

*The
Everton Domestic
Society*



A
LADY'S
PAST

A.S. FENICHEL

A Lady's Past

The Everton Domestic Society

Book 5

A.S. Fenichel



A LADY'S PAST by A.S. Fenichel

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A Lady's Past

The greatest risk—for the sweetest reward...

His fiancée's betrayal nearly cost Jacques Laurent everything. Despite his resolve not to trust anyone again, he can't abandon the young woman he finds alone on the road to London. In the brief hours they spend together, the enigmatic Diana touches his heart in a way he can't explain. Even after bringing her to the Everton Domestic Society for safekeeping, he can't get her out of his thoughts. And when he next encounters her, working as assistant to a renowned scientist, he becomes even more intrigued...

The Society's kindness is especially welcome after everything Diana endured in a French prison, but she fears for the safety of those who get close to her. French spies are on her trail, convinced that her scientific knowledge can help them win the war. As peril draws them irrevocably together, Diana and Jacques succumb to mutual desire. But love may be the most dangerous pursuit of all, when a lady guards her heart even more carefully than she guards her life...

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*In every love story there must be a spark of love. Dave, you are my spark.
You light up all my days and inspire all my words. There is no romance
without you.*

Acknowledgments

Writing the Everton Domestic Society has been a joy. I love these strong, self-sufficient women and the men who love them just as they are. None of these EDS women would be possible without the vibrant women who inspire me every day.

To all the strong women in my life. We have been through good times and hard times, but we always come out more badass than before.

Llonda, Debbie, Juliette, Gemma, Sarah, Corinne, Kristi, Kyra, Sabine, Joanna, Tarryn, Chelsie, Linda, Amy and Mom.

Chapter One

Wet roads, a carriage that needed new springs, a relentless drizzle, and still Jacques Laurent had enjoyed one of the best days he'd had in a long time. Seeing his parents safe in England, after worrying about their fate in France all these years, was a relief beyond measure. If not for an important meeting in London the following morning, he would have stayed a few more days in the country.

Now that he had their well-being to worry about too, he could ill afford to miss an opportunity to increase his accounts.

His small covered carriage did little to protect him from the drizzle, and even less as it turned to a light snow. One never could predict November. He pulled the collar of his coat tighter.

Something large and gray darted into the trees on the side of the road.

Pulling back on the reins, Jacques squinted into the dense woods. "I saw you, so if you have plans to attack me, you may as well show yourself. I am well armed and not the least bit worried about dispatching a villain tonight, though it would ruin a perfectly good day."

The leaves rustled, and someone cleared her throat.

Jacques's curiosity was piqued. He'd never met a female highwayman. Would they be called a highwaywoman? He would give it thought, but later.

Her gun barrel preceded her out of the shadows into the dusk of evening. Hair the color of the richest coffee tumbled around her shoulders as her cape caught on a low branch. "I am also not afraid to shoot. Are you a spy?"

Her question was not unusual. His French accent had provoked the notion more than once. It was the times, and nothing could be done about it until the

unrest passed. “Certainly not. Spies do not dress well, and they keep terrible hours. The question is, why would a lady such as yourself be traveling alone at night and on foot? More importantly and far more interestingly, why do you concern yourself with spies rather than highwaymen and murderers?”

She raised the barrel of her shotgun and looked at him through the threads. “I’m not in a position to answer any of those questions. You should be on your way.” She motioned down the road with the weapon while keeping her cheek against the butt and her finger on the trigger.

Chest tight, he sighed. “I’m afraid I cannot leave you here, madam.”

“Why on earth not?” Her nose scrunched up in the most adorable way.

Wishing he could discern the color of her eyes, he squinted to try to make them out. Blue, perhaps, but the light was dim with the late hour and persistent snow. “I am a gentleman.”

“And that means you can’t leave a total stranger to her own devices?” A hint of amusement filtered into her voice.

There was something compelling about the low, raspy tone. “Were you running into or out of town?”

She huffed. “I’m not running.”

“I suspect this is a falsehood, but it is none of my business.”

“That much is true.” She pressed the gun’s butt tighter to the crease of her shoulder.

Laughing, he said, “If you are willing to stop pointing the dangerous end of that weapon at me, I would be happy to convey you into London and drop you wherever you wish.”

She lowered the gun, her bravado faltering. Her eyes cast down, she pursed her lips. “I will bash you on the head with this if you so much as look like you will attack me.”

“Noted.” He took both reins in one hand and offered her the other to climb up. Once she was seated, he clucked to Midas and the horse trotted on.

“You may leave me at Parliament or Piccadilly, whichever is more convenient to you.” Weapon across her lap and no luggage, now her bravado failed, and she might have been a lost puppy rather than the bold woman of a moment before.

It tugged at something inside Jacques that a woman with an education, from the sound of her voice, had come to be alone on the road several hours outside of London with nothing but a shotgun. He had a suspicion. “If you have no place to stay tonight, I can offer you my townhouse or perhaps take

you to the home of one of my married friends. The Duke and Duchess of Middleton would be happy to take care of you this evening.”

Shoulders back, she stared straight ahead. “That is very kind, but unnecessary. I will be fine.”

The snow came down harder. “I am sure that is true. What is your name?”

The silence stretched out until he was sure she would refuse to answer. Then, her voice barely a whisper on the wind, she said, “Diana.”

Why her name should make him grin, he had no idea. “Yet there is no moon.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He kept his attention on the road but felt her looking at him. “Your name. Diana, goddess of the hunt and the moon.”

“Yes, well, my father was fond of mythology.”

A tiny noose tightened around his heart. It was absurd. “And your father is no longer with you?”

It was a straight bit of road, and he turned his head in time to see her frown and the tightening of her full lips. She reached up and pulled her hair back, twisting it into a knot at her nape. “My father died a year ago.”

“I’m very sorry. I am Jacques Laurent. Have you any family to whom I might deliver you this evening?” Already sensing the answer, he wanted her to say something positive and comforting. The idea of her being alone in the world gnawed at him.

“No. I have no family. You may drop me at one of my previously stated locations.” Her back was straight as an oak, and she stared ahead into the waning gray day. Snow speckled her dark hair. Pulling her hood up, she hid her beauty.

It wouldn’t do to pull the hood back and demand she let him see her. He sighed. The places she’d requested to be left were both heavily frequented. She chose spots where she would not be alone. Obviously, she needed the crowd for protection. But who was she afraid of?

None of his business was the mantra he repeated in his head. He would drop her in the city, go to bed, attend his meeting in the morning and then head back to the country with his friends. The Duke and Duchess of Middleton were anxious to visit with his parents. Preston had been his friend since birth, as their fathers had attended school together. They would collect the dowager duchess and head back to Crestwood, the small estate he’d purchased for his parents. He’d left them with a competent staff, but he hated

the notion of them being alone after their long journey.

His friends had recently married after meeting when Millie was hired through the Everton Domestic Society to be Preston's matchmaker. It was no time at all before the matchmaker became matched. Jacques liked Millie; she was smart and funny and the perfect wife for the serious Duke of Middleton.

It was an early first snow. The wind picked up and the chill seeped through his coat. He imagined Diana was freezing in that light cape.

She pulled the edges closer around her neck, and her teeth chattered together in cadence with the rumble of the wheels. The snow was making it harder and harder to see, and the horse misstepped, pulling the carriage sideways.

Diana gave a short yelp and grabbed the seat.

Jacques couldn't blame her. They had come inches from running off the road. "I think there is a small inn or a farmhouse up ahead. I assume you will not be keen on the idea, but we have to stop for the night and hope the weather clears by morning."

Her shoulders lifted then sank with a long sigh, and she gave him a nod.

The inn was indeed small, and a bit worse for wear. Jacques immediately doubted the wisdom of stopping at such a place with a lady, but they had little choice. Neither he nor Midas could continue.

As soon as they stopped, a round-bellied man in a robe and nightcap rushed into the yard. "Lord, what a night. I expect you two got caught up. Come in. Leave the horse. I'll have young Robbie take the beast for feed and shelter. He'll give him a good rubdown as well. Come in, come in out of the cold. Mrs. Tinker has water boiling for tea."

Jacques secured the reins and turned to Diana. "It seems we are welcome for a bit of an adventure."

The smile she graced him with nearly toppled him from the seat. "It would seem so."

He was going to have to get himself under control. This woman was nothing to him, and he would do well to remember that. Offering his hand, he helped her down from the carriage. He leaned close to her ear. "I shall have to give him a false name and tell him we're married. I assume you have a reputation to protect regardless of your current situation, and you would not wish to be forced to marry me."

"Heavens, no." Wide-eyed, she truly looked horrified.

"You wound me with the quickness of your reply." He joked, but her

decisive rejection gnawed at him.

Cocking her head, she studied him, then turned and followed the waving innkeeper into the building. “Thank you for allowing us to bother you so late on such a night.”

The innkeeper bowed. “Benjamin Tinker at your service, madam. We have only one guest tonight, so you and your husband are a welcome addition. I’m relieved you found your way in the storm.”

“I’ll take you up directly and Mrs. Tinker will bring you your tea. You must be in need of a rest. When we heard the carriage, I took the liberty of having Robbie start a fire in one of our guest rooms. Anyone out tonight will be chilled to the bone.” He nodded to Jacques and ambled up the steep stairs.

The inn was small and worn, but clean. Two tables and a small bar made up the common area. A door that probably led to the family quarters was at the far end, and a smell that reminded him of his cook’s stew filtered out. At the top of the stairs, a short hall revealed three doors.

Tinker took them to the last one and the hinges squealed as he opened it. He lit a lantern on the table and adjusted the flame. “I’m afraid this is the best we have. We don’t usually get such a fine clientele. I hope it will be all right.” He set about feeding the fire in the small hearth.

Sparsely furnished, the room had a bed, a chair and a table. A small trunk sat at the end of the bed. The window out to the yard was freshly cleaned and revealed a young lad cooing to Midas and leading him off toward a barn with the door half off the hinges.

Jacques had stayed in far worse places in his lifetime. He handed a shilling to their host. “This is perfect, Mr. Tinker. I cannot thank you enough.”

Elated with the early payment, Mr. Tinker beamed. “If you need anything at all, we live off the kitchen downstairs. We’re happy to help.”

“Thank you.” Jacques walked him to the door and closed it behind him. “This is cozy.”

“I will sleep on the floor, Mr. Laurent.” She’d leaned the shotgun against the wall and removed her hood, then stood with her cape tightly wrapped around her as if it would shield her from him. The lamplight revealed crystal-blue eyes pale against her warm, creamy skin and mahogany hair.

“The hell you will. I might not be English, but I’ll not sleep in the bed while you lie on the cold floor. You may have the bed, and I will manage with the chair.”

Those full, rosy lips opened as if to protest when someone scratched on the door.

Jacques opened it to a lady in a voluminous robe and cap. Her mousy brown hair poked out from under the threadbare cap, but her faded blue eyes were filled with joy. "I've got tea and stew. I thought you might be hungry after traveling through the weather. You both look wet through. There are extra blankets in that trunk, and I brought you warm water for washing."

"Thank you, Mrs. Tinker. You are most kind."

"Anything you need, you just ask." She blushed and rushed out.

Diana opened the trunk and removed a quilt made with scraps of dozens of materials. The most charming blush lit her cheeks. "I would be grateful if you would hold this while I take off this wet dress."

Suddenly the idea of a naked goddess Diana, complete with bow and arrows, forced its way into his ungentlemanly head. Forcing down his baser thoughts, he bolted the door and accepted the quilt. "Of course."

"This is most awkward."

He held the blanket up high enough that he couldn't see through it. Cloth rustled on the other side. "It is better than freezing to death on the road tonight."

Taking the quilt from him, she wrapped it around herself. Eyes like starlight filled with worry. "I'm not ungrateful, Mr. Laurent. Your timing in picking me up could not have been better. I had planned to search for a hunter's shack or some shelter for the night. This is far better. I only meant that taking one's clothes off while a total stranger held a quilt up was quite awkward."

"I knew what you meant. This has been quite an evening." His laugh rolled out without warning. His stomach growled.

She laughed too. "What do you do, sir?"

"Since I don't know your last name, you should call me Jacques. I invest in inventions and import goods." He spooned some stew and reveled in the rich flavors and unexpected spice. English food was generally bland to his taste. "This is good."

Crossing with one hand clutching the blanket, she sat and ate the stew as if it had been days since she'd eaten. Nothing about this woman added up. "What do you do, Diana?"

"Why would you assume I do anything? Ladies don't have occupations."

He slid the bowl with his remaining stew across to her.

After a brief hesitation, she devoured that as well before picking up her tea and sipping.

“I do not think you are like other ladies. I suspect you have a past that would be most interesting to hear about. Perhaps one day you will tell me what sent you out into the cold with nothing but a cloak and a shotgun.” Sipping his tea, he watched her expressionless face. She’d been scared when they were in the carriage, and she’d let her fear show. Now, in the warm inn with a full belly, she wore a mask of indifference that seemed well practiced.

“My circumstances are hardly your concern.” She put down the tea and slipped into the bed. Watching him with wide eyes that betrayed her mistrust, her mask slipped, and she looked like a lost child.

He wanted to give her comfort, but of course, she was right. “No. If you would turn your head, I would like to get out of these wet clothes and put on something dry. I would have offered you a shirt, but you seem content with that mummification you created.”

She did as he wished, a dark blush creeping into her cheek.

Once he was in a dry pair of trousers and a blouse, he hung their clothes over the chair and the two hooks in the wall near the fire, so they would perhaps dry by morning. Stoking the fire, he watched her and tried to decide if she would rob him in his sleep or slit his throat.

With a sigh, he doused the lamp and pulled two blankets from the trunk. He made a pallet on the floor near the hearth, lay down, and put his hands behind his head. If she was a murderess and thief, so be it. He was too tired to worry.

“Jacques?”

“Yes, Diana?” His heart sped up at the rasp of her voice in the darkness.

“Can I trust you?” Her back was to him, leaving him to wonder at her expression. Her inflection told him nothing of her motives.

It was doubtless the oddest evening he’d ever spent. “I believe you can. I try to live honorably.”

“I’m afraid.” The first quaver touched her voice.

His gut twisted with worry over what scared this complete stranger. He didn’t know her, but he’d formed an immediate attachment, which he couldn’t explain. Sitting up, he turned toward the bed. “How can I help?”

Rolling over, she faced him. The small fire revealed tears trailing down her cheeks, leaving blotchy streaks. “You don’t want to know what scares me?”

“Only if my knowing will ease your immediate fears.”

She shook her head.

“What would?”

Her pale skin pinked, and she stared into the dark corner near the window. “It’s too much to ask. Even if we knew each other it would be too much to ask.”

Standing, he opened his arms wide. “If you do not ask, we shall never know.”

Clutching her blanket, she sat up. “I have been alone and without friends or family for some time. I can’t tell you why I am in this state, but it’s been quite lonely. I wonder... That is to say... Would you be willing to hold me? And only hold me, for a short while?”

Heart tripping like one of his friend Francis’s inventions before the explosions, he cleared his throat. “I... That is not what I expected you to say.” He laughed.

Bright red now, she turned away and lay back down. “I apologize. It was foolish of me.”

Swallowing a wave of desire, Jacques climbed into the bed.

Despite her request, she stiffened like a board.

“It would be my honor to hold you until you fall asleep, Diana. You are safe with me.” He placed his hand on her back and waited.

After a minute, she relaxed.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. The most annoying thought, of how perfectly she fit him, rolled through his head. His body reacted, and it required concentration to relax, as much as one could relax when holding a beautiful, mysterious woman in his arms in the middle of the night.

A long sigh escaped her lips and she relaxed against him. “I have made you uncomfortable.”

It was no use denying it, as he was sure she could feel his arousal. “Only in the most delightful way. Go to sleep, Diana. Things will seem better in the morning.”

Her next breath heaved with whatever burden she carried. “Oh, how I wish that were true, Jacques.”

When she said no more, he breathed in the warm scent of her and closed his eyes. It was best to let sleep take him lest he drive himself mad with curiosity.

Soft tendrils of her dark tresses slid across his cheek from where her head lay on his shoulder. Her head grew heavy and her breath even.

By far, the oddest evening to date. He closed his eyes and let the tiring day catch up with him.



Sun shone bright through the windows, making Jacques squint awake. Warm skin against his chest reminded him that he hadn't slept alone. Her hair splayed like a halo across his neck and chest, Diana slept. Her blanket had slipped precariously low, though it still covered her. Her arm hugged his waist and his wrapped around her back. Her skin was like velvet, and he longed to touch all of her.

Easing up, he shifted her to the pillow. "Diana, it is daylight. We had better pay Mr. Tinker and get to London. I have a meeting this morning."

She stretched like a cat after milk and a long nap. The swell of her breast mounded over the top of the quilt, calling to him to return to the bed and take as much delight as she had to give.

That idea of climbing back into the bed and seeing exactly what she looked like beneath that blanket warred with his good nature and gentleman's status. This was some kind of torture, he was sure. Perhaps it was penance for a misspent youth. The fire was out, but her dress was dry. He gave it to her, tucked his blouse in and finished dressing. He might have time to get home, wash and change before his meeting.

He stuffed his clothes into his bag and went to the door. "I will settle the bill while you dress. Shall I meet you at the carriage?"

Beet red, she forced that look of indifference and said, "I'll be down in a few minutes, and would appreciate the ride to town."

With a nod, Jacques left her to dress and went down to pay Mr. Tinker. He found a parcel of warm bread and cheese had been put together for their journey.

Mrs. Tinker handed it to him. "I thought you two would be wanting to continue on your way early since it was the weather that stopped you."

"You are most kind."

Jacques paid Mr. Tinker and thanked him as well, before stepping into the cool morning, where he waited for Robbie to deliver Midas and the carriage.

Midas looked fed and happy when he clomped into the yard.

Right on time, Diana stepped out of the inn, calling back her thanks as she closed the door.

The three inches of snow was already melting in the sunshine as Jacques handed her up into the carriage.

“I have been thinking about your problem of where to stay in London, and I have an idea that might serve both our sensibilities,” he said as they took to the road.

She looked at him. Her blue eyes sparkled in the early morning light. “I wasn’t aware I had a problem. To what sensibilities are you referring?”

The sarcasm dripping from her words forced his grin. “I do not wish to leave a lady alone on the streets of London, and you are clearly in need of a place to hide.”

“Why would you think I am hiding?” She tipped her pert chin up, and the cape slipped from her head.

His longing to touch that mass of dark hair was completely inappropriate, but churned like a whirlwind inside him. He needed to take her somewhere before she got too far under his skin, then he would never think of her again. “Do not insult my intelligence, Diana. You are clearly running. Though I do not know if it is to or from something or someone. You chose locations that are dense with people so that you can hide in the crowd.”

Her shoulders sagged, and she nodded. “What is your idea?”

Oh, he liked her more and more. This was a problem. Drawing a deep breath in an effort to dispel the memory of her sweet body pressed to his, he said, “I think you might get on well at the Everton Domestic Society. I could bring you there and see if Lady Jane might put you up for a few days, perhaps longer if you have some skills and you are interested in the work.”

“I’m not familiar with the Everton Domestic Society.” She frowned.

He tried to ignore her stiff posture. Where had she been that she wouldn’t have heard of the society? Keeping his mind on the facts and getting her to safety was all he cared about. “It is very popular. Lord and Lady Everton run a business where ladies might find respectable employment as assistants in different areas. Sometimes they help young ladies with a debut. My friend’s mother hired an Everton lady as a matchmaker. I understand they have many functions within the boundaries of proper society.”

“Employment for ladies in London society? This sounds scandalous.” Her light comment told him she was not in the least scandalized.

“It should be, but it seems to be accepted. Most of the ladies are beyond their youth and this is preferable to being a burden on their families.”

Lips pursed, she stilled. “Of course, all we can be is a burden or a wife.”

Something about her annoyance made him smile. Actually, everything about this mystery of a woman filled him with delight. “These are not my sentiments, Diana. I know for a fact there are a great many talented and brilliant women in the world, part of the both upper class and lower. I do not make the rules by which we live. As I said, the Everton Domestic Society finds respectable employment for ladies. If you would like, I will take you to meet Lady Jane, and perhaps you can come to some understanding. If not, I will drop you in Piccadilly or wherever you choose.”

She was quiet for several miles. London came into view and she stiffened. “This Society sounds intriguing.”

“Good.” Awash with relief, Jacques flicked the reins and pushed Midas a bit faster for the final mile.

Chapter Two

The Everton Domestic Society looked like any other nice town house in London. Diana didn't see anything that made it special. She walked up the stairs and let Jacques knock since he was the key to gaining admittance. It might be foolish, but a soft mattress available each night was almost enough to get her to agree to anything. It had been so long since she had even the smallest comforts.

Brushing the thought aside, she steeled herself for whatever might come. There was little sense in hoping for the best. It was better to be prepared for the worst.

There was some noise from inside, but no one answered the door for a long time. Finally, the oldest butler Diana had ever seen appeared and looked them up and down. "How may I help you?"

"Jacques Laurent to see Lady Jane." He handed the butler his card.

"Follow me. The lady may leave her weapon at the door. I am happy to take your cloak." Once she'd done as he suggested, he ambled away with her cloak and Jacques's hat and coat slung over his arm. Tufts of white hair flopped gently as he walked. Opening the door to the parlor, he said, "Please wait here."

Jacques leaned against the mantel. His long brown hair fell just past his shoulders and he crossed his arms over his broad chest. Tall and lean, Jacques had a sparkle in his dark eyes—he looked like a pirate. "I will need to give Lady Jane your family name, Diana."

"St. Cloud."

He cocked his head and watched her. "Is that your real name?"

"It is the only name I'm willing to give."

His smile warmed her in places she'd rather not think about.

He nodded. "Very well. Diana St. Cloud it is."

The butler returned. "Lady Jane will see you, sir. If the lady wouldn't mind waiting here?"

Jacques looked at her to answer for herself.

What an odd man.

"I shall be fine." She sat on the divan, but as soon as they left the room, she stood and walked to the window. The snow had all melted, and everything looked fresh and clean. It had been a long time since she'd dared enter London. This was probably a mistake, but she needed help to avoid whoever was trying to kill her, and she wouldn't find it hiding in the country.

An English prison was preferable to running for the rest of her life.

She ran her hand along the keys of the grand piano before sitting and playing a short piece she remembered from her youth. When Father had taught her about alchemy, he never could have suspected it would lead to so much trouble.

"You play well." The woman in the doorway was tall and thin but not frail. She looked ready to battle any demons.

Diana stood. "I am out of practice, but I thank you."

Jacques stood behind her. "I will take my leave of you, Miss St. Cloud. I wish you well. This is Lady Jane Everton. She will have you delivered wherever you wish if the Society is not for you."

Diana knew nothing of Lady Jane, but her stomach roiled. She made a curtsy to Jacques. "Thank you for the transport, Mr. Laurent. You have been most kind."

Bowing over her hand, he kissed her knuckles. "The pleasure was mine. Do take care of yourself."

Warmth spread through her, as it did each time he touched her, looked at her, or simply laughed. Lord, she would have to get her wits about her.

Luckily, Jacques bowed to Lady Jane and took his leave. It was a good thing, but Diana missed his presence and the feeling of safety he provided, even if it was an illusion.

Jane cleared her throat. "Why don't we go to my office and chat, Miss St. Cloud?"

Following Jane down the hall behind the grand staircase, Diana noted the house was decorated in a masculine fashion. Very few frills beyond the flowers cut and arranged on nearly every table. This Everton's must have a

hothouse.

Inside the well-appointed office with its desk and wall of books, only the thick rug and curtains gave any softness to the space. Lady Jane herself wore dark gray and kept her hair pulled into a severe bun. She was formidable, yet seemed trustworthy, with her simple style and direct gaze.

Jane sat and offered Diana the chair across the desk. “Is whatever trouble you’re in dangerous?”

The prudent thing to do would be to lie. Yet how could she ask for sanctuary and not be as truthful as possible? “Yes.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“You would do well to put me on the curb, my lady. I am nothing but trouble for those who try to help.”

Jane’s severe face broke into a glorious smile. “If this is your entreaty to be asked to stay on at Everton’s, you should try something else.”

Standing, Diana wrung her hands. “I want to tell you the truth, but I fear I would be putting you in more danger.”

Raising one of her curved brows, Jane folded her hands in front of her on the desk. “Mr. Laurent told me you hadn’t heard of our Society before he mentioned it as a possible place of employment. Let me tell you a little about the Everton Domestic Society.”

Diana returned to her seat.

“We have between eight and twenty ladies employed here at any one time. Most are young, but by society’s standards beyond their marriageable years. Some have been through horrors and needed escape. Some are just trying to remove themselves from being a burden on their families’ finances. Because we house so many young women, and because some come from difficult situations, I employ six guards to discreetly watch the house and occasionally accompany a lady to places where she might be in danger. These men dress as footmen, but all have military backgrounds. It is my duty to see to the safety of the Everton ladies, and I take that very seriously.

“Now, why don’t you tell me what has happened to make you take to the road all alone, Miss St. Cloud?” Jane’s expression was mild, with no sense of accusation.

“My father was an inventor and a chemist. He was a very good one. He, my mother, and I were captured by a French spy and taken to France, where he was forced to work on the development of a better rocket. Whenever he would refuse, they would torture my mother or me to make him comply.”

“Dear Lord.”

“Yes, well... About a year ago, a guard went too far for my father, and in a fit of rage, the gentle man who raised me attacked and was killed. My mother was killed as well. They kept me alive because they suspected I could continue my father’s work.”

Jane raised both eyebrows and spoke in hushed tones. “And could you?”

“Perhaps,” Diana admitted. “However, I escaped before their theory could be put to the test. They found me in Naples, but I managed to stow away on a ship, and then another and another until I was in England.”

“You must be an extraordinary person to have survived all of that.” It wasn’t a compliment. Jane seemed to be thinking aloud.

“I did what I had to do. In Scotland, our home was surrounded. I kept to myself and stayed in barns and hunting shacks. Finally, I read a news article claiming the English agencies were also looking for me. I have no idea what they want, and while prison is better than starving to death on the streets, I would prefer to keep my freedom regardless of the country. If I must go and live in Switzerland, I shall learn to climb mountains. All I really need is a place to rest for a week or so, my lady. I realize my presence is dangerous for your Society. I have no interest in putting you or anyone in danger.”

Jane stood.

Of course she was being removed from the house. Why would anyone want to help her? She had nothing to offer. Diana got up. She would gather her cape and her gun and make her way somehow.

“I will tell Mrs. Grimsby to prepare a room. You may sleep for as long as you need. I will have food brought to you for your meals if you wish, or you may join us in the dining room. I’ll leave that up to you.”

Chest tight, Diana didn’t know how to respond. “You want me to stay?”

“Of course. I think you will make a fine addition to the Everton Domestic Society, if you want to stay. Even if you don’t choose to work, you will need to rest for a while. I imagine it has been some time since you’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

The night in Jacques’s arms flashed through Diana’s mind. She didn’t know what she’d been thinking, asking a stranger to hold her through the night. She might have been molested. Still, the memory of being in his arms was sweet and warm. It was the only pleasant memory she could conjure for the past three years. Two years in prison with her parents and a year on the run trying to get back to England had left her little time for comfort. “I can’t

imagine how I can help the Society, my lady, but I will take you up on your offer of a warm bed.”

“Wonderful. I will have your weapon delivered to your room. You should go to the breakfast room, where I will see that Cook brings you some soup and bread. It is past the lunch hour, and I imagine you’re hungry. Then you can rest.”

Tears welled up behind Diana’s eyes. It was impossible that there were still good people in the world. She was sure they had all gone, as she’d seen so little kindness given without payment. Flinging herself into Jane’s arms, Diana wept. “Thank you.”

Jane patted her back. “There now. You’re safe here. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe for as long as you choose to stay with us.”

Embarrassed by her show of emotion, Diana straightened and wiped her eyes. “What types of tasks would Everton want me to take on?”

Shaking her head, Jane smiled. “If, in a week, you wish to discuss an assignment, I have something in mind. First you must rest so that you can think clearly and make good decisions for yourself.”

They walked to a room with a long table and Jane said, “Have a seat, Diana. I will see what Cook has, and when you are finished eating, Mrs. Grimsby will take you to your room.”

It was impossible. She shook her head. After a minute, a large man in livery entered the room and stood just inside the door. One of the guards Jane mentioned. It seemed Lady Jane was serious about protecting Diana, even though she had no reason to do so. She could turn her in to the authorities and collect a five-thousand-pound bounty. Maybe Jane had read the report about the missing chemist, too.

No. She wouldn’t believe anything bad about Jane Everton. She would try to accept that good still existed in the world.



For two full days, Diana slept and ate. It was heaven. Her room was clean and well thought out. A dark wood writing desk sat near a window that overlooked the garden. She had a view of the hothouse and a lovely path that meandered through the garden. She imagined in spring there were many flowers, which were now dormant. Her bed was as soft as a

cloud and covered in azure curtains. As far as she was concerned, she may as well have died, because nothing could be better than Everton House. She finally felt well enough to stay awake and read a newspaper. Perhaps she might begin to figure out how to get herself out of this mess. Maybe she could hide in the Everton Domestic Society indefinitely. She would have wages if she did her job well, and a safe place to stay. What more could she expect from her life? She should be dead, yet here she was, in a clean gown with three more in her wardrobe.

No. It was too dangerous. Once she repaid Lady Jane for everything, she would move on and keep Everton's safe.

The knock on her door startled her. No one had bothered her for a full two days except to bring her trays of food and collect the tray later. Servants scratched gently, but this was a full and demanding knock. "Hellooo..."

Diana cleared her throat. "Come in."

A gray-haired woman, no more than five feet tall, wearing a voluminous gown better suited to a summer picnic than a November afternoon, glided in. She sparkled with emeralds around her neck and wrists. "Dear child, I am Lady Honoria Chervil. Lady Jane tells me you've had a tough go of it since your parents passed. She told me all about having been shuttled from one relative to the next. You can rest assured you are well and home here. We shall be good friends I am sure. I have several bottles of very good whiskey and I'm happy to share."

Lady Jane had lied for her. She didn't know how to respond. "It's a bit early for whiskey, but I thank you for the offer."

Honoria looked out the window as if gauging the time of day. "I suppose you're right, my dear. Perhaps later we can indulge. Now, tell me what I can do to make your stay here more comfortable. I'm told some dresses and gowns close to your size have already been delivered. Do you need toiletries?"

"Lady Jane was kind enough to provide a brush for my hair. I think it will be fine."

Trooping over to the vanity where a pitcher, bowl and the brush sat, Honoria shook her head. "This will never do." She turned and grinned. "Never you mind. Leave it to me."

"There is no need to make a fuss. I'm not even sure if I'll be staying here long." A knot formed in Diana's throat. It had been so long since anyone cared for her needs, she was at a loss.

Full of joy and life, Honoria sat on the edge of the bed. “It really doesn’t matter how long you stay, my dear Diana. You must have some small creature comforts. It’s really the only point of living. Well, that and falling in love. I do so enjoy a good love story.”

Diana’s mind immediately flashed to the memory of Jacques’s shining dark eyes and the kindness within them. “I’m sorry, my lady. I have no love stories to tell.”

With a clap, Honoria stood. “Yet. You have none yet. Who knows what tomorrow will bring.”

Unable to help herself, Diana laughed. “Are you always so optimistic?”

“I’m not a fool. I know that bad things happen, and I have seen some terrible things happen to good people. I’ve also seen some remarkable recoveries. I am constantly amazed by the adaptability of the human spirit.” She gave her head a shake. “I am generally of good spirit.”

Wanting a friend and deserving one were at war within Diana. She couldn’t risk anyone’s safety for the sake of her own comfort. Diana stood and folded her arms across her chest. “Lady Honoria, while I appreciate your goodwill, I’m in need of nothing. I shall not stay here long enough to retain friendships and my life is too complicated in any event. Please forgive my rudeness, but would you be kind enough to leave me in peace?”

Honoria’s eyes widened for a moment before her expression settled back into a state of well-being. “I understand.” She rose and floated to the door.

The knot in Diana’s stomach tightened to the point of pain, but she didn’t waver. This kind lady didn’t deserve the consequences of being close to her.

With the door open, Honoria stood at the threshold. “You are wrong about one thing, Diana.”

Another pang of guilt. “What is that?”

“You have already been here long enough to have acquired a friend. Two, if Lady Jane’s descriptions of you are to be taken into account. You would do well to trust in Everton’s. No matter what type of trouble you have, this house will keep you safe and make the journey with you.”

Diana’s resolve cracked. “What if it is this house’s safety I am concerned with?”

Honoria stepped back inside, closed the door, and frowned. Studying Diana, she leaned against the door. “Are your problems of that dangerous a nature?”

She’d said too much, but the temptation of friendship was too good.

She'd trusted Mother and Father and now they were both gone. Since then, her life had been reduced to bartering for what she needed. "Perhaps—or maybe I left it all in the past. I can't really be sure. I'm not willing to take the risk."

"Lady Jane and Lord Rupert have a great many friends. Not to mention that several of our Everton ladies have moved on to marry influential men. I think you might consider staying on." Her expression softened in contentment, or whatever Honoria thought about when she looked content. She held up one finger. "I'll just see to those toiletries." And she was gone, the door closing behind her.

It occurred to Diana that everyone at Everton House might be insane. Why else would they want to help a stranger who would only bring disaster down on them?



On her fifth day at the Everton Domestic Society, Diana walked the gardens. With the proper outerwear and boots on, the crisp air felt good. Continuing along the path winding through the garden, she admired the garden's detail. The trail meandered past the hothouse, potting shed, a large round fountain that was empty for the winter, and several benches. She wished for warm weather so she could smell the roses. It had been so long since she'd been able to breathe in their sweet scent.

The comforts of the Society already lured her in, and it was dangerous for her and for them. She had met several of the ladies and found them all kind and quick witted. It was a remarkable gathering of young women who worked as Everton ladies and older women who were called dowagers. Their role was to maintain propriety when the ladies took longer assignments. It was fascinating. Lady Chervil was one of the dowagers. As good as her word, Honoria had returned with an assortment of combs, creams, soaps, ribbons and lace. No matter what Diana said to refuse, it was useless.

From the bench with the best view of the rose garden, she saw only brown, thorny shrubs, but she didn't want to look at the forced flowers in the hothouse. She'd had enough of manipulation for a lifetime. Closing her eyes, she imagined what the garden must be like in summer.

If only Jacques was here to sit with her, it would be perfect. A dangerous

notion, and she tried to squash it. Yet his warm scent and strong arms persisted in their invasion of her thoughts. Stupid, since she would never see him again. He was handsome and wealthy with friends in high places. He had no use for a woman of no worth who was followed by trouble. Jacques Laurent wouldn't give her a second thought, and she should forget him as well.

Light footsteps sounded on the stone path. "Am I disturbing you?" Lady Jane's hands were folded inside her dark blue cloak. As usually seemed the case, her eyes were kind while her mouth was drawn in a serious line.

"Not at all, my lady." Diana stood.

With a brief smile, Jane nodded toward the bench and they both sat. "If you are interested, I have a potential assignment for you."

"For me?" It was always best to hide her emotions, but shock and excitement pushed forward before she could rein herself in.

Jane took a deep breath and sat impossibly straighter. "I'm reasonably sure you would be safely out of harm's way. I will, of course, send both a dowager and a footman with you, just in case."

"Won't the client think it odd that I have an entourage?"

A genuine smile lit up Jane's face. "To be honest, this particular client might not even notice. I will, however, inform his staff." She sobered. "It is something in your field of expertise and out of the public eye. Do you think you might be willing to try life as an Everton lady?"

The idea of having something useful to do was tempting. Even if it only kept her mind occupied with anything but her imminent capture, she would be grateful. "I will try, my lady. But if I sense the least danger to the client or his staff, I will take myself away, and you will not even receive a note. It's better you not know where I've gone if French spies have discovered me."

"Yes, I suppose that's true. Though we will likely come looking for you." There was that smile again, though it didn't touch her eyes this time. "Come to my office and we shall look over the contract. Then you can decide if it interests you and when you feel well enough to begin."

Stepping back into the world of London society was not an option, but perhaps she could hide in plain sight. It had worked before. She could pass as almost anything. She'd even managed a three-week ship voyage in which she posed as a boy, mopping decks and cleaning the privy. She could stay out of sight or become whatever she needed.

She took a deep breath and followed Jane into the house.

Chapter Three

Jacques had kept busy the past three weeks. Yet at every turn, he was tempted to go to the Everton Domestic Society and see how Diana fared. He didn't even know if she was still there. She was so skittish, she might have left that very day he dropped her off and run like a thief with a bag full of diamonds. He couldn't even say why she'd touched him so deeply. Perhaps it was that in spite of her strength and bravado, she had needed him. In that one moment in the dark at the inn, she had asked for his help, and he couldn't let that go.

Having just returned to London after another visit with his parents, he went to see Francis Edgebrook. He could check on his investments and have a good laugh. With his enthusiasm for a new invention or discovery, Francis always put him in a good mood.

He rapped the knocker.

After a considerable wait the door opened. Fenwick, the butler, looked even more harried than usual. His red hair flopped in his eyes, and he struggled to make eye contact. "Good afternoon, sir. I apologize for my delay."

"Is something wrong, Fenwick?"

A hint of amusement lifted one side of the butler's mouth. "I'll leave that for you to decide, sir."

Butlers were not generally cryptic, but the Edgebrook household was unusual in a great many ways. "Is Mr. Edgebrook at home?"

