual respect for Thorpe and Iona. Iona had transformed their town into something beautiful, and Thorpe had given the men a decent wage to come and work on his land. They wouldn't dare to speak an ill word on this happy occasion, unlike those in society who might smirk at their simple attire.

He smiled when he saw her feet were bare, her delicate toes sinking into the sand as she moved toward him with a broad smile on her face. It told him everything that he needed to assure himself that she was *happy*. Above all else, that was his main goal—it always would be.

As she reached his side, he looked down into her dark, brown eyes and whispered, “You're enchanting.”

She glanced up at him through the wealth of her dark lashes. “You're rather handsome yourself, Your Grace.”

It was the promise that she didn't say that caused a low purr to emanate from his throat. He said nothing as they stood next to each other and allowed the vicar to begin the ceremony. When it came to the part where he asked for a ring, Thorpe held out his hand where a ruby ring sat. It caught the glint from the dying sunlight and shone with a brilliance that seemed to put everything else to shame.

As he slid the ring onto Iona's finger, he murmured, “This was my mother's. I was able to retrieve it from the safe at Rosewood Manor before we departed. But if you would like to choose one of your own preference—”

She reached up and kissed him soundly on the lips.

The vicar instantly cleared his throat and grumbled, “We haven't gotten to that part yet!”

She pulled away, but her cheeks were a delicate pink, her smile charming, and Thorpe knew she wasn't a bit apologetic for her actions. “I adore it. Just as I adore you.”

They waited patiently for the ceremony to conclude, and when it did, they sealed their union with a kiss full of promise

and eagerness for the night to come.

Thorpe wanted nothing more than to whisk his new wife away from so many prying eyes, but abruptly chaos erupted. “It’s time for the *charivari!*” With a loud, joyous round of cheers to celebrate the new duke and duchess, pots and pans were struck with wooden ladles, several bells rang, and anything else that might make a cacophony of sound.

Iona’s laughter could be heard above it all, or perhaps it was because Thorpe was more attuned to the lovely woman at his side.

A horse was led over to the couple with several white ribbons adorning the shining mane, as well as along the reins that led to the bridle.

Thorpe was lifted off his feet and placed on top of the mighty steed, and then Iona was placed in front of him, practically sitting on his lap, and then the true merriment began to commence.



Iona had never beheld anything like the singing and excitement that was happening around them as they were led through the main thoroughfare of Burnham-on-Sea. It was so different from the somber events that she had attended with her parents when she was younger. She would have been happy to marry Thorpe under any circumstances, but this was certainly something special.

Any other time, Iona would have been nervous about being on a horse, but with Thorpe behind her, she was perfectly relaxed. She turned around to face him, and she was struck by the virility that emanated from him. His clean-shaven jawline was close enough that she could smell the fading scent of the soap he’d used earlier in the day. His gaze flicked to her, and the swirling depths of his mossy green eyes made her lick her lips. Until that moment, she hadn’t really absorbed the full ramifications of who she was with. She knew she had married Thorpe, certainly, and a duke at that, but he was so male, so

raw right then, that she suddenly couldn't seem to draw a full breath. It was as if everything had changed between them, but she supposed it had. She was now a wife, a married woman—the Duchess of Rosewood.

She set her focus back on the well-wishers around them because to dwell too long on her altered circumstances might be too much to handle at the moment. She exhaled slowly and tried to tell herself that Thorpe was still the same man she had given her heart. He might be her master in the eyes of the law, but he had assured her that they would remain on an equal level, that it would be as before.

With some of her anxiety easing over what tomorrow might bring, Iona decided to enjoy the fanfare taking place.

She just didn't know how long it would take.

From Burnham-on-Sea all the way to Highbridge Cottage, the crowd never once slowed down. They made sure to let everyone within hearing distance of the county know that a grand wedding had taken place.

When the horse stopped and they were allowed to dismount, Iona stumbled for a moment, not used to sitting atop a mount for so long. She didn't have time to gain her footing because her husband reached around her and lifted her into his arms amid a hearty round of raucous laughter. "If you will pardon us, it is time that I abscond with my wife."

A few whistles went up into the air around them when Iona wrapped her arms about Thorpe's neck as he carried her over the threshold. But he didn't stop there. He continued walking up the stairs until he reached his chamber, and it wasn't until he kicked the door shut behind him that he gently set her on her feet. The sounds of revelry continued to be overheard outside.

Her husband didn't say anything for a time, and Iona could only imagine what he might be thinking. It wasn't until she bit her lip a bit self-consciously that he released a deep growl and pulled her into his arms. "I was hoping to take my time and love you properly, but I've been waiting too long to have you

beneath me, over me, *around* me, that I may not have the strength to do so.”

Iona’s heart thrilled at his words. When he’d hesitated, she was afraid he might be having reservations. “That’s good because I want you, too. *Now.*”

He reached down and ripped his shirt off over his head. Iona admired the way the muscles in his sides and torso moved with the movement. “At least we are in a proper chamber this time,” he said gruffly.

She made quick work of her gown, and his eyes flared with unadulterated passion. She glanced at the chair next to the gentle burning fireplace. “Then again...”

He followed her gaze and went forward to grasp her about the waist. He lifted her, walked over to the chair she’d indicated, and set her back down. “I like the way you think, Your Grace.”

Iona blinked at the sound of her honorific and realized that, for the first time since she’d embarked on her journey for independence, she didn’t mind it if all her dreams didn’t come true. And perhaps they did, but not in the way she’d first envisioned.

He reached out and unbuttoned the front of his trousers, freeing his impressive length, and then he sat down. He grasped Iona’s hand and drew her closer, urging her to place a leg on either side of his hips. Positioning her entrance on the tip of his cock, he slowly moved upward. “God, you’re already so wet—” His words cut off when she easily slid down the rest of the way until she was fully impaled.

Iona’s pulse was fluttering wildly, but when Thorpe began to unlace the front of her stays, she knew no end of her desire. As her breasts were freed from their confines, he slid down a section of her shift so that her tight, pink nipples were fully bared to him. He cupped each of those creamy orbs and kneaded gently as he rubbed his thumbs over their peaks.

Her body taking over, she started to move her hips, and the friction beneath her underskirts was starting to turn into

something wonderful, something magical.

Thorpe held her and began to kiss her chest, her neck, his tongue laving over the tops of her breasts, then suckling each nipple as he toyed with the other. Iona was being driven mad with the pressure that was building inside of her. Her movements started to become more frenzied, more hurried as she raced toward the glory of release.

Thorpe soon reached up and brought her head down to his for a kiss so explosive and tender that she wasn't sure she would be able to take much more.

As they parted, he grasped her hips and pressed her down more firmly onto his cock. He hissed through his teeth as she ground down, creating a rhythm that had perspiration breaking out on her forehead. When he started to lift his hips in time to her movements, sending him so gloriously deep inside of her, Iona started to tremble with the force of their union.

“Come with me, Iona.” He was breathing heavily, his hair falling forward over his forehead, and Iona could feel some of her control start to slip. From the darkened color of his eyes, to his muscular chest with its light smattering of hair, and the enticing way he looked at her body, she was starting to spin into a spiral where there was no return.

His movements became more fervent, and as Iona rode his cock, heat began to swirl along her limbs and culminate where they joined together. “Thorpe...” She moaned his name because she could tell she was close to her peak.

“Yes...” He slammed her against him. “That’s it. Give yourself to me.”

Iona grasped his arms as her core started to pulse. Iona cried out, sobbing his name as her body exploded in a powerful climax. The pleasure was indescribable, a summit that sent her to the stars and beyond—endless.

She was still struggling to return to the plateau of reality when she could feel Thorpe’s cock expanding inside of her. “Iona...” His voice sounded foreign, distant, as he stilled, shaking with the force of his release.

Now they were truly one.