"Yes, sir. You will find him in his office. Shall I escort you?"

"No need. I know the way." Jacques handed over his hat and coat before going down the short hallway to Francis's office.

Before he could knock, he heard a woman's voice within, a distinctively raspy and sensual voice. Jacques opened the door.

Francis laughed at something before turning. "Jacques, I'm glad you're here. I want you to meet my new assistant. I took a page out of Middleton's book and hired an Everton lady. Who would have thought they could find someone to help an old man of science like me?"

Eyes wide and cheeks as pink as her sweet lips, her shock at seeing him again was evident.

Jacques's first instinct was to kiss her senseless. Heart pounding and palms sweaty, he lost his voice for several beats. "The Everton Domestic Society is full of surprises. I had no idea Miss St. Cloud was of a scientific mind."

Francis clapped. He'd lost some weight after nearly blowing himself to bits the previous year and he had a small scar on his left cheek from the incident, but his color was good. "You know each other. How fabulous. I do love it when my friends are already friends. It shows good taste all around."

For the first time since he'd entered the office, Diana looked away. "We met just last week. Monsieur Laurent was kind enough to offer me transport when I was in need."

The truth, but not all of it. She was the most intriguing woman. Jacques had thought of little else, and she was the last person he'd expected to find at the Edgebrook townhouse. "In what capacity are you assisting, Miss St. Cloud?"

Up like a shot, Francis said, "She's a chemist and mechanic, Jacques. You can't believe what a miracle she is. I've not had one fire or explosion since she arrived three days ago. Diana has a keen knowledge and such instincts." Out the door he went, still rambling on about how wonderful Diana was.

Jacques looked at her. "I suppose we are meant to follow."

Rising, she held back a smile, but it lit her eyes just the same. "Yes. I believe so."

Francis was already heading down the stairs to his laboratory when they reached the hallway.

"Are you well? Has everything worked out at the Society, Miss St. Cloud?" It was best not to use her familiar name. Though just looking at her, he longed to touch and hold her. He'd begun to think the way she fit against him was just his imagination. Now he longed to test the theory.

With her lovely smooth cheeks and her pert little nose, she took his breath away. Diana met his gaze. "I should thank you for delivering me there, Monsieur. Everyone has been very kind."

Doris Whimple stormed down the hall. "Don't you keep him up all night with those beakers and flames. He needs his rest, you know. Oh, hello, Mr. Laurent. I didn't know you were calling today."

Never having seen Doris in a temper before, Jacques was unsure how to respond. One moment she'd been in a rage, and the next she'd simpered at him as if nothing was amiss. Doris had been lady's maid and companion to Millicent Edgebrook, Francis's niece and ward. Millie had joined Everton's and eventually married Jacques's friend, the Duke of Middleton.

"I just arrived, Mrs. Whimple. How are you?"

Hands on her hips, she frowned and shifted her gaze to Diana. "As well as can be expected."

Still as mist, Diana stood next to him without reacting or responding.

Jacques had no idea what had created the tension. "We are only going to see what's new in the laboratory. I'm sure we won't be long."

Taking a rather dramatic breath and heaving a long sigh, Doris said, "I'll go and tell Cook to start some tea."

Once she was out of sight, Jacques turned to Diana. "What was that about?"

"I believe she is jealous." It was said without inflection. Diana stepped through the doorway and down the steps.

The narrow stairs had barely enough room to accommodate his shoulders. Halfway down, he held her elbow to stop her. "Jealous of what?"

Standing on the lower step, she only reached his chest. She looked up at him, her eyes filled with more than he wanted to see, yet he couldn't look away. Beautiful, smart, and mysterious, she was irresistible. There was no reason to keep holding her arm, but he did not release her, slowly caressing up to her shoulder and down again. "Why would Mrs. Whimple be jealous, Diana?"

She reached up and brushed a stray hair from his forehead. As if she'd just realized what she'd done, she dropped her hand. "I believe she feels responsible for Mr. Edgebrook. Doris has been assisting with his experiments for some time, but without any scientific background. She has kept him safe, but not moved his progress forward. I am a usurper who can do what she cannot. Mr. Edgebrook hired me because he has great theories, but needs help

with the alchemy to bring them to fruition. I also think she may be in love with him.”

While he took in everything she'd said, he was lost in those expressive eyes. “I cannot seem to get you out of my mind, Diana.”

The longing left her and was replaced by fear. She stepped down one riser. “You will have to find a way, sir. I can bring you nothing but disaster. Once I am rested and have some money, I will no longer be within your purview. I should not have made that request at the inn. It was inappropriate and selfish. I'm sure that is the only reason you are still thinking of me.”

Jacques followed her down. “You needed comfort and I was happy to give it to you. There is nothing wrong with that.”

Once again, the careful mask of indifference fell into place. “There are a great many things wrong with it, both practically and morally, but that is beside the point. I should not have asked. Mr. Edgebrook is waiting for us.”

A dozen questions ricocheted around his mind. Before she reached the bottom, he had time to ask only one. “Who are you?”

The lamplight from the laboratory shone on one side of her face as she turned. “I am a dead woman and no one to concern yourself with.”

“Look at this, Jacques.” Francis practically came out of his shoes with excitement. “She helped me find the formula for the better fertilizer we've been talking about. I'm telling you, this will be revolutionary. We just need to wait for the test results.”

Soil filled two troughs under the only window in the basement. It was a cloudy day, but light still filtered down. Jacques had come to find out how Francis was faring with his experiments, but now it was the last thing on his mind. “How are you testing your theory?”

Francis pointed to the dirt. “We have a trough with the original fertilizer and one with the enriched version. We should have answers in a few weeks if all goes well.”

Jacques turned toward Diana. “What did you add to the formula, or would I prefer not to know?”

With a giggle, she said, “It's not really complicated or even very scientific. It's just the refuse from the kitchen. My mother used it in our gardens, and I employed it here.”

“I thought,” Francis said, “if you could work out something with the prison, we might gather enough to make it worthwhile. However, if not, you might at least employ it on that new farm you bought your parents.”

“You purchased a farm for your parents?” It was the first interest she’d shown in his life. Diana was a woman with many secrets and troubles, none of which she wanted to share with him.

He touched the soil. “Yes. My mother and father were finally able to leave France. The war and politics did not favor their staying at home. I managed to smuggle them out and bought a small farm for them. I was returning to London from their arrival party when I assisted you with transportation.”

The way her cheeks pinked was the most delightful sight. “You must be a very good son.”

“I do my best.” He had to shake off his longing for more of her attention. “What else are you working on, Francis?”

“I think we’re making some progress on the carts for your mine. We still have a long way to go to make sure they’re safe, but once it works, you’ll be able to get your men into and out of those mines more quickly, and that will be safer, too. I’m hoping in another month or so I’ll have ironed out the details.”

Jacques leaned over the table that held the model of Francis’s invention. It was a series of carts or cups on a rail that would hold men and use a steam engine to pull them up and lower them down into the mines. The problem was making it work without using up more coal than you could extract. “Are you helping with this as well, Miss St. Cloud?”

“Only with some of the mathematics. My specialty is in alchemy, not mechanics.”

Francis frowned. “Not so. She could be an engineer if she were a man.”

It was meant as a compliment, but Diana shook her head.

Undaunted, Francis pointed to the far table. “Here, look at this. This is where we’ve made some real progress. I’ve managed to enclose a flame inside a mesh screen for the mines. The screen allows air to pass through to keep the flame lit, but is fine enough to act as a firedamp for safety. The most thrilling part is a happy accident. We had the fertilizer too close to this experiment at first, and the vapors caused the flame to burn brighter in the lamp. We are still testing for other gases that might be present in the mines, but I think this may be an early warning of a combustible mix of vapors. At the very least, it will tell you if oxygen is low, as the flame will fail without air.”

Fully focused on the tall, slender lamp and its filtered light, Jacques

asked, "When do you think this will be ready, and how difficult is it to make?"

"Simple to construct. If you hire a few workers I can teach them how to put them together in no time." Francis looked at Diana. "Give us a fortnight for testing and you can have your lamp."

"You should send the specifications to the patent office, Francis. This is marvelous." Running his fingers along the top, he imagined a large loop could be added to hang the lamp in the mines.

Giving a nod that didn't look convincing, Francis rushed to the other corner of his laboratory. "You'll like this one, Jacques. I'm improving on a fire extinguisher. I thought, with all my mishaps, it might be a good idea to create a more effective means of putting out fires." He laughed.

The small tank was cylindrical and had a hose, but was otherwise unimpressive. "What have you done?"

Francis picked up the copper cylinder. "This vessel contains potassium carbonate and compressed air. If I have a fire, I just pull this lever and compressed air shoots ash through the hose, putting out a small fire."

"Amazing. You have been busy. I wouldn't mind having a few of those stored around the mines too. Let's put that on the list of experiments I'm financing." Jacques couldn't believe how much had been accomplished in the few weeks he'd been distracted by his parents' arrival. It was exciting to see things coming together for Francis.

Footsteps on the stairs drew their attention. Mrs. Whimple poked her head in. "The tea is ready if you can spare a break in your important business."

Francis scratched his neat beard. "Are there biscuits?"

"Of course." Mrs. Whimple blushed and rushed back up the steps.

Francis tugged his coat down and rushed up the steps behind her.

Left alone with Diana, Jacques longed to know all her secrets. "I was surprised to find you here."

She added some water to the growing beds. "I was equally shocked to have you walk into my assignment."

It was foolish, but he stepped closer anyway. She was like a magnet to him, and he was unable to avoid her pull. "I would not wish for you to think it was an unpleasant surprise. I'm delighted to see you and to know you are well. You look rested."

It was true. Gone were the dark circles under her eyes, and her shoulders were squared. She was still the lovely woman from the road, but without the

terror or the shotgun.

The watering can shook in her grasp, and she placed it on the table. “I was given leave to sleep for several days.”

“Do I make you uncomfortable, Diana?”

Those eyes of hers were as deep as the sea and more compelling. Stepping toward him, she reached up and cupped his cheek, then lifted on her toes and placed the smallest kiss on his lips. “I am not afraid of you, Jacques. Not in the way you think.”

Before she could retreat, he grasped her hand and held it to his chest. It had been a chaste kiss, but it still sent a wave of desire through him, and also something more. Something he didn’t want to identify. “How then? What is this trouble you’re in? How can I help? What do you need?”

“So many questions.” Gently, she pulled her hand away. “I will answer the first. I fear that what I want is impossible, and you are a glaring reminder of that fact.”

“I have a great many friends. Are you sure I cannot be of some assistance?” He should run as fast as he could. This woman was not what he wanted. He didn’t want a wife, and she hardly seemed the type to be a mistress. It must be that he’d lost his mind.

“Diana? Are you down there?” a woman called from the top of the stairs.

“Yes, my lady. I’m on my way.”

“Your tea will get cold.”

“Who is that?” he asked.

“Lady Chervil is my chaperon. Though most of the time she is nowhere to be found.” Diana smiled and disappeared up the steps.

With no other choice, Jacques followed and joined the party in the parlor for tea. Mrs. Whimple served, and sat with her cup perched in front of her pursed lips.

Diana sipped her tea and spoke only when it was necessary in reply to a direct question.

Lady Honoria Chervil flitted about the room chatting with each of them. “Monsieur Laurent, I heard that your family has come to England. Her Grace the Duchess of Middleton came for a visit last week and gushed about going to see them.”

Jacques disliked being the subject of gossip, but this was well meant. “It was wonderful to have my family and friends all in one place. It has been a long time. We hope to have Christmas together at Brookhaven, the Middleton

country home in Derbyshire. I am very much looking forward to it.”

That image flew into his mind. Preston, Millie, Aunt Phillipa, Preston’s mother, together with his parents. He would be there, sharing his fine wine with Diana...

He stopped the thought.

Where had that come from? Diana would not be at Christmas. She was not part of his family, nor were they more than acquaintances. He’d been planning this Christmas for months, and never had he thought to bring a woman with him.

“Are you all right, monsieur?” Lady Chervil stared at him, her eyes narrowed in concern.

He shook his head and forced himself to keep his focus on Lady Chervil, even though he was tempted to look at Diana and see if she was listening. “Yes. Fine. I just was lost in thought about the holiday.”

“I’m sure you will have a lovely time. Are you in London until then?”

“I have missed my parents, and have been splitting my time between London and their estate. The weather is going to make traveling on short notice harder. It is only a day’s journey, but a sudden snowstorm can turn that into two or three.” This time he did shift his gaze toward Diana.

Mask in place, she watched him without expression. Yet something in her eyes said emotion was growing below the surface. Jacques longed to free her from the shackles of her control and see the real Diana. After all, the goddess of the hunt and moon should not be concealed in such a way.

“Miss St. Cloud and I are going to the Hampton ball on Friday. Perhaps you will be there?” Lady Chervil grinned and took a biscuit from the tray.

“I have not agreed to go to a ball, my lady.” Diana frowned.

Waving her hand, undaunted, Lady Chervil nibbled her cookie. “I have already found you a gown and you need to have some fun. A lady cannot live on science alone.”

Jacques had been in Lady Honoria Chervil’s presence on one other occasion and it had been equally amusing. She was a force of nature all to herself. She was single-minded and charming to a fault. As far as he could gather, she had more money than she could ever use after being widowed three times, yet she enjoyed being a dowager at the Everton Domestic Society, so she remained.

Middleton had told him that she’d been offered a home with the Viscount and Viscountess of Devonrose, but had chosen instead to visit them several

times a year so she could continue to work. She was an interesting woman, to be sure.

The idea of Diana dressed for a ball wiggled inside him until it became a looming desire. "I shall do my best to attend if you ladies will be there."

Honorina beamed. "Excellent. I understand Lady Hampton has erected a replica of a Roman temple in her garden. I know it shall be a sight to see."

It would likely be an abomination of good taste, but people would talk about it and that's all the ton cared about. It was one of the reasons he was careful about his choice of friends. He preferred to stay out of the gossip. Still, he wanted to know more about Diana, and if he needed to attend a ball to learn who and what she was, he would endure a dozen.

The more he thought about it, the more he knew he should leave town and stay away until Diana disappeared the way she had suddenly appeared. However, he knew he wouldn't do that. "I'm sure it will be something to see."

Francis and Diana went back to work, but before Jacques left, he found Doris sitting in the ladies' parlor sewing a bit of cloth with fierce jabs of her needle. He could only imagine the horror she was creating.

"Mrs. Whimple, am I interrupting?"

She put the work aside. "No. I'll have to pull it all out anyway."

He sat on a low chair adjacent to her. "May I ask you a rather frank question that is none of my business?"

Leaning forward, she nodded.

"Do you dislike Miss St. Cloud, and if so, why?"

With a sigh, she leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes. "I cannot dislike her. She's too sweet and nice to dislike. I only wish I could do the things she can to help Mr. Edgebrook in the laboratory. I did my best. Truly, I did. He'd hardly had any fires since I started helping him. Of course, he also struggled to make any progress without the fires and explosions to tell him what was wrong. I can see that. I just wanted to help him, to be important to him."

Diana was right.

Jacques patted Doris's hand where it lay on the arm of the chair. "Madam, I think you underestimate yourself, and overestimate the importance of being useful as a person of science where Francis is concerned. He needs you to make sure he eats and sleeps. I think it's possible Miss St. Cloud might need you for that as well. She seems the type to be of a single

mind. If you take care of them, things will fall into their rightful place. I'm sure of it."

Wide-eyed, she flushed. "Oh, I should have noticed if she was eating right. She's terribly thin. Shame on me. I've been selfish and willful. You are quite right, sir. I must take care of them both as they are too set on this science business to take care of themselves. Not to worry. Doris Whimple will not let anyone in this house take ill."

He stood because she did, took her hand and kissed it. "I have no doubt of that, my dear Mrs. Whimple."

Her blush was like a young girl's. "Thank you for pointing out my duty. I needed a friend to talk to, and Millie is so busy being a duchess. I've not seen her since all these changes took place."

"It is my pleasure to be an ear for you whenever you need one. I will take my leave now. I have taken up enough of your time."

She curtsied. "Good day to you, and thank you."

He took comfort in knowing someone was looking out for Diana at Everton House and in the laboratory. Now if he only knew how she'd become so efficient at the sciences, perhaps he'd know who Diana was. Not knowing was going to drive him mad.



Jacques stared at the chessboard and had no idea what his next move should be. He'd been playing these matches against his best friend, Preston Knowles, the Duke of Middleton, for most of their lives. He'd even won his fair share, yet today it was as if he was in a fog.

Preston frowned. "Tell me again how you met this woman?"

"What woman? You've met a lady, Jacques?" Millicent Knowles fluffed her skirt as she sat on the divan near the windows where they were playing.

"The question of whether she is a lady is yet to be answered," Preston said.

"I would like to hear about this woman, Jacques. Also, I regret to inform you that Pres has you in checkmate in six moves." She leaned forward, chin on her fist, blond hair spilling around her face where it had come loose from her bun.

"Millicent, you ruined my fun." Preston's frown couldn't hide the pride in

his eyes when he looked at his clever wife.

“Oh stop,” she said. “Clearly, his mind is not on the game. Let’s order tea and Jacques can tell me all about his newest distraction.”

With no reason to go on with the game, they followed her to a sitting area near the fire, where it would be more comfortable to chat and enjoy their tea. Jacques had always liked the parlor at the Middleton town house. The house was full of cozy niches and hidden passageways. Preston’s ancestors had had a passion for clever hiding places and tunnels. “I don’t have much I can tell you. She is a mystery.”

Millie’s eyes widened, and she raised her eyebrows comically. “How fun. What is the mystery woman’s name?”

“Diana St. Cloud, though I am not convinced that is her real name.”

All amusement fled her pretty face. “Why would she lie about her name?”

“Because she’s in some kind of trouble,” Preston answered before Jacques could. “And as a Frenchman living in England, you don’t need trouble, Jacques. You had enough of that in France. What if she’s a spy working for the French?” Preston pointed, but quickly lowered his hand. “I’m just concerned.”

It was good to have people who cared about him. Jacques never let himself become complacent about good friends. “I know, though I cannot imagine she is a spy. If I could get her out of my mind, believe me, I would. It is clear she is not interested in a courtship. She has said as much. It is also clear she is in trouble of some kind. If I knew what her problem was, perhaps I could help, but she is not willing to divulge the information. At least, not to me.”

“How did you meet Diana?” Millie asked.

“She was hiding on the side of the road into London when I was on my way back from my parents’ arrival party. At first, I thought she was a highwaywoman, and that was intriguing enough. Once she spoke, it was obvious she had a formal education among your English ton. I couldn’t leave her in the cold with snow coming, so I took her with me.” Jacques left out the story of holding her through the night at the inn. He wanted that memory for himself, and wouldn’t share her that way.

“So, you brought her to London and left her?”

“She asked me to leave her in Piccadilly Square or at Parliament. I assumed she wanted some public place where she could hide in a crowd. That kind of hiding does not last long. Whoever she is running from would have

found her. If they know her well, they would have found her quite easily. I took her to Lady Jane.”

Millie’s mouth dropped open. “She’s at Everton’s?”

“Wait, it gets better.” Preston crossed his arms over his chest. “Go ahead. Tell her.”

“Yesterday, when I went to see your uncle about some projects I have funded, she was there working as his assistant. It seems she is accomplished in several scientific fields, though how that is possible, I do not know.”

Like a fish out of water, Millie opened and closed her mouth several times and blinked her eyes. “She’s with Uncle Francis? Uncle Francis hired an Everton lady? Good gracious, I should not have missed our appointment for tea last week.” A sweet giggle escaped her, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“You think this is funny?” Preston raised his voice. “Our dearest friend is fumbling over a woman who may be a spy, murderer, or who knows what.”

She patted Preston’s knee. “If Jane Everton trusts this Diana, then you can rest assured she is worthy of that trust. I agree with Jacques.”

It was true that Lady Jane and Lord Rupert had a good record for hiring their Everton ladies. Though Jacques had never taken any stock in Preston’s dire worries. If Diana had wanted to harm him, she could have done so at the inn. “On which point do you agree with me, Millie? I didn’t actually know I had made one.”

Frowning, she shook her head. “We need to find out what trouble Diana is in, so we can help her. Of course, Jane likely knows, but she’ll never tell me. Well, it doesn’t matter. I shall see if Diana and I can be friends, and the lady will tell me herself or she will tell you, Jacques, as you are already her friend.”

“She hardly considers me a friend.” The fact sent an ache through him. Never had any woman affected him so strangely or strongly.

Millie shrugged. “That doesn’t matter. It is clear you consider her a friend, and will go to any lengths to help her.”

The tea arrived.

“How is that clear?”

A slow smile spread across her face. “Your eyes light up when you say her name. I’ve never seen you worry about anyone besides your parents and Preston the way you are fretting over Diana, and you let Preston trounce you at chess. If that’s not telling, I don’t know what is.”

Preston's previous hard edge on the subject of Diana eased. "Perhaps we shall also attend the Hampton's ball. I believe I would like to meet this lady and see what all the fuss is about."

Chapter Four

Diana liked Francis Edgebrook. His knowledge of science was impressive, though he did tend to be careless and often wanted to push things past safe limits. Still, she enjoyed her time assisting him.

His previous assistant, Mrs. Whimple, had finally come around to liking her after a difficult beginning. Now it seemed Doris felt obligated to take care of both Francis and Diana. She'd taken to forcing them to stop work for meals and rest. It was often annoying, but always endearing.

Ten minutes earlier they had been summoned to the parlor for tea, with a reprimand that they hadn't taken a break for nearly three hours.

Doris poured the tea and handed Diana a cup. "There you go. And have a biscuit."

"Thank you." Diana hadn't had someone take care of her in a long time. She should have protested, but it was too nice to reject. Even Honoria was charmed by Doris's need to keep everyone fed and comfortable. Diana wasn't sure how she had become part of the group receiving care, but it was far better than the previous disdain.

Francis sipped his tea and read through a paper. "Mrs. Whimple, did you know they are having Sir George Cayley speak at the Royal Academy on Thursday?"

Smiling, Doris put a biscuit on his plate. "Who is Sir George?"

Eyes bright with excitement, Francis waved the paper. "He's invented some kind of flying machine. I'm thinking we should go and hear him speak."

"Do they allow ladies into the Royal Academy?" Honoria asked.

His gaze shifted while he considered the question. "I couldn't say for

sure, but I don't remember reading that women were excluded."

Honorina cocked her head. "I think a talk about flying in the clouds would be fascinating."

Rising, Francis regarded her. He joined them around the coffee table. "If you are interested, I don't see why we can't all attend. I am a member and am entitled to bring as many guests as I wish."

Doris clapped. "Oh, yes. Let's all go. Miss St. Cloud, wouldn't you enjoy a talk on Sir George's flying thing?"

Already she'd been pushed into attending a ball, and it was foolish to be out in public too much. Still, she loved the idea of being surrounded by people of science and learning what had happened in the real world since her capture. "I would like it very much."

"Excellent. We shall pick you both up at Everton House and go directly to the Academy. Perhaps we might find some tidbit that will help us in our work. You never know who you will meet at such events." Francis went to his desk in the corner and wrote a note.

Honorina put her teacup on the table. "You realize, bringing three women to an event generally reserved for men will make you the talk of the town."

Looking up, Francis removed his spectacles and raised his eyebrows. "At least I'll be gossiped about over something other than my latest explosion."



On Tuesday, tea was served early because the Duchess of Middleton arrived to visit her uncle. Millicent Knowles was very pretty and kind. Diana had tried to excuse herself so the relations and their old friend might have time alone. Millie, as she insisted on being called, demanded she stay.

"I must admit, Miss St. Cloud, I heard about you from my husband's oldest friend. It seems you have made a most unexpected impression on Jacques. I was sure he was a confirmed bachelor." Millie sipped her tea with a mischievous smile while looking over the rim.

Diana nearly choked and had to put her cup down to recover. "I'm sure he is still as he ever was. Mr. Laurent merely gave me transport when I was in need."

Looking far too delighted, Honorina said, "Did you know that Her Grace

was an Everton lady?”

Perhaps she had heard something of it from Jacques, but she wasn't ready to admit that. “Really? It seems a long way from being a duchess.”

Millie laughed with a shrug. “It's not as far as you might think. You see, I had dreams for my life, and I left my dear Uncle Francis in order to pursue those goals. I joined the Everton Domestic Society with the idea that I would work there for a year to earn enough to travel and see the world.”

It wasn't so far-fetched. Diana had avoided any type of serious courtship so she could continue to help Father in his laboratory. Poor Mother was beside herself, with a daughter not interested in marriage. “Then you gave up your dreams when you met His Grace?”

Mrs. Wimple laughed out loud. “As if Millie would ever give up on something she wanted badly enough. She had planned on me traipsing around the world with her.”

Raising her eyebrows, Millie said, “My path may have altered, but my goals never have.”

Diana thought herself to be reasonably smart, but she seemed to have lost her way in the conversation. “I'm afraid I don't understand. Did you not choose marriage over your dream of travel?”

“I did not. I married a man who respected that my dreams were as important as his. We have been abroad twice since our marriage. We shall travel again soon, I think.”

Gaping, Diana didn't know what to say.

“You look shocked, Miss St. Cloud.” Millie finished her tea and put her cup and saucer down on the table.

“I didn't know such men existed. In the world I grew up in, when you married, you gave up childhood frivolity and settled for what your husband desired. I'm fairly certain this is the way of things in good society, yet you speak of a kind of partnership that is equal.” She had no idea why she was whispering. It wasn't as if the conversation was of a personal nature.

Francis puffed up with pride. “My Millie would settle for nothing less.”

“You are not wrong, but there are other kinds of men. They are rare, but they exist. Men who view their wives as equal and worthy. Were your parents of a more traditional view?”

Father had worked on his experiments. Mother took care of things so he didn't have to. She never complained and always looked happy. When she looked at him, her eyes lit with adoration. “My parents are both passed now,

but they had a great love. Mother left home to live in Scotland with Father. They each had some part to play in the house, but I suppose in their way they were equal.”

She’d never thought about it before. As far as Diana knew, Mother had no dream to pursue some masculine occupation. It would be different for her. What man would want his wife toiling in some laboratory all day?

“I’m sure they were very happy. I’m very sorry you no longer have them with you.” Most people of the ton said they were sorry, as polite society demanded, but Millie Knowles’s eyes filled with tears. “I lost my parents to an illness when I was young. That is how I came to live with Uncle Francis.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Your Grace. It is very hard to lose both parents.” Diana wished she could blot out the images of Mother and Father lying in pools of blood in that dungeon, but they were always with her.

Millie said, “For many years, I blamed myself for not doing more to save them. I was fifteen; I called the doctor, but it was too late. If I had been older and ignored their orders to wait, perhaps they might have lived. Then I realized, with Preston’s help, that these things were not in my control. I did what I could, and they died anyway. I miss them and mourn them, but there is no point in blame.”

Diana was directly responsible for her parents being killed. She might not have held the knife, but it was her virtue Father had been protecting. Still, Millie made a good point. People died and we couldn’t change the past by issuing blame. Father had protected her from rape and given her the strength to get out of that prison before they could torture her into complying with their wishes. “You are lucky to have a husband who supports you so completely.”

“Oh, what poor Middleton puts up with,” Doris said.

“He is very happy,” Millie scolded, but laughed, ruining the effect.

Doris huffed.

The way they all spoke filled Diana with joy she’d not felt in too long. This was a family. The kind she remembered and wanted. The kind she’d lost. “You have given me a lot to think about, Your Grace. It’s an interesting notion that such men exist.”

“My name is Millie, if you please. Let’s take a short walk together, Diana.” Millie stood.

“Millie, then.” Having little choice, Diana took Millie’s arm and they made a turn around the room together. Never in her life had she thought to

have friends again, yet here were three people who liked her and wanted to spend time with her. And this was a duchess.

“I can see why Jacques likes you,” Millie whispered.

Warmth flushed Diana’s cheeks. “He is a kindhearted man who helped me when I was stranded. That is all. To say he likes me is far too bold. He took pity on me, and I am grateful.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” They rounded near the window, and a light snow had covered the ground.

“It’s only that I’ve never known Jacques to speak of any woman. He never tells tales, though we know he has his liaisons. Since meeting you, he is distracted and full of energy. I also have it on good authority he is not keeping a mistress. He gave her up before his parents arrived because of his busy schedule and has not taken up with anyone new.”

“I’m not anyone’s mistress.” Anger rose from deep inside Diana.

Millie stopped and faced her. “I never meant to imply you were. Forgive me. I only meant that he is free of other obligations that might keep him away from you.”

Her assumption was ridiculous and had to be stopped. “Millie, I appreciate that you are very close to Mr. Laurent, and I’m flattered that you are fond enough of me to wish us together. However, we are not, nor shall we ever be. My life is...complicated. He would be far better off with a nice woman who did not have such a burden-filled past.”

Taking her arm once again, Millie continued around the room. “Be that as it may, he does not seem interested in that make-believe woman. He speaks only of you.”

Continuing to argue the point was silly. Besides, Diana couldn’t help loving the fact that she was on Jacques’s mind, even if being part of his life was impossible.



T rue to his word, on Thursday Francis picked them up and brought them to the Royal Academy. A tall staircase and ornate arches loomed above them. A sea of men in black coats and hats filed through the doors.

It was safe to say that Doris, Honoria and Diana were the only women in attendance. Diana had worn a dark russet dress that was very modest. Doris was in her typical gray skirt with a crisp white blouse. In contrast, Honoria was in a peach confection with lace and ruffles. She made no effort to go unnoticed.

A tall man with a monocle rushed over. “Lady Chervil, I had no idea you were interested in the newest inventions.”

“I have a great many interests, Lord Graves.”

“Excellent. May I escort you in?” He offered his arm.

“I would be delighted.” Taking his arm, Honoria turned her head toward Diana and gave a wink.

Francis grinned. “Come, ladies. We don’t want to be late.”

“May I join you?” Jacques approached from the street. He offered his arm as they walked up the stairs.

“I think we will be tossed out,” Doris whispered.

Patting her hand, Francis said, “Not at all. We have seats and I am a long-standing member.”

Diana didn’t take Jacques’s offered arm, though she did stay close to him. “I think Doris might be right.”

“Nonsense. No one will say a word.” He shrugged. “At least not to your face. It will be all the gossip tomorrow that three ladies dared invade the male-dominated world of the Royal Academy.”

Of course, he was right. She laughed. “I’m interested to see how Sir George intends to create loft.”

“How are the experiments with the lamp coming along?”

She liked talking science with him. It was nice to think there were people who took her seriously and who were also taken seriously in society. When her father was alive, she’d been his assistant, and they had made many discoveries. Father never questioned her ability to work in a man’s world, but she’d believed him alone in his forward thinking. Certainly, her few suitors had believed her abilities unladylike. Jacques Laurent was a most unusual fellow. “They’re going well. We’ve identified two combustible vapors that the flame is sensitive to. We just need a bit more time to make sure the lamp is safe and practical.”

He chuckled, and a grin transformed his face from handsome to stunning. “I can’t imagine practicality is a major concern for Francis.”

It was undeniable that Francis was loose with his safety concerns.

“Perhaps not, but he did have the good sense to request help. I feel it’s my responsibility to remind him of such things.”

“You are the perfect assistant for him. I’m pleased he found you.”

A man with dark hair and fierce eyes approached. He was lean and reminded her of a cat on the lookout for danger at every turn. “Laurent, it’s good to see you.”

“Kerburghe, shouldn’t you be in Scotland with that enormous brood of yours?” Jacques spoke as if they were old friends.

Relaxing, Diana stepped back so as not to intrude.

Jacques took her elbow and gently pulled her forward. “I would like to introduce my friend, Diana St. Cloud. Miss St. Cloud, this is Michael Rollins, the Duke of Kerburghe.”

He stared her in the eye as if he knew something, but then bowed. “A pleasure to meet you, Miss St. Cloud.” He added an emphasis on her name.

Unable to meet his gaze, she lowered her eyes and curtsied. “Your Grace.”

“Michael helped me get out of France before my head met the guillotine. We have been friends a long time.” Jacques looked from her back to Michael. “He also called in a favor to get my parents passage to England.”

“You must be a very powerful man, Your Grace.” Diana didn’t know if she should attach herself to this friend of Jacques’s and beg his help, or keep as far away as possible. He had no reason to help her, and he could know the people who might lock her away for her lifetime, however long that might be.

“I’m just a retired soldier who managed to get himself a title. My only power is my very large family, and really, Her Grace holds all the strings.” Charm and modesty oozed from this duke.

With a laugh, Jacques said, “Your lady has to be formidable with all those children to keep in line. What brings you here, Michael?”

“I couldn’t resist the chance to see George Cayley’s flying machine. I’m always curious about what great minds come up with.” Someone called his name, and he excused himself.

Diana and Jacques entered the assembly room. Her thoughts lingered on the Duke of Kerburghe. “Is your friend the duke very well connected in Parliament?”

“He is a war hero. He receives a lot of respect and has some friends that come in handy from time to time, though not so high as Parliament.” He guided her through the crowd of men, who looked at her as if she had grown

another head.

They joined Doris and Francis and sat. “How many children does he have?”

“What is your curiosity with Michael Rollins? Should I be jealous?”

Heart beating out of her chest, she looked at him. “Why on earth would you be jealous? We are not courting, nor shall we ever. You mentioned his children several times, so I wondered how many he has.”

A darkness drifted over him. His gaze bore into hers. “At last count, I believe there were seven little Rollinses.”

She would have said more, but he spoke to Francis, giving Diana his back. It was unclear whether she had offended him by saying they would never court or with her curiosity about his friend. Whatever caused his displeasure, she wished she could take it back. Having Jacques unhappy with her made her chest ache in a way she’d never experienced before.

The most extraordinary machine occupied half the stage. The glider’s white wings, similar to the shape of a kite, were attached to thin pieces of wood. It had an adjustable tail with a vertical fin. Diana longed for a closer look.

A man of perhaps forty with thinning gray hair and long sideburns took the stage. He stepped up to the podium and cleared his throat.

Some of the very large crowd quieted, but most continued their chatter.

He cleared his throat again.

Another man, taller, with blond hair and an air of authority, stood off to the side. “Quiet, please.”

The crowd hushed.

Sir George Cayley fussed with his papers and cleared his throat again. “As you may already know, I have achieved a successful flight. I have much to tell you in a short time. My experiments are without comparison in this field.”

“He thinks very highly of himself,” Doris whispered.

Diana had to agree, but his work was fascinating. He’d set forth to develop a fixed-wing flying machine. The machine had separate systems for lift, propulsion, and control. He discussed the four forces that acted on the heavier-than-air flying vehicle as weight, lift, drag, and thrust. The wings were developed with large chambers on top and flat, smaller ones underneath. He claimed the chambered design helped with lift. He predicted that sustained flight would not occur until a lightweight engine was developed to

provide adequate thrust and lift.

Riveted by his innovation, Diana sighed when he finished.

The hall erupted in applause.

Sir George folded his notes and tucked them in his pocket before moving off to pose in front of his creation.

People began to move about and leave the hall. Francis and Doris stood and walked toward the aisle.

Jacques didn't move.

Sitting next to him had been half thrill, half agony. He'd not said a word to her since telling her that Michael Rollins had seven children. "You are angry with me."

A low sigh, then he turned toward her. "I have no right to be, but yes. I am angry that you dismiss any notion of our courting."

"You don't want to court me." It came out far more forcefully than she intended.

His voice was low and for her ears only. "I do not know what I want where you are concerned."

Shaking her head, she couldn't help the giggle that escaped. Her life was so strange and terrible, the idea that anyone would find her attractive was farcical. "Let us speak of something else, Jacques."

With a nod, he stood and offered his arm. "What did you think of Sir George and his flying machine?"

"Quite amazing."

They wound their way through the crowd and out to the street where Francis waited outside the carriage. "What do you think, Diana?"

"I would love to take a flight on his machine. I'd also like to talk to him about how he manages lift. I'm curious about drag. The entire model is fascinating."

"Perhaps we can attempt a small model just for the fun of it." Francis's eyes lit with excitement.

The old thrill she used to get when her father had a new idea rumbled inside her. "That would be fun."

Laughing, Jacques shook Francis's hand. "I see you two have a lot to talk about. Mrs. Whimple, make sure they take time to eat and sleep."

"I'll take care of them, Mr. Laurent," Doris called from inside the carriage.

Lady Chervil sashayed over with two older gentlemen. "I think this idea

of flight is quite wild and dangerous. However, I did manage to learn that we are not the first women to attend. Pinky here tells me several ladies have graced this hall over the years. Even the Duchess of Stilton made an appearance on one occasion.”

“Lord Pinkney, good to see you.” Jacques shook his hand.

“Laurent, what news of France? Will you ever get your land back, or is that a lost cause?” Lord Pinkney slapped Jacques on the back.

“It is likely a lost cause. Besides, I am very happy here in your country, and your king is happy to gain my tax money.”

The men laughed, but Diana thought Jacques’s amusement was forced. She’d not known about all his troubles in France, and what she’d learned today was only bits and pieces of a story. His eyes held pain despite him making light of the subject. All the more reason to keep her troubles from him, lest she lose his friendship.

Chapter Five

As expected, the Roman temple was a ridiculous sight in the center of an English garden. Jacques walked the perimeter, which had been lit with torches. Despite its garish quality, it was rather a magnificent mistake. White pillars stood ten feet high and statues of several Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were standing watch. In the center, Apollo stood nearly seven feet tall, holding a lyre and looking off into the distance.

Jacques supposed it would be impolite to tell his hostess that, traditionally, Apollo was depicted with a kithara, not a simple lyre. He laughed to himself and continued his walk around the temple.

Preston and Millie were dancing, and he'd not seen Diana. He stopped in front of the statue of the goddess Diana or Artemis. He wasn't actually sure if the temple was meant to be Roman or Greek, nor was he sure Lady Hampton knew the difference. She drew her bow back on some distant beast and her short tunic revealed far more shapely legs than any depiction he'd seen in the museums. Whoever the artist was, he'd taken some liberties and made the goddess of the hunt far more voluptuous than was traditional.

"She looks quite determined." Diana's voice was soft but clear in the crisp night.

Taking a breath, he turned. Her hair was coiled high, but with sweet curls left loose to surround her face. Her dark eyelashes drew attention to those bright eyes, ever watchful. The emerald gown she wore was darker than was traditional for an unmarried lady, but since nothing about Diana was traditional, it suited her. "You look lovely."

The gift of her pink cheeks was more than he could have hoped for. "Thank you."

“Were you looking for me, or did you have plans to make a donation to this temple?” He was teasing, but hoped it was the former.

She ran her hand along the pillar. “Do you think praying to this mismatched set of gods and goddesses would help me?”

Like a moth to her flame, she drew him closer. “I would help you if you’d let me, Diana.”

A sad smile tugged at her lips. “You shouldn’t offer when you don’t know the extent of my troubles, and I wouldn’t be a very good friend if I allowed you to be pulled down my path.”

“I can take care of myself. If we are friends, then I should assist you in some way.” He ran his knuckles along her jaw to her neck. Her soft hair tickled his hand.

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “I cannot allow it, Jacques. I wish I could make you understand, but even that is denied me.”

The number of unanswered questions with regard to this woman were mounting to the point of madness. “In that case, I wonder if some normalcy is the best I can offer.”

Dabbing away her tears, she said, “What do you suggest?”

Leaning forward until his lips were an inch from her ear, he took in her scent, roses and fresh linens along with the warmth that was distinctly Diana. “Dance with me.”

When she turned her head, it brought her lips within a breath of his. Only the sounds of laughter from guests coming out to see the temple kept him from indulging.

Jacques straightened and offered his arm. “Dance with me?”

Through her glove and his clothes, he still felt her heat. The late November chill suddenly disappeared, and he longed to be warmed entirely by her touch. With her nod, he led them into the ballroom.

Just as with the garden temple, the rest of the Hampton town house was equally overdone and ornate. Sir Miles Hampton had been knighted for his service to the crown, which was a nice way of saying he’d bought his knighthood. They threw elaborate balls and made horrendous decorating choices, but the wine was good, as was the food. In truth, though, had it not been for the notion of seeing Diana, Jacques would never have attended such a crush.

The waltz began.

Holding her in his arms could have been enough to keep him happy for

many years. How had he gone from confirmed bachelor and rake to blithering idiot in such a short time? “Diana, I must confess, I’m more taken with you than is comfortable.”

She cocked her head. “Is that a French way of saying you like me?”

“No. The French way would be far more charming and decidedly less appropriate.”

Letting out a slow breath, she forced her expressionless mask into place. “It would be better for both of us if you would forget all about me.”

“Impossible. Once I held you in my arms, I was lost.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed, and he longed to kiss his way along that sleek column. “That was a mistake on my part, and I apologize again. I should not have asked that of you. It was stupid and dangerous. I don’t even know you, and what a wanton you must think me. I was lured by the idea of feeling safe for a few short hours. I should have been stronger.”

“I’m glad you trusted me. It was an honor.”

“Yet now you think you want more from me,” she whispered, so that none of the other dancers would hear.

The room was awhirl with music and colorful gowns. No one cared about the two of them. He hated that they were in public having this conversation. “I would prefer if you did not presume to know my mind. It was my honor to hold you. I do not know you, Diana, but I do know you are in trouble. That was obvious from our first meeting. I would not take advantage of your need for safety, and you must have known that, or at least have been willing to take the risk. I hardly know what I want from you or what I can offer you in return. I only know that you are on my mind when I wake in the morning and you are the last image in my mind when I take to my bed each night. Perhaps I am a fool, but I cannot ignore my feelings.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek as the music ended. “In another time, those words would have been everything to me. I’m sorry they can mean nothing now.” With a curtsy, she left him standing alone on the dance floor.

Preston and Millie were beside him a moment later.

“The lady herself, I presume.” Preston stared across the ballroom to where Diana had joined Lady Chervil.

“That woman is going to be the death of me.”

“I certainly hope you’re not being literal.” Preston slapped his back. “Introduce me to your friend, Jacques.”

If he refused, they would badger him for the rest of the night. They crossed to the ladies and Jacques bowed. "It is good to see you again, Lady Chervil. Of course, you know my friends the Duke and Duchess of Middleton."

Bows and curtsies all around. Honoria smiled. "Of course. Good to see you, Millie. Your Grace."

Millie kissed Honoria's cheek. "I've missed you. I must come and visit more often. It seems every time I come you are off somewhere."

"I'm kept quite busy for an old woman. Millie, you have met Diana. Your Grace, may I introduce Miss Diana St. Cloud. She is the newest Everton lady." Honoria fiddled with the rubies around her wrist.

Preston bowed. "I have heard a lot about you, Miss St. Cloud. I hope we shall become better acquainted."

"I'm happy to see you again, Miss St. Cloud. Are you and my uncle getting on with those experiments?" Millie smiled and her blue eyes lit up.

It wasn't easy, but Jacques was starting to see small variations in Diana's expression even when she was trying to be unreadable. Now her eyes narrowed just slightly, and he thought she was annoyed or worried.

"Mr. Edgebrook has a great many interesting projects in the works. I was thinking after our visit the other day, would His Grace have disapproved of you continuing as an Everton lady?"

Preston opened his mouth, but Millie stayed his response with a gentle hand on his arm. "No. He would allow me to do whatever I wished. I wished to travel, and so we did for the first year of our marriage. As I told you, I think we shall go again in the spring. The Everton Domestic Society is a place where women can find employment when the realities of the world would leave them unpleasant choices. I would not keep my place there when my need no longer existed."

"I see," Diana said. She fidgeted with the bottom edge of her bodice. Perhaps a nervous habit.

Honoria sang out, "We have decided a bit of fun was in order tonight. One must get away from the day-to-day and attend a ball whenever possible."

Laughing, Millie asked, "Is this a rule you just made up?"

"I make them all up, my dear. Besides the *Everton Companion Rules of Conduct*, there are Lady Chervil's rules for living. One day I shall publish."

Even Preston laughed. "That would be a book I would enjoy reading."

As the talk continued, Diana scanned the room. Her watchful eye must

have spotted something. Shrinking back, she didn't exactly hide, but she made herself less. She shifted so that she was hidden from the crowd behind their cluster of friends.

Jacques tried to follow her gaze, but couldn't make out who or what had made her hide away.

After a few minutes, she excused herself, saying she was going to rest in the lady's retiring room for a few minutes.

Thirty minutes later, she had not returned. Jacques whispered, "Millie, would you mind checking on Miss St. Cloud?"

No questions asked, Millie left the ballroom. She returned not five minutes later. "She is not in there."

"Thank you. I will just have a look around. Perhaps you can entertain Lady Chervil. We wouldn't want her to send out the alarm for her missing ward and cause a scandal." When he could not see her in the ballroom, Jacques went to the garden.

A crisp bite to the night air warned of snow in the near future. France had its share of harsh winters, but when winter came to the English island, it chilled to the bone.

"I saw her. I know I did," a man with a thick French accent said in a loud whisper.

Jacques backed into a corner where the Roman temple would shield him from their sight. He didn't recognize the voice, but the hair on the back of his neck still stood on end.

"So many people. How can you be sure it was her? Besides, she could not have made it all the way to London. I'm sure she's hiding in France and will turn up there in time. When she does, they will call us back to finish what we started." The other Frenchman's voice was familiar. Victor Caron had been a sergeant of the guard for Napoleon when Jacques had been captured, but had spent a lot of time in England over the past few years. He had a reputation with the ladies that was not at all favorable. Jacques had never liked him, even when Jacques had still been loved by his own government.

Could they have been speaking of Diana? Why would they look for her? Good Lord, the mystery just grew deeper, and he became more the fool with each press of the shovel.

Staying concealed was easy while Victor and his friend searched the gardens. Several couples had found niches and benches in the dense plantings where they stole kisses. As the men disturbed these assignations, angry words

filled the garden.

They rounded the temple, and Jacques shifted to remain in the shadows. A soft gasp behind him alerted him that she was there, hiding. Backing into the dark corner, it was electric to be so close to her. He turned.

Despite the dark, her eyes shone with terror.

Even with whatever danger lurked, his need for her grew. His good sense told him to leave her to her fate. As she had said, she was nothing to him, and the fact that she was hiding from French agents could only mean trouble. His life had been saved by having good friends in England; perhaps this was his penance. "Trust me?"

The slightest nod told him she did trust him.

Nothing he'd suffered in the past few years had prepared him for his attraction to Diana. Not even Monique's betrayal had taught him to steer clear of a lady with a past. Jacques lowered his head and drew her into his arms. Pressing her against the stone wall, he kissed her. Diana sighed against his mouth, and he dove inside. Their bodies fit like the edges of a fissure come together after millennia apart. Only by horrific disaster could they come back to each other. She was some part of him he hadn't known was missing, and now he was complete. In that moment, he knew he would never let her go. "Mine."

"You there. Who is that?" Victor demanded.

Her breathing was hard and erratic. The people he'd watched go to the guillotine had been scared like this. She feared for her life. As he remembered that sensation, anger rushed through Jacques like a blizzard. Whoever had caused this kind of terror in his Diana would pay. His lips against her ear, he whispered, "Trust me, and giggle."

How she managed it, he didn't know, but her impassioned chortle sounded like bells to him.

Jacques turned and kept her hidden behind his back. "Caron, what are you doing?"

"Laurent! *Je cherche une dame.*"

"You will have to find your own. This one is the daughter of an earl and I'll not share her."

Victor's thin lips disappeared. He stepped forward. "If I had the power here in London, I would finish what we started in Paris, you coward. Now you're nothing but a fortune hunter. At least at the guillotine you would have died with honor. Madam, you would do better to find a frail Englishman you

can control.”

His temper near its limit, Jacques fought the urge to punch the ass in that narrow nose of his. The only thing keeping him in place was the need to conceal Diana. “You speak of honor, and all I saw was horrific injustice. There is nothing honorable about what is happening in France.”

“I could kill you here and no one would care. You are less than nothing in England. I would do it if not forced to leave my sword at the door.”

Jacques slipped his dagger from its hiding place inside his coat. The steel glinted in the torchlight. “You speak very bravely when you know I won’t allow the lady to be exposed to gossip.”

“I would not fear a fop like you regardless of the situation. You know nothing of what I can do, Laurent.”

His companion tugged his arm. “She’ll get away.”

With a smile, Victor said, “Take my advice, madam. This one is pretty, but nothing but trouble.”

The two rushed off, checking every bush and pillar until they returned to the house.

Jacques turned back to Diana and pressed her against the stone. His anger at Victor had done nothing to quell his need for her. “What do you think Lady Chervil will do if you do not reappear inside?”

After a stammer, she said, “Likely, she will assume I returned to Everton House, as I didn’t wish to come out to begin with.”

“Good.” He grabbed her hand and stormed through the garden toward the side gate. He pressed her into a shadowy space. “Do not move. I will find you if you run, Diana, and I will be very vexed.” Rushing through the gate, he flagged down his driver, who immediately made his way through the clogged street.

It was early, so most of the partygoers were still inside.

Stepping back through the gate, he was relieved to find her still there. This time he didn’t grab, but offered his hand.

She looked at it, then up at him. Fear, sorrow and maybe hope churned in those crystal eyes. She grasped his hand and followed him to the carriage. Once inside, she pulled her hand away. “Where are you taking me?”

The warm imprint of her fingers stayed with him, sending a charge through him. “Somewhere to talk. When we get there, you will tell me what the hell is going on and you will not leave out a single detail. I do not know why I feel such strong ties to you, but I do, and I will not have men like

Victor Caron threatening you.”

“He’s a dangerous man. You shouldn’t have made him angry.”

“He is pestilence, a plague upon the earth. But this is not the place for our talk.” Jacques removed his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Are you cold or scared?”

Looking directly into his eyes, she shrugged. “Does it matter?”

He put his thumb under her chin. “To me, it matters quite a lot.” He ran his finger along her jaw, leaned down and kissed her.

The way her body relaxed into his was a punch to his gut. The last time he’d wanted someone so thoroughly, he’d met with devastation and nearly lost his head. Madness was the only explanation for his current behavior.

“Are you afraid of me, Diana?” he said against her lips.

“No. I only long for what I can’t have.” Her fingers threaded his hair, and her tongue touched his. She was passion and desire wrapped up in the neatest bundle of womanhood. She let him caress her lips with his and moaned as he kissed her neck and ear.

“Who says you cannot have this?”

She pressed her hands to his chest, pushing him away.

With no other choice, he complied and sat across from her. He adored the way her hair had tumbled from its carefully placed curls and now lay long and lush against her shoulders and chest.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she watched him. “I have some questions, since you insist I answer yours when we arrive wherever it is we’re going.”

“You may ask me anything.”

“Are you a marrying kind of man, Jacques Laurent?” Her eyes narrowed.

It was a fair question. “I have never thought myself to be the type of man to settle down and have a wife and children. I have always been content with my friends and lovers for company.”

“Then am I to be your latest lover?” Her gaze softened, but sorrow crept in.

“If I am honest, Diana, you do not strike me as the mistress type. That fact leaves me with some uncertainty.”

Her expression softened, but her tone was hard. “At least I don’t look like a whore.”

Unable to hide his surprise, his face grew hot. “I have no idea why you would say such a thing.”

“Never mind. It isn’t significant to our conversation. If you don’t see me as your mistress of the week, why are you so intent on pursuing me?”

He leaned back against the cushion. “Since we met, I have often wished I could have dropped you off at Everton House and not had you invade my thoughts night and day.”

“You should have left me on the road, Jacques. It would have been better for both of us.” Shifting her gaze, she stared out into the street.

“Well, I did not, and I could not, so that point is moot. The current problem for me is that I cannot abandon you to your fate, Diana.” He ached to reach across and give her comfort, to pull her into his lap and sooth her stiff spine until she relaxed against him.

The carriage slowed, and she looked at him. “Why not?”

It was a good question, and one for which he had no answer. “Stay here for a moment, please. I will make certain no one is at home.”

“Where are we?”

“Stay here.” He jumped down and sealed her in the carriage. Going around the side of the house, he entered through the servants’ door. The town house was likely empty, but he would make sure after he saw to Diana’s safety. They were in a less popular part of town, but not entirely without possible onlookers. The street was clear as he returned and assisted Diana from the carriage, up the steps, and inside. He bolted the door.

“Whose home is this?”

“It belongs to Middleton, but it is rarely in use. He bought it for his mother, but she spends most of her time in the country. Stay here a moment. I will light a candle and see if there is wood for a fire.” Managing to light three tapers on the candelabra in the parlor, he returned to the foyer.

“Do you not have a home in London?”

“If I brought you to a gentleman’s home in a popular neighborhood, your reputation would be compromised.”

She followed him. “I have no reputation to damage. Is there no staff here?”

“Since Her Grace will not return for several months, Middleton employs only a housekeeper and butler here. I will go down and inform them we are not to be disturbed.” Not wanting to leave her in the dark, he lit several more candles and knelt down at the hearth.

“And then what, Jacques? You have me alone. You will tell the servants to mind their own business. I am at your mercy. What will you do with me?”

Only the hint of a tremor shook her voice.

He'd never met anyone like her. Calm despite her fears and her predicament. Staying on his knees, he sat back and watched her sit on the divan. "I would think that if I was going to take liberties beyond what you allow, I would have done so the night at the inn. You will have to trust me."

"You have given me little choice."

He stacked the wood and lit some kindling underneath. "There are always choices, Diana. You might have exposed yourself in the temple and seen what Caron wanted with you. You could have run away at the garden gate and perhaps made your way back to Lady Chervil before I found you. You might have even tried asking me to take you directly back to Everton House. You chose none of those things, and you hardly strike me as a woman who does many things she doesn't want."

In the firelight, her eyes glowed with passion. Perhaps it was anger, but it was not mild by any means.

He longed to put that look into her eyes but without any question as to the reasons.

"I am a woman who has done what was necessary to stay alive. You do not want me, Mr. Laurent. I am not who you think I am."

Leaning against the doorjamb, he almost laughed. "I honestly have no idea who you are, Diana. I know I desire you and, in a strange twist, I like you. I am going to inform the butler we are here, so he does not take a fire iron to us in the night. If you wish to leave, no one will stop you. I hope you will stay. But if you do, I must warn you, I have a great many questions I want answers to."

Not waiting to see if she reacted, he turned and went below stairs to the servants' level.

Chapter Six

Diana studied his back as he left the parlor. Strong and sure of himself, he was everything a young man of wealth should be. Her only contribution to his life would be disaster. She should walk out the front door and never look back.

The fire illuminated the simple but elegant room. Part of her wished he'd been scandalous and taken her to his home in London. She longed to know his tastes, where he lived and how he lived. Perhaps his parlor was done in the French style or maybe he was austere and kept things simple. She guessed it was the latter. Nothing about Jacques Laurent was fussy or pretentious.

The dowager duchess of Middleton had lovely taste. Dark woods, light fabrics and just a hint of lace. It reminded her of her mother's parlor before they were taken. It had been comfortable, unfussy, and filled with warmth.

Pushing back her tears as she had for over a year, Diana straightened her back and waited. Let him hear her story. It would send him running, and she would not have to make that choice, at least.

Sitting back, she kicked off her slippers and pulled her feet up under her. A fluffy blue pillow lay beside her, and she hugged it to her chest. If she could just find a place to hide until this nonsense with the French was over, perhaps she would be safe. Though, the things she knew... There were people who wouldn't want her to talk about the things she'd seen.

His sharp steps sounded on the hallway floor. "The butler is out, and the housekeeper insists on bringing us tea. It seemed useless to try to talk her out of it."

"It's rather a waste to have this town house unused." The fire began to warm the room, but nothing ever warmed her. The only time she'd been

warm in years had been sleeping in Jacques's arms. It made her foolishness difficult to regret.

"Preston can afford the house, and it came in handy tonight." He sat at the other end of the divan.

His staring made her uncomfortable. "Ask your questions if you must."

On the arm of the divan, he lounged as if he'd not a care in the world. If he were English, he would sit straight and never stare. Everything about him screamed confidence, honor and directness. "Where were you born?"

Surprise pulled a laugh from her. "That is what you want to know?"

He leaned toward her. "I want to know everything, Diana. I thought we might start with where you came from and your real name."

Needing to steady her heartbeat, she took a deep breath. "What makes you think Diana is not my name?"

It was maddening the way his half smile transformed him into someone dangerous and irresistible. "I believe Diana is your real name. It is St. Cloud that I doubt, as I'm sure you already know."

She leaned in too, bringing her face within a few inches of his. Heart racing and her brain blaring warnings, she knew she should leave, but he drew her in like nothing and no one else ever had. She whispered, "What you ask can get you killed, and I cannot be responsible for anyone else's life."

Sorrow marred his smile and he ran his fingers along her jaw. The touch was innocent, but traveled through her like a lightning bolt. Before she'd been captured, his attention would have been fun and amusing. She might have giggled and found a way to avoid him. Mother would have been frustrated with her lack of interest in marriage. Father would have been happy to retain his assistant and confidante. They would have gone on happily.

Yet the way he looked at her. Perhaps even in lighter times, she could not have resisted Jacques Laurent. Oh, but how she longed to meet him under different circumstances.

Heavy footsteps in the hallway forced them both to sit up.

"It's so nice to have someone in the house. My lady hasn't been here in nearly six months. Once His Grace was well married, she stopped visiting. I suppose she has nothing else to nag him about." Mrs. Poppy chuckled as she waddled in and set the tea tray on the table in front of them. "I'll just set this here."

Diana turned her head, looking at the fire.

"Thank you, Mrs. Poppy. We can manage from here. We will not be

staying long.” He spoke to the housekeeper as he did anyone of the ton. He seemed not to know that in England, servants were commanded and lords were pampered.

“Take your time. If you need anything else, just ring for me.”

As soon as she was gone, Jacques poured the tea and handed Diana a cup. “I am willing to take the risk, and you are certainly not responsible for me, Diana.”

The tea was strong and hot in contrast to how she felt on the inside. The weariness that followed her between escapes, running and hiding, settled over her. “I’m so tired of lying. What I tell you, you must keep to yourself. If you mention me in passing, you’ll destroy me and possibly yourself. I am poison.” She took a deep breath. “My name is MacLeod. Diana MacLeod. My father was a Scot and my mother English. I was born in the borderlands.”

“Your father was the inventor who went missing, Jacob MacLeod? They said he collaborated with the French on some kind of improvements to black powder.” His eyes narrowed and a tightness tugged at his tone.

“Is that what your French friends say? Lies and half-truths. They wanted my father to improve the effectiveness and range of the Indian rockets.” It was impossible to keep her voice level. She needed him to hate her, to leave her, but that didn’t mean it was what she wanted.

He lowered his voice. “I have come to England and brought my family here at great cost to avoid those ‘friends’ you speak of.”

Closing her eyes, she took a few breaths. Her temper, emotions and exhaustion were catching up with her.

The cushion shifted, and when she opened her eyes, he was closer, looking into her face as if he could read something there beyond her words. “Tell me what happened, from the beginning.”

Unable to ignore the plea in his voice, she sighed. “Three years ago, just before Christmas, some men came to our home and put sacks over our heads. The servants tried to help, but they were silenced. I think Dickerson, our butler, was killed, but I can’t be sure.” She brushed a tear away. Never knowing what had happened to the servants had been so hard. They had been with her family her entire life.

Jacques thumbed away another of her tears. “Where did they take you?”

“We were placed in the hold of a ship. They fed us barely enough to survive. Mother was sick most of the voyage. Father kept demanding to know what was happening, but the French crew would tell us nothing.

“When we reached land again, they put the hoods back on our heads and carted us off to some dungeon where they made every attempt to force my father to work to improve their chances of winning the war. They had a great deal of information about the work of William Congreve, but their information was several years old. I suppose whoever they were using as a spy either was killed or reposted. My father was a good friend of Congreve’s. They shared experiments, but while Father had the expertise, he’d lost interest in rockets when his ideas were rejected by the English. Congreve continued his work and Father read his friend’s papers, but certainly had no desire to help the French. He refused...” A shiver ran up her spine. Every word brought her back to those horrifying days.

Pulling her into his arms, Jacques leaned back and wrapped her up in his warmth. He ran his hands along her arms, infusing heat as he went. “What happened?”

Images of that damp, dark dungeon blasted her memory. Pain and horror stiffened her muscles. “Mother wasn’t the fighting type. She sewed and knitted quite a lot. She enjoyed her garden and writing letters to old friends. Yet faced with these terrible men, she remained stoic. After six months, she’d completely stopped speaking. I would try to draw her out of her cocoon, but she just stared at nothing. At night, Father would hold her, and she cried. Even her weeping gave me comfort. The silence was unbearable. Though I think her retreat inward was her way of protecting herself.

“Father fought more openly at first. He yelled in English and French. Occasionally, he ranted in Latin. After a while, he too gave up and just plodded along with the work they wanted him to do. He’d stand for hours over the workbench. One day he caused a small explosion.” The guards nearly had apoplexy when they ran in to the cell. Father hid his grin, only sharing it with her.

Her throat clogged at the memory of one joyous moment in the misery of their imprisonment. It was impossible to speak of the things that happened in that dungeon.

Jacques took her hand, kissed her fingers, and held it to his heart. “They tortured you and your mother to keep your father working?”

The words stuck in her throat, but she managed a nod. The steady beating of his heart synchronized with hers. Two hearts chimed as one. As foolish as it was, she reveled in the rhythm.

“Did your father succeed in improving their rockets?” His voice was

level, with no accusation.

She shrugged. “He gave them bits. Just enough to keep us alive, nothing that would really make a difference.”

“But he could have,” Jacques said.

“Yes, well, when Victor realized Father was stringing them along, he became angry and thought to force his hand. My father was a sweet, kind, thoughtful man of science. My last sight of him was as an animal who attacked a guard with a shard of the glass beaker he’d smashed. Both he and my mother were killed during the fight.” More tears poured down her face and she couldn’t make them stop.

Jacques tightened his hold and kissed her temple.

Sobs racked her body, and she was helpless to stop them. Years of pain poured out of her while Jacques cradled her in his arms.

“*C’est bon, ma chérie.* None of this was your fault.” He was a warm balm on a wound too deep to heal, pressing kisses along her cheek, neck and shoulder. “You are safe now.”

Swallowing down her tears, she hiccupped several times before she could catch her breath. “I am not safe.” She pushed his arms away. They only offered false hope. Moving to the edge of the divan, she faced him. “They will find me, or the English who think I’m a traitor will capture me. Regardless, I will never be safe.”

“After your parents were murdered, they made you help them?” His eyes shone in the firelight, fierce and beautiful.

“They tried. I escaped.” The chill returned, and she shivered despite the warm room. “It took months to make my way to England’s shores. I tried to go home, but found English troops surrounding the house and grounds. I have been running a long time, Jacques. I’m tired, and I don’t want anyone else to die for my sake.”

“How did you escape, and how did you get yourself back to England?” His voice was tight, and the earlier, soothing tone had disappeared.

“I have told you more than enough, Jacques. None of this is your business. I can take care of myself.” She hated herself more and more. She was a fool to let him in for even one second. If she told him what he asked, it would be the end. She should do it, but imagining the disgust in his eyes when he knew, she couldn’t. Wiping her eyes, she reached for a napkin and took a moment to clean herself up. It was good to let some of it out, but nothing had changed, and she would need her strength to stay alive.

Watching her a long moment, his frown eased into a sigh. He stood. “Stay at Everton’s. Work for Francis. You are safe there for the moment. I saw that you have a very large footman who follows you. I assume you have told Lady Jane of your troubles?”

But she knew he was wrong. Safety was an illusion. No one was truly safe. “It seemed only fair that she knew harboring me could bring danger on the Society.”

Expression devoid of all emotion, he leaned over the fireplace with his arm on the mantel and stared into the flames. “I am not sure what can be done. You and your family are infamous. It was in the paper for weeks after you disappeared. The French must have someone at the newspaper who writes their propaganda.”

“Why would you want to help me? I’m nothing to you. A woman of no means from a country family. My father was a gentleman, but of little worth. And as you say, I am infamous, with a reputation beyond repair.”

Eyes filled with passion, he returned to her, wrapped a curl of her hair around his fingers, and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. “Why did you trust me on the road to London? Why did you trust me, a Frenchman, to hold you while you slept? Of all the people to trust—I am French. I represent those people who hurt you and destroyed your family. There is something between us, Diana. I cannot explain it, but I have never felt it before.”

“Just because the men who hurt me were French does not mean that all Frenchmen are evil. You have a kindness in you that shines through. I knew you would never harm me.” Her soul open and bare to him, she wished she could take the words back as soon as she’d said them.

His smile was the North Star bringing her home. “You are an extraordinary person.”

“I’m a fool who is not good enough for a man like you.”

In a flash, he lifted her from the divan and wrapped her in his arms. He pressed one hand to her back, and the other cupped her cheek. Tipping her head back, he stared into her eyes. “Do not speak so meanly about yourself. I cannot allow it. Those bastards hurt you, and they will pay. I swear it. Nothing you endured or that you did to survive will matter to me, Diana. Wounds heal.”

Just because she wanted his words to be true didn’t make it so. Lord, how she wanted to believe him. “Some wounds fester until they kill you. You are a kind person, but you are too idealistic. Nothing can make me the person I

was before.”

He kissed her forehead and eased away. “I did not know that woman. You are probably right. She no longer exists on her own. Still, she is inside you, intertwined with three years of experiences that shaped the woman you are today. It is who you are that I am drawn to, not someone you used to be. When you embrace this Diana, you will be whole again.”

“I don’t believe that is possible.” Mother and Father had died to protect her, and it was that sacrifice that forced her to survive. She couldn’t let them have died in vain. A noose tightened around her heart. Staying alive was the most she could hope for.

“I shall make it my goal to prove you wrong.”

“Perhaps it is you who are the fool.”

A twitch of a smile lit his eyes before they hardened and narrowed. “How much does Victor Caron have to do with this?”

Even his name sent chills through her. “He was in charge of capturing my family and forcing my father to help them. He is the devil in the guise of a man. He became obsessed with getting what the emperor wanted, and fixated on me during our imprisonment.”

Jacques’s hands flexed and fisted several times. “Did Caron touch you?”

“If you are planning to do something stupid on my behalf, don’t.” When she’d spotted Victor at the ball, her entire body had tightened like a band about to snap. Running was her only hope. That ridiculous temple had been a haven. It never occurred to her that anyone would bother to look for her. She’d been lucky; Victor hadn’t seen her, only his lackey, Reneau, and she was sure it was a fleeting glance. He couldn’t be sure it had been her, or they would have been far more forceful with Jacques and demanded to see who he had in the corner of the temple. Still, the notion of her being in London was planted in his head. Leaving town would be the smartest thing to do.

“I never do anything stupid.” His knuckles were white with strain.

She covered his hand with hers. “I am not yours to avenge or care for.”

Pain flashed across his face and was gone in an instant. “Perhaps not, but I do not like Victor Caron, and I never have. He was someone else’s lackey when I had my troubles in France, but he was already a viper. My country is in peril, and it breaks my heart.”

All the warning bells went off, but Diana let them ring. She released his hand, but he gripped her fingers before she could pull away.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to her hand. “I am an uncomplicated

man, Diana, goddess of the hunt and moon. I work hard and have a few good friends. Once I make a friend, I am fiercely protective.”

Intimate in their temporary world, emotions clogged her throat. “And I am your friend?”

“You are and shall be for our lifetimes. Even should you reject me out of hand, I shall always be available to help you in any way I can.”

Her life might end tomorrow, yet with such a pledge to hold on to, how could it matter? No one had ever touched her heart so completely. “I will stay at Everton’s for now, but it would be better for everyone if I left London. Percival Reneau is not the smartest, but he did glimpse me tonight, and now they are looking. Eventually they will find me.”

He cocked his head and stared into the corner of the room before offering his hand. “I will take you to Everton House now. It would not do for Lady Chervil to send out a search party.”



They reached Everton House and found the usually staid atmosphere transformed into complete chaos. Bertram, the footman who guarded her most days, was gathering men in the foyer while Lady Jane questioned Lady Chervil.

Every head turned to stare at them in the open doorway.

Jacques said, “Would you prefer if I left you here or shall we face the music together?”

Even after the dangers and admissions of the night, his eyes filled with warmth and caring. She had to swallow down the wave of emotions trying to take over for her good sense. The last thing she wanted was a scandal. Perhaps she should have found another way home. “It might be best if you left me to deal with this.”

“Are you certain?” He reached out, but did not touch her in full view of Everton’s residents.

“Yes, thank you.” If he stayed it would only make the gossip worse. Better to deal with this on her own.

With a bow and a wink, he smiled and said goodnight.

Lady Jane recovered first. She charged to the door. “You are safe. When Lady Chervil arrived without you, we imagined the worst.”

Lumbering forward, Bertram took Diana's elbow and eased her inside before closing the door. "I should have insisted on accompanying you tonight."

With so many people watching, Diana could say very little. Several Everton ladies stood on the staircase in their nightclothes and robes, and at least five footmen had gathered. Diana forced a smile. "I'm sorry to have worried everyone. I assure you, I am unharmed."

Taking stock of the crowd, Jane breathed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment.

Lord Rupert Everton combed his fingers through his beard and cleared his throat. His bright eyes were narrowed on Diana for the barest instant before he addressed the room. "Thank you all for coming together so quickly. We are all happy to have Diana back at home. You may find your beds and rest easy tonight."

The residents of Everton House dispersed. Several called out to Diana that they were glad she was safe. Soon only Lord and Lady Everton, Bertram, and Lady Chervil remained.

Jane said, "Why don't we go to my office where we won't be overheard?"

Once inside the office, Diana was unsure what to say. She sat on the chair near the hearth with Honoria to her left. The Evertons sat on the divan across from her. Bertram stood behind her right shoulder with his arms crossed.

Honoria leaned forward and patted Diana's hand. "What happened, my dearest?"

It would be best to keep the details to herself. She already risked too many people by making friends. Loneliness pressed in on all sides. She couldn't bear it. "My past showed up at the ball. It was important not to be seen."

Not being much of an explanation, it was unlikely to be accepted and left alone. Lord Rupert Everton was a burly man who said little, but commanded attention when he chose to speak. Yet he turned his kind eyes on her and gave a faint smile. "I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that, Miss St. Cloud. We were seconds from sending out a search party, and you gave Lady Chervil quite a fright."

"I'm very sorry to be such a burden, my lord. It might be better if I took my leave of Everton House to protect everyone's safety."

"Unacceptable." Bertram grumbled the word but said no more.

“Bertram is quite right.” Honoria folded her arms. “Where did you go and how did you get home? I realize you are in some kind of trouble, Diana, but you will have to tell us a bit more—and you most certainly are not going out on your own to be in who knows what kind of danger.”

Jane nodded. “We cannot force you to stay, but I really think it’s safer for you with us than traipsing about London on your own.”

Safer for her perhaps, but Diana worried about the danger she put the house in. “I don’t want my troubles to become yours, my lady.”

“You are part of our family now, Diana. We shall not abandon you when you need us most, and I will be very disappointed if you leave us without good reason and a safe harbor.” Jane’s firm stand and direct gaze soothed Diana’s wounds.

These wonderful people had adopted her into their family when she needed every bit of what they had to offer. They were kind and caring in a world full of viciousness. “Two men I know to be French agents were present at the ball. One saw me, but the crowd was dense and he was unsure. I ran to the garden, where Jacques Laurent found me. Mr. Laurent kept me hidden and assisted in my escape. As you saw, he brought me back to Everton House.”

Honoria palmed her cheek. “I’m so thankful he found you. I should never have bullied you into attending that ball. It was a foolish mistake. Please forgive me, Diana.”

Tears pressed at the back of Diana’s eyes. It was too touching, too much. She took Honoria’s hand. “This was not your fault. I should have known better. I do know better. I can want a normal life, but for now, it is not possible to have one. My troubles are too real and too present for me to be foolish. I put you in danger with my desire to be a normal young woman tonight. It is I who should ask forgiveness.”

“Oh, no. You are in real trouble, and I am an old fool.”

Rupert chuckled. “We are all sorry, and since Miss St. Cloud is safe at home, we can all rest easy. Bertram will post extra guards around the house and we will dispense with any frolicking for the present.” He stood and straightened his coat. “It will not be forever, this war. Eventually, you will be able to enjoy a good party without worrying, my dear.”

“Thank you, my lord. I hope you are right.” Though Diana doubted he was. As she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, she still wondered if these fine people wouldn’t be better off if she took her leave and found another means

of staying alive.

Chapter Seven

Jacques had been up all night deciding how to best help Diana. By first light it was clear he would need help, and specifically the same help that had saved his life. Considering the situation too dangerous to send a note that might be intercepted, he went directly to Michael Rollins's home as soon as the hour permitted.

He waited in the office. Burgundy curtains had been pulled back, allowing overcast light to shine in. A fire burned in the hearth, keeping the chill out. It was everything a duke's home should be. Yet, beneath all its grandness, practicality spoke of Michael's simpler upbringing and military background.

A large atlas lay open on the long table near the windows, a line running along the Seine from Le Havre to Paris.

"Good morning, Jacques." Michael walked in and rounded a seating area to where Jacques was looking at the map.

"Good morning. I assume the duchess is not in town, since I have heard no little feet storming the hallways."

Michael slapped his shoulder with one hand while shaking his hand with the other. "Elinor and the children are in Scotland. I had plans to travel home at the end of the week. Did we have an appointment that I've forgotten?"

They left the atlas behind and Michael sat in a large wingback chair facing the door.

Jacques followed, facing him on a mustard-colored divan. "No. I have a matter of great urgency to discuss, and did not think a note would be appropriate as they can go missing and fall into the wrong hands."

"You are not in trouble with the French again? They have no rights here

to return you to your mother country.” Michael sat forward, a deep frown creating a crease between his eyes.

“No. I would not come to you for such a minor thing. Now that I am in England, they would not dare try anything. The matter I have come about is for a friend. She is hunted by French agents and needs the help of the Horsemen or she will not survive.” Holding his breath, Jacques watched Michael’s small shift in expression. It was hard to tell if he was curious or annoyed.

Michael said, “The Buckrose Horsemen helped you because you have always been a friend to the English and the Duke of Middleton requested the assistance. What makes you think your friend will warrant their attention?”

“Perhaps she will not. In that case, I shall muddle through on my own. I will not let her be captured again.” Fear and anger coursed through Jacques, making it difficult to keep his tone level.

Leaning back, Michael eased his legs out and crossed them at the ankles. “Perhaps you had better tell me about this friend of yours.”