CHAPTER 24



At some time during their lovemaking, the excitement outside had subsided. Thorpe couldn't have said when the revelers had decided to move on. All he knew was since being here so intimately with Iona—his wife, his duchess—everything had gotten quiet. There wasn't even a single servant who was stirring because when he'd gone back to London, everyone had returned with him. However, he had it on good authority that the ladies of the boarding house had prepared a few surprises for them in the kitchens.

Currently, Thorpe was reluctant to move. He held Iona against him as their breathing steadied. They were still joined together, but he didn't care. He could happily die in this moment. It seemed as if he had just moments ago. Never in his life had he had such an explosive instant of pleasure. His entire body had been on fire from the inside out, and now the steam of his cooled passions was still keeping them warm.

Iona lifted her light-colored head and looked at him. "That was remarkable."

He grinned in a haphazard way. "I'm not sure I will ever get tired of hearing you say that."

She laughed and carefully separated them. He mourned her loss, but she didn't go far. With a coy glance in her eyes, she moved to the bed and lay down, propping her head up with her bent elbow. "Now what happens, Your Grace?"

He would have been reluctant to get to his feet, except she looked so damned enticing lying there that he found a sudden

burst of energy. “I can think of a few things...” He walked over and removed the rest of her underclothes until she was naked. He kicked off his trousers and then joined her on the bed, her back to his front, and drew her within the circle of his arms. The stirrings of a rekindled excitement coursed through him, and he cupped her breasts with his eager hands. Molding them gently, he could hear the hitch in her breathing as her legs started to move restlessly. His cock immediately hardened.

Slipping his left hand down the side of her smooth skin, he found the damp curls at the apex of her thighs and slipped a finger through the folds. When he found the sensitive bud nestled there, she moaned.

Thorpe closed his eyes, desperate to keep his control long enough until she found her release. Rubbing faster and faster, her entire body stiffened and then began to tremble. Thorpe closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment to the fullest. He had never felt so powerful. As a duke, he was used to people bending to his will, but Iona gave herself without hesitation. She responded perfectly to every touch, every kiss. She was incomparable to any other woman he’d ever known.

“Thorpe...” she cried out his name. “I want you inside of me. Please...”

He didn’t have to be told twice. Rolling her onto her back, he crawled on top of her and positioned his cock at her entrance. But rather than give her what they were both craving, he bent down and teased her, kissing gently and nibbling his way along her body until she was almost demanding with her pleas.

When he slid inside of her, he groaned at the sweet torment of their joining. He couldn’t imagine that each time it could get better, but it certainly seemed to be that way as he could feel his body tightening. As she started to ride the wave of bliss, his thrusts became relentless until he spilled himself deep inside of her core. Stars danced before his eyes, and he enjoyed this second of heaven before it sent him spiraling back to earth.

When he rolled onto his back, he knew nothing else would happen for a while. His body was gloriously spent. As he glanced at Iona, he could see her eyelids start to droop slightly, and he could tell she was of the same accord.

As if reading his earlier thoughts, she looked at him and whispered, “Will it always be like this?”

He smiled gently. “I can’t say. I hope so. I have certainly never felt like this before.”

She returned his smile. “Neither have I.”

It should have been the opening he needed to tell her those three little words, but Thorpe found they wouldn’t come, no matter how much his brain screamed at him to speak. There was just enough of his own hesitation that caused him to remain silent. Perhaps it was his own insecurities continuing to plague him, or his doubts about Iona’s feelings for him. It wasn’t the future she had planned for herself. Was she happy with the direction her life had taken?

Allowing the moment to pass, he urged her to snuggle up next to him. She did so, laying her head within the crook of his arm. “Goodnight, Your Grace,” he whispered.

He could feel her grin against his chest. “Goodnight, Your Grace.”

He closed his eyes.



Iona woke sometime in the middle of the night. At first, she was disoriented. There was little light in the room, other than the glowing embers from the dying fire and the moon that was shining through the windowpane.

She slowly lifted her head and glanced at the sleeping Adonis next to her. For a moment, she was transfixed, unable to move as she watched his steady breathing. She allowed her gaze to travel down his form and back and realized he truly was a fine specimen. She was a fortunate woman, indeed, to have landed such a prize.

Biting her lip, Iona was somewhat shy when she recalled all the licentious things they had done before exhaustion had claimed them both. Now she was feeling the effects, with a dry throat that was in desperate need of some water.

Careful not to wake her husband, she slid out of his arms and out of bed. Without a robe to tie about her waist, she gathered her shift that had been tossed onto the floor and put it on. She glanced at him before she opened the door of the bedchamber and shut it quietly behind her.

On bare feet, she padded down to the kitchens and grabbed a glass from the cupboards to fill it with some fresh water that had been left in a cistern. She greedily drank half a glass. With her thirst quenched, she wasn't quite ready to retire just yet, so she made her way to Thorpe's study.

Iona walked inside with a curve to her lips. She recalled the first time she'd walked into this room, feeling so intimidated and unsure of herself but quickly finding the resolve to turn her nervousness into confidence.

She trailed a hand along the cushioned settee and had a flashback to that night—that *one* night—she'd lain with Thorpe. It had changed everything. She hadn't known it at the time, but looking back, she realized it was the turning point in acknowledging her love for him.

Perhaps when she returned upstairs, she might offer him a gentle kiss and impart those three little words that had been threatening to spill out into the air between them all night. She no longer questioned how he felt about her. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach that he would reciprocate her feelings. If she were honest with herself, doubt had faded away long before then, when he'd told her that he wouldn't try to take away her dreams.

Spying a folded letter on his desk, Iona wouldn't have thought anything about something so inconspicuous sitting there except for one important factor.

It was addressed to Thorpe in her father's handwriting.

A strange sensation snaked its way up her spine. She told herself not to look at it, that whatever it entailed didn't matter, but considering there was still friction between her and her family, she found herself moving forward. With a shaking hand, she picked up the vellum and opened it.

To the Duke of Rosewood,

I am writing to you on behalf of the family of Miss Iona Richards. I am taken to understand she has been in your employ for the past several weeks. I'm sure you can feel my distress when I say her rebellious behavior has been upsetting to myself, her mother, and her elder brothers, all who have families of their own. They are doing their best to safeguard them from the damage my daughter is causing to our good name.

I implore you to cease allowing her to continue making a fool out of us all. She has always been a spirited girl with a forward-thinking mind that needs to be curtailed immediately.

I have it on good authority that you have done remarkable things by recouping your family fortune. I have a sizable dowry to offer you as a gesture of our gratitude, should you accept my offer and find a man worthy of combating her independent urges. I hope I can count on your honorable nature to assist in this regard.

Cordially Yours,

Mr. Harven Richards

The paper in Iona's grasp shook as fresh tears stung her eyes, but instead of the emotional joy she had experienced that day, it was the heartbreak in knowing that her father truly despised her and a new way of life that she was determined to see come to fruition. After reading this letter, she realized now that they would never approve of her choices, and the rift that spanned between them might never be hurdled.

More than that, she thought of her husband, sleeping soundly upstairs.

She glanced at the ceiling as though she could see him, lying there in all his wonderful, masculine appeal—and

wondered if he could be trusted to keep his promise to her. He had told her that she could continue doing what she loved, landscaping the rest of his land and beyond, but now she had to ponder if he was being sincere. The day he'd returned to Rosewood Manor, her father had been there. Had he refused the offer?

Or had they finalized their arrangement?

Returning the letter to its original position, Iona took a deep breath to keep her composure. Nothing would be gained by getting upset when she didn't know the full story.

She supposed a test would be in order. She would mention returning to London in the morning, that she needed to get back to work. If Thorpe agreed, knowing how much her work meant to her, she would be satisfied that all was well. If he acted as though he wanted to delay their return...

She closed her eyes and prayed for fortitude.



Thorpe reached out an arm, intending to bring his wife into the circle of his arms, perhaps enjoy another round of intense lovemaking. He had no doubt, with the attraction that was palpable between them, that it wouldn't be long before she was carrying his heir. The image of her belly starting to swell with their child had his cock hardening with renewed interest.