After telling Michael everything Diana had told him, he waited. Michael might be a duke, but he was a soldier through and through. In fact, it was his courageous acts and sacrifices that had earned him a title. He threaded his fingers together and rested them on his stomach. He appeared totally relaxed, but was like a cat ready to strike. It was foolish to underestimate Michael Rollins based on his calm demeanor.

“When you introduced us at the Royal Academy, I thought there was something unique about her. Are you certain she is telling you the truth, Jacques?” he asked softly. With so much espionage and treason about, everyone was paranoid.

It would do no good to take offense. Michael was only being cautious and didn’t know Diana. “I am reasonably certain she is in real trouble. If she is lying, she is a magnificent actress. I believe her.”

“She lied about her name.”

“I cannot say that I blame her for that. It would have been foolish to rush into London and announce herself. The English think her family traitors and the French are after her to complete her father’s work.” An edge seeped into Jacques’s voice, which he tried to control.

With a nod, Michael sat up. “I will contact the Buckrose Horsemen. I have some influence, but it’s up to Alexander. Once I tell him, he may decide the best course is to arrest your friend. It’s a risk.”

Jacques held his breath and forced down his anger. “I realize that is a possibility. I will vouch for Diana. I will take full responsibility if she is not what she appears to be. She is no traitor, nor was her father. She said her father only gave them enough to keep his family alive, and I believe her. If he had helped them, they would be firing rockets farther and with more firepower. They had him for two years before killing him. You and I both know he could have given them what they wanted in that time if he had been inclined.”

“I’ll need to know what exactly Mr. MacLeod did tell his captors.” Michael’s acknowledgment that Jacob and his family were prisoners and not there of their own free will was a huge step in Diana’s favor.

“As that information would have had little meaning to me, I did not ask. I am sure she will be able and willing to tell you if the Horsemen are going to keep her out of Caron’s clutches.” Diana was not very forthcoming, but he believed she was sensible and would see the value in giving the Horsemen anything they needed.

Michael stood. “Perhaps it would be best if we went to Everton House and I had a chat with Miss MacLeod.”

“She will be at her assignment now. I can take you. But Michael, I will not let you bully her.” Standing, he knew that even in a fair fight, Michael was more likely to win. Still, Diana would not be made to fear anyone. Not if he could help it.

Cocking his head, Michael watched Jacques a few long seconds. “Are you in love with her?”

At the word, Jacques’s heart pounded, and warning bells went off in his head. “I gave up on love in France, as you know. I like her and she is important to me.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “You know, Jacques, love has a funny way of not caring if you’ve given up on her or not. This woman is important to you. She is on your mind and you are willing to risk your own standing in England to save her. Why?”

“Damned if I know.”

Laughing, Michael called for a footman to bring his overcoat.



It was not unusual to find the Edgebrook town house in total chaos, but since Diana had begun helping Francis there had been no accidents. Yet when Jacques and Michael arrived, smoke poured out the open front door.

Fenwick ran from the house. "Pardon me, sirs. I must open some windows. The fire is out, but the smoke." Hair flopping in all directions, the butler ran down the stairs to the side of the house.

Bertram ran out next, coughing like mad. "No one was harmed." He stopped at the bottom of the steps and kept a watchful eye.

Michael laughed. "I see Edgebrook is little changed."

"This is the first incident in months. I wonder what went wrong." Jacques waved at the smoke in his face and proceeded inside.

Doris rushed out of the basement door, coughing. "Goodness. It's not much better up here. Oh, hello, Mr. Laurent, Your Grace, we weren't expecting callers. There was a wee accident in the laboratory. It was the strangest thing. But the good news is, Mr. Edgebrook's new fire extinguisher works with great speed and no one was hurt."

Jacques's heart began beating again. "Where are they, Mrs. Whimple?"

"Downstairs trying to find out what happened. I tried to get them to abandon the room until the smoke clears, but you know how they are."

"Perhaps I can convince them some clear air would be more advantageous." Jacques headed for the door to the steps, and Michael followed.

Most dukes would be averse to traipsing down to a basement that was recently on fire, but Michael was not like most dukes. "What are they working on that might catch on fire?"

Francis answered from below, "It was the mining lamp. That flared up. Shouldn't have happened. We had put that aside to check on the plantings."

Both Francis and Diana were covered in gray soot.

Her bright eyes widened at the sight of him and Michael. The dress she wore might have been blue, but it was now ash colored. "The good news is, the extinguisher worked even better than expected. I'm relieved it was handy. We think the vapor tank we were using for testing somehow leaked."

It didn't add up. Jacques asked, "I thought the lamp was designed to warn of dangerous vapors with a small increase in flame."

The windows above opened one at a time, allowing the smoke to clear.

“Is that better, sir?” Fenwick called down.

“Thank you, Fenwick. Much better.” Francis walked over to the singed lamp. “That’s the odd part. Somehow black powder got into the mix. It could have been much worse. I’m not sure how this might have occurred.”

Stepping forward, Michael coughed. He examined the table and lamp. “How do you know there was black powder?”

“Your Grace, what are you doing here?” Francis held out his hand to shake, having just noticed the presence of a peer.

His friend’s absentmindedness would be amusing if he and Diana hadn’t almost been blown to pieces. Jacques watched Diana as she studied the lamp.

“I came to meet your new assistant, who Laurent speaks so highly of.”

At that, Francis grinned, his white teeth shining against his filthy skin. “Miss St. Cloud is a marvel. If she were a man, she’d be at the top of the field in her own right. I, for one, am happy to have her help.”

“Did you have a theory about the gunpowder?” Jacques tried to get him back on the subject.

Pointing to a spot several feet from where the table was singed, Francis said, “We found the powder scattered here. I’m puzzled about how it could have gotten in the laboratory. I’m not working on anything regarding firearms.”

Jacques didn’t like the sound of any of this. “Miss St. Cloud, would you like to get cleaned up so that His Grace and I might have a word?”

Even through the grime, he could see her swallow, and fear enter her gaze. He longed to give her comfort, and all he gave her was trepidation and worry. It would change, he vowed.

With a nod, she climbed the stairs. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Take your time. We’ll wait.” Michael looked over the other experiments.

Removing the handkerchief from his pocket, Francis took a moment to wipe his face. He cleaned his spectacles and stared at Jacques. “Is my assistant in some kind of trouble that might bring a duke to my humble home?”

“Why would you think that, Mr. Edgebrook?” Michael stopped perusing and stared at Francis.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but you are not exactly a typical peer. You have military ties that are said to run deep. What in the world could you want with Miss St. Cloud?” Francis stepped around the table and faced Michael.

Jacques stood between them. “Francis, we are here to help, and you will

have to trust me. We are not able to tell you all the details at this time.”

With a sigh, Francis walked to the stairs and turned, blocking the way. “I know what you and all of society think of me. Madman and putterer. I hear the rumors. You think my head is so far in my experiments and books that I don’t know what’s happening around me. If you’re here to arrest her, Your Grace, I’ll not have it. I’ll protect her by whatever means necessary.”

Certain that his mouth hung open, Jacques didn’t know what to say.

“You know who she is.” Michael watched, but didn’t move.

“Of course. I’ve known since she walked in here that first day. I knew her father, though I imagine since she’s on her own, he’s gone to his maker. Jacob would never have left that girl to fend for herself. She doesn’t remember that I met her once when she was just a child. I saw the resemblance to my friend, and with her knowledge of science and the name, I put it together. Now why are you here?”

Shaking his head, Michael laughed. “She certainly does instill a great deal of loyalty in people who barely know her. There must be something good in her.”

“She is all good. I sent multiple letters to Parliament when Jacob was declared a traitor. I knew he would never turn. Then, when the French didn’t have better weapons after six months, I sent another letter expounding on my knowledge of the man. It was the only time I wished I had a better reputation.” Sorrow laced Francis’s voice on the last sentence. “Jacob MacLeod was a good man and a great patriot. His daughter is a good girl, and I will defend her with my life if need be.”

Jacques couldn’t contain his smile. She really did have a way of becoming part of people’s lives. So much so that both he and Francis were willing to die for her.

With a sigh, Michael nodded. “That will not be necessary, Mr. Edgebrook. It is clear that if you and Laurent are willing to lose everything over a slip of a girl, she must be very special. I only came today to meet her and see if I can help.”

“Well, good.” Francis didn’t give an inch. “How can you help? What kind of trouble is she in?”

“I’d rather not tell her tale, if you don’t mind.” Michael looked around the laboratory. “I would suggest that you secure your home better and not use her true name outside present company. What happened here today may have been an accident, but there are a great many questions unanswered. That

tends to make me uncomfortable.”

On the main floor, Jacques walked out the front door and down to where Bertram still stood. “Anyone make an attempt to enter?”

Shaking his head, Bertram kept his arms folded and gaze watchful. “A couple of odd-looking blokes walked by but turned down the cross street when they saw me. I have my doubts about odd accidents, sir.”

Jacques patted Bertram on the back. “You are a good man. Keep an eye out. I will have a wet cloth and a cup of tea brought out for you.”

“Much appreciated, sir.”

Back inside, Jacques joined Michael in the study. Francis was kind enough to vacate to his rooms. He said he would need time to clean up.

Shortly after they were seated, Diana came in with a clean face and hands. Her dress was still covered in ash, and she carried a towel.

Jacques and Michael stood until she had placed the towel on the divan and seated herself on top of it. Jacques marveled at how thoughtful she always managed to be. Despite her obvious nervousness, she still worried about the furniture.

“Are you here to arrest me, Your Grace?” Diana was right to the point.

Michael smiled. “I don’t think so, Miss... I suppose we should continue with St. Cloud for now. Because two men I respect have vouched for you, and because Lord Rupert and Lady Jane are excellent judges of character and have offered you employment and a home, I am going to help you if I can.”

Wide-eyed, she swallowed several times before she spoke. “How can you help?”

The towel she sat on covered a rose divan, and Diana ran her fingers along the patterned fabric. She must be terrified if she was unwilling to make eye contact with Michael. Jacques moved to sit next to her. “I will not let anyone harm you, Diana. You must trust in that.”

Looking up at him, her fear eased from her gaze. “I would not blame you if you turned me over to the government. You must be careful in these times.”

“Michael is here to help.” He wanted to take her in his arms and ease her worry, but that wasn’t possible with Michael present.

“I have a few questions for you, Miss St. Cloud. Do you feel up to a short discussion?” Michael leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. His expression was earnest, but not forceful. “I will try to make this as brief as possible.”

She folded her hands in her lap and straightened her shoulders. Resignation, bravado and a dozen other emotions crossed her sweet face. "Ask your questions."

"What information did your father give the French?" Michael's steely gaze was as direct as the question.

"My father didn't have the military data the French were hoping for. They captured us with the erroneous idea that Father had been working with the British military. They had planned to get him to build them the same rockets he'd built for you. Of course, Father hadn't built those rockets. He'd only sent the idea to the Royal Academy, where someone must have stolen the papers and given them to the French."

"But he must have given them something, or there would have been no sense in keeping you alive."

Jacques's instinct was to rush to her defense, but that would be counterproductive. It was important that Michael believed her innocent. If he rushed in like a knight in shining armor, it would do nothing to show Diana's character. Biting his tongue, he wished his friend would be a bit gentler.

She huffed. "He told them if they wanted a rocket to go farther, they would have to build a bigger rocket. They demanded he come up with a diagram for the larger rocket and then build it."

Fire flashed in Michael's eyes. "And did he?"

"Every month when Caron would come to see his progress, Father would explain about some trouble hindering the process. After a few months, Caron began torturing Mother and I to get Father to work harder. At the time of his death, Father had drawn up half a rocket that was aerodynamically unsound, and my mother had lost the thumb on her right hand and had her leg broken twice. I was lucky and only had a few broken ribs and bruises."

Leaning back, Michael sighed. "I'm very sorry. When our government learns that they were wrong and left her citizens to suffer, they will be sorry as well."

"How can you help me, Your Grace? Will you arrest Victor?"

Michael shook his head. "If I do that, there will be another just like him who will take his place. We need to expose them. I shall call on some friends who are experts in such matters. Have you heard of the Buckrose Horsemen?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not surprised. They work mostly in secret as an agency against the

Terror. It was with their assistance that we managed to rescue Monsieur Laurent from his fate.”

“And you believe these Horsemen will be willing to save me from mine?”

With a shrug, Michael rose. “I cannot say, Miss St. Cloud. I will ask them and recommend that they help.”

She stood. “What shall I do in the meantime?”

“Nothing. Be cautious and send word if you notice anything unusual. I will contact you when I have the Horsemen’s response.”

“And you are sure these are not the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse come to carry me off.” She walked him to the door.

A rare full laugh fell from Michael’s lips. “I think they would be very amused by the comparison. Laurent, I’ll make my own way home.”

Jacques nodded and waited for Michael to leave.

She stood with her back to him by the door. “I thought you might have betrayed me, but I couldn’t blame you.”

“I shall never do that, Diana. I will protect you no matter the cost.” He walked to her and caressed her shoulders. It would be best to keep his distance, but was impossible to achieve. Between the gravel in her voice and the anxiety in her stoic stance, he had to touch her, ease her fears.

“You say lovely things for a man who is not the marrying kind. I don’t know what you want from me, Jacques. I only know that people who care about me end badly, and I don’t want that for you.”

Gently, he eased her around to face him. “It is too late to stop me caring for you. It might have been past that point the moment we met. But the road we are on is an uncertain one. I suggest we try to get through all of this and get you safe. After that we can worry about the rest.”

Her eyes were like the deepest, clearest pools as she stared up at him. Her dark eyelashes framed them in stark contrast. They glistened as if she might cry, but held those emotions just below the surface. “If I live, I would like to go home. That will take me out of your view, which will be best for everyone.”

The idea of her leaving him for the borderlands created a knot in his gut that would not release. He ran his hand from her shoulder up the soft skin of her neck. Her skin was pink from washing away the grime of the laboratory fire. Longing to kiss the path his fingers took, he touched her jaw and cupped her cheek. “Do not speak of leaving me, my goddess of the wood. I fear I would seek you out to the ends of the earth.”

She wrapped her hand around the back of his but did not pull his touch away from her face. “You mustn’t say such things. Our paths are not the same.”

Threading his fingers through her soft, dark hair released the smoky odor from the fire, but also her own scent that lingered beneath. The night he’d held her, that floral warmth had enveloped him and made her mark on him. “I should not say a great many things to you, Diana, but I find all I want to do is spew sonnets in your presence. You must forgive me.”

A giggle like bells in winter fell crisp and rich from her lips. If he could have bottled the sound and drunk it like fine wine, he would have made himself drunk every day and longed for more. Suddenly shy, she cast her eyes down. “I should find Bertram and go back to Everton House. I need a bath and a fresh dress.”

Lord in heaven, the idea of her submerged in warm bathwater was too much. “You can do that in just a moment.”

Turning her head up to meet his gaze, she gasped at what she saw in his eyes.

Jacques could no more stop himself than he could stop breathing. Leaning down, he ran his hand along her jaw and tipped her chin up. She breathed in as he breathed out, like one beautiful heart beating. It wasn’t their first kiss, yet as his lips touched hers, it was as if her soul joined with his for that brief moment. He felt her inside him, like the blood pumping through his veins.

Her lips opened against his and moved with him in perfect counterpoint. It was all new, yet an ancient dance. Her hands weren’t soft; light calluses from her work and the trials of the past few years scraped along his neck. She toyed with the hair at his collar before tightening her hold for a deeper kiss. Bold and fragile, she was all things.

The housekeeper spoke from the hallway beyond the door.

Jacques broke the kiss. Regret could not begin to describe his emotion as he separated from her. Dropping a kiss on her sweet nose, he closed his eyes. “Were we not in Francis’s study, it would be impossible to leave you.”

A shy smile tugged at her red lips. Everything about her lured him; lips, eyes, skin, and even her soot-covered dress. “It is unseemly to be in such a state at my place of business.”

Stepping back, he made an effort to pull air back into his lungs. She was right, but he’d be damned if he cared about propriety as much as he wanted to hold her and never let her go. “I will find Bertram and follow you. It concerns

me, this explosion with no explanation as to how gunpowder might have gotten into the basement.”

“But Mr. Edgebrook has mishaps all the time. I’m told he is famous for them.” She clutched her hands in front of her.

Running his index finger along her jaw, he couldn’t help the grin, probably a stupid grin, that pulled at his mouth. “Ah, yes, but you do not make those kinds of mistakes, Diana. It is for that reason, I think extra caution will be necessary even here.”

Her eyes widened. “You think they have found me? Dear God, I could have gotten everyone in the house killed. I will suspend my duties until this is resolved.”

It was hard to argue with her logic. They could all be wrong, and the accident was just that, but what if Caron had found her and thought it easier to get rid of her than risk his own exposure by recapturing her. He had been a spy in England for years. He came and went as he pleased. “I think that is a good idea. Hopefully, Michael will have an answer soon and you will be free of all of this in no time.”

“We shall see.” Diana’s doubt was not unfounded.

He had his own doubts as to the outcome, but one thing he was sure of. No harm would come to her, even if he had to hide her away in Scotland or ship her off to Virginia. The idea of her crossing an ocean away from him tightened the knot in his gut. Perhaps it was time for a more pleasant thought. “I have an invitation to deliver to you.”

Adorable as she cocked her head, she waited for more. “What invitation?”

“The Duke and Duchess of Middleton wish for you to attend their dinner party on Wednesday.”

“Is that wise?”

“You will be surrounded by close friends, many of whom are former military. I cannot think of a safer place.” It was true. It was also true that he wanted to see her dressed for a party. Did she flirt? He doubted it, but he would like to try his hand at getting her to flirt with him.

“It is probably a silly risk to take. All those people in danger so that I can get a few hours outside the walls of Everton House.” She sighed deep and long. “I will go, but at the first sign of any trouble, I’m leaving.”

He bowed, grinning on the inside at the knowledge he would see her in just a few days.

Chapter Eight

Bertram had done his best to change Diana's mind about going to the dinner party. But after a full four days of nothing but Everton House and being followed about the gardens by Bertram, Diana was ready to get out, even for a few short hours.

"This is a bad idea, miss. You would be safer to stay at home." Bertram's low grumble continued as he handed her up into the Everton carriage.

Honorina climbed up behind her. "All will be well, Bertram. Don't fret so. It's still daylight and Mr. Laurent will accompany us home."

Even his name sent a thrill through Diana. She'd not seen him since the day of the explosion in the laboratory, and couldn't help hoping it was him each time the door knocker sounded. However, he hadn't visited. There was no reason for him to.

Diana had sent a note to Francis explaining that she would not be returning for a few days and would let him know when she could continue their work. He responded that he understood, and she would be missed. Such a simple note, but it had warmed her through. She had friends. It was a kind of miracle, and one she'd never expected to have again.

The carriage rolled forward. An uncomfortable shiver ran up her spine and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Looking out the window, she scanned the street. Nothing unusual, just a few people walking despite the chill of December. A baker pushing a cart with bread along the rutted road now frozen in place after autumn's damp.

With a sigh, she pulled the shade down.

Bertram rode up top with the driver and two footmen stood on the back. It was overdone, but comforting.

The Middleton townhouse was brightly lit. Laughter and voices drifted out into the street. Diana would not allow her worries to ruin the evening. Honoria was right, all would be well.

All the Everton ladies had boasted about the Duchess of Middleton having been an Everton lady at one time. In their two meetings, Diana had found her kind and easy to speak with. Hopefully her disappearance from the ball hadn't soured the opinions of her host and hostess for the night.

As soon as they entered, Jacques crossed the parlor to greet them. "I thought perhaps you had changed your mind."

If they had met under different circumstances, they might have been lovers. Diana wished things were easier, but the truth was, the worry she felt as they rode through town was all too real. "No. I've been penned up in that house long enough. I'm near to losing my mind."

Honoria sighed. "Bertram would have preferred we remain at home, and has posted footmen around the house. I'm sure all of this is more than adequate to ensure Miss St. Cloud's safety."

Worry twisted in Diana's gut.

Jacques leaned in. "Is something wrong?"

Sunshine and woodsmoke, along with the scent that was uniquely Jacques's, flooded her senses. Gracious, he made her into a fool. Shaking off the notion before she swooned, Diana said, "I thought we were being watched when we left Everton House, but I'm sure it's just my nerves getting to me."

He studied her a while longer, then smiled. "It would be very bold to watch a house in a busy neighborhood while still daylight. I am sure it is too much worry, with guards and orders to remain indoors."

The Duke and Duchess of Middleton were elegant as they moved around the room speaking to each of their guests. Millicent Knowles née Edgebrook dressed boldly in a ruby gown. She might have been an Everton lady at one time and the ward of her eccentric uncle at another, but now she was every bit a duchess. Next to her tall husband dressed in black, they struck a lovely portrait.

Diana followed Honoria into the parlor with Jacques by her side. He made no attempt to hide his regard. Her skin heated, and she wished she could hide the blush. "You should not accompany me as if we were courting, monsieur."

That wicked smile she associated with Jacques when he was happy sent

delight through her. "I am going to pretend you did not say that. You and I will discuss our status in private when all of this other nonsense is at an end."

"It will never be at an end." Before he could respond, she turned and walked to where Millicent stood talking to a blond lady with a kind smile.

Millicent smiled. "It's so good to see you again, Miss St. Cloud. I worried about you when we lost sight of you at the ball."

"I'm sorry to have worried everyone, Your Grace. I tore my dress and could not return." The lie was necessary since a woman whom she'd never met was present.

Smiling, Millicent made the introductions. "May I present my friend, Miss Diana St. Cloud? This is Elinor Rollins, the Duchess of Kerburghe."

Shock must have registered on Diana's face, because Elinor laughed. "Are you surprised I'm a duchess or have you met my husband?"

Shaking herself out of her rudeness, Diana regained her composure. "I apologize, Your Grace. I don't know what I expected His Grace's wife to be like, but you look like an angel."

She laughed again. "Michael is the angel for putting up with me and all of the children."

"Nonsense," Millicent said. "He loves all of you and you know it. Michael thrives best in chaos, and that means he either needs to go to war or live with you and the brood you two have amassed."

A lovely smile lit Elinor's face. "I admit I love the madness too. I do insist that you dispense with calling me Your Grace. I'll never get use to that title. I would be honored if you would call me Elinor."

Millicent was already nodding. "I have already invited Diana to call me Millie. Just over a year ago I was an Everton lady myself, and I much prefer names to titles."

Two duchesses had just asked her to use their familiar names. Was outcast and escaped prisoner Diana suddenly friends with duchesses? It was not possible. The world had turned topsy-turvy, and it was best to just ride it out and enjoy. "Thank you. Please call me Diana. I can't tell you how much I enjoy working with your uncle. He's quite brilliant."

Staring at her wide-eyed, Millicent's mouth hung open. "Most people think him mad."

It would probably be best to drop the subject, but society's ignorance of Francis Edgebrook's abilities was untenable. "Perhaps he is a bit reckless and enthusiastic, but he's certainly not crazy."

Both Millicent and Elinor laughed. Millicent pulled Diana into a hug. “You need not defend him to me. I adore him and only worry he’ll truly blow himself to bits one day. It’s quite refreshing for Uncle Francis to have an advocate besides me. Now he has both Mr. Laurent and you, Diana. I shall be easier about his safety from here on.”

Guilt over not being able to help Francis over the last week tugged at Diana. “I hope in the future your uncle will allow me to help him improve a great many things in this world.”

Before Millicent could respond, the butler entered. “Dinner is served.”

Diana waited until everyone else had entered the dining room. As she was untitled and of no importance, her place was at the very last. All of Bertram’s preparations for leaving Everton House meant they had arrived after most of the guests. Diana hadn’t been able to meet anyone and she worried she would be seated next to someone she didn’t know.

“May I have the honor of escorting you in, Miss St. Cloud?” Jacques’s richly accented voice was a balm to her nerves.

She placed her hand on his coat sleeve. “That is very kind.”

“It is practical. I happen to know we are seated beside each other for dinner.” He winked.

“How would you know that?” The dining room was elegant with gleaming candelabras running the length of the table. A perfect dozen guests had been invited, as not all of London was still in town as the holiday drew near.

Holding her chair, he leaned in as she sat. “As the best friend of our host, I have certain privileges. One includes picking my dinner partners.”

All the guests were busy chatting while they settled in to their seats. “You should not say or do such things, Monsieur Laurent. Our lives will soon take different paths.”

With his head cocked, he looked young, handsome and completely irresistible. “Our life journeys will take us wherever we wish.”

She wished it was true, but sadness swamped her more quickly than she could hide. Brushing aside a tear, she swallowed down the rest. “If only I could believe that was true. However, I know every journey is controlled by some sinister puppet master who will lead me where he wishes, and I will be powerless to avoid my destiny.”

Preston Knowles, the Duke of Middleton, tapped his spoon against his crystal wineglass and made a toast. “My lovely wife and I would like to thank

you all for coming. As so many of our friends were still in town at this late date, it seemed serendipitous to gather together before Christmas.” He lifted his glass. “To good friends, old and new. May the new year bring us all what we most desire.”

All the guests lifted their glasses in agreement.

Diana followed along and sipped the rich, fruity wine.

As the first course was served, Jacques leaned close enough for his coat to brush her sleeve. “I shall make sure your strings are cut, my goddess. No one shall rule you save yourself.”

It was a wonderful, impossible notion that not even Jacques could truly believe, but Diana favored him with a smile and allowed the idea to warm her soul through dinner.

Nothing could have been lovelier than a handsome gentleman paying her attention at a fine dinner where she was treated with kindness and respect. She pinched herself several times to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. Though her dreams had never been so wonderful. Even in her darkest days, the best she had hoped for was to not fear for her life and the lives of those she loved. Since everyone she loved had died, part of her problem was horribly solved.

“What are you thinking that has put that frown upon those lovely lips, Diana?”

She took a sip of her white soup to buy time to formulate an answer. “I was contemplating how much life can change with the least bit of notice.”

He had removed his gloves for the meal, so when he took hold of her hand where it rested in her lap, a shock of erotic sensations shot through her entire body. “Sometimes those changes are for the better.”

So much warmth spread through her, she questioned the idea that perhaps her problems had merely shifted and not gone away at all. “I know, Jacques.”

“I wonder if you do.” He turned his attention to his own soup.

When he released her hand, a hollowness settled inside her, more noticeable than before. Perhaps because she had not missed being touched until she had been touched by him.



Diana enjoyed the entire evening, but had looked forward to the carriage ride home with Jacques. Despite Honoria’s presence, she

knew it would be a treat to spend time close to him without a crowd of people. It might be scandalous, but she wished for more evenings like the one when he rescued her from the garden. Just to be near him, held by him, was a kind of heaven she'd never thought possible in her life.

Jacques handed both ladies up before sitting across from them. "Lady Chervil, did you enjoy the party?"

Patting her hair into place, Honoria grinned. "I always enjoy a good party. I am blessed with many good friends who don't mind inviting an old lady to their events. It was very convenient that I could also act as Miss St. Cloud's chaperon tonight."

"I, for one, am most grateful to spend time with both you and Miss St. Cloud."

Bertram poked his head in the window. "We're ready to go. I haven't seen anything unusual."

"Very good," Jacques said.

A sliver of doubt curled into Diana's heart. It was just foolishness, but she rubbed a shiver from her arms.

The carriage rolled down the street. Diana watched outside, but the night was too dark to see much more than a few candles burning inside random homes. No moon or stars cut through the clouds that looked about to dump snow on them. As she thought it, the first flake flurried through the carriage window.

Honoria pulled her cloak close. "I hope it does not snow too hard before we get to Everton House."

Someone outside hollered a curse.

The carriage jerked forward.

More yelling as the horses broke into a run.

Jacques's eyes shone bright as he pulled Diana and Honoria to the floor of the carriage. "Stay down. We must be under attack."

They turned a corner and Diana toppled on her side. She couldn't help the short scream of surprise.

A gun's report rent the air.

A sudden stop tipped the carriage. Jacques threw himself against the other wall and kept them upright. When the rocking stopped, he drew a gun from under the seat. "Stay here, ladies."

Jacques reached for the door just as the barrel of a pistol appeared through the window and the end touched the side of Diana's head.

Her heart, which had been pounding, stopped and lodged itself in her throat.

Victor Caron said, "You may put the weapon down, Laurent, or I shall be forced to harm Miss MacLeod, and neither of us want that."

With a French curse, Jacques put the gun on the floor.

Something dark juttred through the opposite window and hit Jacques on the back of the head.

He crumpled to the floor.

Diana screamed and knelt next to him. She felt the back of his head, and the sticky, warm blood sent terror through her. His even breathing was the only thing keeping her sane in the eruption of madness.

Hand over her mouth, Honoria watched with wide, terrified eyes.

"Now, Diana, you have been very bad, but if you come quietly and finish your job, all will be well." Victor's silky voice nauseated her. His French accent lifted with arrogance and none of the joy that hearing Jacques speak gave her.

"I'm not going to help you."

He pointed the gun at Honoria. "Laurent will likely die because of you. You do not want another death on your hands. If you say that again, I will kill the old woman."

The sweetest, almost bored sigh pushed from Honoria's lips. "That would be a shame. I'm terribly rich, you know. If I die now, no one will benefit from three very profitable marriages."

"What are you blathering about?" Victor tore open the door. His eyes had narrowed, but he was listening.

"Oh yes, I have more money than I'll ever be able to spend. I would think you quite stupid to kill me before you extorted some of it. What kind of criminals are you?" She examined her gloved hands.

Victor grabbed Honoria's arm and pulled her down to the street. "I'm not a criminal. I'm a patriot."

"That's funny, I've never heard of patriots robbing people at gunpoint in the streets of London," Honoria said, as if she didn't notice he'd manhandled her.

Waving his gun, Victor ordered, "Get out of the carriage, Diana."

"Lady Chervil has nothing to do with this. Leave her with the carriage and I'll come with you quietly."

Shoving the gun barrel painfully against Diana's ribs, Victor smiled,

enjoying her discomfort. “I suggest you come quietly, or I’ll kill your ancient friend here and leave her body in the street. She’ll be covered in snow in an hour and the other English pigs will trample her on their way home from those parties they so love.”

Jacques’s unconscious form lay across the carriage, his head and right arm hanging out the door. She prayed he would live. Part of her wanted to cry, while the rest wanted to scratch Victor’s eyes out. Neither choice was a good one in her current circumstance.

A man’s body lay on the ground. It was hard to tell in the dark, but someone that big could only be Bertram. How many more people would suffer for her sake? She gave Victor a nod.

He grabbed Honoria and brought her to another carriage painted all black. With no other option, Diana followed and climbed up next to her friend. “You should not have done that, my lady. They might have left you behind with the carriage.”

The carriage shifted as the driver climbed up.

Honoria whispered. “You are mine to watch over, Diana. I would not leave you to be dragged about on your own by these men. We shall survive this, mark my words.”

Victor climbed in and sat across from them with his gun leveled at Honoria.

Taking Honoria’s hand, Diana steadied her nerves as once again her fate spun out of her control.

Knees high, as his extreme height made riding in a carriage awkward, Caron watched the two of them with his beady eyes narrowed. “What is your name, old woman?”

“I seriously doubt you will live to grow old, given your chosen profession, but if you do, I hope someone treats you as rudely. My name is Lady Honoria Chervil. And what might your name be, sir?”

Victor wrinkled his nose as if he recognized the likely truth of Honoria’s words. The expression fell away, leaving only his hateful glare. “I am Victor Caron. I would like very much to hear more about this money you claim to have.”

“You don’t believe me?” Honoria giggled.

“Don’t laugh at me.” Victor waved his gun about.

Sobering, Honoria stared at him. The woman was fearless, either because she had lived a long time or because she had the upper hand with her

knowledge that a man like Victor must be greedy rather than honorable, regardless of his claims to be a patriot of France. “I beg your pardon, monsieur. It is common knowledge in London that I have been widowed three times, and each time became richer than the last. It’s quite late now, but if you will keep my friend and I alive and unharmed, I will take you to my man of business and he will give you as much money as you require. However, if you harm one finger, bone, or inch of flesh on either of us, I will see you in hell. Do I make myself clear?”

Victor blinked, and even in the dark carriage, it was clear he was taken aback by Honoria’s bravery. “How much money?”

If their situation hadn’t been so dire, Diana would have smiled at how easily Victor was manipulated.

With a shrug, Honoria examined her gloved hand. “More than you can fathom with your limited imagination.”

“And you will give it to me?” He waved his gun around carelessly.

“If you will ensure that both Diana and I will be unharmed, I will give you money. In fact, as a good-faith gesture, I shall give you this ring.” She handed over an emerald ring that was likely worth more than Victor made in a year. “Then tomorrow, I can give you as much as you want, a thousand pounds? Of course, I need your guarantee that we will be released.”

“My superiors want her in France.”

“Then I suppose you shall not be a rich man, Mr. Caron. But I quite understand you have a duty to fulfill.” Honoria squeezed Diana’s hand as they rounded a corner.

The foul smells of the port flooded the carriage. A fire must have started; pungent smoke wafted in with rotting fish and sewage.

They stopped and Victor jumped down. “Come on. I will think about your offer. In the meantime, I will promise only to not kill you.”

Honoria stepped down into the filthy street, in a dangerous neighborhood, as if she were the queen walking into court. She stepped close to Victor and stared up at him, as he was more than a foot taller than her. “If you harm either of us, I’ll give you nothing. As you keep mentioning, I’m an old woman. Dying is not a threat. You seem to need Diana for some nefarious purpose and won’t harm her. You only have my life to bargain with, and I promise you this, monsieur, should you so much as cause a bruise on that girl’s flesh, I will die before I give you a penny. I suggest you have that ring examined so that you will know I am a woman of my word. You will find it

is worth quite a fortune.”

“You speak too boldly for a woman in your predicament.” Tightening his fist around the ring, he turned to his two men. “Put them both in the room and see they are not harmed.” Getting back in the carriage, he knocked on the roof to indicate he was ready.

The man who was with Victor in the garden, Percival Reneau, held his gun pointed at Diana. Not as well educated, his accent was thick and guttural. “Get inside, ladies. I cannot keep you safe on these streets.”

Diana and Honoria complied and were locked in a small bedroom. The furniture was old, but the house was clean. A guard walked back and forth outside their door for several minutes before dragging a chair down the hall and sitting. The walls were thin enough to hear everything, even the creak of the chair as he sat.

The noise from the street made its way inside as if they were part of the dock community. Diana spoke close to Honoria’s ear. “You must be crazy to threaten Victor Caron. He’s a vicious man and would think nothing of killing you. I’ll never forgive myself if you’re harmed.”

Honoria pulled her into a tight hug. “He won’t hurt either of us. He’ll want the money, my dear. Once we are out of this house, we’ll need to find a way to make our location known. We must believe Bertram and Mr. Laurent are alive and will get help to look for us.”

Panic rose up in Diana’s throat. “You should have stayed with the carriage. You would be safe. He wouldn’t have seen you as a threat and would have left you unharmed. Now, he’ll use you to get to me.”

Pulling her to the bed, Honoria sat them both down. “Calm down, Diana. I know you have some experience with this man, and I’m sure you’re right about him being capable of horrible things. However, neither you nor your parents had the means to bribe him. I think you will find he is equally motivated by riches as he was by his warped sense of duty. He will have the ring investigated, and when he learns how much it’s worth, his greed for more will take over. That will get us out into London and to the bank before they drag you off to France. We cannot let him put you on a boat.”

“I suppose your plan has merit. He might have put me directly in the hull of a boat tonight if not for the promise of riches. If Jacques is alive, he will get help.” Her heart ached with the possibility that the blow to Jacques’s head might have been fatal. Poor Bertram lay in the street. More people harmed trying to protect her.

Honorina patted her hand. "Don't fret. Those men are strong. They'll live."

Nodding, Diana swallowed down her worry and focused on something she could do, rather than on things she was powerless to change. "I will tear the lace on my petticoat. Perhaps we can leave a trail of bread crumbs."

"An excellent idea. Perhaps we can bribe these guards to let us go." Honorina rubbed the emeralds around her neck and stared at the door.

"Let's not risk it. Victor is smart and he has a strange obsession with regard to me. If these two tell him you tried to win our freedom, all will be lost, and I'll be on the next boat to France.

With a sigh, Honorina lay back on the bed. "I suppose you're right. We had better get what rest we can. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

Diana knew she was right, but it would be impossible to sleep. She left the candle burning and rested beside Honorina. "I appreciate you risking yourself to protect me. I don't think I've ever had such good friends as I've made these last few weeks."

"I am lucky to call you friend, my dear. I could not let anything terrible happen to you, if there is a chance I can prevent it."

Snuggling against Honorina the way she used to with her mother, Diana sighed. "While I wish you were safe, I'm glad you are here with me, my lady."

"As am I, Diana." Honorina relaxed, and a moment later a low snore sounded as she drifted to sleep.

Diana watched the candle until it burned out.

Chapter Nine

Head pounding, Jacques struggled to focus on the voices in the room.

“Wake up, Jacques.” Preston’s order cut through the din.

Jacques blinked. Several candles lit the room along with a blazing fire in the hearth. Preston’s study at the Middleton town house came into focus. How had he gotten there?

The dinner party.

Diana looking stunning in a blue gown.

The carriage ride to Everton House.

Victor Caron!

“Diana!” Jacques sat up. “Where is Diana?” If a spike had shot through his skull, he’d not have been surprised. The pain nearly sent him to the floor.

Preston put a hand on his shoulder and firmly kept him seated and steady. “Good. You remember. Don’t get up too fast. We’re already looking for them.”

Michael stepped out of the shadows. “Do you remember anything that might help?”