Instead, he encountered nothing but a sheet that was cold to the touch, proving that she had been absent from his side for some time.

He frowned. *Where is she?*

He got out of bed and slipped on his trousers. Without his glasses to see properly in the poor light, he walked over to the clock on the mantel with a squint and noted it read half past five. Surely, she wasn't the sort to rise so early? Whatever the reason, he intended to locate his lovely bride as soon as possible.

He headed downstairs and saw a dim light on in his study.

Curious, he walked inside and stopped at the sight that met his eyes.

Iona was sitting in one of the wingback chairs by the fireplace, wrapped up in a blanket with a book on her lap and fast asleep.

His heart swelled inside of his chest as he looked at her fair countenance. Once again, he was struck at how fortunate he had been to find such a magnificent woman and make her his wife.

He knelt down beside the chair and reached out a hand to cup her cheek. "Wake up, my duchess. I'm lonely in bed without you."

She stirred, a slight frown marring her features, and then her lids fluttered open. He waited for her to smile, or perhaps entertain the fantasy of throwing herself into his arms. She did neither. "What time is it?"

"Still early," he noted.

She nodded. "I suppose I should start getting ready."

He hesitated. "For what?"

Those dark eyes slid to his face, and he wondered about the directness of her stare. "Aren't we going back to London today?"

Again, he paused. "What gave you that impression? I thought you enjoyed it here?"

"I do." She swallowed, and he had to wonder if she was being entirely truthful with him. "It's just that since work started on the estate, I shouldn't be gone for very long. I need to oversee some of the progress."

Thorpe sat back on his heels. Although he admired his wife for her fortitude with her craft, the fact that she was so eager to return made him wonder if she was truly happy with her decision to marry him. Surely, she wasn't already lamenting her future? "Are you quite sure? I thought perhaps we might stay for a few days, perhaps even a week or so to have a bit of solitude to celebrate our nuptials."

He hoped she might be accepting of the idea, but when she merely nodded her head and seemed to withdraw from him, he wondered if he'd done something terribly wrong. If so, he wanted to rectify that as soon as possible so they could return to their earlier passion.

Deciding to turn the conversation to neutral ground for the moment, he gestured to the book on her lap. "What had you so enthralled?"

She turned the cover around so that he could read it. *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded by Samuel Richardson*. "It's the story of a young woman pursued by her employer who is much higher in status. They eventually wed, but the road to her happiness is not without travail."

Thorpe clenched his jaw. "I'm well aware of the plot line to this particular novel. It was one of my mother's favorites, and I felt as though it mirrored the life she shared with my father." He looked steadily at her. "Are you trying to claim I pursued you in such a licentious manner?"

She plucked the title from his grasp. "It's just a book." She moved away and got to her feet.

Thorpe also rose as she put the volume back in its place on the shelf. He noticed that she didn't answer his question but gave a vague reply in return. He was starting to grow weary of dancing around an obvious error on his part. Putting his hands on his hips, he asked directly, "Have I done something to upset you, Iona?"

"Nothing at all," she returned. "Why would you think that?"

He narrowed his eyes because she couldn't quite look him in the eye. "I suppose it has something to do with your cool demeanor toward me."

She shrugged. "I haven't noticed anything different."

Thorpe spun around and shoved a hand through his hair. He was starting to get annoyed because he could tell she wasn't being entirely honest. Something was bothering her,

and he didn't understand why she didn't wish to talk about it so they could move forward.

With a heavy breath, he was about to demand she do just that when his gaze stopped on his desk. Or more importantly, the letter sitting calmly on the top. He clenched his fists because his gut was trying to tell him the solution to this problem.

He walked over to the desk and grabbed the missive. Holding it up in the air, he said, "I don't suppose you happened to read this?"

In reply, she turned her head to the side.

"Iona..." His patience was starting to grow thin. "Answer me."

She slid her focus back on him, and he could see the spark of fury in her dark eyes. *Ah, yes.* She didn't have to say anything because he could read the truth there. She crossed her arms. "What if I did?"

"Because it would explain your sudden hostility toward me when you have no reason to be upset."

"I don't?" she countered.

He would have laughed if the situation wasn't so absurd. "It sounds to me as if you don't trust me enough to turn down your father's offer."

She lifted her chin. "All I know is when you returned to London, I found you speaking with my father. As he left, he said you could take care of all the arrangements." She waved a hand at the paper in his grasp. "Then I find this, and it doesn't take much for me to ascertain what happened."

He snorted as he lowered his hand. Tossing the letter on the desk, he walked toward her. "It sounds as if you have it all figured out." He lifted a brow. "If you are so certain about my character, that I would immediately go back on my word to you, then why did you marry me at all?"

For an instant, there was a slight hesitation in her gaze. But it was too late. The damage had been done, and it was more

than his pride that was injured. “It’s not as if I was given much of a choice.”

He shook his head. “There’s always a choice, Iona. I’m just sorry that you made the wrong one.”

With that, he turned on his heel and left the room.

CHAPTER 25



Iona stood there on the verge of tears and realized what a grave mistake she'd just made. She'd allowed her insecurities to rule her common sense, to tell her what she feared rather than the truth that was staring her in the face. Because of her inability to accept Thorpe could be genuine in supporting her dream, she might have just upset the best thing that had ever happened to her.

She came to her senses too late. When she walked out of the study, Thorpe was shutting the front door behind him, his greatcoat flying out behind him. "Wait!" she shouted at him, but he didn't hear her. Or else he didn't care.

Iona rushed to catch up to him, but the dust trail behind his horse as the sun was starting to streak the sky was all that she saw. Desperate to catch up to him, she grabbed the blanket and tied it about her shoulders as a makeshift cloak since she was still just wearing her shift.

Although she wasn't a fan of riding, she rushed to the stable and urged the groom to ready a horse for her use as well. She waved off the saddle and waited impatiently by the mounting block. The servant led it over to her as requested, without the benefit of a saddle. She had only ridden sidesaddle before, so it was a foreign sensation to dare to try it astride on the horse's bare back. She was terrified that it would buck her off, but she would have time to think about the fear coursing through her veins later. Right now, she had one goal in mind.

Holding on to the bridle for dear life, she urged the horse into a canter, and then a full gallop. The wind rushed through

her hair and made the blanket fly out behind her like a brandishing flag. With her nearly transparent shift clinging to her, she thought about Lady Godiva riding naked through the village and prayed she wouldn't have to worry about going that far. She would do what she must to catch Thorpe and tell him that she was sorry, that she regretted ever doubting him. The betrayal he'd had on his face was worse than anything she might have felt before then.

Trees rushed by them as the horses' hooves thundered along the ground. She closed her eyes when she stared down at the ground beneath them and decided it would be best if she kept her focus ahead.

After a time, she finally caught sight of a distant rider. "Thorpe!" She shouted his name, but it was ripped away by the wind. Desperation clawed its way through her, and she urged the horse to reach its full potential.

Now that she had her target in her sight, she wasn't going to lose him. The distance between them began to close, and she could feel hope rising within her. She was nearly upon him. Victory soared through her when he finally turned. She raised her hand and waved it frantically, shouting at him to stop. When he did, relief made her weak.

Tragedy abruptly struck when a rabbit darted out in the middle of the road. The horse reared on its hind legs, panic making its forelegs claw at the air. Iona held on to the reins for dear life, but she could feel herself starting to slide backward.

As the horse reared up a second time, she flew through the air. She struck the ground with a harsh impact, feeling as though every single bone in her body had been jarred loose. The air was pushed out of her lungs, and she gasped with the strain of trying to bring it back.

"Iona! Dear God, what were you thinking? You're afraid to ride!" Thorpe was by her side in an instant with an anxious admonition. His hands were touching her everywhere, trying to ascertain the extent of her injuries, but other than her wounded pride, she had never felt better.