Rubbing the back of his head, Jacques irritated a rather large knot covered by a bloody mat of hair. “Only that Victor Caron pointed a pistol into the carriage. I think he rode in an all-black Clarence.” He pushed his aching mind to remember more. “There were no markings. I saw one other man, and someone must have hit me from behind, so he had at least two with him.”

With a nod, Michael left the room and spoke to someone in the hallway.

A maid ran in. “We packed some snow. It won’t last long, but should help with that bump on your head, sir.” She handed him a damp towel.

He eased it onto the back of his head. "Thank you."

Preston sat next to him and raked his fingers through his hair.

"Did the footmen from Everton's survive?"

"Yes. It was lucky no one was killed. One is shot, but he will live. The rest were knocked unconscious in a similar fashion to you. Victor knows a bloodbath in the streets of London would attract too much attention. He was smart to keep the damage to a minimum. He probably thinks we'll not care about the fate of one untitled woman. They took Lady Chervil, though. That puzzles me. It would have been wiser to leave her behind. Certainly, he knows we'll search for her."

"Perhaps she refused to be left behind. She can be persuasive and is very fond of Diana." Jacques was still struggling to focus his mind. "What about Bertram? He's the large footman who guards Diana daily."

"He woke first and stumbled after the carriage for about a block before he lost them. He ran back here, badly beaten and his head bleeding. Michael was just climbing in his carriage. He's called the Horsemen. Alexander is in town and came immediately. Sebastian is a day's ride and we've sent a messenger to fetch him. Oliver and Nathaniel are at the castle, and while we've sent a note, they will not likely be here before this has concluded."

Not even when his own life balanced on the edge of a guillotine had Jacques experienced the wave of pure rage that filled him at the thought of Diana left in the hands of a monster. He'd failed her. "If he so much as scratches her, I will tear him to pieces with my bare hands."

"I know." Preston patted his back then stood. "Rest a while. I doubt they will pick up a trail until daylight. I called Thomas Wheel, as he has a knack for such things, and Michael and he are close friends. He is trying to pick up a trail or find someone who knows Caron's movements in England. Prepare yourself. I'm going to let Millie in before she breaks down the door."

As soon as Preston opened the door, Millicent ran in and threw herself into Jacques's arms. "I was so worried. When they brought you back and you were unconscious, I thought the worst. Poor Diana and Honoria. I can't imagine the horror of being dragged off in the night."

His snow-filled towel was just a wet mess with a bloodstain from his head wound. He dropped it on the tea tray he'd just noticed on the table and hugged Millicent. "I'm fine, Millie. Just a bump on the head, and you know how hard my head is."

Pulling back to look him in the eye, she studied him. "You know your

name and mine, that's a good sign. We've had a steady flow of people coming through, but Bertram hasn't returned. He blames himself."

"He's a good man. I do not know how they managed to surprise him, but I doubt he could have done anything to change the outcome." Jacques put weight on his feet and leaned forward before slowly standing. The room wobbled for a moment, but then he was fine. He took a breath and walked to the window. He had failed her when he said he would keep her safe. A knot formed in his chest and tightened painfully.

Millicent said, "Diana is a clever girl. She will find a way to help herself, and with Honoria one never knows what antics will take place."

Turning, he faced the pretty blonde his best friend had married. Still in her red gown from dinner, she was a vision marred only by the worry etched around her eyes and mouth. "How well do you know Lady Chervil?"

"Very well. She lived at Everton House much of the time I was employed there." Millicent took a step back and narrowed her gaze.

"I like her, but she strikes me as frivolous. Is she likely to get Diana killed with her whimsy?"

A slow smile pulled at Millicent's lips. "You should not worry about that, Jacques. She may appear as if she hasn't a care in the world, but she is a smart, clever and very resourceful woman. She is also quite well off. If I were in trouble, Honoria Chervil would be a fine asset to have on my side."

Jacques sent up a prayer that she was right. Diana would need all the help she could get. If Victor had a boat waiting in the harbor, Jacques might never see Diana again. It wouldn't do. He would strip his homeland bare, but he would find her.



An hour later, Jacques was desperate to get out of the house and look for Diana. His headache was a reminder that he was alive, and she might be in the hold of some boat waiting for an opportunity to leave England forever.

Alexander Lynds, the man at the head of the Buckrose Horsemen, arrived in an elegant black coat and well-shined shoes. He hardly looked like the rough-and-ready pirate who'd helped Jacques escape the Bastille. "It's good to see you, Laurent. I heard you've had a difficult night."

In other circumstances, he would have been happy to see Alex. He shook his hand. “Lynds. I appreciate you cutting your evening short to help. Miss MacLeod and Lady Chervil are in grave danger. I fear they may already be beyond our borders.”

Alex gave the butler his hat and overcoat, then sat on a large chair near the window in Preston’s library. “At least I can give you some relief with regard to that. No one matching the description of Victor Caron or either lady has left London by road, and no ships have been permitted out of port since I was contacted. It is extremely unlikely Caron could have made it out before then. I assume the timeline you gave me is accurate, Your Grace?”

Michael nodded. “As accurate as is possible, within twenty minutes.”

“Then I am confident they have not left the country. We will find them.” Alex leaned forward. “I’m somewhat concerned about the circumstances of this incident. Can you tell me what happened?”

“What do you mean, you are concerned?” Jacques’s defensive instincts kicked in.

“How were you ambushed?” Voice steady, Alex never took his gaze away from Jacques.

Part of Jacques wanted to rage against the obvious implication that things might not be as they seemed, but he needed Alex’s help. “We left here around ten o’clock. It was prearranged to take my carriage back to Everton House where the ladies and footmen live.”

“Why did the ladies require your carriage?” Alex brushed a bit of lint from his coat and leaned back in his chair.

“The Everton Domestic Society carriage was needed elsewhere.”

Alex pushed his blond hair back from his eyes. “Who asked for your help?”

“Miss MacLeod sent a note a few days ago.” This was not going well.

“So, Miss MacLeod asked for you to transport her home and the carriage was attacked.” Alex pulled out a notebook. He took a quill from the desk, dipped it in ink and jotted a note.

Jacques stood. “She did not arrange this. She is a prisoner and in danger. You are wrong about her.”

With a long sigh, Alex put the notebook away. “I understand your affection for this lady, and you may well be correct. Perhaps she is an innocent who has been taken advantage of. Certainly, her parents’ absence from her life and her claim that they were murdered counts in her favor. I

know you believe her innocent, and Michael, I mean His Grace, also thinks she's a good woman. However, I must look at this from every side."

Fury raced through Jacques. It was insane that anyone could believe anything but good could come from Diana. He stood in front of Alex. "I will vouch for her. Get her back and you can see for yourself that she is all things good. Her story is painful to listen to. I have known my fair share of liars. Get her back and let her prove her innocence."

Gaze steady, Alex nodded. "I will find her if it is possible. Hopefully the lady wishes to be found. If she does, she will assist in her own rescue. In the meantime, we will watch all the roads out of town. I have stopped all ships and small boats from leaving English waters. I can't enforce that for more than twenty-four hours, so we have until tomorrow evening to find her."

It was a struggle to be grateful, but Jacques said, "Thank you. She will prove herself worthy of the Horsemen's attention."

Alex nodded. "I think we should speak to her employer and Middleton's wife's uncle. Perhaps we can at least get some clues about what she had planned."

"All she was planning was to stay alive and clear her name." Jacques was going to have to get his temper under control before he made a fool of himself.

Michael stood. "It's late and you've had a difficult night, Jacques. We all want to believe Diana is innocent. All Alex is doing is making sure we haven't missed anything. You know as well as we do that some people are excellent at hiding the truth."

"Not Diana."

Standing, Alex nodded. "Then there is no harm in making a few inquiries."

Unable to argue with the logic, Jacques nodded.

"Good," Preston said. "I suggest we visit Everton House and my wife's uncle in the morning. I've sent out my own footmen to see if Bertram and the other footmen from Everton House have come up with any leads. I also sent word to Lord Rupert Everton informing him of the situation. He and Lady Jane feel responsible for the safety of their employees. I'm sure they will wish to help in any way possible."

Alex walked to the door. "I will return at first light. I know it's not fashionable, but the more time we lose, the less chance we have of finding them."

It was the first thing Alex had said that Jacques agreed with. “I doubt I will sleep tonight. I’ll be ready when you arrive.”



Francis was still in his nightclothes when they arrived. He rubbed his eyes. And called for coffee. Jacques said, “I am sorry to wake you, Francis. It is rather urgent.”

“Is it Diana? Is she hurt?”

“What makes you ask that?” Alex asked.

Blinking, Francis looked from Jacques to Alex to Preston and Michael. “I suppose I asked because all of you have come here, in a state, at such an hour, and Diana isn’t with you. What else am I to think, knowing who she is and the danger she’s in?”

Preston took the coffee tray from Doris. “Thank you, Mrs. Whimple. I’ll take it in. You might call on my wife today. She’s had a trying night and could use her friend.”

Opening and closing her mouth several times, Doris wrung her hands. It appeared she had several questions, none of which she asked. “I’ll get my cloak and go straightaway.”

“Thank you.” Preston nudged the door closed and brought the tray to the table. “Francis, we just have a few questions, then we’ll leave you in peace.”

He stopped his pacing and huffed. “First you’ll tell me what has happened to Diana. And Jacques, why do you look a bit green?”

Head pounding like someone was wielding a pickax, Jacques wasn’t surprised he looked as terrible as he felt. He sat on one of the dark-red overstuffed chairs where he and Francis often talked of new ideas. “Francis, sit. Please.”

With another huff, Francis complied. “What’s happened?”

Unable to meet Francis’s gaze, Jacques stared down at the red-and-gold rug. “She was nabbed out of my carriage by French spies. I tried to protect her but failed.”

Patting Jacques’s arm, Francis said, “I’m certain it was not your fault. You would do anything to protect that girl.”

Preston stepped behind Jacques’s chair and rested a hand on his shoulder. “It was not his fault. They were jumped. Jacques and all the Everton footmen

were knocked out.”

Alex cleared his throat. “What kind of experiments was Miss MacLeod helping you with?”

Taking his coffee from the tray, Francis shook his head. “Not what you’re thinking, Lynds.”

“Humor me, sir.”

Francis sipped his coffee. “We’d been testing a new fire extinguisher and the new mining lamp. We had also made great strides with using kitchen trash as fertilizer.”

Raising an eyebrow, Alex looked at Michael who nodded. “Nothing involving rockets?”

“No.” Francis put down his cup with a loud clank.

“Did Miss MacLeod ever discuss rockets or their workings with you?” With his voice unnaturally even, he might have been speaking of the weather.

Jacques wanted to rage, but it would make a bad situation worse. He would play this the Horseman’s way, because they needed their help if Diana was ever going to be safe.

Narrowing his eyes, Francis leaned forward. “Diana has no interest in rockets. Her knowledge of them is all due to her father’s knowledge. I might add that that information was offered to the English but was thought too dangerous. I suspect there is a spy inside the government who leaked that rocket research to the French, and that is why my friends were murdered and their daughter is now in danger of meeting the same fate. Now, you get your haughty ass out of my house and find that girl before they take her to France. She was clever enough to escape once, but they’ll not let her get away again. Do I make myself clear?”

It would have been inappropriate to cheer, but Lord, how Jacques wanted to hurrah for what Francis said.

Preston chuckled behind his hand. He was a duke and could get away with almost anything. “Time to be on our way, gentlemen. My uncle has been generous with his time and knowledge.”

Rising, Alex looked as if he might say more, but thought better of it. “Thank you for receiving us at such an early hour. I will set to work to bring Miss MacLeod back safely.”

Francis stood with his hands on his hips. In his long white nightshirt and brown robe, he looked comical, but his expression was fierce. “See that you do.”

Outside, Preston said, "I assume we will be given a similar dressing down at Everton House. Shall we go?"

Of course, a note had been sent the night before to Lord and Lady Everton. Jacques had sent one of his own as soon as he could see clearly enough to write. When the ladies didn't arrive home, the Everton Domestic Society would have gone on full alert. As it turned out, they had done so anyway.

Gray, the butler, admitted them without asking their business. "The lord and lady are in the office. I'm certain they will wish you gentlemen to join them."

Three footmen rushed through the foyer. To the left of the front door, the dining room was bustling with Everton ladies. One brunette rolled bandages while another worked with a maid putting together bundles of food.

In the office, Lady Jane Everton handed Bertram a note. "Are you sure you are well enough to continue? You should probably rest."

"They were taken on my watch, my lady. If it's all right with you, I'll be seeing this through." Bertram waited for a nod from his employer before turning. His gaze met Jacques's. "You all right, sir?"

"Other than a pounding head, I am fine. What about you?" Bertram's size might have caused their assailants to hit him harder. Jacques had been lucky to get away with just a small cut and a knot on his head.

"Just a bit bruised up. More angry than hurt, to be honest." With a nod, Bertram stomped out the door.

Rupert Everton sat behind the desk where his wife usually presided. He didn't look up from the letter he penned. "Come in, gentlemen. I'm nearly done here."

Michael stood in the back of the room with a clear view of the door while Preston strode in and bowed. The only bit of femininity in the room was fresh flowers, which were unusual in winter. The dark wood and heavy brocades were distinctly masculine in a house filled mostly with women. The bookcase Michael leaned on was filled with tomes of ancient titles of history, religion, philosophy and only a few novels.

Lady Jane made a curtsy. "Please sit down. We've been working since we received your note. Our own footmen are ready to assist, and his lordship has written a few friends for their assistance as well. Bow Street has been very kind and will send a dozen men."

Not even stoic Alex could hide his surprise. "I had no idea your

organization was so well connected, my lady.”

She sat in the chair beside the desk so that the men would sit. “You would be shocked at how many friends the society has. We have helped many families over the years, and often stay in contact with them long after our ladies’ assignments are over.”

Lord Rupert folded his letter and handed it to Gray, who hovered nearby. Once the butler plodded out the door and closed it, Rupert said, “Now, what has been done to recover our ladies?”

Leaning forward, Alex entwined his fingers and rested his elbows on his knees. “I have a small force of well-trained men who are searching for any signs of them. I have most of my resources making certain they have not left London, and I feel sure they have not. Michael contacted his friend Thomas Wheel to see what he can find out. The problem is, no matter how many men we gather, finding two women hidden in all of London is nearly impossible. We need to narrow down our search.”

The knot in Jacques’s stomach tightened. Alex was right. It was like finding a needle in a haystack, but if they had to pull every stalk of hay one at a time, he would spend his life doing so. “I think it unlikely they would be in any of the finer areas of London. The gentry are far too nosy about their neighbors’ comings and goings. It would be far smarter to hide out in a poor area where people tend to mind their own business.”

“Jacques is right,” Preston said.

Alex stood. “I agree, but even then, there are too many buildings to search. They could be in a hotel, a hovel or the hull of a ship. I can keep the ships in port for a few more hours, but captains get rather uppity if you demand to search their ships.”

The door opened and Thomas Wheel entered. His dark red hair was windblown, and he wore trousers and a worn jacket. He looked more like a common miller or cobbler than the wealthy gentleman he was. “I’m sorry to barge in uninvited. Please forgive me, Lady Everton.”

A rare smile lit Jane’s face. “You are most welcome, Mr. Wheel. I had the pleasure of hearing your wife play pianoforte last spring and was mesmerized. She is a wonder.”

“Yes, she is.” He grinned. “Forgive the abrupt change of topic, but I have some news.”

Michael pushed away from the bookcase. “What is it, Tom? Did you find them?”

“I’ve been all over town and into some old haunts I would have preferred never to frequent again. However, I didn’t find them.”

It was unbearable waiting for information. Despite his throbbing head, Jacques was about to tear London to bits. “Why did you come all this way, then?”

Thomas nodded. “I found a trail of information about the carriage and even a few sightings of Caron, though probably too late in the night to be related to the kidnapping. I tracked them to the port. They must be somewhere near or at the docks. I found a woman who heard feminine voices around eleven.”

Finally, something to go on. Jacques would only have to tear the port of London to pieces.

Preston put a hand on his shoulder. “Not yet, my friend. If you storm in, you could get the ladies harmed or worse.”

“I can’t sit around and do nothing.”

With a nod, Alex stood. “How many men have you gathered, Lord Rupert?”

“Twenty, with the Bow Street men, and I’ve just sent a note to another friend to see if he might spare a few more. The Everton footmen are all well trained and have military backgrounds as batmen or the like. They might not be gentlemen, but they’re good men.” Rupert rounded the desk and opened the door. Bertram and seven other footmen stood waiting in the hallway.

Alex said, “We will watch all roads out of the port. Also, we must make sure they are not already on a ship. Can the Everton footmen handle searching the boats and ships in port?”

Eyes bright and fists clenched, Bertram nodded. “We will make sure they’re not aboard anything on the water, if you take care they’re not carried out of London.”

“What if the captains refuse to be searched?” Jane asked.

Bertram smiled. “Not to worry, my lady. I have a few friends in the Royal Navy who will help.”

“Very good.” Alex paced. “They will have to come out of hiding eventually. If they’re not already on a ship, we’ll find them and get the ladies back.”

“If they are on a ship, I’ll find them,” Bertram said.

Rupert said, “Don’t do anything foolish. If you think you’ve found them, send for help.”

“Yes, my lord.” Bertram bowed and left the room. A moment later he called orders from the foyer.

“I will send word to all of you as soon as I know something.” Alex pulled on his overcoat.

Jacques grew tired of sitting and waiting. “I will take up a position at the south end of the port. I am not waiting around for word from you or anyone.”

“I’ll take the block to the north of Jacques,” Preston said.

“It’s been a while since we had an assignment, Tom. Shall we take a block as well?” Michael asked, but it was more stating than asking.

“Of course.”

Alex shook his head. “You are the oddest group of gentlemen I’ve ever met.” He sighed. “Fine, you can each take a block. I’ll check in every few hours. I have runners who will carry messages if you see anything.”

There was no arguing that they were not the average overstuffed gentlemen. Without waiting for the others, Jacques and Preston said goodbye to Lord and Lady Everton and left the house. In the carriage, Jacques allowed the fear of losing Diana to invade his mind. “I do not know what I will do if anything has happened to her.”

“I know.”

“It was foolish to lure her out of the safety of Everton House. Foolish and selfish. I wanted to see her, and now she is gone.” He rubbed the tender bump on the back of his head and winced.

Preston whistled through his teeth. “That is a lot of blame to put upon yourself, Jacques. You wanted to see the woman who you are clearly in love with. It’s not a crime.”

Heart pounding, Jacques swallowed his denial. “I have no right to her. It is foolish to want her so desperately. Besides, I swore off love after Monique.”

“You may have sworn off, but love has a way of weaving its way back inside you when you meet the right person. Diana is smart and interesting. She will keep you alive. I can’t imagine a better match for you.”

Jacques watched Preston for any sign he was saying these things to somehow distract from the fact that Diana was missing. He found no signs of deception. “I thought you didn’t like the idea of a lady with a past.”

“I have given it some thought, and this particular lady is worth a bit of intrigue.” Preston smiled. “We’ll find her.”

The sun peeked through the clouds for the first time in days. Snow

covered London in a white blanket, cleaning the filth of the city for a short time. Soon the bustle of daily life would darken the pristine mounds, but for the moment, it gleamed in the morning light. Jacques watched the city go by as they rode toward the port. “I will never forgive myself if they have taken her to France.”

“You’re not considering going back.” Panic rang in Preston’s voice.

“If she is there, I will have no choice.”

Preston sat forward and grabbed Jacques’s shoulders. “You can’t go back to France. You’ll be killed on sight or imprisoned and taken to the guillotine. Do you know what I went through to get you out last time?”

He did know. It had taken all Preston’s influence to arrange an escape with the Buckrose Horsemen. Still, he would go if Diana was there. “I can never make up the debt I owe you for saving my life, but I cannot live knowing I left her to my fate or worse. We cannot imagine the horrors they have in store for my Diana if they get her back to France.”

“There is no debt, Jacques. You would do the same to save me. I have no doubt of that. But returning to France now is a death sentence, and I won’t be able to help.”

“Then we had better hope Victor Caron fails in his assignment.”

Chapter Ten

The sun coming in the filthy window did not improve the look of the room that made up Diana and Honoria's prison. A cockroach skittered across the floor and disappeared through a crack in the wall. It was not the first time Diana wished she was an insect and could escape her prison.

"Is this what it was like?" Honoria's voice was soft with sleep, but it still surprised Diana, as she thought her friend asleep.

"What do you mean?"

Honoria sat up, stretched and made a face as she looked around the shabby room. "When they kept you in France, was it like this terrible place?"

Flashes of her mother's throat slashed and her father stabbed through the heart pummeled her brain. The gray stone walls of their dungeon were splattered with their blood. The putrid stench from the bucket they used for necessities filled her nostrils. "No, my lady. This is far better."

"Better!" She looked around the sparse room with bare, worn, wood floors and tattered curtains that may have once been blue. Pulling Diana into a warm hug, Honoria said, "Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry for what you have endured."

"It was not your fault, my lady." The sun cast odd shadows through the grime on the windows, and Diana traced the path with her gaze. It would be a long day, and no telling where it would end. More than likely, she would be crossing the English Channel by nightfall. The only thing Diana must be sure of was to gain Lady Chervil her freedom.

Wishing she wore plain clothes rather than an evening gown wouldn't make it so. Diana got up and brushed out the gown's skirt, realized it was hopelessly wrinkled, and walked to the window.

Honorina yawned. "You are a remarkable person, Diana MacLeod. I wonder if anyone has told you so."

The only thing she was remarkable at was getting the people she loved killed. "I'm very flattered that you are fond of me, my lady. I'm quite fond of you too. I don't think I have ever had a finer friend."

Throwing her feet over the side of the bed, Honorina cocked her head and watched Diana. "I like you, Diana, but that has nothing to do with the fact that you are extraordinary. I would not survive more than a few hours in this hovel, yet you endured worse for years and still glow with hope."

"I think that just makes me a fool." With nowhere to sit other than the bed, Diana leaned on the wall. It was unladylike, but she no longer cared. It was as if the past few months had never happened, and she was a prisoner again. There was no need for the rules of society where she was going.

"You are certainly no fool. You are a vibrant, beautiful and brilliant woman who was thrown into an unbearable situation through no fault of her own. Yet look at you. Most people would be a whimpering mess after such a turn of fate."

"I only endured because I had no other choice."

A sad smile tipped Honorina's lips. "Oh, my dear, there are always choices."

"I have made some terrible ones. I should never have involved you and the Everton Domestic Society in my messy life. It would have been better to find a quiet place to live, out of sight, and take a job as a shopkeeper's assistant. If I had done that, you would not be here. Maybe I would still be sweeping some bookstore's floors right now. It wouldn't be wonderful, but it would be safe."

Rising and stretching did little to add to Honorina's height. Yet there was something regal about the woman. She walked to Diana and patted her cheek. "Coming to Everton House is the smartest thing you've ever done, and I imagine you have done some very brilliant things. Jane and Rupert know everyone, and almost everyone owes them a favor. They won't rest until we are safe at home."

"They have no way to find us, my lady. I don't want to upset you, but we are likely to be loaded on a ship bound for France at any moment." Diana hadn't meant to raise her voice, but her calm facade was slipping.

Taking her hand, Honorina led her over to the bed, and they sat. "Tell me how you escaped last time."

Diana cringed. “It is not a nice story. You will be shocked and likely never speak to me again.”

“Nonsense. We are friends and nothing you will say can change that. Tell me. I think it will do you good to let it out.” Honoria patted Diana’s hand where it lay in hers.

Could she? Diana had held on to all the pain of her imprisonment for so long, she didn’t know if she could share it or if sharing it would help. Hands shaking, she took a moment to steady her nerves. In the daylight, it was harder than telling Jacques about being captured and losing her parents. “I don’t know where to start.”

Honoria squared her shoulders. “I will help you. You were taken from your family home in the north and carted where?”

“The carriage bumped and banged me around, but they’d put a hood over my head, and I couldn’t see where they were taking us. Mother found my hand and held tight. Her hand trembled in mine, and I wanted to be strong for her sake. The ropes that bound our wrists cut and rubbed my skin.

“The sun shone through my hood after what seemed like hours of travel and the scent of the sea reached me. When they tossed us in the hold of a ship, they cut our bindings and removed our hoods.”

Squeezing her hand, Honoria lent strength and stability. “How horrible that must have been for you.”

“We were at sea for a long time, though I have no idea how long. They rationed our food, barely keeping us alive, and the rocking made Mother so sick she couldn’t keep much down. As bad as the ship was, I dreaded arriving.”

Honoria nodded. “Did your father say anything? Did he know why they had taken you?”

“Yes. Of course, he knew. He was the foremost expert on rockets. The French had tried to curry favor with him before. They had offered him riches to give them his research and had even tried to steal it once.” Pulling her hand back, Diana crossed her arms.

“Where did they take you once you reached France?”

“It was an old castle.” Diana relived the moment when she’d seen the dark spires and crenellations against the gloom of an approaching storm. The rain that followed was nothing compared to the deluge of her life for the years to follow.

“You can tell me, Diana.” Honoria’s jaw was tight, but her gaze steady.

“I think you will be sorry you asked, my lady.” When Honoria nodded, Diana continued. “They put us in a dungeon and demanded my father make improvements on their rockets. They wanted them to go further. Father refused, so they beat Mother and I in order to get him to comply. Eventually, he started work. Most of what he told them was misleading. They would do as he said, and the rocket would fail. This went on for months. Victor Caron became our warden some months into our imprisonment. He’d been promoted and was very pleased with himself. He was also determined to succeed where his predecessors had failed. His brand of torture was far worse. He cut off two of Mother’s fingers. He beat us until we lost consciousness.”

“My God!” Honoria covered her mouth as a tear ran down her soft cheek.

“It might have been much worse, but I don’t believe Victor likes ladies much. He became more and more obsessed with me, trying to prod me to work with my father. I refused, and Father said I was just a girl who knew nothing of science. However, one day Victor lost his patience. He came at me, disgusted but determined. Father lost his temper and attacked. Mother did what she could. My hands and feet were bound. All I could do was watch in horror while the guards stormed in and killed my parents.”

Honoria pulled her into a hug.

Diana wanted to cry, but a chill settled where her heart had been. “Once it was clear they would force me to finish my father’s work, I bribed a guard with the very thing Victor threatened to steal and made my escape. I walked miles through muddy woods. Eventually I found a kindly farmer who hid me in his cart and carried me to the coast. I dressed as a boy to get work swabbing decks on a ship to Spain. There I managed to find a small boat to take me to Cardiff. It took me a long time to make my way by land from Wales back to England.”

The silence that followed gave Diana time to shake off the memories that haunted her sleep. Somehow, she felt lighter. It was wrong to share her burden, yet as Honoria said it would, it helped. “I’m sorry you know such terrible things about me, my lady.”

Honoria placed her soft, chubby hands on Diana’s cheeks. Gently, she turned her head and met her gaze. “These things are not about you, my dear. They only happened to you. You endured more than most people could bear.”

Unable to fathom why Honoria wasn’t disgusted by her, Diana stared. She probably looked like a fish as she gathered her words. “You understand I

gave away my virginity to escape. I'm soiled beyond repair. I'm a whore and you should keep clear of me."

"Nonsense!" Honoria smiled. "You did what was necessary. No one would fault you for that. Besides, no one need know such a personal thing."

Jacques's face flashed in Diana's mind. He must never know. She couldn't stand it if he looked at her with disdain.

"One day, when you fall in love, you can tell your husband the truth or you can tell him you fell from a horse as a child, it will be entirely up to you. You can thank God that no child came of it and move on unhindered by such a small thing." Honoria kissed Diana's cheek and brushed out her skirts as if she were brushing away the ugly thoughts.

"I'm surprised you put such little stock in virginity, my lady. Generally, people of society value it in a young lady above good character."

Honoria smiled. "And isn't that a shame?"

It was, but there wasn't time to say so. Boots clomped up the stairs and down the hall toward them.

Leaning in to Diana's ear, Honoria whispered, "I hope you are a good actress, Diana. Follow my lead, but don't say too much. Keep those bits of lace from your petticoat handy. We're getting out of here."

Even if she'd had time to contradict Honoria, Diana was too shocked by the ferocity in the dowager's tone to utter a word.

The bolt slid and Victor threw open the door. "I want to know how you intend to give me money, old woman. If you can convince me, I will keep this lovely little bitch alive a while longer." He pulled Diana's hair, ripping several strands from her head.

Diana bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out at the sting to her scalp. Screaming never did any good, and Victor seemed to derive pleasure from it.

Honoria narrowed her eyes. "As you keep mentioning, I'm an old woman with little to live for. If you don't control yourself and treat Miss MacLeod with respect, I'll give you nothing."

"I could kill her and torture you until you give me what I want, hag." He pulled Diana close and licked the side of her face.

Diana's stomach roiled. His breath, putrid from rotting teeth, sent a wave of disgust through her. It was as if her escape never happened. She'd done it all for nothing.

"Torturing me will not incite my man of business to give you a thing.

You will take me and Miss MacLeod to Fleet Street where we will visit C. Hoare & Company and meet with Mr. Richard Colt Hoare. He will give you the balance of my account. You will not be disappointed. I expect you to release us after you are paid.” Honoria added the last sentence quickly.

“I will not release her. I need her. You may stay with your Mr. Hoare for all I care. Your payment will only grant your life, and an extension on hers.” His grin exposed crooked yellow teeth.

Honoria flounced on the bed. “Then you may as well kill me now. I’m not giving you a penny unless you agree to free us both. Keep in mind, with the kind of money I’m going to give you, you’ll not need to return to France at all. You can live in luxury anywhere in the world. Though I would suggest you leave England, as your welcome will be rather bleak.”

Eyes flicked back and forth between Honoria and Diana.

He glanced back at his assistant, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows. “The port is closed.”

“Percy seems to think we should believe you.”

“Percival must be a very wise young man and a good judge of character.”

Staring at her a long moment, Victor appeared to be making his decision. He turned to Percy. “Tell Roger and Finn we will not be needing them today. Give them half their wages.”

It wasn’t surprising that Victor planned to cheat his own hired men. His character demanded despicable behavior. In fact, she was certain he would go back on his word to Honoria as well. Still, getting out of that room and not being put directly on a boat set to sail was an opportunity. It was more than she and her parents had ever had. Diana placed a piece of her lace petticoat on the mattress just beneath the thin blanket while Victor took the bundle of black cloth Percy had been holding.

He tossed the cloth at Diana. “Put these on. We cannot have you looking like that in the middle of the day.”

Unraveling the cloth revealed two overcoats. Diana handed one to Honoria and put the other on.

The women were loaded in the carriage, Finn and Roger leaned against the building and watching as Percy drove the carriage away. It was a bit of a ride, as Honoria’s banker was close to Westminster though still within London. The air improved as they angled away from the river.

Cold and damp, Diana pulled the overcoat tighter around her neck. It wouldn’t keep her safe, but she appreciated the idea of protection just the

same. She turned toward the window while Honoria babbled about how her second husband had been quite rich. Diana dropped a bit of lace out the window. She did so twice more when Victor was properly distracted.

Just as Victor closed the blind on her window, she would have sworn she saw Michael Rollins, the Duke of Kerburghe, standing at the corner with a blond man she didn't recognize. If only she could have dropped another piece. Michael hadn't seen her, if it really was him and not just her imagination playing tricks on her.

She sat back and watched as the city rolled by. Victor left his window open, and it was uncomfortably cold, but even riding backward it was good to see daylight. Two pieces of lace left. She put her hand on the window frame and let one slip away before they turned on Fleet Street.

When they stopped, Honoria said, "I suggest you pretend to be a gentleman, or Mr. Hoare will suspect a problem."

With a hideous grin, Victor jumped down from the carriage. He handed Honoria down and bowed with mock grace before handing Diana down.

Richard Colt Hoare was thin and wore his cravat with an intricate knot. He was dressed for a day of business in a black jacket and powdered wig. He had a crooked nose and pale skin. When he saw Honoria, he sauntered over and bowed over her hand with flourish. "My dear Lady Chervil. What a pleasure it is to see you. How may we be of service today?"

Honoria smiled and blinked a moment longer than was comfortable. She acted a bit addled, which was out of character. "This is my nephew Victor and his wife, Diana. I'm granting them funds to buy some land up north. May we sit in your office, my lord? I'm afraid these old bones are sore and tired at my advanced years."

Good gracious, she was pouring it on a bit heavy. Diana had to keep from rolling her eyes or laughing. Luckily, the pistol under Percy's overcoat that jutted into her ribs deterred any sudden outbursts. After all she'd been through, this trip to Hoare's was farcical. Had her father been a rich man, he might have paid off the men who captured them and they would all still be living in peace and obscurity.

A heavenly notion, but not at all useful. Diana inspected Hoare's office for ways to escape, or at least indicate they were in trouble. One window faced the street. Voices and the clatter of carts filtered in, muffled but present. The window was about two people wide and tall enough to get through. However, it seemed rash to try to jump out while Percy had a gun. Honoria

could never manage such a feat, and Diana wouldn't leave her alone with Victor.

"You are such a generous relation, my lady. What amount should I draw for your fine nephew and his lovely wife?" Richard Colt Hoare charmed with every word. He was a bit like syrup, but Honoria drank it up.

"He has been such a good nephew to me. I shall give him everything that is in the account from Bastian Cumberbatch, my dear second husband."

Diana had never heard the name before, but perhaps that was not strange. Yet Mr. Hoare looked confused for several heartbeats. He looked at Honoria for a long moment, and her gaze did not waver.

Standing only inches from Honoria's right shoulder, Victor said with a near-perfect English accent, "Is there a problem, Aunt?"

"Of course not. I think Mr. Hoare is just shocked that I would give so much at one time." She turned back to the banker. "You see, Bastian Cumberbatch, my dear second husband, was particularly fond of Victor, and I want to help."

For his part, Victor actually looked contrite. It was an extremely odd expression for him. He must be a very good spy for the French, with his ability to sound English and look kind.

Mr. Hoare smiled. "I completely understand. Family is so important. I myself owe everything to my family, since it was my great grandfather who started this establishment. I'll just go and check the balance on your account and be right back."

As he rounded the desk, Victor took his arm. "You know, sir, I'm very close to my aunt. I would not like to think you had designs on her money."

Diana had tucked the last bit of lace in her sleeve. She eased it out now and worried it in her fist.

Eyes wide, Mr. Hoare had not missed the threat, even if it had been given with charm and a grin. "I assure you, my intentions toward your aunt are, and have always been, honorable. Her finances have been safe with C. Hoare & Company for many years. I only need to retrieve the ledger book pertaining to the lady's account. I shall return shortly."

Stepping forward, Diana squeezed Victor's arm. "It's all right, dearest. I'm certain Mr. Hoare is an honest man."

"Thank you, madam." Mr. Hoare beamed at her and took her offered hand.

Diana remained expressionless as she slipped the bit of lace into his palm.

“We will be happy to wait.”

It was a risk, but Mr. Hoare gave no outward indication that he had received the bit of her petticoat.

With Percy at her back, she had no idea what kind of reaction he’d had to her moving away from him until he grabbed her upper arm and hauled her back.

Mr. Hoare gaped at them.

Victor laughed. “You will have to forgive my man of business. He’s very protective of my wife.”

With only a slight stutter, he said, “I see. Well, I’ll just be a moment.”

Once Mr. Hoare had bowed out of the room, Victor’s charm evaporated. “You do anything so stupid again, and I’ll kill the old woman.”

The harsh whisper sent a chill up Diana’s spine. Maybe it wouldn’t matter. Either the banker would see that something was amiss and call for help, or he would return and give Victor the money. Victor would not keep his word, she was certain of that. If he left Honoria behind, that would be good enough. “I only wanted to smooth over your and Percy’s blunders. Grabbing that man’s arm! Really, what were you thinking? You could have ruined everything. I want you to get that money as much as you do. It’s the key to my freedom.”

“You are a stupid—”

The door opened and Mr. Hoare poked his head in. “I’ll just need Lady Chervil to come sign these documents.”

Honoria stood.

Victor put his hand on her shoulder, stopping her. “Why can they not be signed in here? My aunt is old and feeble.”

Raising her brow, Honoria looked ready to elbow Victor in the gut. “I’m sure I can make the walk for your sake, nephew.”

“We need witnesses, sir. I assure you it is quite standard, and her ladyship seems quite spry, as she always has been.”

Honoria walked out, followed by Percy.

Taking Diana’s arm, Victor squeezed hard enough to leave a bruise. “Come, my dear.”

C. Hoare & Company was filled with armed men. The blond man Diana had seen with Michael on the street grabbed Honoria and pushed her behind him.

Michael Rollins put a gun to Percy’s head. “Kindly hand me that pistol.”

With no other option, Percy complied. His face turned bright red as two men grabbed him.

Still holding tight to Diana, Victor dragged her in front of him with the office door at his back. "I suggest you all let me pass or I promise you this woman will die. I have one of her handy explosives in my pocket, and I will blow myself and her to pieces before I allow you to take me."

"I never made him any explosives."

Something hard bashed against Diana's head. "She is mine. I own this one."

The room spun for several seconds before throbbing pain replaced the vertigo. She touched her skull and winced.

Preston Knowles stepped forward. Rage highlighted the angles of his cheeks and bright eyes. "Let her go and you might have a chance to live."

Grabbing her around the waist, Victor took a step back.

Preston's eyes shifted to the right.

Jacques barreled into them, knocking Diana to the floor. He wrapped his arms around her and rolled away.

The door of Mr. Hoare's office exploded with smoke and the bitter odor of gunpowder. Bits of stone, wood and plaster rained down around her, but Jacques used his body to shield her from any harm.

Men screamed orders and ran toward the office.

Jacques rolled them over, leaned against the wall, cradled her in his lap and peppered kisses along her cheek. "Are you hurt?"

Alive. Jacques was alive and well and holding her in his arms as if he would never let her go. Holding her tightly because she too had survived? Across the room, Honoria danced with glee as she congratulated Mr. Hoare on being so clever.

Diana hugged Jacques tight and let his warmth and scent surround her. The knot of terror for nearly getting him killed eased a smidgen, but she knew what she had to do. "I'm not hurt, Jacques. You may release me."

Those strong arms she adored tightened around her. Jacques's breath tickled her neck, confirming their good fortune. "I do not know if I can. I have never been so terrified in my life. Please tell me you forgive me?"

Pushing away, she looked him in the eye. "Forgive you for what? None of this was your fault. I'm the one who put everyone's lives in danger."

The way he touched the side of her head, searching for her injury, was the sweetest thing she'd ever experienced. When he found the lump, he winced

as if he had been the one bashed on the head. He kissed her where she'd been hit. "I should have protected you better. I was foolish to think I could keep you safe without rooting out the people after you. I am so very sorry."

"I did not make that explosive. I have never helped Caron or any French agents." It was important he know, even if the English government thought she was a traitor.

Staring at her like she was the moon, he ran his fingers along her jaw. "Of course not."

Honorina stomped over with her hands on her hips. "He got away. After all that, Victor escaped out the office window. They did manage to capture Percy, and that handsome Alex Lynds said they would take him for questioning before we head north."

Accepting Preston's assistance, Diana stood up. Her body ached from the fall. "Are we going north?"

When he stood, Jacques let his fingers lightly brush against hers. "The Buckrose Horsemen have a safe place where they will take you and Lady Chervil until they capture Victor. It is for your safety and her ladyship's."

"I see." What she saw was that she was to be a prisoner again. Only this time, her jailer would be English and have a name given to bearers of the apocalypse. A kinder dungeon, but a dungeon none the less.

Chapter Eleven

Jacques kept a close eye on Diana throughout the afternoon. She coolly answered all Alex's questions about Victor Caron. They had returned to Everton House, where everyone had been instructed to gather.

Diana spoke quietly with Lord and Lady Everton for twenty minutes. Jacques wanted to hear what they spoke about, but he gave them their privacy and only watched from across the room. The only time he saw any spark of emotion from Diana was when Bertram arrived.

Happiness and relief flooded out of her, and she rushed to her footman and protector. "Oh, thank goodness you're all right. I was so worried about you, Bertram."

It was the first time Jacques had seen Bertram smile. His broad grin revealed a gap between his front teeth. "I'm happy to see you, miss. I cannot tell you how bad I feel about letting them take you."

"Not your fault. When I saw you in the street, I thought you had been killed. I couldn't forgive myself."

"It will take more than a beating to kill me, miss."

Alex interrupted the reunion. "Bertram, did you find the boat?"

Straightening, Bertram focused on Alex. "Yes, sir. It was a skiff with a Flemish captain, name of Martius Verbeke."

Thomas Wheel and a pudgy official named James Hardwig had arrived with Bertram. James worked in some official capacity for the government, but Jacques didn't know exactly who he was or what he did. He had met Mr. Wheel through Preston, and if Preston trusted his school friend, it was good enough for Jacques.

Running his hand through his hair, Thomas gave a laugh. "That poor

captain didn't know what was happening. One minute he was quietly waiting for his large wage and illegal cargo bound for France, and the next he was in shackles and dragged off his boat. The first mate was also arrested, but the crew were just poor sailors signed on for one trip. We let them go. It was a fine skiff, and it's now the property of His Majesty."

James rubbed his paunch and chuckled, and slapped Preston on the back. "I always find some excitement when you gentlemen are involved."

Smiling, Preston shook James's hand. "We hope to someday stop all this nonsense, but so far there has been little success."

There was obviously some history Jacques was unaware of. Diana watched all the men intently but stayed close to Bertram.

With a nod, Alex put his fists on his hips and surveyed the group. "Well done. Thank you for your help. It does little good to save these ladies if the men involved are still at large, though. Did you find any leads as to where Caron may have headed?"

"The only things that have left this city were farmers with empty carts. Unless he took a lesser path. I just don't know." Thomas shrugged.

Preston said, "Jacques and I will find him. He didn't get out of London without help. We'll ask around and check the roads. It may take a day or so, but we will pick up his trail. Once we do, we'll send word to Yorkshire."

With Alex's approval, Preston looked to Jacques to get moving.

Though she was only a few steps away, Diana might as well have been across the ocean. She'd melted in his arms when he'd held her at Hoare's, but ever since she'd been distant and cold. "May I have a word, Miss MacLeod?"

Silent and keeping a few feet between them, she followed him into the hallway.

The Everton servants were abuzz with excitement, and rushed this way and that. Several Everton ladies stood in the foyer chatting excitedly.

Wanting her close, Jacques threaded his fingers through hers and led her through a door. It entered on an extremely small and heavily furnished parlor. Scandals be damned, he closed the door. "I have to leave you for a while."

"Of course." She crossed her arms over her chest and leveled her gaze on him.

"I hope you understand that your safety is very important to me. I would not rush off at this time if it wasn't important." He wished he'd kept hold of her hand so he could drag her into his arms, but her current stance didn't bode well for a warm hug or more before he left.

“I appreciate your consideration. If anything had happened to Lady Chervil, I could not have lived with it.” Sincere but still distant, she stood as far away as the small parlor would allow.

“You are angry with me?” He closed the distance between them physically, if not otherwise.

Dropping her hands to her sides, she backed up to the wall. “You saved my life, why on earth would I be angry? You have been very kind to me, Mr. Laurent. I will always appreciate what you have done.”

So many emotions coursed through Jacques, he didn’t know what to say. Her formality was the most hurtful. “I was Jacques to you not long ago. Would you care to tell me what has changed?”

She’d managed to make her body as flat against the wall as her curves would allow. “Nothing has changed. We should never have become so familiar. I blame it on the danger. Now the danger seems to have passed, and I’ll be carted away to the north. You are safe and will go on with your life. Everything is as it should be.”

Nothing was as it should be. If it were, Diana would fling herself into his arms rather than making such an effort to keep him from touching her. He stepped back, frustrated. He needed her to be the warm, loving woman he’d come to adore, but she had changed over the last few hours, and it was his fault. Victor Caron should never have been allowed to get his hands on her even for a moment, let alone for a day. Jacques would make this right if it took a lifetime. “I have to go after Caron.”

“Yes, I know. He is a French spy and enemy of England. You and your friend will find him. I’m sure the English will appreciate your effort.”

The knock on the door forced Jacques to step even farther away.

Preston stuck his head in. “We have to go.”

Jacques wanted to tell her so much, but she had closed herself off from all emotion. He needed time to find the woman inside, but time was the one thing he didn’t have. “I will contact you as soon as we find Caron and bring him to justice.”

Crossing her arms pushed her breasts up in the evening gown she still wore from the night before. “Thank you. That will be a great relief.”

He’d loved seeing her in that gown, but now he cursed himself for not demanding she be allowed to change and rest. He couldn’t take her in his arms or kiss her. Denied even the slightest warmth, he was at a loss. He bowed. “Good day.”

“Goodbye. Please be careful.” She cleared her throat and left the parlor. Preston raised an eyebrow. “Is everything all right?”
“No, but we have no time to fix it, so we had better go.”



They had been to every pub between Cheapside and the high road. If Victor was going to get out of town, he would need help and he would have to find it in a less-than-reputable place.

Sick of the stench of stale beer and sweat, Jacques didn't think he could stand going into yet another of these establishments. This was for Diana, he told himself as he held his breath and entered the Bull and Maid.

It seemed as though the same people were at every bar telling the same lies to each other.

Preston went to the owner and leaned over the swill-stained bar. “We're looking for a friend who's gotten into some trouble. His name is Victor and he has a French accent.”

The barman laughed. “What kind of fix has Caron gotten himself into? I just saw him a few hours ago. Now that you mention it, he did look a bit out of sorts.”

“I'm afraid it's about a young lady. We were hoping to find him before her husband does. If you take my meaning?” Preston gave a wicked grin.

“Oh, that one always has a story about some little nugget he's soiled.” The barman slapped his hand on the wood, making the splattered beer splash. “He should be safe, though. Said he was leaving town and took a ride with William Farmer.”

“That's grand news. Do you know where they were heading?”

Two seats over, a man yelled a profanity at another. The evening had brought out the masses for their indulgence. Another man called back with an equally vicious curse. Fists started flying, pulling the barman away to break up the fight.

Preston rolled his eyes and Jacques shared the sentiment. They were so close.

It took a few minutes, and in the meantime, Jacques and Preston stayed out of the fray. When the barman returned, he stank almost as bad as the pub. “Sorry, you wanted to know where Caron and Farmer were headed?”

“That’s right. We want to put the husband off the path.” Preston was more adept at lying than Jacques would have thought.

He poured several ales and handed them across the bar to a lush-figured serving girl. “I heard Caron say he needed to use a less traveled road out of London. Must be avoiding that husband. They were going east before they took Farmer’s cart to his place. Strange thing, though, I was sure Farmer lived north of London. I guess they really want to steer clear of that tart’s husband.”

Preston left a shilling on the bar and they traversed the throng of revelers out of the Bull and Maid.

As soon as they were in the alley, Jacques asked, “So, do we go east or north?”

“East, I think. We have to find his path. It’s getting late. The Horsemen will start their journey with the ladies tomorrow at first light. We need to know where Victor is and keep him as far away from them as possible.” Preston waved and tossed a shilling at the boy who held their horses.

“If we go north, we might head him off.” Jacques mounted his horse.

“I still say we follow directly. We’ll never track him down if we don’t start in the same direction.”

They trotted out of London to the east. The man Alex had been watching the road had seen Farmer’s cart, but there had been only one man, and he hauled only empty bushel baskets.

Jacques was sure Victor had been in that cart. Somehow, he had hidden from sight, but he had been there and was now outside London. Since Diana was still in London, it gave Jacques some comfort.

They were fifteen miles outside of London when the rain started, and they hadn’t seen any sign of Victor or his conspirator. The chill in the air meant that the rain might very well turn to snow or ice. Jacques searched the edges of the woods for where two men in a cart might have left the road for shelter, but found nothing.

“Jacques, there’s an inn up ahead. We’ll not find them in this, not tonight. We can start out at first light and continue our search.” Preston tugged his hat down, shielding his eyes from the driving rain.

“We’ll lose the scent,” Jacques protested.

“My friend, you know as well as I that we have seen nor heard any hint of him. Perhaps a new day will bring us better luck.”

Unable to argue the point, Jacques nodded.

Preston urged his horse forward and they took a fast trot to the Wastrel Inn. A boy took their horses. Jacques gave him an extra shilling to see they were well fed and rubbed down.

Inside, the common room was full of men and women enjoying ale and food. A rotund man in a soiled apron and grinning from ear to ear waddled across the room. He made his way around tables and chairs as if he'd navigated the path a thousand times. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, welcome. Will you be needing rooms for the night? I'm afraid I only have one left, but it has two sturdy beds. I can offer you a warm fire, good food and fine brandy."

It was easy to like this innkeeper. Jacques shook his hand. "The room would be much appreciated, as would all the rest. I am Jacques Laurent, and this is my friend Preston Knowles."

Eyes wide as saucers, the innkeeper stared at Preston. "The Duke of Middleton, in my establishment. I'm honored, Your Grace. I am John Innis, and the Wastrel has been in my family for three generations. If you need anything at all, just say so, and I will do all in my power to grant it."

Jacques exchanged a look with Preston. It was possible Mr. Innis might be of help. Preston smiled. "We are searching for a Mr. Caron. Would you happen to have seen him today?"

Mr. Innis shook his head. "Never heard of him, but we've had a busy day, and now that the weather has turned bad, everyone is coming in for a pint."

"Of course. Some soup and that brandy you spoke of would be most welcome." Preston shook out his overcoat and hung it on the peg near the door before walking to a table near a large fireplace.

Jacques followed, but his mind was on where they would search in the morning. Had Victor gone east to escape England, or had he gone north with some other plan in mind? Once they were seated on a bench near the fire, Jacques said, "Perhaps we are looking for the wrong man, Pres."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You have been asking travelers and Mr. Innis if they've seen Caron, but perhaps this Mr. Farmer would be better known in such circles. If he carries his wares into London regularly, he might run into the same people each week or month. We have to assume Caron is still with Farmer."

Accepting his brandy from the server, Preston sighed. "It is our only clue. You make a good point. Let's eat and rest a few hours, then I'll ask after Mr. Farmer and his cart. I don't know how you look so wide awake. It's been a long day."

Jacques didn't bother to savor the mediocre brandy, drinking it down in one gulp. He endured the burn, then called for the bottle. "I am as tired as you, but I will not rest until Diana is safe. I cannot."

"I can see that you are smitten with her, but does the lady share your feelings? I would hate to see you brokenhearted again." Preston downed his brandy and poured them each another.

Scoffing, Jacques began feeling the effects of an empty stomach and two glasses of brandy in quick succession. He put his glass down. "Monique did not break my heart, though she did abuse my good faith."

"And nearly landed your head in a basket." Preston lowered his empty glass.

"Indeed. It was a near thing, and without your intervention, my parents would have been devastated. Still, I was not in love with Monique. At least now I can see it was merely an infatuation with a beautiful and experienced woman. She intrigued me, and of course she was a great deal of fun." He recalled all the times they had laughed together after making love. A shame she used him to profit from a government hunting for dissidents.

"You have not answered my question about Miss MacLeod."

The server was a buxom woman with blond hair peeking out from under her cap. She smiled and her cheeks were rosy apples. "I brought you some bread to go with the soup. It's beef. I hope that will appeal to you gentlemen."

Preston favored her with a wide smile. "Thank you, madam. It smells divine, and is just what we needed after a wet, cold ride."

Blushing, she curtsied and backed away.

Surprisingly, the soup was delightful. Tender beef, potatoes and carrots melted in Jacques's mouth. "It is very good."

While he spooned soup, Preston shook his head. "Still no response. Shall I take that to mean you are in love and don't want to admit it?"

Jacques put down his spoon. His head spun with both regret and brandy. The knot in his chest tightened painfully. "Diana is both brilliant and beautiful. I have found her heart to be pure in spite of the horrors she has endured. Despite my determination to never let another woman enter my heart, she weaved her way inside me. I will not let anything happen to her. I have failed her to the point where my chances of winning her are destroyed. For this, I shall never forgive myself."

"Are you saying you don't intend to pursue the woman you love?"

Preston had put his own soup aside and stared at him wide-eyed.

“She has distanced herself from my affection.” Even saying the words broke Jacques’s heart far worse than Monique’s betrayal. “I cannot blame her. I promised to keep her safe, and the moment I lured her out of Everton House she was taken by the very man who killed her parents.”

“That was not your fault. No one can blame you for the attack on the road. Victor Caron was well prepared to wait her out. She couldn’t stay in that house indefinitely. At least we were able to retrieve her and Lady Chervil. This is not a tragedy, Jacques. This was a success.” Preston pounded his fist on the table, making several heads turn.

Jacques forced a smile to ease any worries the revelers might have had. “I appreciate your passion on the subject and your support, but I failed her. She is alive and that will have to be enough for me. I am determined to find Caron, even if it means finding every man named Farmer in London to do it.”

“I don’t know how you can let her go. I would not allow anything to take my Millie away from me.”

“And Millie is lucky to have you. She is a gem and you are a perfect pair. Diana and I are mismatched from the start. I cannot imagine that loving a man of the same nation that imprisoned, hunted and tortured her would be an easy thing.” Another piece of his heart tore away and died.

It had been years since Jacques had cried, but the lump growing in his throat told him if he didn’t let this subject go, he would make an ass of himself.

“I never thought I would say this, Jacques, but you are a fool. That woman loves you just as much as you love her. You will both end miserably if you don’t pursue her.”

Jacques turned his attention back to his soup and the crust of bread. “It is not relevant. I must find Caron and secure a future for Diana even if that future is not with me.”

Shaking his head, Preston also returned to eating his soup. “Why is it that men in love turn to idiots? I have seen it dozens of times, and was nearly guilty of it myself. Ask the lady directly about her feelings. If she rejects you, at least you won’t have to wonder for the rest of your life over what might have been.”

The last spoonful of soup was cold after more talk than eating. Jacques poured another glass of brandy. Better to numb his pain than experience it tonight. “I think she made it quite clear by her cold reproach this afternoon. I

could not illicit any emotion from her. If that does not tell you of her resolve, then nothing will.”

Jacques tossed several coins on the table, picked up his glass and the bottle, and tromped up the steps to their room, where he planned to get good and drunk.

At the steps, the server who’d brought their food stopped him. “Sir?”

“I left your pay on the table.” He mounted the first step.

She touched his arm. “It’s not that, sir.”

He stared at her hand on his arm. She was not dressed as a prostitute, but sometimes these things were less obvious. He met her gaze. “I’m not in the market for company this evening, my dear, though I appreciate the thought.”

A deep blush stained her round cheeks, and she pulled her hand away. “I overheard you and your duke friend talking about Mr. Farmer and his French friend.”

Jacques searched her eyes for any signs of a ploy. He saw only dark rings of a hard-working woman at the end of a long day and earnest blue eyes. “What can you tell me, madam?”

“Billy Farmer was here a week ago with some man with a French accent. The Frenchman was rude and grabby.”

“What is your name, my dear?”

“May.”

“May, what did the Frenchman look like?” The rumble of excitement started in Jacques’s gut.

She pulled a sour face. “Tall as the doorway with brown hair and eyes, though not kind eyes like yours. He was a wicked one, I could tell. Made Mr. Innis wait on them, I did.”

“A wise decision. Have you seen either of them since?”

Across the common room, Preston spoke with Mr. Innis before heading toward Jacques and the server.

“That’s why I stopped you, sir. I saw them before I came to work today. They were in Billy’s cart and turned into Sally Wendell’s boardinghouse just before dark.”

“Who is Sally Wendell and where is her boardinghouse?” It took all of Jacques’s restraint to keep from jumping for joy.

May shrugged. “Sally is a widow. Keeps a clean house and boards travelers who don’t want all the hubbub of the inn.”

Preston heard only the last bit but must have guessed from Jacques’s

expression that the news was promising. “Where is the boardinghouse?”

“It’s just up the lane a mile or so. The drive is on the left when you pass through town.” May blushed up at Preston. She didn’t likely speak to dukes very often in her capacity as a server at the run-down Wastrel Inn.

Mr. Innis looked over and frowned. He started toward them, but a couple of drunks stopped him with some foolery.

“May, you have been a great help.” Jacques handed her a pound sterling. “I would hide this away before your employer arrives, and not speak of this to anyone.”

She gaped at the coin in her palm before ferreting it away in the pocket of her skirt. “Thank you, sir. You can’t know what that will mean to my family.”

Extricating himself from the drunks, Innis finally arrived by the stairs.

Preston said, “Miss May, the food was very good. Thank you.”

Puffed up like a pigeon, Innis grinned. “I’m so glad you liked it, Your Grace.”

“It has revived us, Mr. Innis. In fact, we are ready to be on our way. Of course, we’ll pay you for the room.” Preston handed Innis some coin.

“But, Your Grace, you should rest, and this is far too much for one room.” Innis looked genuinely confused by the amount of money in his hand.

“Consider it extra for such fine brandy and soup.”

Jacques handed the remaining brandy to the innkeeper, smiled at May and followed Preston out of the Wastrel Inn.

Their horses had been fed and watered, but it would be foolish to ride them hard after such a long day without rest. Mrs. Wendell’s boardinghouse was not far. They rode the horses down the road at a walk, and ten minutes later they turned down the lane May had indicated.

“How do you suggest we approach? Shall we storm the front door or sneak about?” Preston kicked his horse into a slow trot to pull up beside Jacques.

“I suggest we knock on the door,” Jacques said. “We may have a better chance with the proprietress if we are direct and polite.”

“And if Caron is within?”

“Then we storm the house and capture him. If he should die in the process, I would not mourn his loss.” Jacques let the rage roll through him before discarding it for a calmer head.

“No. I don’t imagine you would.”

The looming stone house was surrounded by woods. The snow-covered yard showed several carts, horses and people had been through in the last few hours. They couldn't know if any of those cart tracks belonged to Mr. Farmer.

They tied the horses to a long post near a walkway paved with small stones. Those stones made it difficult to approach without making any noise. Perhaps that was wise on the proprietress's part.

Preston rapped the knocker.

Brisk footsteps echoed inside before a woman in her midthirties opened the door. "How may I help you gentlemen?"

"Are you Mrs. Wendell?" Preston put on the smile he used whenever dealing with women he wished to charm. It had been a while since Jacques had seen the expression.

"I am." She was tall and stood very straight. With her blond hair pulled up in a severe bun and her dark gray dress, she appeared unapproachable. A slight blush proved that she was not immune to Preston's charms. "Who might you be?"

"I am Preston Knowles, Duke of Middleton, and this is my friend Jacques Laurent. We were told that you might have two guests we've been looking for tonight."

She narrowed her eyes and closed the door a few inches. "Who are you looking for?"

Stepping forward, Jacques put his boot against the door. It wouldn't do for her to bolt them out before they had their answers. "A Frenchman named Caron and his friend William Farmer."

She released the door and her expression eased. "They were here, but Billy got drunk and I told them to leave. I'll not have that kind of foolishness in my house."

Bad luck. Jacques said, "A wise woman, to be sure. Would you happen to know where they were traveling to?"

"Nothing but trouble, those two. I could see it the moment they showed up." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I shouldn't tell you, but I like Billy and I'd hate for the Caron fellow he's taken up with to get him into trouble."

"We will do our best to keep Mr. Farmer safe. We are well aware he is being used by Mr. Caron." Preston leaned in to further ensure the door would not be closed on them.

“As I said, Billy had been drinking. He was going on and on about some foolishness involving a pot of gold they had to go up north for. That Caron fellow told him to shut his mouth more than once, but Billy kept on about heading all the way to Yorkshire, and that being the farthest he’d ever been from home.”

“Bastard.” Jacques couldn’t contain the curse. “I beg your pardon, madam.”

A fierce look from Preston told Jacques he should stay silent before he made this good lady angry. “Forgive my friend, Mrs. Wendell. You see, it is his pot of gold that Caron is after.”

Her eyes widened at his language. “This pot of gold is a woman?”

Preston smiled. “I’m afraid we are not at liberty to say, but you have been very gracious.” He handed her a shilling.

Waving off the payment, she said, “I don’t need that, Your Grace. I do a fine business here. I’m an honest woman. You go and make sure that Caron stays away from your woman. He’s not the type to treat a lady with respect.”

They bowed, and Preston said, “I’m sure you’re right. Thank you.”

Mounting their horses, Jacques looked at the snowy road before them. “It’s going to be a long night. We should get some fresh horses.”

“Since we know where he’s going and he will likely take a surreptitious path, perhaps we might go back to the inn and get a few hours’ sleep.”

“I’ll never sleep.” Jacques’s temper was rising faster than he could control. “But you have a point. The snow will make travel harder for a cart, and he has already set himself back two days’ ride. We’ll rest for two hours and then pursue.”

With Preston’s nod, they headed back to the Wastrel Inn.

Chapter Twelve

Diana watched the countryside change out the window of the carriage. It had taken them three days to reach the Midlands. They would stop for the night in Leicester. That was what Alex had told her. Alex was polite, but he never asked anything, just issued orders and expected everyone to follow.

The day before, the last of the four Buckrose Horsemen had joined the party, and the other men seemed to relax. They acted as if together, they could not be harmed. She thought them a bit arrogant.

Shivering, Honoria pulled her cloak tighter. “You shall freeze me to death with your Scottish blood, Diana.”

Diana pulled the window closed. “I’m sorry. It is good to be traveling north, even though we won’t get as far as my family’s home. Someday I hope to see it again.”

“I have been wondering why you have no accent.”

“Mother sent me to finishing school in England. She wanted me to have an opportunity to marry well, and thought the Lowland accent would hurt my chances of making a good match.”

Honoria cocked her head. “Was marrying well important to you?”

“No.” She laughed. “I wanted to invent things and run experiments with Father. It was a great debate between my mother and me.”

If she had been more obedient, she might have already been out of the house and Victor wouldn’t have been able to use her to incite such rage in her father. Her parents might still be captive, but they would be alive, and they would have had her to defend them in England. Perhaps she could have gotten the English government to rescue them. Maybe these Horsemen would

have helped.

A long sigh issued from her, and she wished she could run and hide from all of it.

As if she had looked into her heart, Honoria's eyes filled with sympathy. "It wasn't your fault, Diana dear. You were not to blame for what happened, and wishing for a different past will not make is so."

Diana could not think why such a kind woman would have taken her part, but she was happy to have a friend and companion on this journey. Honoria was her only hope of ever seeing outside again. When the Horsemen had informed her she would be traveling north with them for her own safety, Diana assumed she was being carted off to some prison where they would ask a lot of questions and believe none of her answers. When Honoria said she was going too, things seemed less bleak.

"I realize I was not the direct cause of my parents' deaths, but had I behaved differently throughout my life, things might have turned out better." Emotion clogged her throat and built behind her eyes.

Honoria took her hand. "We are given circumstances throughout our lives, and we act according to our needs and wants at that moment. You can't expect to have known five years ago that some action or inaction would lead to disaster. It's illogical to believe that or berate yourself over the past."

Everything about Honoria was surprising. "You know, when I first came to Everton House, the ladies said you were nonsensical and flighty, but such fun. You are nothing like they described. You do like to have fun, but there is nothing flighty about you."

"Oh, I can act with great whimsy. All things for all times. Our association has required a different side of my nature, to be sure." Honoria grinned wickedly. "I suppose we shall see your Mr. Laurent soon."

Heart pounding, Diana forced her expression to remain bland. "I wouldn't think so. He is a smart man and will keep his distance."

"Even smart men fall in love, Diana."

"It is possible his heart was leaning in that direction, but I have made certain he will alter his course. And just so, he has taken another route to stay away from me." Her voice cracked, and she swallowed down the hurt she had caused with her cold regard in London. It was for the best. He had saved her, and that was that.

Honoria's grin never faltered. "I think Jacques Laurent is made of stronger stuff than that."

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

Alex trotted up to the door. “We’ll be stopping shortly, ladies. There is a fine inn here and we shall enjoy a good meal. I know it will be inconvenient, but from this point on, we shall push a bit harder. We feel it safest to get to Buckrose Castle as quickly as possible. The castle is impenetrable.”

“So this will be our last decent night of sleep for a few days?” Honoria fussed with her cloak.

“I’m afraid so, my lady.” Alex kept his horse at a pace with the carriage, which had slowed as they approached the inn.

Once they arrived, he dismounted, as did the other three horsemen and Michael Rollins. This was the finest inn they had come to since leaving London. The stone building was lit with candles, and there were several men sitting watching the snow fall while drinking ale. Two boys ran over to help with the horses and carriage, while an older man with gray hair and a stooped walk came across the yard at a snail’s pace. He ordered the boys to care for the animals, then he stopped and talked to the Horseman named Oliver Graham.

Diana suspected all of the Buckrose Horsemen were titled, but none said so. Arrogance came with a title, and all four displayed it.

As Alex handed her down, she whispered, “If we are going to travel at night, we shall need ways to keep Lady Chervil warmer. This weather is quite hard on her.”

Worry flashed in his eyes, and he watched as Honoria pulled her cloak around her throat and ambled toward the inn without waiting for an escort. “I will procure a few furs and we shall ask for heated stones whenever we stop for food. Will that be sufficient?”

The genuine concern he showed surprised Diana. “I think that will be very helpful. Thank you.”



T rue to his word, the rest of the journey, though fast, was warmer. Alex had purchased four thick furs and managed to get two warm stones every time they stopped for food.

They turned down the lane to Buckrose Castle and Honoria sighed. “I shall miss all this pampering, but it will be good to get out of this blasted

carriage.”

“I’m sure you will manage to be well cared for within the castle.” Diana watched out the window as a group of boys in school clothes laughed and played on the snow-covered field to the left. “What manner of castle is this?”

Honorina gazed in the children’s direction. “I believe part of the castle is in use as a school of some kind.”

The carriage didn’t stop, though the children paused their play to wave, and all four Horsemen waved back. Honorina waved as well and giggled.

“This is not what I expected,” Diana said under her breath.

The traveling party of five men on horseback and the carriage rounded the right side of the castle, where they approached a smaller entrance and a full line of servants waiting to greet them. The footmen were in black livery and looking very smart alongside the maids, housekeeper and butler. Ten servants in all lined the steps.

Alex handed them down as a man with gray around his temples and a slight paunch dashed over. “My lord, you are earlier than expected. I hope all is well.”

“Hello, Bates. We rode fast despite the weather. Better to be home should anything ill befall us. This is Miss MacLeod and Lady Honorina Chervil. They will be our guests for a few weeks, and have the run of the castle and grounds.”

“A pleasure to meet you both. Mrs. Bates is the housekeeper. She will show you your rooms and see to anything you need.” Bates bowed low.

Mrs. Bates was thin with a kind face and a hint of graying hair poking out from under her cap. She rushed over. “I’m just sure you both need a rest.” Her thick Yorkshire accent was light and comforting, like a favorite aunt who you only saw once a year. “I have everything made up and have arranged baths and maids for you both. I was told you wouldn’t be traveling with your own.”

Alex asked Bates, “How have things been here? Any trouble?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, sir. I have guards posted as you requested, and no one has seen anything unusual.”

“Follow me, ladies.” Mrs. Bates smiled as they passed her husband.

Diana wanted to hear what the men were talking about, but the lure of a hot bath was too tempting. “Do you think we might find a crust of bread or something, Mrs. Bates? It has been since morning that we ate.”

When she spun around, Mrs. Bates’s eyes were wide and her mouth open.

“Good gracious. That won’t do. As soon as I have you both settled, I’ll go and see Cook. You must be half starved. Those men. They should have been more considerate.”

It took a great deal of effort not to laugh. “I think they smelled home today and were anxious to get here.”

Fury waning, she pursed her lips. “I suppose I can understand that, but it’s no excuse for starving the two of you.”

It wouldn’t be surprising to find out Alexander Lynds was in trouble with his housekeeper and would hear about this. Diana giggled. “You are very kind.”

She cocked her head. “Maybe you have not had enough kindness, miss.”

The comment brought tears to Diana’s eyes, and she dashed them away.

Honorina smiled and put her arm through the crook in Diana’s elbow as they walked up the stairs. “That much is certain, Mrs. Bates. Our girl could use a dash of indulgence, and I can tell she is in the right place to be well spoiled.”

A wide smile broke out on Mrs. Bates’s warm face. “We will do our best to care for you just as we care for our Horsemen.”

“Just who are these ‘horsemen’?” Diana asked.

They stopped at a door. Mrs. Bates opened it and showed them in. “You’ll have to ask them that, miss. It’s not my place to say, but I think if you ask, they’ll tell you. It’s not much of a secret.”

Had she never asked? Diana supposed she’d been so caught up in whether she was a prisoner or under protection, she’d never considered just asking them who they were and why they were helping her. “I will ask them. Thank you, Mrs. Bates.”

With a nod, Mrs. Bates said, “You have water for washing and that tub will be filled in a few minutes. Cecilia will be your lady’s maid. She’ll be here to introduce herself in just a few minutes. The footmen will bring your trunk up right away. I’ll see to a meal and Lady Chervil will be just one door down. If you need anything at all, ask any of the staff and we will be happy to help.”

“Thank you.” Diana sat on the end of the soft down bed as soon as she was alone and looked out the window over the snow-covered gardens. Perhaps this place wouldn’t be too terrible.

There was a knock. Maids didn’t usually knock so firmly, but this was a different kind of place.

Diana wished she could have a few more moments to herself. "Come in."
"It's a lovely view," Jacques said from the threshold.

She jumped up from the bed, her heart pounding in her throat. "You... I... I wasn't expecting to see you."

He stepped inside but left the door open. "Pres and I found out that Victor Caron was headed this way, so we took the quickest path to get here. We arrived yesterday."

"Did you see him?" There was no sense in panicking. She was not in control of her life and hadn't been since becoming a French prisoner.

"No. No one here has seen Farmer or Caron. You will be safe here, Diana." He stepped closer. "Why didn't you expect to see me?"

She pulled her chin up. "Why would I? You have your own life."

"That is where you are wrong."

"Excuse me." A girl of perhaps eighteen stood in the doorway. Her dark blond hair was falling out of her cap and her cheeks were bright red like she'd been running. "Should I come back, miss?"

"No. Cecilia, is it? No. Come in. Mr. Laurent was just leaving." Diana both wanted and didn't want to know what he meant by his comment. He was too close, and it was too soon. She'd not gotten her heart under control yet. Though, until she'd seen him standing in the doorway, she'd thought she had.

"I'll see you at dinner, Miss MacLeod." He bowed and left with the hint of a grin on those beautiful lips.



Dinner with only two women and so many men was something new. She wore a blue dress with a modest collar and skipped meeting with everyone in the parlor beforehand. These men were not her friends, with the exception of Jacques and perhaps the Duke of Middleton. The rest wanted information, at the very least.

When she arrived in the dining room, everyone was already seated. She curtsied and took the empty chair between Sebastian Turril and Oliver Graham. The two Horsemen who had met them halfway to Buckrose.

Sebastian was the kind of man women swooned over. Lean and tall, with fair skin, dark eyes and a smile that muddled one's mind. His dark hair was pulled back in a queue, and he bowed as he held her chair. "Good evening,

Miss MacLeod. I trust you have everything you need.”

Avoiding meeting his gaze, she nodded. “Yes. The staff has been very accommodating. Thank you.”

Oliver smiled, and despite the fact that he looked as if he could break a person in half with his huge arms and broad back, the effect was charming. “If there is anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you. You are most kind.”

Across the table, Honoria tapped her fork on her plate. She studied the delicate flowers around the edge of the fine china and the polish on the crystal. “What manner of place is this? Who were all those children we saw playing as we drove up?”

Like all the men, Alex had dressed in a suit for dinner. He was no less formidable than he had been in traveling clothes. “Most of Buckrose Castle is a school run by Mrs. Jessica Fallcraft.”

Intrigued, Diana said, “A school. Are you four teachers of some sort?”

Michael laughed. “Hardly. They can only teach you to roughhouse and defy authority.”

The soup was served, and Honoria sipped, then regarded Michael a long while. “Did you attend this school, Your Grace?”

“I went to Eton, my lady. However, Middleton’s father attended here, as did Laurent’s.”

She turned to Jacques. “Your father was schooled here in Yorkshire?”

Somehow Jacques’s smile sent a warm balm over Diana’s world. She could see his face for ten thousand days and never tire of it. He looked at her as if he could read her thoughts before answering Honoria. “My father and Preston’s met here. It is why the Horsemen saved me when I was scheduled for the guillotine.”

Oliver interrupted. His deep voice and sharp blue eyes left no room for debate. “I hope you both paid your respects to Mrs. Fallcraft.”

Swallowing a spoonful of soup, Preston grinned. “Before we even settled into our rooms, Oliver. Never fear, we know what is important here at Buckrose.”

Sebastian leaned in to speak to Diana. “Mrs. Fallcraft is a remarkable lady. If you can find the time, you will enjoy meeting her. Everyone who meets her falls just a little bit in love with her, as well as learns a healthy fear of a dressing down.”

“Goodness, I’m sure Lady Chervil and I will make it a point to get to know her. If she has all of you on your toes, she must be something.” Diana left half of the bland soup in the fine china bowl and avoided Jacques’s gaze.

The rest of the meal was well cooked and adequate, but nothing tasted good to Diana. She decided it must be her, since Honoria raved about each course.

Pudding was placed on the table. Oliver turned in his chair to face Diana. “Tell us about yourself, Miss MacLeod.”

Even though she expected questions, her heart sank when the kindly pretense was over. “What would you like to know, Mr. Graham?”

“Start at the beginning.” He frowned.

She sighed. “The beginning of my life or just from where French spies carried us off? You’ll have to be more specific. I’m nearly six and twenty. Are you interested in all those years or just these last three?”

Sebastian laughed. “She has a point, Oli. You should just ask what you want to know.”

“All right. Are you working or have you ever worked for the French government or any organization that might harm England or the crown?”

“Well, that was direct,” Nathaniel said.

“Is this necessary?” Eyes filled with anger, Jacques stared the Horsemen down.

Alex said, “If she wants our help, it is.”

Preferring the direct question, Diana held up her hand to stop Jacques from mounting a defense. “It’s all right. I’ll answer.” She took a breath. “My family was captured and tortured. If you want to know about when my mother’s fingers were chopped off, I will be happy to give you a detailed account. No. I have never worked for the French or anyone else besides the Everton Domestic Society. My father was forced to assist, but gave them next to nothing when he could have built their rocket with ease. He protected this country, which is more than England did for him.”

She had to steady her breathing. Thinking of Mother’s pain and Father’s resignation and sorrow broke her heart and infuriated her. She searched for some sign that the men doubted her, but everyone stared back with either surprise or sympathy. Jacques looked ready to leap across the table. “My parents were killed trying to protect me.”