She started to laugh and Thorpe froze, obviously wondering if she'd struck her head too hard. "Iona?" He said her name with obvious confusion.

She only laughed harder. Once she had started, she couldn't seem to stop. After a time, he sat back on his heels, and a reluctant grin began to spread across his face. When she finally had enough air to breathe and speak at the same time, she sat upright. He looked worried, but she waved off his concerns. "I'm fine if not a bit mad for chasing after you like that. But in my defense, I didn't want you to go."

He eyed her in a tolerant manner. "It's not as if I had planned to be gone for long." His voice turned distant. "I just needed to clear my head."

Her voice shook with emotion. "I'm sorry for making you upset. I was the one who was wrong. I allowed my doubt to cloud my judgment—"

He reached out and kissed her gently. When he pulled back, he said, "You were entitled to your anger. I've never given you any reason to trust me other than my word, and that is easily broken. I was hoping to find the opportune moment for this, but I guess this is it. I love you, Iona. I think I have from the first moment you waltzed into my study with an ultimatum that I should have taken immediately. But because of my own prejudices at the time, I allowed myself to be swayed into believing someone else had the same talent that you do. It was a terrible lie that I've regretted from the beginning."

He closed his eyes momentarily. "But I can promise you that I accepted no such bribe from your father. When I asked him to visit me at Rosewood, it was to tell him that I declined his offer, but I still wanted to marry you because I loved you. I don't think he was impressed, but neither did I care. The arrangement he was referring to was likely the second attempt he made to change my mind, which I also refused." His voice became fervent. "There is nothing on this earth that could make me break my promise to you. Not only is your determination what trapped my heart, but it was also the vision you possess. You don't just see a lawn, you see art, and what

you can create is impressive, indeed.” He tilted his head to the side. “Have you even looked at the backyard to see what’s been accomplished during your time in London?”



Thorpe knew he was rambling, that he was making it impossible for Iona to keep up with his line of thought, but there was so much he wanted to say that it was jumbling together all at once. He still couldn’t believe she’d dared to ride after him, fearing the worst, when he knew how much she was scared of horses. She had proved her devotion to him by her actions if she hadn’t yet voiced the same sentiments.

“To be fair, it was dark when we returned last evening.” Her cheeks colored a charming pink. “And I was preoccupied with other matters.”

“For which I am grateful.” He winked at her. “But it’s time you see just how talented you are so you can put some of that doubt about your abilities, and us, behind you.” He stood and reached a hand to her, which she accepted. He glanced at the two horses that were happily munching on some grass nearby. “Would you be offended if I asked you to ride back with me?”

She shook her head and released a relieved sigh. “Not at all. In truth, I would like that very much.”

Thorpe held the reins of her mare to one side of his mount and then he swung himself onto his horse. He reached down to Iona and pulled her up until she was seated securely in front of him and then urged them into a steady walk.

With his arms around her, he breathed in her feminine scent and imagined the moment when they might be together again. Her soft curves were driving him mad, but they weren’t going to go any further until he was confident that she fully understood her worth.

When they reached the cottage, he dismounted and helped her down. The groom rushed out and took the horses to the stable as Thorpe reached out to Iona and grasped her hand in his. The sun was bathing the entire landscape in a soft yellow-

and-orange glow, but it wasn't the colors in the sky that caused the breath in his wife's lungs to catch. As they turned a corner of the cottage and she spied the work that had been continued in her absence, he could tell she was impressed.

She stood there, staring at the sparkling pond with its curved stone footbridge, a weeping willow tree on an island in the center of the rolling landscape beyond, and Thorpe could tell she hadn't really believed in herself until that moment.

He moved behind her and gathered her in his arms. He rested his chin on the top of her golden head as she absorbed what she was seeing. "Didn't I tell you it was brilliant?" he whispered. "That *you* are brilliant?"

"I always dared to dream I could accomplish something amazing—" She broke off as her voice cracked. "But I never imagined that it could be quite so... remarkable. It truly is a work of art."

"There have been men that came before you who might have done fabulous things, but you are just as capable as Capability Brown. Perhaps I shall call you the Duchess of Capability."

She laughed, and it was so freeing that he had to smile. She turned around to face him. "I love you, Thorpe."

This time, he was the one who was finding it difficult to take the proper amount of air into his chest.

Taking his silence as the incentive to continue, she said, "I dared to leave my home, everything I'd known, to pursue a dream that I was never fully confident that I would ever achieve. I almost rapped on the coach on the way to Somerset and begged them to take me back to London, but I knew if I did that, nothing would ever change. I went to that boarding house to make a difference, not just for myself, but for women like me who were hoping to succeed. Someone had to take that first step, and although I dared to do it, I didn't have the wherewithal to believe in myself any further than it took for me to climb into that coach. If you hadn't changed your mind, I have to wonder if I would have gotten this far." She reached for his hands and squeezed them gently. "You were the one

who made me realize what I could do, that I had the talent. I daresay what I feel for you goes beyond mere love. It encompasses gratitude and so many more things that I can't put into words. All I know is *I love you* doesn't seem like a strong enough way to tell you what you mean to me."

Thorpe looked deeply into her hypnotic, dark eyes. "That is good enough for me."

They sealed their future with a kiss that would have sent sparks flying into the sky if they'd had the ability to create actual fireworks.

When they broke apart, Iona looked at him with a smile. "Take me to bed, Your Grace."

He reached down and lifted her into his arms. "You don't have to tell me twice."

Later that night, Iona crept out of bed, careful not to disturb her husband. She crept downstairs to where she had hidden her journal in the traveling valise in the study. Removing it, she moved to the desk and sat down. With a smile on her face, she opened the cover and, after dipping her quill in the ink, she wrote a small passage:

My dreams have come to fruition. Perhaps not the way I envisioned when I began this journey, but I am perfectly content—dare I admit incandescently happy—with my choices. There have been plenty of travails to get to this fork in the road, but I am confident that with Thorpe by my side, we shall conquer them all. Together.

CHAPTER 26



Six weeks later...

“**T**hat looks perfect. No, bring that over here.”

Thorpe leaned on the terrace railing and watched as his wife issued orders to the men working tirelessly on the rear lawn of the manor. He had to smile because he was quite sure that she was the only duchess in England who eschewed the best that life had to offer and preferred wearing those common, serviceable gowns. It was rather ironic that he used to despise that hideous brown, but now he found slowly removing it from her body at the end of the day was rather rewarding.

Work had continued on the estate, although they had decided to remain at the cottage for the rest of the summer, leaving only when the work there had been completed. With messages sent back and forth between the estates, Iona mentioned the men who were working in London were more than capable of completing the task without her constant supervision. She said it would take some time for the gazebo to be completed and for the dirt and trees to be transported and set in place. Now that they were back, it hadn't taken her long to fall back into the role that came naturally to her.

Thorpe had to admit it had been nice at the cottage because, with few servants to attend them, they'd had plenty of intimate encounters. It had well been worth the time to linger in Highbridge, but they were both smart enough to realize nothing lasted forever. It was time they both returned to the duties that awaited them.

“Your Grace.” Thorpe straightened as he turned to face Beckham, who was holding a silver salver laden with several folded papers. “Where would you like the latest invitations?”

It was all Thorpe could do not to sigh. It had been this way since they’d returned to the estate. It hadn’t taken much for society to start knocking on their door, both eager to meet his new duchess and hear the rather unusual way they had decided to conduct their marriage. He wasn’t looking forward to being put on display, but he couldn’t say he was surprised, especially after the Prince Regent unexpectedly dropped by to sanction their union.

Although he had appeared rather disappointed that he hadn’t been invited to the wedding, he was impressed by Iona’s direct manner. Not only that, but he had taken particular note of her skill with the grounds at Rosewood Manor and mentioned he might wish to call upon her expertise when he was ready to make some changes to his lands.

That had really gotten society talking, and the invitations had been nonstop ever since. Thorpe was worried what might happen when the Season turned into full bloom the following spring. He could only hope Iona was with child by then, so they wouldn’t have to entertain continuously.