With a nod, Sebastian lowered his gaze and studied some point on the table. He looked at Diana. “How were you able to escape?”

“I bribed a guard who fancied me.” Shame washed through her. But through her embarrassment, she knew she would do it again. “I could not let my parents die in vain only to have those pigs force me to finish Father’s work. I would have killed to escape at that point. What I did seems a small price compared to what Mother and Father gave.” A tear ran down her cheek, but she refused to wipe it away.

Honorina wept openly.

Alex handed Honorina his handkerchief. “I know this is difficult, Miss MacLeod. Please don’t think we are unsympathetic, but there are things our government must know. What part of the better rocket did your father give them?”

“He told them they would need a larger rocket with more thrust in order to reach farther destinations. They asked about accuracy and he researched the problem. He spent hours writing notes regarding his work. None of those notes were correct.”

“For two years he continued that farce?” Oliver’s voice boomed in the quiet dining room.

When she’d read her father’s journals, she’d been shocked and relieved at the cleverness in each page. “He kept them thinking he was working toward their goal. When Victor Caron realized he had been misleading them, things took an ugly turn.”

Alex stood and paced the length of the table. “I don’t understand what they gained by killing your father. Forgive me, but your mother would have made sense. How could they profit by killing the man they captured for his skills?”

She had to close her eyes at the notion that her mother was expendable. It was impossible to feel nothing. Mother had been a beacon of light in a world gone mad, and those animals had slit her throat as if she were a sheep. “It was an accident, I think. A guard stabbed Father to protect himself. Of course, Caron was furious and had the guard killed. He is only a moment away from insanity. He became obsessed with me during our captivity, deciding I was the key to making my father work for their cause.”

The four Buckrose Horsemen looked at each other for a few seconds. Some silent communication passed between them before Alex nodded. “We believe you, Miss MacLeod. When the danger has passed, the king will not require your imprisonment.”

Diana wasn’t certain what to say. “You have that kind of power?”

Smiling, he shrugged. “The Horsemen serve the king and the king trusts our judgment.”

“Will I be forced to complete my father’s work for England?” Certain she was missing some key piece of information, she refused to be caught unawares later. It was best to find out immediately what England had in store for her, and adjust her life accordingly.

Alex crossed his arms over his chest. “His majesty’s loyal subjects are not forced into labor. You will be free to do as you please.”

It was impossible. Nothing she expected from her government had come to pass. Was all of this Jacques’s doing? He certainly had powerful friends willing to help him and extend that assistance to her. Perhaps she had become so jaded she couldn’t see the good in people anymore. Diana stifled the long sigh building up inside her.

“What is to be done about Victor Caron? It is clear he had plans to journey here. It means our enemies know of this place.” Michael pursed his lips and stared at Alex.

“The castle is impenetrable.” Oliver stood and held Diana’s chair.

Sebastian offered his arm. “Shall we all go to the parlor?”

Rounding the table, Jacques offered his own arm. Expression fierce, he bowed to Sebastian, who immediately stepped back.

Jacques stared at where her hand lay on his arm before addressing Oliver. “No place is without flaws. If someone is willing to take enough risk, he can get in and get what he wants. Besides the fortress, what have you done to protect these ladies?”

Alex raised a brow and walked toward the door. “Clearly, Miss MacLeod has you to protect her as well as the guards posted all along the walls and gardens. We will do all in our power to keep both ladies safe, but you are correct. If someone is willing to die for what they want, they can get in.”

The familiar knot tightened around Diana’s heart. She would never be safe, and her ordeal would never end. “There is one thing I have not mentioned before, as no one asked.”

Halfway across the hall, they all stopped, an awkward spot with nine people all clustered in the passage.

“What is it, Miss MacLeod? Do you have more information about rockets?” Alex’s question rang with accusation.

“Not rockets really. When Victor became certain that I was his ticket to success, he toted me around the fortress like a rag doll. I saw a plan to burn

Porto to the ground. Something about the English army coming through and the city being expendable. Besides his obsession, that may be why Victor hunts me so doggedly.”

Oliver said, “Porto still stands, but the war has been very hard on Portugal and Spain. There has been talk for several years about sending troops. The debate continues.”

“If you like, I can draw you a map of their attack routes in the morning. I have a good memory.” All those memories weighed Diana down.

“That would be helpful.” Uncertainty underlined Alex’s agreement.

All Diana could do was be honest and try to help. Whether they believed her or not was out of her control. “I think I have had enough to eat. It has been a long journey. If you don’t mind, I will retire for the night.”

Honorias took her arm. She looked full of fire. “I agree. I’ve had enough as well.”

With seven pairs of male eyes watching her, Diana had never experienced such an awkward walk up a staircase.

Instead of going to her own room, Honorias followed Diana into hers. “They say they believe you, but these men have too many secrets. I’m not saying they’ve lied, but I think tomorrow we will go and meet this Mrs. Fallcraft and see if their characters can be discerned.”

Diana sank on the bed and a long sigh pushed out. “What makes you think their teacher will be any more honest?”

“If she is not forthright, we can assume they are not to be trusted. Let’s just see, since we have little choice but to remain here.”

Getting up, Diana pushed down a wave of nausea. “That’s not true, my lady. You could go. You are not required to stay here and would be far safer if you went back to London or to one of your other homes.”

Honorias took a step back and leveled her eyes on Diana. “I’ll not leave you no matter the danger. Do you think I would abandon you to this pack of men? I could never.”

“But your safety is more important than whatever might happen to me,” Diana begged.

“No. You may stop this line of thought, Diana. I will not leave you until I am certain you will be safe and free. Not even the King of England will lay a hand on you while I’m your chaperon.” Like a small lioness, Honorias wouldn’t be swayed.

Diana pulled her into her arms. “I wish you would go, but thank you for

being here. I can think of no one I would rather be in danger with.”

Bell-like giggles bubbled out of Honoria. “You are a good girl. I think Jacques will make you a fine husband as soon as the two of you realize there is no other possibility.”

It took Diana a full ten seconds to respond, and all the while Honoria patted her back in a motherly way. “He is smart enough to stay away from a woman who nearly got him killed.”

Honoria shook her head and pushed out of the embrace. “Nonsense. Men are stupid by nature. If you love him, it is my opinion you let him know sooner rather than later.”

It was because her feelings for him were so strong that Diana was going to leave him to his own future. No one wanted a woman who put them in harm’s way at every turn. “I’m sure you’re right, my lady.”

“Of course I am. You should get some rest. It has been a long day.” Honoria sashayed out of the room humming a tune of her own devising.

Chapter Thirteen

Jacques was determined to find out what he had done to cause the rift between Diana and him. She'd said she didn't blame him for her abduction in London, but he couldn't think what else had gone wrong.

Back in his room after pudding, he'd waved off a very fine brandy. Clouding his mind would not help. He lay in his bed for hours, staring at the ceiling and listening to each member of the group clomp up the stairs and go to bed. When the clock in the foyer chimed one o'clock, he gave up all pretense of sleep.

He pulled on his trousers and blouse before creeping down the hall. She might turn him away, and then he would have to return to his sleepless night. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had made him nervous. Maybe never. Yet standing outside Diana's door, his stomach was in knots and a bead of sweat dripped from his temple.

Becoming an idiot hadn't been in Jacques's plans. He knocked softly enough so no one in the other rooms would hear. It was possible Diana wouldn't hear the weak rap, either.

"Who's there?" Her raspy, soft voice filtered through the door.

"Jacques." It was the only word he could manage before his throat closed.

The bolt slid, and she opened the door. She was an angel in a voluminous white gown with one thick braid that lay in front of her shoulder. "Is everything okay?"

Heart beating like a rabbit on the run, Jacques swallowed his longing. "There is no danger, if that is what you mean. May I come in, Diana?"

Backing in, she fully opened the door. Embers from the dying fire and moonlight reflecting on the snow left enough light to see her standing to the

side with wide eyes. She clenched her hands in front of her.

“I’m sorry to come so late, but I could not sleep.” He added a log to the fire and poked at the embers.

“Is something troubling you?”

Placing the poker back in the rack, he took a long breath before turning. “I am troubled by many things these last few months. I had a plan for my life.”

“I am sorry that meeting me has altered your plan.” She inched along the wall toward the fire while keeping her distance from him.

He stepped into her path. “I am not sorry.”

Those large eyes begged for something, but he wasn’t sure what. Nothing about her nightdress was alluring, yet when she crossed her arms over her chest, she was adorable. “How can you not be? I almost caused your death. If they had hit you any harder, you could have been permanently damaged. It’s a miracle no one was killed. And for no good reason.”

He hated the tears tightening her voice. “You were not to blame, Diana. I should have protected you better, but that fact aside, Victor Caron is to blame, the French government he works for is to blame. None of this is your fault.” He stepped so close she had to look up to keep her gaze on his. “As for the reason, you are more than enough. Do you think Bertram would have stayed home if he had known he would be battered trying to protect you?”

“I cannot watch anyone else die for me. You should not be here, Jacques. These men work for the government and will use me to get what they want. If you get in the way, you will be hurt. I want you safe.” Her tears flowed freely down flushed cheeks.

“What good is it to be physically well if my heart is broken?” He ran his thumb along her cheek and wiped her tears away. “I would die for you, Diana. I appreciate your concern, but I will not give you up.”

She backed up a step, and Jacques was captivated by the bobbing of her throat as she swallowed. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. “And if I tell you I don’t share your feelings?”

“If I thought it was true, you would destroy me. However, I do not believe you are devoid of feelings for me. Perhaps it is arrogance, but I think you care for me, if only just a little.” He touched the soft braid at her shoulder, then pulled his hand away and waited.

“You should go back to London or to your parents’ home.” She clasped her elbows with her hands.

Jacques pulled her hands away. Kissing one, then the other, he rejoiced in her sigh. “Even if you hated me, I would not leave you when the danger is still very real. I must know you are safe. If, after Caron is caught, you wish to send me away, I will have no choice but to go. But I shall see this through with you. The Horsemen are good men and they will protect you, but they also have an obligation to make sure you are not a danger to England. That duty overshadows anything else they may do. You need more than Lady Chervil on your side. Preston and I are here for you. We will keep you safe not only from Victor, but also from the Horsemen if need be.”

Since she didn’t pull her hands away, he kept them in his. Touching her gave him purpose and a taste of what his life might be. He refused to believe it wasn’t possible.

“Jacques, you do too much. You cannot hope to save me from England.” She rested her cheek on his chest.

Heaven. Wrapping his arms around her, he breathed in the flowery scent of her hair and reveled in the warmth of her skin. “Preston is a duke. He has quite a bit of influence. Michael is also a duke and a hero, and while his loyalties are split, he is well known for always doing the right thing. He will not let anything happen to a good person.”

“How can you be so sure I am good?” Her body sagged into him.

Jacques lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Placing her on the sheets, he leaned over and kissed her forehead. “You are good. I have never doubted it, and I shall never doubt you, my sweet goddess.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “You have always believed in me.”

Leaning away, he said, “And I always will.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to my own bed.” He brushed an errant hair from her cheek.

“Will you not hold me until I sleep? It is only in your arms that I can truly rest.” She curled on her side and wrapped her arm around her pillow.

Knowing he should leave, and being able to deny her, were two different things. “Only for a short while. I will not give anyone cause to mistrust you. You are a fine lady and should be courted.”

“I used to be fine. Now I’m soiled. You can do far better.” Sleep further roughened her voice.

Jacques climbed into the bed behind her and wrapped his arms around her. Just as it had been the first time, it was perfection. So much trust rested with him when she had little reason to trust anyone. It was his undoing.

“There is no one better than you, goddess. You are as perfect as the moon herself.”

Breaths even and deep, she might have been asleep before hearing him. It was of no consequence. He would have time to tell her every day how perfect she was. Somehow this remarkable woman would be his.

The fire dwindled and popped, waking him just before dawn. Jacques crept from the bed and made sure Diana was properly tucked in before slinking back to his own room and into bed.

It hadn't been exactly what he'd wanted, yet it was more than he'd hoped for—to hold her for a few hours and give her some peace. One day he would chase all her demons away.



The ladies broke their fasts in their rooms, so only men sat at the breakfast table. Jacques's father had told him that boys who went to the Buckrose School grew into remarkable men. These Horsemen were remarkable, that was true, but he didn't know if he could trust them to keep Diana safe.

Preston gave him a look that said he was staring and should stop. Much like the four Horsemen, he and Pres had been friends long enough that they managed much conversation without saying a word.

Turning his attention to his coddled eggs and sausage, he ate and listened to Oliver and Alex discuss some plan to draw Victor into the open. Neither said how they would accomplish this feat.

Sebastian said, “Once we have him, you know we will have to turn him over to London. They will want a trial, and either lock him up or hang him publicly.”

Sitting back in his chair, Alex placed his folded hands on his stomach. “They will get him, but not before we have all the information we need from him. Miss MacLeod's situation is unfortunate for her, but might prove very helpful to us.”

Footfalls on the stairs were followed by the butler poking his head in. “Miss MacLeod has come down, sir.”

Alex stood. “Please ask her to meet me in the study, Bates.”

It took sheer will to remain in his seat. Jacques watched Alex walk to the

door.

At the threshold, Alex stopped and turned back toward the table. “Mr. Laurent, I assume you would like to be present at this meeting.”

Jacques shot up from his seat. “Yes.”

“Very well then.” Alex nodded.

The study spanned half the depth of the castle. Jacques imagined it had once been a ballroom, but if so, it had been converted to its current life long ago. A spiral staircase filled the center near a long span of windows and led up to a cat walk with cases of books that wrapped the entire room. “I think you have more books than Preston, and that’s quite a feat.”

“They don’t belong to me. They are part of the school, but this section has been dedicated to the Buckrose Horsemen for almost ten years. Under normal circumstances, students are allowed to come and borrow books. We have suspended those privileges while there is danger, of course.” Alex sat in one of four wingback chairs in the front of the study. The windows there were not as large as the ones under the stairs and they faced the front garden near the drive.

Diana cleared her throat.

Alex rose. “Please come in, Miss MacLeod.”

“I apologize. I overheard your conversation.” She joined them, and when Alex offered her a chair, she sat.

Waving off the apology, Alex said, “No need. We were discussing the study and the school. None of it is a secret.”

She watched him, eyes filled with curiosity. His Diana was always seeking knowledge. “Why do the Buckrose Horsemen reside here? If I may say, it seems an odd pairing with a school.”

“I suppose it is, but Oliver, Nathaniel, Sebastian and I went to school here. We formed the Horsemen at the request of the Prince Regent shortly after we left school, to help with French spies. At almost the same time, the Buckrose School was struggling to stay afloat. It might not be as prestigious as Eton, but it’s a fine school, and there are young people who need a place less regimented and stuffy.”

Jacques sat. “So you bought the school and saved it, and put the Horsemen’s headquarters here to protect it?”

With a shrug, Alex smiled. “I like to keep an eye on things here, and it’s out of the way. Most people don’t know of our existence, and that is for the best most of the time.”

“You are nicer than you let on.” Diana kept her gaze level with Alex’s.

When Alex laughed, the sound was out of character. “I suppose that’s true. And with that thought still on your mind, I would like to make a proposal.”

The hair on the back of Jacques’s neck stood up. “I am not going to like this.”

“No. Probably not,” Alex agreed.

Diana kept a mild expression plastered on her face. It was how she looked whenever she wanted to keep her emotions in check. “Tell me what you want of me.”

“We plan to do a thorough search of the area. Mr. Laurent and His Grace are reasonably certain Victor Caron has come in search of you. That means he already knew about us, and it could mean that the French government also knows about us. The Horsemen will keep you safe, but our first priority is to capture Victor and find out exactly what he’s told Napoleon.”

“What does that have to do with me.”

Perched on the edge of his seat, Jacques wondered the same thing, but he had a suspicion that it would not be safe.

“If we cannot find Caron within a reasonable period of time, we will have to draw him out. As you yourself have admitted, he has an unusual obsession with you. It might be the only flaw in his ability to hide.”

Jacques leaped from his chair. “You cannot mean to use Miss MacLeod as bait!”

Diana’s voice was soft and shot to his heart. “Jacques, please. Let’s hear Mr. Lynds out. The danger of French spies in England is very real. I can attest to that. If learning the information carried by Victor Caron will save another family from the horror I’ve lived through, I will do what I can.”

Eyes bright with surprise, Alex leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “You would be willing to help us?”

Sitting back, she rolled her eyes. “Mr. Lynds, you forget that I am English. I have always wanted what is best for England. My parents died protecting their country, no matter what you may think.”

“Diana, you could be killed. It is not acceptable to use you to lure Caron into the open. Victor hates me with a specific passion. I will be adequate bait.”

She looked into Jacques’s eyes with something warm and full of emotion. He wanted to call it love, but that would have to wait for her to decide. For

now, the beauty of that expression could hold him for years.

“Either one of you might draw the attention of Caron and cause him to make a misstep.” Lynds slapped his knees and stood. “Let us finish our search. We may get lucky and find the blackguard before any danger comes to either of you.”

Diana rose. “That would be preferable, of course.”

“You don’t think I can find him?” Alex folded his arms and looked down his crooked nose at her.

Outside, the gardens were awash with snow. Diana walked to the window and stared out. “Victor Caron was not my first jailer. Pierre Menard captured my family. Victor worked for him, and while he was there when we were taken, it was Menard who imprisoned us. Because he could not get Father to comply, Menard was removed from our dungeon and Victor was promoted. Menard was mean and brutal, but Victor is worse. He takes pleasure from inflicting pain. He is clever and conniving. I don’t think he will be easy to find.”

Alex bowed. “We will do our best.”

“Thank you.” She nodded.

He walked to the large double doors. “Feel free to borrow any books you like. I know there is not much to do in winter here at Buckrose, but we have quite a few tomes about scientific study that might interest you.”

Diana strolled to the shelf to the right of the windows below the stairs and ran her hand along the book spines. “He’s a puzzle, isn’t he?”

Following along like a lost pup, Jacques watched her. “Yes. He keeps his own counsel and does not share much.”

“Do you think I can trust him?” She continued along the shelves.

“I believe he is sincere in his statement that he will protect you, but not to the detriment of his main goal.”

She rounded the stairs from behind and started her ascent. “I meant what I said. I want to do what is best for England. Besides, with Victor near and me being kept here at Buckrose, I have little choice.”

Jacques followed her to the catwalk. “We are at the mercy of the Horsemen, but I feel certain it will all work out.”

With a short laugh, she pulled a heavy tome from the shelf. “Are you always so optimistic, Jacques?”

He drew closer, but she moved away with the book in hand. Stopping to feign interest in a book on geography of the African continent, he kept watch

as she leaned against a pillar and opened the book. “Not always, but in this case, I can accept no other outcome.”

Making another attempt to get close to her, he rounded a small table.

Diana’s eyes widened and she scampered around the southeast corner of the catwalk. “So you can choose when and if you are accepting of a particular circumstance?”

He stopped at the corner. “I do not like to leave anything to fate. I rarely gamble, and I only risk what I am willing to lose. Diana, while I’m enjoying this game of cat and mouse, I’m beginning to wonder if you are afraid of me or flirting.”

She stopped moving and faced him. “I could never fear you. How could you think such a thing after last night?”

As he walked along the tall shelves of books, he admired her curves and how well the blue dress accentuated her slim waist. Since she stayed in place, he stopped when he was directly in front of her. “Last night you were tired and in a new place. You drank wine at dinner and perhaps this morning regretted your request.”

Meeting his gaze, she licked her lips. “I do not regret any time I’ve spent with you. I only worry for your safety when you are near me.”

Everything about her lured him in; her keen mind, pure, warm heart and her stunning beauty. But the way she cared about him and the people around her was the sweetest thing of all. He ran his knuckles along her jaw. Her skin was soft and warm to his touch as she leaned her cheek into the caress. “You shall have to accept that I am not going anywhere, and am capable of taking care of myself.”

“I would think after being betrayed by that woman in France, you would prefer a less complicated life than one with me offers.”

“One would think that, but it is not so.” Leaning in, he pressed his lips to hers.

A long sigh, then she stepped into his embrace, molding her body to his.

From a woman who had no reason to trust, gaining hers left him breathless. The door to the study was ajar and anyone could walk in and see them. Still he ran his hand down her back to her waist and cupped her cheek with his other hand. He shook with need as he ran his tongue along the crease of her lips, begging entry.

On a gasp, she opened to him and touched her tongue to his.

Being struck by lightning could not have been more shocking. The kiss

thrilled him from head to toe. The little sounds she made low in her throat were like a drug he couldn't get enough of.

He pressed small kisses to her cheek and jaw. "You may slap me and tell me to stop, Diana."

"I don't want you to stop." Her whisper shot another bolt through him and he pressed the evidence against her pelvis. Clutching at his shoulders, she let her head fall back, giving him access to that lovely neck.

He kissed her throat where he'd often admired her swallowing down whatever she'd wanted to say. Where her shoulders connected, her skin was like fine-woven silk. The scent of roses drowned him like excellent wine on a winter night. "You are everything, my goddess of the moon."

"Be careful. You'll put me up so high, you won't be able to reach me." Running her hand up his back, she smiled, then threaded her fingers through his hair.

The black ribbon holding his hair in a queue fell to the floor. "I shall climb quite a ways if need be."

Her soft lips were honey, and he the bee unable to stay away. His blood burned too hot for an encounter in a public room. It took a force of will, but he pulled back. "I think it best if we hold these feelings for a more private moment, my sweet."

Lowering her gaze to the floor, she flushed the most delicious pink.

Jacques kissed her forehead, then pressed his against hers. "Please do not be shy or embarrassed, Diana."

"Only at how wanton I have become. Nice ladies do not pant and kiss in the library or out of wedlock." Her blush deepened.

"Of course they do," he said. "They just do not talk about it. Trust me, you are not in the minority, though you are extraordinary. Besides, there is no one to know but you and me, and I assure you all your secrets are safe in my care."

"I fear one day you will find out that I am just a simple girl who was put into strange circumstances. You will realize I'm nothing special."

How could she think such a ridiculous thing? He stayed close, not wanting her to run from him, but giving her enough space so as not to feel trapped. Skimming his fingers along her arm to her fingers, where he entwined his with hers, he reveled in the warm softness. "Most women of gentle birth would have withered under such trying events. It would have broken them. Yet you became stronger and smarter than your captors,

allowing you to escape. A fact for which I am eternally grateful. Some nights I thank the snow for falling on that night I found you.”

Tears set her eyes aglow. “Why the snow?”

“If not for that unexpected snowstorm, I would not have held you in my arms that first night. I might never have learned how remarkable you are. Our story could have ended with me taking you to London and never seeing you again.” The possibility had kept him awake more than one night.

“If that had happened, you would have a far less complicated life. I would never have attended that ball and might be safely hiding somewhere.”

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her knuckles before turning her hand over and pressing his lips to her palm. Her sigh was all he would ever need for happiness. “To hide you away from the world is a tragedy that we will soon remedy. I admit I am not happy about the possibility of using you to lure Caron, but I abhor you being trapped. It is time to set you free, moon goddess. If you could become this remarkable in captivity, I can only imagine what you will evolve into with freedom.”

Her laugh was music. “You are too romantic by far. You do realize that?”

“Of course.” He chuckled. “Still, everything I say is the truth.”

“Only in your mind, Jacques.”

He loved the way she looked at him as if he were as special as she. “I can only know my own truth. I leave the rest to men like Alexander Lynds. He seeks a greater truth, and I imagine it is a tiring life.”

Drawing a full breath brought her breasts to the edge of her day dress. It was maddening to watch those lovely globes rise and fall and have to wait to feel them in his hands.

She said, “He is a hard man to trust or understand.”

“We need only endure this place for a short time. I hope to be out of here before Christmas Day.”

Eyes wide, she said, “That’s only a week away. Don’t you think it a bit too optimistic?”

“Perhaps, but a man can hope.” Happiness like he had never experienced before filled him from the inside. When she was safe, he would let her know what was in his heart.

Honorias voice echoed down the halls as she called Diana’s name.

Jacques backed away, regretting having to release her hand.

Blushing, Diana called, “I’m in here, my lady.”

The library doors swung open and Honoria breezed in. “We have an

appointment to take a stroll with Mrs. Fallcraft in twenty minutes. I thought you might like to change into something warmer. But perhaps you are warm enough?”

Honoria’s gaze and smirk fell on Jacques.

He followed Diana down the stairs. “I am sure you will enjoy Mrs. Fallcraft. I have known her all my life, and have a great deal of respect for her. I will see you both at dinner.”

Watching as the ladies left the library or study or whatever Alex wanted to call it, Jacques wished for many more hours spent in the stacks of books with Diana in his arms.

Chapter Fourteen

Taking Honoria's advice, Diana had bundled herself up in her warmest wool day dress, a sturdy pair of boots and a fur cape she borrowed from the castle. Cecilia had insisted that the fur would be necessary as the temperatures had dropped.

Mrs. Fallcraft met them in a small, perfectly manicured garden at the other side of the castle. The shrubs were bare but made a low maze around an empty fountain. In the summer it would be a lovely place.

"How do you do?" Mrs. Fallcraft was perhaps an inch taller than Honoria and half as wide.

Diana couldn't help the amusement she kept bottled up at the thought of all those large men on the other side of the castle being afraid of this tiny woman. "So nice to meet you, madam."

They all curtsied.

Mrs. Fallcraft gave each of them a long look before smiling. "It is rare for the boys to bring anyone back to Buckrose. I have to admit, I've been curious to meet you both. It was very kind of you to send a note and call on me."

"I could not resist meeting the lady who manages to keep all those grown men on their toes." Honoria giggled. "You should hear how they speak of you."

Jessica Fallcraft had keen eyes the color of a stormy sea. Her gray hair had been pulled into a loose bun and tucked under a black cap with white lace at the edge. "Shall we walk?"

A path through the garden had been cleared of snow. Larger cedars, surrounding the little haven, blocked the biting wind, making a stroll pleasant after she'd been tucked away in houses, carriages and castles. Diana took a

deep gulp of crisp air. “Lady Chervil is correct, madam. The gentlemen are quite in awe of you.”

Her eyes flashed with joy. “They were students or the children of students. I suppose to a young boy who has been tossed from other schools or bullied because he does not have the discipline for Eton, I am a welcome relief and a bit of a tyrant.”

A child laughed somewhere on the other side of the trees. Diana wished she had listened to her mother and had married. By now she would have a few children filling her days with laughter. “Is that what this place is, a school for boys who had trouble elsewhere?”

Turning to the right, Mrs. Fallcraft pulled her dark gray cloak tighter. “I take on young men who are bright and spirited. Let’s use Middleton as an example. Of course, I’m speaking of the late duke. Preston Knowles never had any problems at school. His father had been to three before being sent to me. He arrived with a valet and a note from the Duke of Middleton. I shall never forget that note: ‘My son is incorrigible and cannot be taught. You, madam, are our last hope to get some knowledge into him. My wife can bear no more children, so he is the next duke of Middleton regardless of my wishes.’”

It was a horrible notion to imagine a father writing such a thing about his own son. Diana wished the old duke was still alive, so she could give him a proper dressing down. “What on earth did you do?”

Mrs. Fallcraft grinned and shrugged. “I brought the young lord into Buckrose without a word about his other schools. I see no sense in berating a boy for his past. When they come to my school, they get a fresh start. They are told the rules, which are quite strict, and given a lot of time between studies to run around and burn off excess energy. Their days are scheduled to the minute, and by the end of one, they are tired enough to sleep. I am proud to say I have lost very few of my Buckrose students.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but does a curriculum filled with running about compare to an education at Eton?” Diana should have kept the question to herself, but she wanted to know.

Never missing a step, Mrs. Fallcraft navigated them around the fountain. “When a young man leaves here, they are ready for the world. Most continue to university. It is a long day, keeping my boys busy from breakfast to supper. After supper we usually have time for reading, and often one of the older students will read aloud.”

Honorina said, "You must be very proud of this school and all you have done."

"I have to admit, I am pleased that I could help and continue to help young boys become good men, many of whom run our government."

"How much longer will you continue?" Honorina was of an age where she said what she thought, regardless of its appropriateness for a first meeting.

Mrs. Fallcraft was undaunted. "I am getting on in years. Like Middleton, many of my students have gone to their final resting place, and I am still here." She pulled a long sigh. "I don't have anyone to follow in my footsteps as yet, but I have hopes that one of my Horsemen might like to take on the challenge after he's finished hopping about the world for the greater good."

It was impossible to imagine any of the four men Diana had met being tame enough to run the Buckrose School, but Mrs. Fallcraft was in earnest. "I'm not certain any of the Horsemen are of a temperament to teach."

Raising her eyebrows, Mrs. Fallcraft gave a wicked grin. "You would be surprised at the many sides of the Horsemen."

"I mean no disrespect. They are the reason I am here and not tucked away on some French ship."

They approached the back side of the castle. "Will you ladies join me for some tea in my private parlor?"

The temperature had dropped several degrees since they began their walk. Clouds made their way across the sky and the bite in the air spoke of snow. Diana shivered. "That would be very nice. Thank you."

Inside, the school portion of the castle was buzzing with students who were curious about them. It appeared Buckrose School did not get a lot of visitors and perhaps never ladies. Several boys tripped over each other when they caught sight of Diana.

Mrs. Fallcraft frowned. "That will do, Mr. Crane, Mr. Wallace. Don't you two have somewhere to be?"

One of the wide-eyed boys, perhaps sixteen, stopped staring long enough to respond. "History class, ma'am."

"You had better stop loitering and get on, then. We do not wish our guests to think you lax in your studies." How she managed not to grin or laugh was a mystery.

Crane and Wallace bowed, and all arms and legs, ran down the hall with their black coats flapping behind them.

Diana hid a giggle behind her hand. "They are quite curious."

“We do not get many female visitors here, Miss MacLeod. Please accept my apologies for the boys.” Mrs. Fallcraft opened the door to her left and they stepped into a room that might have been transported from a fairy tale.

Where the hallway had been stone, this room had been covered in a light blue damask wallpaper with an elegant rose pattern. It was feminine, but not so much that a man would be uncomfortable in the room. The sturdy overstuffed furniture would bring comfort to any soul needing a soft place to rest, and the light scent of fruity tobacco reminded Diana of Lord Rupert Everton and the way Everton House had given her comfort. Large windows overlooked the garden they’d just left, and books lined one wall. A small writing desk sat in the corner, but the bulk of the room was taken up by a pianoforte and seating for conversation. Diana waved off the apology. “This is lovely.”

“My sanctuary away from boys and men. Once a week, I invite two or three of the students to have tea with me. It’s become a tradition and strangely, they all covet the invitation. The rest of the time, I can come in here to write letters, play the pianoforte, and relax before bed, and the sound of rambunctious boys is left outside.” She settled into a large chair as if it were a throne.

Diana and Honoria sat adjacent to her on a deep couch. Diana toyed with a gold fringe at the edge of the dark blue fabric. “I imagine a small refuge is needed with so much energy around you all the time.”

Honoria clapped her hands and laughed. “If it were me, I would never leave this room. I can’t imagine how you run such a large school on your own.”

A maid arrived with tea and Diana wondered how she had known to bring it. They had not seen Mrs. Fallcraft call for refreshments. The woman was fascinating.

“I have help from five teachers employed by the school. Occasionally, I ask a former student to help, depending on the problems that arise. I have been raising and teaching boys for so many years, it is all I know.” She poured the tea and handed each of them a cup and saucer.

The tea service was all white without painted flowers or vines. It was perfectly practical for a lady who ran a boarding school, and the rich tea warmed Diana’s insides. “May I ask you something that is none of my business, madam?”

“Are you in love with one of the Horsemen?” Excitement flashed in Mrs.

Fallcraft's eyes.

Honorina laughed. "I think I could fall in love with all four of them."

Trying to give Honorina a scathing look, Diana was so amused, it probably looked more comical than scolding. "No. Not a Horseman. I was wondering what you would be willing to divulge about Mr. Laurent."

The fire eased from Mrs. Fallcraft's eyes, but her smile remained. "I see. Well, Jacques was never a student here. He did visit each summer with his parents when they were in England. He was a lighthearted youth who thought his father the beginning and the end of all things. He and Middleton have been friends since birth, as their fathers met here at Buckrose. I have only seen him a handful of times as an adult, but whenever he is in this area, he makes a point to visit. I'm sorry, I don't know what you want to know."

Diana put her tea down. "I'm not sure myself. I suppose I need to know if he's a good man or just charming. He wants to help me, but perhaps he just has some need to assign himself to a lost cause."

Tapping the edge of her teacup with her index finger, Mrs. Fallcraft watched Diana over the cup's rim. "I would not wish to gossip, but I can see you are in earnest, Miss MacLeod. Jacques's adoration for the women in his life nearly landed his head in a basket in front of the Bastille. He is not given to random affairs, as far as I am aware. I have never heard of any untoward news or behavior about him. He is charming, that is true. He has a way of making everyone in the room more comfortable, but I believe he is genuine in his desire to help those around him. And he does like to find a lost cause and repair the damage. It is why he and Middleton have gotten on so well; they are so different."

"I don't understand." Diana had not noticed a large difference between the two friends. Middleton was a duke, so naturally he had a higher sense of importance. Though for a man of power, Middleton was fairly humble.

"Preston Knowles is as serious a man as I have ever known. He has a set idea of how things should be. If he sees something wrong, he fixes it, with authority. He would not know how to have fun were it not for his friendship with Jacques Laurent. And for his part, Jacques would not have such a deep need to right every wrong. I cannot tell you if Jacques is in love with you, but he is a man of honor."

"I didn't mean to question his honor. Forgive me. I suppose I am afraid of being hurt." Diana picked her tea up off the table and sipped, using the china as a shield.

Mrs. Fallcraft nodded. "I understand, my dear, but love is always a risk."
"Hear, hear!" said Honoria.

"It seems as though I shall never find a safe haven such as this." Diana couldn't stop the low sigh that pushed from her chest.

"Pish. Safety is boring." Honoria sipped the last of her tea and put her cup down with a snap.

Laughing, Mrs. Fallcraft put her cup down as well. "Her ladyship is correct. When I came here, I was barely twenty and already widowed. My parents planned to wait out my mourning period and marry me off to some rich old man. I couldn't bear the idea, so I ran with what fortune was left to me. Bad weather forced me off the road to this abandoned castle, where I found two young boys who had also run away. They were twelve years old and had come all the way from Eton. Together we built this school with the help of the earl who'd left the property vacant. The Earl of Buckrose had to do quite a lot of legal work to change his entailment and give this place to the school. It has not always been easy, but here it still stands. It has been quite the adventure. I know that if you are under my Horsemen's protection, you have been through a lot. Take the advice of an old woman. Do not let the bad that has befallen you close you off to the good that awaits."

It was perhaps the sagest advice Diana would ever receive. "I hope I can take your advice and have as wondrous a life as you, ma'am.



Diana dressed in a yellow gown for dinner. Its low-cut neckline was far more revealing than she was used to, but she admired herself in the glass before she went down, and thought how nice it was to look like a real lady.

The way Jacques looked up at her from the bottom of the stairs made any momentary worry over her gown disappear. His admiration sucked all the air out of the room, and Diana had to remind herself to breathe.

"You are stunning," he said, offering his arm for escort into dinner. "Why did you not join us in the parlor before dinner?"

"It took longer to dress than I expected." It was a half-truth. Diana was still leery of socializing with the Horsemen. However, her meeting with Mrs. Fallcraft had changed her opinion of them more than she'd expected, and

eased her mind.

As soon as Jacques had finished helping her to her seat, Sebastian asked, “What did you think of our Mrs. Fallcraft, Miss MacLeod?”

Diana took a sip of the wine. “She is a remarkable lady.”

“We had a lovely time.” Honoria had already drunk more than half her glass and the footman refilled it. “We heard much about the school and not nearly enough about the four of you.”

Even Alex smiled at that. “I’m glad to hear we are not completely exposed by the headmistress.”

Dove was served as a first course. Diana’s stomach grumbled. “Mrs. Fallcraft only divulged that she was very fond of each of you and that perhaps one of you might take over for her when she retires.”

Alex’s smile faltered. “I suppose it is inevitable that one day she will not be able to continue.”

“She is getting on in years and it’s a rigorous schedule,” Oliver said.

Nathaniel looked at Oliver. “What do you say, Oli? Ready to take the reins?”

“What makes you think she was referring to me? I’m no teacher.” Oliver stabbed his poor dove brutally and it was a good thing the bird was already dead.

“Oliver is too short-tempered to be a headmaster at Buckrose. He’d do better as the headmaster at Eton.” Sebastian laughed and ate his food without looking up.

“There is no need to be insulting.” The dove slid across Oliver’s plate. Finally, he gave up on the utensils and tore into his food with his fingers.

Sebastian continued without lifting his gaze. “Can you imagine the thugs that would come out of Buckrose with you in charge?”

Waving his dove as a pointer, Oliver said, “I could do it. I just have no desire to. I’m certainly smarter than the three of you.”

“That is certain.”

Diana was both amused and surprised by Alex’s agreement and the nods from the other two Horsemen.”

Honoria asked, “Exactly how smart are you, Mr. Graham?”

“I don’t know how to answer that, my lady.” He’d devoured his dove and wiped his hands on the napkin.

A footman came with a bowl of warm water and placed it on the table beside Oliver. It must have been quite normal for him to eat with his hands.

Diana kept her giggling behind her hand as he washed and dried his fingers.