Thankfully, his wife was easing into her new role with both charm and intelligence. The servants already respected her choices and treated her with the same loyalty they had always shown to Thorpe. Life couldn’t be more perfect—except for the small affair of her family.

They had not attempted to call on Iona’s parents or siblings any more, deciding that it was best if they didn’t pressure a reconciliation. It would have to be amicable or not at all.

Since Thorpe was without any relations of his own, he sometimes felt bad for Iona that he was the only one on whom she might rely in times of discouragement. Of course, the ladies from the Seaside Society kept in contact with her, and Lady Beauvais, Miss Grantham, and Miss Stratford had made the journey to see how she was faring. He couldn’t help but see the smug expression on Lady Beauvais’ face. She likely

thought to take some of the credit for Iona's current status. And Thorpe agreed she would be within her rights to do so. She had certainly been instrumental in giving him the courage to return to his estate and save Iona from a terrible fate that her brother might have thrust upon her otherwise.

It was with some surprise that, as Thorpe was shifting through the latest batch of correspondence, he came across something from Mr. Jeffrey Richards. He was the youngest of Iona's brothers and the sole member of the family who was willing to put any past indiscretions behind them. He asked if he might call on them when it was convenient.

Thorpe decided he would let Iona decide the best way to answer that request. When she was finished for the day, he caught her as she was walking by his study. A smudge of dirt was on her cheek, and perspiration dotted her brow, but she had never looked more lovely. She never failed to impress him with her dedication.

“This arrived today.”

He held out the missive to her, and she opened it somewhat curiously. She read it with a neutral expression and then slowly folded it and handed it back to him. “I would be willing to meet with him. He was always the most sensible of my siblings.”

Satisfied, Thorpe replied back to him, and two days later, he was walking in the front parlor.



Iona sat beside her husband in the front parlor. She was wearing a lilac dress with a silver lace overlay and praying she gave off enough of a calm demeanor when her brother walked into the room. Thorpe stood and greeted Jeffrey while she rose a bit more hesitantly. She noted he had come alone, without his wife or children, and she wasn't sure if that was a positive sign or a foreboding of what was to come.

In the end, she had nothing to worry about. After he greeted the duke, he walked over to her and extended his arms,

as if he wanted to embrace her. Tears stung her eyes, and she welcomed the embrace. "I'm sorry it took me so long to call on you, Iona." His voice seemed sincere as he took a seat across from them. "I daresay I can't understand why Mama and Papa can't swallow their pride, as well as my arrogant brothers, but I wanted you to know I never approved of how you were treated when you left." He smiled a bit ruefully. "I admit I was a bit jealous that I didn't have the courage to do the same. Instead, I married a woman I didn't love out of duty, and I find my days are spent in misery rather than happiness. I'm sure I speak for my ill-fated wife as well."

Iona reached out and took his hand in hers. "It means a lot that you are here, Jeffrey, and I hope you can find peace, if not love, within your house. I was hoping after all this time..." Her throat closed up, and she offered a bright smile. "You are welcome to come here any time."

He inclined his head respectfully. "I would like that very much. And perhaps someday, the rest of our family will come around and realize what is truly important in life. It's much too short to spend it holding a grudge."

"I agree." After a bit more conversation, he asked if he might see what she'd been working on at the estate. Thorpe allowed them some time alone as she led Jeffrey to the grounds at the rear of the house where a magnificent, whitewashed gazebo was sitting on the top of a grassy knoll.

"This is remarkable, Iona." She didn't miss the wistful note in his voice. "I admire your resilience. For someone who dared to make her own way in this world, you have certainly succeeded."

She smiled gently. "It's not too late for you to do the same, Jeffrey." She gave him a light, playful nudge.

He appeared thoughtful. "I will consider it." Then his dark eyes swung to her with the mischief that she remembered from their youth. "Race you back to the manor!"

With a cry of glee, she lifted her skirts and took off after him.

Later that night, Iona was lying beside Thorpe in the massive, master chamber after a vigorous round of lovemaking. “It was nice to see Jeffrey today.”

“It seemed like the two of you had no trouble reconnecting.”

“Not at all. He was the closest to me in age, so we had a stronger relationship. Perhaps the reason he was able to forgive me so readily.”

He put his hand on her head and slowly stroked her unbound hair. “The rest of them will start to come around. You can’t lose heart.”

“I won’t,” she said with resolve tinged her tone. “I’m not the type to give up that easily.”

“Indeed, I know that for a fact.”

He lifted her chin, and as he looked into her eyes, she couldn’t help but smile. “I know a way to get your mind off any lingering melancholy.”

She lifted a coy brow, and already her blood was starting to rush through her veins with anticipation. “Do you now?”

“Quite.” He pulled her on top of him, and she straddled his torso. His focus turned to her naked breasts. He reached out and began to massage them, and she was eager to join with him again.

She slid down onto his hard length and sighed in delight. He groaned as she started to move, slowly at first, and then quickly picked up the pace until they were both panting with their mutual satisfaction.

Afterward, he pulled her down to him and kissed her almost reverently. “You are my dream, Iona.”

“No,” she corrected. “What we have is real. It supersedes anything that might drift into the realm of fantasy because it is governed by love.”

He closed his eyes and released a steady breath. “My heart beats solely for you.”

“And mine for you,” she whispered.

EPILOGUE



“I wonder if we ought to change our sign to Seaside Society and Matchmaking Services?”

Lady Beauvais chuckled at Alexandria’s suggestion. “I would be careful what you wish for. You could have half of English society knocking at your door. We did manage to match up Iona with a duke.”

“That may be true,” Josephine pointed out as she patted her red hair in the middle of the parlor at the boarding house. “However, I wouldn’t count your chickens just yet, my lady. This was a stroke of luck on our part. The rest of the ladies here don’t seem very inclined to find a husband. I daresay Tassandra is too busy sailing to settle down long enough to find a suitable mate. She is already wed to the sea.”

“Perhaps,” Alexandria noted, “but I wouldn’t discount anything at this point. I certainly didn’t think our Iona would win the heart of the Duke of Rosewood. He was a confirmed bachelor for all intents and purposes, but he’s quite besotted with his new wife. Anyone can see what they have is everlasting.”

Lady Beauvais gave a sigh of longing. “I recall the days of young love when passion ran fiery hot. But alas, it cost me dearly. No one suffered more than my poor husband. God rest his soul.”

Alexandria reached out and covered her hand and gave it a tight squeeze of reassurance. “You always have us.”

Josephine agreed, and then she added, “We are doing quite well in our current status, but I admit that should we gain such fortune in pairing off a perfect match again, it might not be a bad idea to investigate branching out further.”

“Very well,” Lady Beauvais said with a long-suffering roll of her eyes, but her lips twitched, nevertheless. “But I wouldn’t get too eager in that regard. Our first goal is to, first and foremost, give independent women a chance to express themselves.”

“Naturally,” Alexandria noted firmly. “But there is always that slight chance...”

The End

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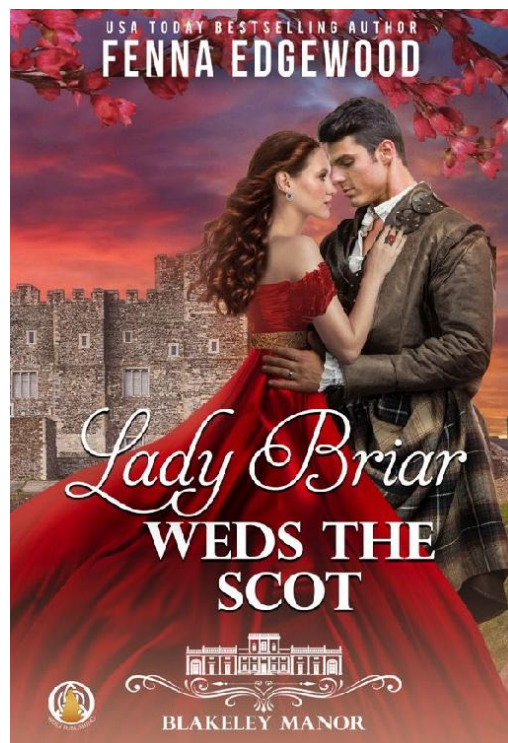
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CHAPTER ONE

Blakeley Manor, August 1817

Lady Briar Blakeley had already suffered more than most young ladies her age could have tolerated for longer than one morning.

But Briar was not most young ladies, and come to think of it, “endured” might have been a more apt term for what she was currently experiencing.

The large watery brown eyes of young Mr. Percy Quintrell were looking back accusingly at her.

Watery, not because of the unshed tears they might have held, had Percy been a more romantic or sincere sort of young man. Rather because of the great drams of liquor Briar presumed he had drunk rather recently before arriving at Blakeley Manor that morning. On second thought, she rather suspected there *were* a few unshed tears, but they were tears of petulance and annoyance rather than any deep feeling.

She had wounded Percy right where it hurt—in his pride. And what was more, she could not feel sorry for it, not when he had wounded hers by showing up in the first place and expecting her to accept his preposterous marriage proposal.

“You cannot be serious,” Percy was saying loftily. “We have been all but betrothed our whole lives.”

“Have we?” Briar wrinkled her nose doubtfully. “This is the first I have heard of it.”

“Of course,” Percy said, shaking his head reproachfully at her, which Briar could immediately see was a mistake on his part. He put a hand to his temple and grimaced. A hangover, no doubt. She could smell the liquor seeping off him and resisted the urge to give him a scolding. “Since we were small, our parents have held out the hope that someday we would wed...”

“Our parents? Mine have been gone for more than five years. I do recall them chattering on about how sweet we

looked together when we were small. But we were what? Six years old, then? Younger? And as I recall, we were wearing matching outfits that day,” she mused. “Perhaps that was a large part of it.”

“Matching outfits had nothing to do with our parents’ matrimonial expectations for us,” Percy huffed. “And I, for one, have rested my hopes and dreams upon the expectation of our marriage for many years.”

“Truly? You have?” Briar was doubtful. “You haven’t visited Blakeley Manor in quite some time. Not since before your father passed.”

“Of course, I have dreamed of it,” Percy said, ignoring the other comment. “How I have pined, waiting until the time was finally right...”

“And is it right? Now, I mean?” Briar interrupted, raising her eyebrows.

“Of course,” Percy snapped. “I do wish you would stop interrupting.”

“I’m afraid that is one of my greatest failings, Percy. If we were to be married, you would become used to it, I’m sure,” Briar said breezily. “Not that I truly believe that will happen.”

“My becoming used to your interruptions? Or our marriage?” Percy huffed.

“Well, either. I certainly have no intention of marrying you, Percy. You’re drunk for one...”

Percy bolted out of his armchair as if he had been shot. “I am not. How dare you!”

“Do not shout at me in my own home if you please,” Briar said mildly. “My brother is just down the hall. If I might continue? Second of all, besides smelling like the inside of a barrel of whisky, there are other impediments which make you quite an undesirable match as far as I am concerned.”

Percy’s face reddened. “Oh, really? Such as?”

“Well, you haven’t shown the least bit of interest in me until now, have you? But I understand that since your father

passed, your estate is in quite dire straits financially. I'm terribly sorry for you, Percy." More particularly, she was sorry for his mother and younger brothers. "But I don't see how drinking yourself to death or... well, carousing rather dishonorably is meant to help you fix things up. You're running through your wealth when you should be conserving it. And I certainly won't play your heiress wife, if that's what you came here hoping for."

"Carousing dishonorably?" Percy sneered. "Just what is that supposed to mean? What would a naïve chit like you know of what men get up to?"

Briar narrowed her eyes coldly. "A man? Is that what you are declaring yourself to be? Well, Percy, I have two brothers. And from what I have seen of the antics of young men, carousing is one thing. Behaving as dishonorably as you have done is quite another." She blushed, despite herself. "I am referring, of course, to the Brewer girl."

Percy had the grace to blanch.

"Yes, I've heard about that." Briar crossed her arms over her chest.

She watched with disappointment as Percy tried to brush off the words, his face quickly moving from guilt to stubborn condescension.

"Well, and so what?" he sneered. "As if men do not sow wild oats. She was a silly green girl. What did you expect me to do about her?"

"If she was a silly green girl, as you say," Briar said hotly. "Then you should not have dallied with her in the first place!"

"Bah!" Percy waved a dismissive hand. "What would you have me do? Marry the chit?"

Briar bristled. "That is not as ridiculous an idea as you appear to think. Certainly less ridiculous than the two of us marrying."

Percy stopped laughing at that and scowled. "I can see this has been a waste of my time."

“For both of us,” Briar said coldly. “But as we are already conversing, why not do right by the girl, Percy? From what I understand, she is carrying your child! Do you not care about her in the least?”

Percy refused to meet her eyes. His scowl deepened. “I see what you’re doing.”

“Oh, yes? And what is that?”

“It’s the pot calling the kettle black, isn’t it? You’re too good to marry me. As if the prim and proper Lady Briar hasn’t made any mistakes.”

Briar choked. “None so great as yours, certainly. Though of course, I am not a perfect...”

“No, you’re not, are you? You’re a prude. You’re missish. Puritanical. You’d be lucky to have a man such as I to marry you. Who else is going to do it? I don’t see them lining up at the door. And with the mouth you’ve developed, I can see why.” Percy looked despicably triumphant. “But you won’t get rid of me so easily. No, I know my rights.”

Briar was becoming weary of the inane conversation. She glanced at the bell on the table beside her. Her brother, the duke, was just down the hall. Moreover, there was sure to be a footman or two not far away. Should she summon someone? Or see to Percy on her own?

He was a worm, she decided, and thus she would deal with him on her own. She did not require assistance to squash a worm.

That said, he was rather working himself into a frenzy.

“I won’t let this go, you see,” Percy said, pointing melodramatically. “You *shall* marry me, as was promised. I am not about to be made a fool of.”

Briar snorted. “A little late for that,” she muttered.

Percy took a threatening step forward. “What was that?”

“Percy,” she said, standing up straighter. “You are being utterly ridiculous. Get hold of yourself. I am not going to marry you, and you *will* let this go, for there is nothing to be

so worked up over. We have never and will never be engaged. I wish you luck in finding a more amiable young lady who is interested in your suit.” Wished the young lady luck, that is. “Now, I bid you good day.”

But Percy would not be dismissed so easily.

He stepped forward and grasped her arm rather roughly. Briar gasped in outrage.

“Let me go at once!”

“I will not. A man may lay hands on his own wife, and you will be that soon.”

“You are a lunatic if you think so, Percy Quintrell,” Briar replied. “And when my brother catches you...”

The door to the drawing room swung open, almost lazily.

“Catches you what?” a voice queried coldly.

“Your Grace!” Percy dropped her arm like a hot coal and whipped around to face the man standing in the doorway.

For once, Briar was rather grateful for the intimidating way her brother had of carrying himself.

Edmund Blakeley, the Duke of Dareford, was a handsome man of thirty who bore himself with confidence, which could at times be mistaken for arrogance. Tall and lanky, he dressed conservatively but stylishly, possessed a strong angular jaw that ladies quite admired, an elegant Roman nose inherited from his father, and the dark hair he shared with their elder sister, Katherine.

He was a wonderful older brother and frequently funny, warm, and affectionate. Though at the moment, his face was frigid and stern as he glared at Percy Quintrell.

“We have not seen you at Blakeley Manor in some time, Mr. Quintrell,” the duke observed coolly.

“That’s right, Your Grace. It has been some years. I had hoped to remedy that by catching up on lost time, as it were, with your sister today,” Percy blustered. He glanced behind

him as if hoping Briar would decide to play the saint and confirm his story.

Briar smiled blithely and looked past Percy at her brother.

“Percy has just been reminding me of our engagement, Dare.”

The Duke of Dareford raised his eyebrows laconically. “Engagement? I did not realize we had been invited...”

“Our betrothal, I should say rather,” Briar corrected. “He claims it is a longstanding one. Agreed upon by both our sets of parents. Do you recall this, Brother? Did our parents arrange my engagement, Dare? To Percy?”

Dare looked back at her expressionlessly for a moment. “Are you engaged to Percy Quintrell? Without your own knowledge?” His lips twitched. “I should think not. Mother did not even like his family all that much.”

“I say!” Percy exclaimed. “That is not what I recall.”

“Quiet,” Dare commanded. He studied the young man with distaste. “Am I to understand that you came here this morning, hoping to coerce my sister into believing she was obligated to marry you?” He frowned. “Even if there had been some sort of family agreement between our parents, Quintrell, I assure you, I should have broken it for Briar’s sake some time ago.”

“What the devil is that supposed to mean?” Percy retorted.

“Your father did not leave his family in the best circumstances when he passed, from what I understand. Which is a pity for your mother and brothers’ sake. Since his passing, your reputation for recklessness has not improved, Percy. Quite the contrary. In fact, a story has been circulating. One I shall not deign to mention in front of my sister...”

“About the village girl who is increasing, Dare? I already know of it,” Briar offered helpfully. She ignored Percy’s furious expression. “She is the Brewers’ daughter, you know. Our tenants.”

Dare nodded reluctantly. “It is a shameful thing to have done to a young woman, Percy. And to not even provide for

her in her distress.” He shook his head slowly. “Do you really think I would let my sister marry a man—of the landed gentry, no less—who could not or would not even take care of his own natural child?”

Percy opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“Yes, excellent decision.” Dare narrowed his eyes. “I think it is best you leave now.”

Percy nodded stiffly and, to Briar’s relief, began to walk toward the drawing-room door. Then he stopped and looked back at them both, his expression returning to its earlier petulance. His eyes honed in on Briar.

“This isn’t over, you know. You think to drag my name through the mud? How about some mud of your own? I’ll see your name doesn’t remain so very pure much longer, *Lady Briar!*” he swore nastily.

“What pathetic threats, Percy,” the Duke of Dareford replied, his eyes very cold. “You’ll do no such thing. You’ll stay away from my sister if you know what is good for you, or you’ll find yourself horsewhipped and pilloried before you can say Jack Robinson.”

He gestured at the door, and for the first time, Briar noticed a tall and striking man standing there. Clearly, he had been watching all the proceedings. He was very tall indeed, even taller than Dare, who was over six feet.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to conduct our meeting about the new greenhouse another time, Spencer,” Dare said apologetically. “I don’t suppose I could trouble you to show our unwanted guest the way out on your way back to the gardens?”

The man was a gardener then, Briar realized. And more than that, he was one of the Spencers! The name held special significance to Briar, for her elder sister, Kat, had recently married for the second time. And the man she had fallen in love with had been none other than one of the Blakeley Manor grooms, Ashley Spencer. Their wedding had caused quite the stir a few months back.

This must be Ashley's elder brother. Briar's curiosity was piqued. She had glimpsed the elder Spencer only briefly at the wedding breakfast, a tall man who she had somehow mistaken for being much older. But this man was no older than Dare. They had not had an opportunity to meet, which she now decided was very odd—for she routinely made it a point of learning all the Blakeley Manor servants' names—and must soon be remedied. After all, were they not family? Perhaps Mr. Spencer was a shy and reticent man, and that was why their paths had not yet crossed. Though as she watched him, she was not sure the word “shy” was applicable.

“I should like nothing better, Yer Grace,” the man said, nodding his head. “Happened to be passing on my way to yer study and heard this one”—he gestured at Percy with a lazy shrug of one shoulder—“stirring up a fuss, so thought I'd see if my services might be required.”

There was something about the way he spoke that was quite unusual, Briar thought.

“Very good of you, Spencer,” Dare said, nodding his appreciation.

“Come along with ye now,” Spencer growled, looking darkly at Percy.

Briar felt her eyebrows raise of their own accord. Mr. Spencer was decidedly fiercer than his amiable younger brother. He had *growled*. Rather like a wild animal. There was a low burr to his speech that Briar was at first not able to put her finger on. Then it dawned on her—of course! He was a Scot!

Decidedly odd, for Mr. Spencer's younger brother had no such Scottish accent. Furthermore, while she had known her sister's new husband's brother and two sisters were employed at the Manor, this man was not what she had been expecting.

He was simply huge, for one. Mr. Spencer possessed the physique of a warrior, his body packed and powerful. His face was handsome, with a strong, square jaw framed by dark chestnut hair so long he wore it in an old-fashioned queue, a single tail bound with a leather strip. She was not used to

seeing such hair on servants. It made him look rather roguish, a little like a pirate.

But then, he did not carry himself like most servants, either. He looked at Dare as if they were equals. His gaze was sharp and piercing.

“You are Scots,” she exclaimed. “But I have met your brother, and he is...”

“No’ a Scot, nay,” Spencer said. He looked at her and frowned. Was he annoyed that she had questioned him? Delayed him in his task further? “We are brothers, aye. But half-brothers.”

“Oh, I see,” Briar said hurriedly, feeling herself blushing. “My apologies.”

“I daresay Spencer would like to continue on his way, Briar,” Dare said.

“Of course,” Briar said hastily.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say “Farewell, Percy.” Then she thought better of it and said nothing at all as the hulking gardener stood aside to let the sulky suitor enter the hall.

“Well, you have had quite the morning,” her brother remarked, turning toward her as the drawing-room door closed.

“I suppose I have,” Briar sighed. “I could have handled Percy, you know. I was just about to throw him out myself.”

“Were you?” Dare smiled. “Well, I’m sure you could have managed him. Nevertheless, I was passing and heard raised voices.” He frowned. “Really, you should not have met with him alone at all, Briar. What were you thinking?”

“He is a childhood acquaintance. I thought nothing of it. Really, Dare, do not scold me. It is not my fault he behaved so ungentlemanly!”

“No, of course not,” Dare agreed. But his frown remained. “Still, you ought to have called for me or that lady’s maid you

are forever dismissing. You should know better than to meet with a young man alone.”

“He isn’t a young man. He is just Percy! Our neighbor. The boy I played with all through my childhood. Just a silly boy. Until this morning, I had never even considered him as a suitor,” Briar said defensively. “I had no idea he was going to start in with all that nonsense about being engaged.”

Dare sighed. “I suppose that is fair enough. It was rather... bizarre.”

“Very bizarre,” Briar agreed. She hesitated, then added, “Do you suppose he is so desperate for funds, Dare?”

“Do not go feeling sorry for him now, Briar,” Dare said, warningly. “His mess of an estate is not your affair.”

“No, but he has a mother and young brothers, as you said. If he remains on his present course and becomes a spendthrift and a wastrel, then they are at his mercy.”

“His father is to blame for whatever poor circumstances his mother and brothers find themselves in, not Percy,” Dare said with a sigh. “But you are correct. As the eldest son, it is his responsibility to see to those under his care with maturity and fortitude. His time for playing the rich coxcomb should have been at an end long ago.” He scowled. “And no matter what, there is no excuse for not taking care of... Well, we need not speak of it.”

“Oh, please.” Briar waved a hand. “You know, I might at least visit the girl. After all, she is the daughter of one of our tenants.”

Dare’s expression hardened. “Indeed. Until you mentioned it earlier, I am afraid I had not realized that.”

Briar nodded. “They must be very worried about her. I’m sure she thought Percy would provide for her in the event that she should become... well.”

“Yes. Well.” Dare ran a hand through his dark hair. “Very well, pay a visit to the family. Do what you can. We can at least take care of the girl, even if Percy will not.”

“Thank you, Dare,” Briar said, brightening. “I’ll go very soon.”



Wren Spencer had no desire to become a footman, yet here he was playing the part of one.

However, the duke was an excellent employer and an honorable man. What was more, Wren could relate to the protectiveness of an older brother trying to do right by a younger sister.

And lastly, this young man was an arse.

Therefore, it gave Wren some measure of pleasure to throw—nay, *escort*—Mr. Percy Quintrell out of Blakeley Manor and onto the front drive where his barouche waited.

And that was where the matter should have ended.

But the young fool could not keep his trap shut.

He managed to remain silent as he tromped behind Wren all the way to the front door. But as soon as he stepped outside, his tongue loosened, and all his miserable self-indulgence began to pour out.

“Your duke is a damned fool. Do you know that, footman?”

Wren ignored him and said nothing.

“What is more,” Quintrell continued, “his sister is an even greater fool. Passing up an opportunity to get married! You’d think they were lining up at the door for her.” He paused. “As if I were so desperate to get leg-shackled to the wench. They sing her praises as if she were something remarkable, but she’s just an ordinary girl. Rather plain, one might say.”

Here, Wren most certainly disagreed. He was no expert on dukes, but certainly a duke’s younger sister was unlikely to suffer for proposals. Especially when she was not hard on the eyes. But there was no point in saying so. This young man clearly believed himself the only expert on the matter.

“Why, she’s a bit of muslin like any other bit. And I’ve had my bits if you take my meaning.”

This was obviously a pathetic attempt to inspire Wren’s admiration. But Wren did not admire men who made a sport of conquering women. Nor did he appreciate hearing the virtue of the young lady of the house disparaged by an arrogant whelp.

Despite his best efforts, Wren felt his temper beginning to rise.

“She’s beneath my touch. I’ll say it frankly. She’s no better than a village light-skirt,” the young man continued. “I should count myself lucky to have escaped, really.”

Wren ground to a halt.

The young gentleman ground right into him.

Wren waited a moment for Quintrell to take a step back, then turned.

“Ye would do well,” he said slowly, “to guard yer tongue and watch yer words, young sir.”

For a moment, Quintrell only stared. Evidently, he was not used to being addressed in such a tone by a servant.

Then the young pup sneered. “Or what?”

Wren would not be baited so easily.

“Let us get ye to yer carriage,” he said simply, turning around again and resuming his walk across the smooth, white pebbled drive.

“Briar has you wrapped around her little finger, the little trollop,” the young man burst out, evidently deciding he would push his luck with Wren since he had not been sufficiently set down by the duke and his sister.

Wren stopped and turned back. “I would recommend ye refrain from speaking the young lady’s name again, ye wee numpty. I willna ask a second time.”

The young man sneered nastily. “Oh, so she’s your lady, too, is—”

Wren decked him.

He hit him in the nose, not the jaw. This was intentionally done, for Wren decided the sight of Quintrell's own blood might have more of an impact. Sure enough, the young man began to howl, clutching his nose as the blood dripped onto the pebbled drive and hopping about in a way that forced Wren to bite the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from laughing.

"You've bloodied me!" Quintrell shrieked. "You've wounded me! You! A damned servant! I'll have your head for this, I will. Oh, you have no idea who you have made an enemy of today, you—"

"Get in yer carriage, or that willna be the last of yer blood ye'll see today," Wren instructed, marching toward the conveyance and gesturing to the driver's seat.

The young man eyed him nervously. "Y-you'll hit me again?"

"With great pleasure," Wren muttered, too low to be heard. More loudly he said, "I hope that shallna be necessary, for ye're departing. Immediately. If ye do so with great haste, perhaps I willna tell the duke the sort of language ye were using regarding his younger sister. If ye think yer nose hurts right now, ye have no idea how much more it will sting when ye've been dealt a blow with all the force of an elder brother's fury behind it."

Of course, he should not have hit the young gentleman. But he was *not* a footman. And he highly doubted the duke would have done any less. Nor that he would have disapproved.

Wren would never have to see the clot-heid again. After this, he would return to his work in the gardens. To peace and quiet.

Young Mr. Percy Quintrell was clambering hastily into the barouche. He picked up the reins and seemed to be about to use them but, of course, could not help but try to get one more nasty word in.

“You’ll pay for this, whoever you are. I’ll see that you’re sacked. I’ll see that your name is mud from here to... to... Scotland! You’ll never work again. You’ll live the rest of your days begging. You’ll—”

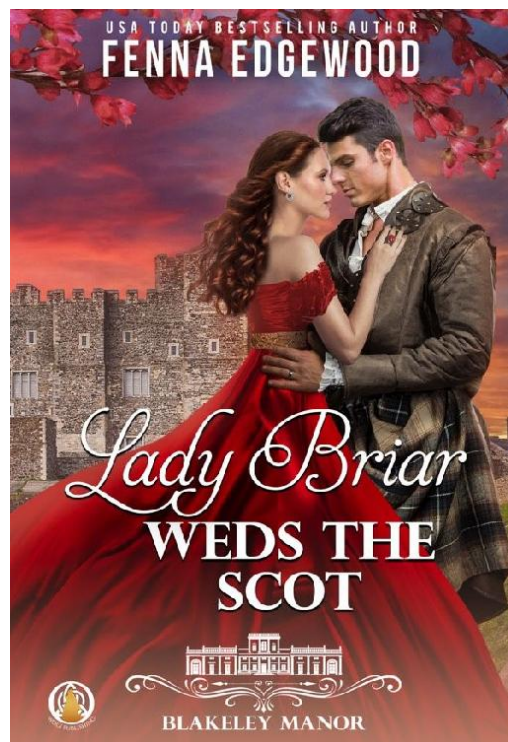
“I highly doubt that,” Wren interrupted. “Ye really must stop making threats ye canna see carried out, lad. It is unmanly. Now get.”

Stepping forward, he gave the horse pulling the barouche a stimulating slap on the rear.

Quintrell yelped as the barouche started forward at a breakneck speed.

Wren watched until the vehicle was well out of sight, then began walking back to the formal gardens.

[Read on!](#)



AUTHOR'S NOTE

As far as I am aware, a planting wall with a moon window and sailboat topiaries never graced Burnham-on-Sea's High Street, but wouldn't that have been lovely? I came across some interesting ideas for this story thanks to the book I have called *Ornamental English Gardens*. Combining my imagination with that of Iona's character, we were able to have a bit of fun.

While the first lawn mower, a device capable of cutting grass, wasn't invented until Edwin Budding in 1830 in Gloucestershire, England, it was a difficult and grueling task to keep a nice yard. Scythes and lawn rollers were important to keep a mowed area. Sheep and other animals were also necessary to keep the grass down.

The Globe Inn is an actual pub in Highbridge, UK. I had trouble finding the exact origins, but I wanted to use it in the story, so I decided it suited the time period.

I happened to stumble across the mention of the Portland Vase by accident. It is made of cameo glass and housed at the British Museum. It is one of the most rare and expensive vases to have been uncovered. It's definitely worth a bit of investigation.

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ABOUT TABELHA WAITE



Tabetha Waite began her writing journey at a young age. At nine years old, she was crafting stories of all kinds on an old Underwood typewriter. She started reading romance in high school and immediately fell in love with the genre. She gained her first publishing contract with Etopia Press and released her debut novel in July of 2016 – “Why the Earl is After the Girl,” the first book in her Ways of Love historical romance series. Since then, she has become a hybrid author, published with both Soul Mate and Wolf Publishing, Radish serialized fiction, Dragonblade and KB Driven Shared Worlds, as well as transitioning into Indie publishing. She has won several awards for her books.

She is a small town, Missouri girl who continues to make her home in the Midwest with her husband and two wonderful daughters. When she’s not writing novels filled with adventure and heart, she is either reading, or searching the local antique mall or flea market for the latest interesting find. You can find her on most any social media site, and she encourages fans of her work to join her mailing list for updates.

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