Undaunted, Honoria put her fork down. “Well, for example, are you as smart as Miss MacLeod?”

Putting his index finger to the side of his head, Oliver stared at Diana. “Can you do complex calculations in your head, Miss MacLeod?”

“Is that important?” Diana leaned back while the footman cleared her plate and brought soup. Spices filled the dining room, and she struggled to wait for everyone to be served before taking a taste.

Jacques cocked his head. “I think Miss MacLeod is embarrassed by your directness.”

“I apologize. I don’t mean to put you on the spot, miss. I just wondered how your mind works. Some people must do all things on paper. Some do it all in their head. I have often struggled with putting my work to paper, but I am quite adept at giving a complex calculation its final result.”

Everyone focused on Diana. The thought of crawling under the table appealed to her. “If I answer, can we change the subject?”

Oliver smiled. “It will depend on your answer, I should think.”

All gazes remained focused on her. “Oh, for pity’s sake. I can do calculations of a complex nature both in my head and on paper. I can tell you every discovered element and all the known and some unknown properties of each. I have not written any papers because women are not taken seriously in the scientific field. Further, I am adept at most forms of mathematics, physics and alchemy.”

“There’s no need to brag,” Oliver quipped, and everyone at the table laughed, including Diana. He turned back to Honoria. “Miss MacLeod might be smarter than me, my lady.”

Nathaniel put his spoon down. “Oli writes poetry as well as prose.”

Grinning, Diana said, “I have no talent for words, Mr. Graham. Perhaps we may call it a draw.”

He raised his glass to her. “You are a good sport, miss.”

Jacques’s admiring gaze landed on Diana and sent a warm wave through her. In her experience before they were taken to France, men did not care for women who were smarter than them. With the two men who had courted her, Mother had been very specific about not talking science. She had tried, but as soon as one of them mentioned her father’s work, she’d expounded on his experiments. Of course, Mother had been right. They ceased courting after that.

When he finally pulled his gaze away, Jacques looked at Alex. “Before we came in for supper, I noticed it has started snowing again. This will delay finding Caron, I assume.”

Alex pushed his plate back before propping his elbows on the table. “It is damned inconvenient. The only good thing is that if we can’t get around to find him, he can’t be moving much either. You are safe for the time being, Miss MacLeod.”

“That is something.” Diana didn’t feel safe. The only time she had any sense of security was in Jacques’s arms. She quickly pushed those thoughts down before her blush gave her away.

Honorias slapped the table. “If there is no danger imminent, I suggest we see if this old castle has a good bottle of whiskey in it.”

Sebastian laughed at his dining partner. “Are you a great admirer of a fine whiskey, my lady?”

“Well, I have taken the trouble to marry three times, and I like whiskey more than men.” Honorias winked at him.

The table erupted in laughter.

Alex called the butler. “Mr. Bates, will you bring a Scotch and an Irish to the parlor?”

Mr. Bates bowed and left through the servants’ door.

Jacques held Diana’s chair as they all exited. He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “What about you, Diana? Do you enjoy a good whiskey?”

His breath on her skin sent a thrill of delight through her that settled low in her belly, and she longed for privacy. Wondering whether he would come to her after the others had gone to bed was a delicious morsel that she would savor. “I have never tasted whiskey.”

“Well then, you shall either love it or hate it, my sweet. Very few people are ambiguous about a fine whiskey.”

Turning put her only inches from his chest. She could lift on her toes and press a quick kiss on his lips. The dining room was empty save for them. The wicked thought simmered so violently, she followed through. His mouth was both soft and strong as he recovered from his shock and kissed her back.

His hand settled on her hip.

Having been a captive, she should have hated the possessive touch. Yet his touch was as welcome as coming home. She relaxed back on steady feet, but it took a moment for the world to stop spinning. “Do you love or hate whiskey, Jacques?”

Chest rising and falling quickly, he gave a fast glance around the empty room. “At the moment, I could completely forget what whiskey is and just remain drunk on you for a lifetime.”

She may have gone and fallen in love. It was foolish and she should regret it, but she couldn't, not even for a second. “And normally?”

“Normally, I am a great admirer of a good whiskey.” His gaze drifted to her lips.

If she could will him to kiss her, she would.

Honorina called out from the parlor across the hall. “Diana, my dear. Where are you?”

Jacques smiled and dotted a quick kiss on her nose. “Shall we join the others?”

Her breath shuddered more than she would have liked. “I suppose we have little choice.”

He stared at her a long moment, his eyes holding a question he did not voice. Offering his arm, he said, “We had better go before I do something extremely foolish.”

The parlor, like the study, was very large and filled with books, though these were less diverse and leaned toward legal matters. Diana tried the Irish whiskey; it was sharp on her tongue and burned its way down her chest. She could see why some people didn't care for the strong spirit, but she liked it. However, by the time she finished the small glass, the world seemed to tip in a silly way. “I think I shall retire for the evening. I will see you all in the morning.”

Honorina followed her out, and they climbed the stairs. “We must strengthen your constitution, Diana.”

“You may stay and enjoy the whiskey with the men.”

“My purpose is to keep you safe.” Honorina's serious tone was out of character, but comforting.

“Thank you, my lady. You are too good to me.” Diana kissed Honorina's cheek and stepped inside her room, where she collapsed on the bed.

At some point Cecilia came in and put her in her bedclothes, but it was a foggy memory.

Chapter Fifteen

Jacques wanted to go to Diana during the night, but it had been obvious the whiskey had gone to her head, and he was not a man to take advantage. In the morning he'd searched the house for her, but not found her.

Panic had begun to set in when he spotted her walking in Mrs. Fallcraft's garden. It was the place where they had always visited his father's headmistress in the summers. This was the first time he'd ever stepped into the garden in winter.

Diana walked along the edge of the garden wrapped in brown fur and cutting a path through several inches of snow that had fallen overnight. The snow continued, and as long as it did, Alex was probably right about Diana being safe. Still, he worried about her being alone.

"Shall I join you or would you prefer privacy?" He kept his hands clasped at his back to avoid his need to reach out and touch her.

"You are most welcome." A soft pink blush brightened her cheek.

"I know I have no right to dictate, but it would be better if you did not walk alone until all of this madness is in our past."

"And you believe this will eventually be past?" She kept her hands inside the fur and her gaze ahead.

He didn't like her avoiding his gaze, and stepped in front of her. "I do believe it."

Cocking her head, she smiled and finally brought her gaze to his. "As you believe you will spend Christmas with your parents. To make that happen, you will have to be on your way very soon."

"My parents will be disappointed, but I sent a note yesterday explaining

that a dear friend was in need of my help. I told them I would come as soon as possible. They will understand.” Leaving Diana was not an option he would entertain, not while she was in danger, not ever.

“If you left today you could be with them on the holiday. They are probably missing you—and what of His Grace’s family? You should both be home. The Duke of Kerburghe is packing to leave today. You should go as well.” She put more distance between them and walked toward the fountain.

Reaching out, he held her arm. “Michael has many children, who need their father to be home for the holiday. Preston and I are not in that situation. His mother and Millie are in the country with my mother and father. They are all safe and happy. Our place is here with you until you are safe, and then Preston will go to his wife.”

Emotion raced across her face. “And you will go to your parents.”

“I will go wherever you are, Diana. I’ll not leave you.” It was time she knew how he felt.

Tugging her arm back, she bit her bottom lip. “I cannot be what you want.”

Lord, how he longed to nibble on that lip. “I want you just as you are.”

The rough scratch of her voice tightened with raw emotion. “In spite of all I’ve done and been through, I will never be a mistress to anyone. I may be alone in the world, but I feel my parents inside me watching.”

Shocked that she would think him such a rake, he released her arm. Had he been so vague in his desire that she would believe he only wanted a mistress? Jacques chased after her, past the fountain, toward the castle, and caught her near the small veranda. “Diana, stop.”

Obedying, but keeping her back toward him, she held her shoulders rigid.

“Please look at me.” His own heart raced as if he’d run miles rather than just across the tiny garden.

Diana turned with tears streaming down her face. “It occurred to me this morning that we had spoken twice about your desire not to marry. I wish I was more like the girl in the dining room last night or the one who asked to be held through the night. She was too bold and perhaps gave you the wrong impression. I don’t blame you. I’ve behaved like a woman of little morals. What else were you to think?”

Jacques didn’t know if he was angry, hurt, or stupid, but he could hear no more of this. “Stop talking, Diana.” He backed her up to a wall that separated the veranda from the garden. “I think and have thought nothing wanton about

you. I love you, Diana MacLeod. You taking the kiss you wanted last night was one of the nicest moments of my life. Holding you while you sleep is my greatest honor and sweetest memory. I hope you will always take from me exactly what you need. You never have to ask me for my lips to kiss or my arms to hold you. I shall make love with you at even the hint of your desire. I long to bring you pleasures you cannot yet imagine, and I will do so as soon as you give permission. I could never and will never leave you, Diana. You are a part of my soul now, a deep imprint that can never be washed away. I am an ass to have led you to believe I would make you my mistress. You could never be my mistress, and I shall never have one. If you want me as I need you, I will take you across the border a few miles and marry you as soon as it is safe to do so.”

She swallowed and stared at him with wide, tearful eyes.

Unable to resist, he pressed his lips to her throat. “Tell me what you want from me, goddess.”

The snowstorm grew heavier, a blanket of white all around them.

“I want you.” Barely audible, she said the words and buried her face in his chest.

Jacques slid his arms under her fur cloak and pulled her tight against him. His body tightened with desire. “Does that mean you will marry me, Diana?”

“If you still want me when this is all over, I will marry you, Jacques.” Her heart beat against his chest.

The moment when one world disintegrates and another is born is both beautiful and catastrophic. Jacques’s beliefs about what his life would be crashed down around his ears. A cacophony of wind, rustling trees and beating snow marked the moment, while peace, security and love settled in the spaces left empty for so many years. She hadn’t said she loved him, but Diana would not marry for any other reason. “You have made me very happy.”

She studied him. “You don’t look happy. You look a bit... I’m not really sure how to describe that look.” She ran her hand along the side of his face.

Leaning into her warm palm, he turned his head and kissed her bare wrist. “I probably look as surprised as I feel. It is a dream to imagine you beside me for a lifetime.”

Worry tugged at the corners of her mouth and dimmed the light in her eyes. “I hope you will not be disappointed.”

“Never.”

Impossibly, the snow came down even harder.

Diana made no move to seek shelter beyond his embrace, but he had to get her inside before they were found in spring by the garden wall. "Come, before we are frozen to death standing here."



Two days later the snow finally stopped, and the sun came out.

Sebastian rushed into the breakfast room winded and soaked. "Pardon my appearance." He bowed to Diana and Honoria.

Standing, Alex tossed his napkin on the corner of the table. "What's wrong? Did you find him?"

"No. Not yet, but William Farmer has been found." Sebastian gave his coat to Mr. Bates, who handed the Horseman a towel and a hot beverage.

"Where, when?" Alex narrowed his eyes.

Sebastian drank from the steaming mug and collapsed into a chair at the far end of the table. "Westow. He and his cart were left in a barnyard."

Jacques's stomach tightened on the eggs and sausage he'd just finished. "Dead?"

Gesturing with the hand holding the towel, he cut a line across his throat from ear to ear. "I apologize, ladies."

Diana paled and placed her napkin on the table next to her plate. "Poor man. He had no idea who he was dealing with."

"Probably not." Alex rounded the table. "Mr. Farmer's fate is unfortunate, but it probably means that Caron will make his move very soon. We must all remain vigilant in keeping watch for signs of him."

Mr. Bates returned and took the towel from Sebastian. He placed a plate filled with food on the table and retreated.

Sebastian must have been out all night with the searchers, because he dived into the food. Dark rings circled his eyes and he ate as if starved. "I received a letter from London. The map Miss MacLeod drew was quite accurate. The army has discovered two storehouses of munitions along the route to Porto. They have been confiscated."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Excellent news for us and the Portuguese."

Standing, Diana frowned. "I'm glad it was helpful. One never knows after so much time if a plan like that will still be in place. I'm afraid all these

dramatics have left me tired. I'll just take myself back to bed unless you require me to do something this morning, Mr. Lynds?"

"We shall give Caron some time to stew and worry. I will alert you when we are ready to go forward with our plan."

With a quick curtsy, Diana strode from the room."



It was another day before they could get out of the castle grounds and visit the small village of Scrayingham. Preparations were being made for the Christmas holiday, keeping the town hopping with residents gathering provisions.

Jacques and Diana strolled through town in full view, as if they had not a care in the world. On their right, a charming stone church, complete with cemetery, gave him a chill. All he wanted was to protect Diana and here he was, leading her into danger.

Knowing that Preston and the Horsemen watched gave Jacques little comfort. Even though he knew he had to free her from Victor's terror, he hated this plan.

The only thing Jacques was certain of was that Victor was watching. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as soon as they'd entered the village.

Children tossed snowballs at each other and laughed. It was easy to scoot around them and continue to act the courting couple, as that was precisely what they were. Even walking with Diana for the sake of luring a maniac into public was still time well spent with her and time he cherished.

"I don't think this is working," Diana said, but she smiled and gazed longingly at him to keep up the show.

"We have to give it more time. Besides, it is unlikely it will work this first time." He pointed to a hat in the window of a shop. "We need to allow Caron to believe that we assume he has headed back to France."

Diana pointed to a lace scarf. "So this is only act one of our farce?"

"The only lie is that we think it safe to stroll about the country. The rest is exactly what I would do to court you. The fact that madness brought us together is unfortunate, but I cannot regret any of it."

They continued their walk, and Diana pulled her overcoat close against the cold. "You know, courting has never gone very well for me."

“This time will be different.” He led her down the high street exactly as the Horsemen had directed.

“How can you be so sure?”

The open carriage waited at the end of the street. Jacques handed her up before joining her. It was too cold to use the vehicle, but a closed conveyance would have been scandalous and might have revealed to Victor that they were setting a trap. “I am sure because I know what I want. I have no need for a large dowry or a wife who will bring me notoriety. Those are reasons Englishmen of the ton marry, and I assume whoever courted you had such an agenda. I only want you, Diana. I need nothing else and no other will do.”

“Jacques, will you always say exactly the right thing?”

“No. I will fumble and make a dozen errors daily.”

She nodded. “Good. If you were perfect all the time it would be too much to live up to.”

Everything about her brought joy into his heart. “Who is saying the right thing now?”

Giggling, she watched the road as they wound their way back to Buckrose Castle.



Each day they took a different path, hoping to draw Victor out of hiding. They strolled local gardens and the hilly path east of Buckrose. Each route was carefully thought out and designed to allow them to be observed by their friends the entire way.

Finally Christmas arrived, but no sign of Victor.

Honorina had the staff bring in sprigs of evergreen and holly to decorate the house for the holiday. She'd tied large red bows on anything that would stay still long enough.

The castle smelled of pine, the greenery giving Jacques more hiding places where he could steal kisses from Diana. He rather liked Christmas at the castle, with its long halls and odd angles. As long as he had Diana with him, their location didn't matter.

After luncheon, he and Diana walked to the front door hoping for a stroll in the garden. They were intercepted by Alex. “I think it best not to go out today. It is brutally cold, and the wind has picked up. If you must walk,

please take care and stay in the back gardens. The high walls will protect you there.”

Diana frowned. “I had hoped to walk the line of holly along the drive, but I suppose it can wait for another day.”

“Never mind,” Jacques said. “We can go to the study and find a treasure trove of books for you to read.”

Her eyes brightened. “That is a wonderful idea.”

Honoraria shuffled down the hall. “Don’t be too long. I have spoken to Cook, and since we are such a fine party and it is Christmas, I have arranged a special meal complete with pudding. You will want to dress for it, my dear.”

Laughing, Alex bowed. “I see I have completely lost control of my house and staff.”

“Only for a short time, sir. Soon I will return to London and you will have nothing but peace and quiet.” Honoraria said the last as if it were a poison dart.

“It will be our loss when you go,” Alex said, and walked to the parlor where the Horsemen met each afternoon.

Jacques said, “We will not be too long, my lady. Your supper sounds like just the right thing to make us all feel better about the holiday being celebrated at Buckrose.”

Honoraria frowned and put her hands on her hips. “It’s not so bad, is it? You are here among friends and we have much to look forward to.”

Taking her hand, he chided himself for sounding petulant and bowed. “You are quite right. I had other plans for this day, but it is wonderful to be here with you and Miss MacLeod.”

Immediately pleased, her face lit up. “There you have it. It doesn’t matter where you are in life as long as you have friends beside you, monsieur. As long as you have friends, life is glorious. I have had to make new and younger friends over the years as my old friends have met their ends. I shall always miss the old ones, but I am grateful for you and Diana and so many more I have been blessed to meet through the Everton Domestic Society. You can spend time with your family when we leave here, and have yourself a second Christmas.”

“That is a wonderful idea.” Jacques couldn’t wait to introduce Diana to Mother and Father. They were going to love her.



As promised, Christmas dinner was spectacular. The bitter cold weather meant that they had been cooped up in the house all day, but the feast was magnificent.

Mrs. Fallcraft joined them, making for a lively meal. “Thank you for inviting me to dine with you all, Lady Chervil.”

Honorina waved away the thanks. “It was Mr. Lynds’s idea. I only wrote the note.”

Remarkably, Alex actually blushed.

Jacques couldn’t help laughing. “You look as if you’ve been caught in the act of kindness, Lynds.”

Raising his glass, Alex toasted, “Merry Christmas. I am pleased to have such a merry group around the table.”

“Hear, hear,” came the reply from everyone.

Diana cleared her throat. “Mrs. Fallcraft, perhaps you will play for us this evening. I assume the pianoforte in the large parlor we never use is in working order.”

Tapping his crystal glass with a fork, Sebastian gave enthusiastic agreement. “It is, and that is an excellent idea, Miss MacLeod. I haven’t heard you play in many years, ma’am. It would be a treat.”

“I am not as good as I once was, but I will play for you.” Mrs. Fallcraft rubbed her hands together as if trying to warm them.

The pudding was a triumph, and both Cook and Honorina smiled with pleasure. The entire table erupted with applause.

Diana sat across from Jacques. Perhaps it was the Christmas spirit or just the sense of family around the table, but she bloomed with smiles and joy. She laughed and chatted with Sebastian and Oliver, her dinner partners. Her wine-colored gown was trimmed in white lace and fell from just above her breasts, showing off her lovely figure. She was a confection, and he longed to taste every inch of her.

Jacques had a moment of jealousy, but quickly realized her banter with her neighbors was more like brothers and sisters, and held none of the flirtation and warm gazes she shared with him. Her special regard for only him coiled around his heart and tugged, until he wished everyone in the room would suddenly disappear and he could have her to himself.

When the pudding was properly devoured, they retired to the grand parlor. As Diana had said, the room was rarely used. An ornate pianoforte with gold filigree and curved legs sat in the corner.

Mrs. Fallcraft went directly to the instrument, and Sebastian assisted her, while Oliver and Nathaniel shifted furniture from the center of the room. Following a series of descending notes, Mrs. Fallcraft played a festive array of music.

Taking Diana's hand, Jacques led her to the center of the room, where they were joined by Sebastian and Honoria, and the dancing began.

They managed every country dance they knew, and Jacques even withdrew his hold on Diana a few times to allow the others to dance.

After an hour, Mrs. Fallcraft broke from the festive tunes and played a waltz.

Alex bowed to Honoria and offered his hand, and the two settled into a steady turn around the room.

With Diana only a breath away at his right, he reached for her hand. Even through the gloves, her warmth infused him. Once she turned toward him, she stepped into his arms as if they had each been born for this moment, dancing around a parlor in Yorkshire staring into each other's eyes.

"I enjoyed seeing you this evening." He loved the way her eyes shined in the candlelight. Smitten was what he was, and it was remarkable that he didn't mind one bit.

"You have seen me every evening for almost two weeks."

Each step in the dance brought her closer and further away, like an intimate torture designed to drive him to madness. "Tonight, you were different. You enjoyed yourself far more. It is the first time I have seen you in public when I did not detect worry."

"I suppose I am feeling more at ease. Perhaps your optimism is wearing off on me." The way her delicious mouth turned up in a pretty bow undid him.

"You will have to stop looking at me as if I am the only man that exists, or I will embarrass myself here in the parlor in front of all these people."

Eyes wide, she missed a step but recovered. Her cheeks burned bright red. "I'm not at all sure I know what you mean, but perhaps I do."

"Are you horrified by what you think you know?" Jacques held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"No."

He filled his lungs. "Because you are safe here in Buckrose?"

Diana biting her bottom lip forced his eyes to follow. Lord, but she was a delight. "I am safe with you regardless of our location."

"I am not at all certain that is true, Diana. I want you quite fiercely."

Meeting his gaze directly as the music came to an end, Diana leaned in far enough so that he was the only person who could hear her. "My desires are equal to yours, Jacques Laurent. Perhaps I might have an opportunity to look at you as if you are the only man who exists in a private setting."

For several beats, he didn't believe what he'd heard. If she hadn't been bright pink in the aftermath of her seductive invitation, he would have thought his desire had actually driven him to hearing things.

Before he recovered enough to ask her to specify what she wanted from him, she'd walked over toward Honoria.

Mrs. Fallcraft said, "I am tired, my dears. Thank you for a lovely evening. I shall just make my way back to the school and find my bed for the night."

"I shall be honored to escort you, ma'am." Jacques offered his arm to the person his father admired most in the world.

Accepting his offer, she wound her thin arm through his and said her good nights. There were several passages from the Horsemen's side of the castle to the school. None were permitted to be used by students, but all were known to him. When his father attended Buckrose, the east wing had been off limits because it was reserved for the earl who donated the castle. On one summer visit, Father had shown him all the sneaky passages he'd used to escape as a boy.

"I'm very pleased you managed to get your parents out of France before anything terrible happened to them." Mrs. Fallcraft shivered. "I have seen enough of my students leave this world."

Jacques had fought off many nightmares when his parents were trapped in France. "It was the greatest day of my life when they stepped off that boat and I could bring them to the house I bought them."

"I'm quite happy for you, Jacques. You are a good son and shall make a fine husband to Miss MacLeod."

"Have I been so obvious in my intentions, ma'am?"

She patted his arm and kept both hands on him. A bit of her weight as well. Her age was catching up with her and the late night must have been a strain. "It is clear to me that you are smitten and she, too."

"I wanted to bring her to meet Mother and Father, but this trouble we

have has put a delay on the process.”

Mrs. Fallcraft sighed. “Lady Chervil is a fine chaperon, but you must realize that all this time at the home of four men is not likely to be greeted with warmth from society at large. She works for that Everton Domestic Society, does she not?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, should you choose to break your own heart, she will be protected by them.”

He stopped at the end of the passage. The door in front of them led to the school. “What makes you say such a thing? I intend to marry her.”

“There is no need to become impassioned, Jacques. Anything could happen. You could be killed, or she could refuse you.”

He opened the door. The school was silent. The few students who didn’t go home for Christmas would have eaten long ago and gone to bed, happy after a fine Christmas day.

“I apologize. I should not have raised my voice. You make a good point. I shall write several letters tomorrow so that should anything happen to me, Miss MacLeod will be well taken care of.” He’d been foolish to not take such measures before. If he was killed in all of this, Diana would have a hard time of it.

“Miss MacLeod seems the kind of lady who can take care of herself. She has a keen mind and is quite capable.”

“It is one of the things I find most attractive about her.”

At the stairs, she stopped and turned to him. “You are much like your father, though more controlled. It is a fine thing to be both passionate and restrained at the same time. A rare gift, in my opinion.”

Thoughts of Diana ran rampant in his head and heart. “You do me honor, ma’am. I feel completely out of order and filled with anxiety.”

She laughed. “Then you hide it well, Jacques. You will find your way and do well by your lady, I have no doubt. I can manage the way from here. Happy Christmas.”

Kissing her hand and then her cheek, he smiled. “Thank you for the talk, ma’am. Happy Christmas.”

Jacques wandered the halls of Buckrose Castle for an hour or more after leaving Mrs. Fallcraft. By the time he returned to the grand parlor, everyone was gone and the candles snuffed. A small fire had been banked but still gave some warmth. The drafty halls had given him a chill, and he stood near the

heat lost in thoughts of Diana and her troubles.

Preston spoke from the doorway. "I thought you'd gone to bed."

"I have been walking and thinking."

"I'm sure I know of whom you've been thinking. Why the milling about, though? Is something troubling you?" Preston stood next to him. He'd removed his coat and loosened his cravat.

"Something Mrs. Fallcraft said. She worried that if something happened to me, Diana would be exposed to much ridicule. Of course, I shall take precautions for her benefit. Still, I have spent so much time worrying over her well-being, and I foolishly did nothing to protect her beyond the physical. A stupid oversight." He grabbed the poker and stirred the embers back to life.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Preston turned toward Jacques. "Are you planning to marry her?"

"Of course I am. As soon as this mess is resolved."

"Are you certain about this?"

Jacques's temper flared as he faced Preston. "What did you think all of this was about, Pres? I'm in love with her."

"Keeping an innocent woman safe. I can see you care for her, and I like her. She's a lovely girl." He ran his hand through his hair as he did whenever he searched for words.

"If you are about to tell me to find a woman with title or money, I swear I will knock you on your ass." It had been years since he'd hit Preston or even disagreed with him, yet his fist clenched, ready for battle.

"You know I don't care about any of that."

"What is it, then?"

Preston held his hands out to his sides. "You are a Frenchman in England. You rely on a good relationship with people in society in order to continue your lucrative business. Marrying a girl who was accused of treason is not exactly the best way to endear yourself to the ton."

"Do you have any other objections?" Jacques bit the inside of his cheek. None of it made any difference. The fact that Preston was right didn't matter. If the members of society didn't want to do business with him, they would suffer as much as him.

"Only one other." He tugged on his cravat.

"What is it?"

"What if we're wrong about her? What if she is a traitor to the crown?"

Jacques sucked in a long breath and rushed forward, grabbing a handful

of Preston's blouse. He backed his best friend to the wall. "Do not ever say that again. Diana is a good and kind soul who has been through more than you can imagine. I do not care what your English gentry think and frankly, I do not care what you think, Pres. I am going to make her my wife because I am in love with her and cannot live without her."

Nodding, Preston made no move to get away from him. "Then you need not strangle me. If this is how you feel, I shall love her like my own sister."

One breath at a time, Jacques brought his anger under control. He let go of Preston's shirt. "Thank you. I would hate to lose your friendship, Pres."

Preston slapped him on the back. "And you never shall."

Chapter Sixteen

Diana had been looking for Jacques because he'd never come back to the parlor. She'd tried his bedchamber but found it empty. Nice women didn't traipse about in the middle of the night, but she wanted to see him once more before Christmas was over.

In her bare feet and nightgown, she'd taken the stone steps down and found him talking to Preston in the parlor by the fire.

She should have made her presence known, but when Preston said she would damage Jacques's business, she'd hid herself just outside the door. It was beneath her, but she couldn't help herself. Preston was right. She would ruin all Jacques had built in England. One day he would come to resent her for destroying his business.

Jacques's voice had been so calm and unaffected. When he'd asked if Preston had any other objections, Diana had run back up the steps and gone to her bed for a good cry. How could she have been so wrong about his feelings for her?

No. He said he loved her. Perhaps the reminder of losing so much money by marrying a woman of doubtful character had tempered his love. It was too much to give up for a girl who had nothing to offer the marriage. Perhaps if she came with a large dowry, he could afford to be rejected by the ton. Diana had nothing; no connections and no riches. All she could do was help Francis Edgebrook with his experiments. Hardly enough to base a partnership on, let alone a marriage.

It seemed like her tears would never stop. She wiped her face a hundred times and had even gone to the washbasin to scrub her sorrow away. It had no effect, and the tears fell endlessly.

When the knock came soft as a bird at her door, she froze. Silence followed. Maybe she'd imagined it.

There it was again.

Wiping her face with the sleeve of her voluminous nightdress, she padded to the door. "Who's there?"

"It's me," Jacques said. His voice light and eager, he sounded nothing like the cold, detached man she'd heard in the parlor.

Leaning her head against the cold stone around the door helped force her to stay her tears. "You should not be here. Go away."

"Are you crying? Open this door."

Admitting to herself she wanted to see him and know why he hadn't defended her, Diana unbolted the door. Perhaps because the truth needed no defense. Marrying her could ruin him. She peeked out. Still in his evening clothes with his hair pulled back, he stopped her heart. "You should go to your own room."

Forceful but gently, he pressed the door open without hurting her. He lifted her chin with his finger and looked at her with narrowed eyes. "What are you crying about?"

"I don't want to tell you." She sounded like a child and felt like an idiot. She might be able to do complex mathematics both on paper and in her head, but she was still a blithering idiot when her heart was breaking.

Jacques stepped inside the room and closed and bolted the door before scooping her up in his arms and carrying her to the bed. He sat with her in his lap and held her. "Are you sick, Diana? Shall I call for a doctor? I know the weather is bad, but if you are ill, I will find you a doctor."

"I'm not ill." Her tears started again and there was no stopping them. She buried her head in his soft white blouse and cried until she gulped air on every sob. She needed to cry. She was dying, but he was the last person in all of England she wanted to see her so low. She should be braver after all she'd survived, yet she was dying inside.

"If you are not sick, you are going to have to tell me what is wrong. Just a few hours ago you were happy and dancing. What happened?" He kissed her temple and hugged her tighter.

"You didn't come back." She gasped for air.

"I had a lot to think about, so I took a walk about the castle. Is that what upset you?"

Shaking her head, she clutched him around the neck and refused to look

him in the eye. On a long breath out, she said, "I went looking for you."

His hand stilled where it had been rubbing her back. "Where did you look?"

Speaking directly into the patch of his blouse that she'd made sopping with her tears, she said, "I went to your room."

"Now I am very sorry, I took that walk. I should like to know what you would have done if I had been inside. Would my goddess have seduced me? I assure you there is no need to cry about it. I am certain I would have been in favor of such an initiation." His lips were so soft where they touched her cheek.

"When you weren't there, I went downstairs."

He stiffened but didn't release her. "You heard my conversation with Preston?"

Pushing away did her no good. He held her firmly, but without harming her. "I should have told you I was there or run away sooner. You should let me go, Jacques. Middleton is right. I can only bring you ruin. I've tried to tell you so, but then you've been so sweet. I just wanted something normal and good. Having you love me was a treat I couldn't resist."

"I do love you, Diana. That will never change." He caressed her back again.

The sweetness of his goodbye was too hard to bear. The last thing Preston said as she was moving away from the parlor door rang in her ears. What if she was a traitor? Of course they still doubted her. "Let me go."

Very slowly, Jacques released his hold on her. He placed her on the mattress and Diana wanted to die from the loss. She steeled herself for the moment he would walk out of her room and her life forever.

Her heart stopped when he knelt in front of her. "Listen to me very carefully, Diana. I will never let you go. Preston is my best friend, and he worries about me. He does not disapprove. Not in the way you think. He voiced his opinion and we nearly came to blows over it."

"You did? I didn't hear that." She replayed the cold agreement from Jacques in her head.

"Then you abandoned your eavesdropping too soon." He smiled. "If Preston disapproved, I would be sad, but it would not change my desire or my determination to be with you. However, if you had stayed longer you would have heard him say that he will love you like a sister."

"He said that?" Her heart leaped, and she had to swallow more tears,

though this time they were happy tears.

“He did. My business will not suffer, and if it does, I will change my clientele. It won’t matter. I have enough to keep us quite comfortable for many years. Now, tell me what you had planned when you came to my room.” He pressed kisses to her hands where they lay in her lap.

It was impossible that this perfect man could want her. She slid from the bed and knelt with him. “I’m not really sure. I thought... I didn’t want to go to sleep on Christmas without saying good night.”

“Then I am honored.” He kissed her tear-streaked cheek.

Suddenly embarrassed by her hysteria, she put her hands over her eyes. “I’m a mess. I’m sorry for acting like such a ninny.”

He pulled her up with him as he stood. “Let me think. I got to carry you in my arms, sit with you in my lap, and hold you while you cried. I’d call that a full evening and not a bad one, from my perspective.”

It was impossible not to laugh, her cheeks were on fire. “Still, I should not have eavesdropped.”

“Perhaps not, but there is no harm done. Nothing I will ever say is a secret from you. I cannot control what other people say, and listening at doors often leads to misunderstandings.” He gently pushed her hair behind her ear.

At the gesture, so sweet and caring, Diana’s heart felt like it might burst. It also reminded her she likely had red, swollen eyes and nose. “I need to wash my face.”

When he stepped aside, she rushed to the washbowl and pitcher on the table. Splashing water on her face took some of the fantasy out of the last few moments. Jacques Laurent was in love with her. Truly and wonderfully in love. It was impossible to believe and yet it was real. “What made you come here tonight? You have not visited my room in over a week, and since you didn’t know I’d behaved like a ninny, why did you come?”

As she dabbed the water from her face with a towel, Jacques’s arms came around her waist. He pressed his body firmly against her back. He was hard in all the places she was soft, and they melded together in harmony. “I thought I had been issued an invitation after the waltz. Was I mistaken?”

Lord, so much had happened in just a few hours, she’d forgotten. The dancing in the parlor seemed like days ago. The space below her stomach tightened and she flushed from head to toe. The desire for Jacques overwhelmed any good sense. “You were not. It was an invitation.”

He nuzzled her neck. “I am so relieved to hear it. However, if the events

of this evening have made you uneasy, Diana, I will wait for you. I have no desire to pressure you into anything you are ambiguous about.”

Turning pulled her out of his arms. The last thing she was unsure of was him. She had doubts about herself and her worthiness of his adoration, but he had always been sure and true. One at a time, she tugged the bows at her shoulders, and her nightdress slid down her body, pooling at her feet. Every place the soft material touched tingled with longing for Jacques’s hands and mouth. Standing naked before him, she should have been embarrassed, but the desire in his eyes emboldened her. “I am not ambiguous.”

The firelight glowed in his dark eyes with an intensity that might have frightened her when she was younger. Knowing Jacques would never harm her in any way assuaged any worry, leaving only desire in its place.

Jacques placed the back of his hand just under her throat and traced a path downward with his knuckles.

Diana’s breath hitched as his fingers passed between her breasts. Looking down, she followed his darker skin against her pale flesh as he touched her stomach, then lower, to the patch of hair between her legs. She let out the breath she’d been holding and shuddered as sparks of something new and wonderful lit inside her.

Instead of continuing, he placed his palm on her hip, then slid it to her waist and higher, cupping her breast. His thumb grazed her nipple.

She clutched his shoulder to keep her knees from buckling. “I’m off-balance.”

“Good. I would hate to be the only one.” Leaning down, he took her nipple in his mouth and suckled.

She wanted to scream and laugh at the same time. Knowing Honoria was sleeping just one room away kept her quiet, but it wasn’t easy. Despite her best efforts, the wondrous delight he caused with his mouth elicited a long moan as she dug her fingers into his back. She tried to find some stability as everything tipped out of control.

He released her breast, lifted her in his arms again, and carried her to the bed. He removed his blouse and shoes and stretched out next to her, running his fingers lightly from her neck to her thigh.

“I need to tell you.” It was difficult to get words out with him touching her so intimately.

“Tell me.” He kissed her shoulder, then just behind her ear.

“To get out of prison... I...” She drew a long breath. “I’m not a virgin.”

His fingers stilled.

Pushing up on her elbows, she reached for the blanket to cover herself.

“Diana, I have had little doubt about what you had to do to escape France. I am not a virgin either.” His smile put all her fears at ease.

Years of shame swamped her, but she let his words sink in. “You don’t mind?”

Threading his fingers through her hair at her nape left his palm at her cheek. He rubbed his thumb along her cheekbone. “I only mind that you have suffered, and gave away something you cherished. I cherish only you.”

“Most men would throw a woman back for being soiled.”

As another wave of shame threatened, he opened his mouth on hers and devoured her. His lips demanded and coaxed her to respond. Worries fled as his kisses addled her brain. Body on fire, wanting more, she pressed against him.

He broke away and trailed kisses down her jaw to her throat.

Each spot his lips touched caught on fire. When he reached her breast, she arched into him, longing for more.

“You are perfect. Please do not say such a thing again.” Jacques gripped her hip and continued his path down her body.

Unsure what to do with her hands, Diana reached for any part of him she could touch. She found his strong back, and when he pulled away to kiss her abdomen, she ran her fingers through his soft hair, pulling it free from its ribbon. As his head moved lower, his hair was silk against her skin.

He kissed lower and the sensation jolted her to sitting. “Jacques!”

“Shh, my love. Trust me.”

Diana eased back against the pillow and watched. Wanton and erotic, the sight was as stimulating as his kiss.

He slid his tongue between her folds and the sound that escaped her lips was nothing she’d ever uttered before. Lightning jolted through her core, waking every inch of her body. “Oh my God.”

Smiling against her thigh, he nudged her legs apart.

Writhing in a torturous ecstasy, Diana forgot who she was. The world and all the dangers in it faded away to nothing. There was only this soaring sensation created by Jacques’s lips. Fire rocketed through her. Gripping the bedding, she erupted in such wonder.

Then she was in his arms with him holding her tight and pressing his lips to her temple. She clung to his shoulders while waves of rapture washed over

and through her. When she settled back to earth, she said, “That was—I have no idea what that was.”

His grin was wicked, and laughter shone in his eyes. “That, my love, is lovemaking.”

“Then this was my first time, and I’m so happy it was with you.” The stain of giving her body to gain her freedom lifted. Nothing about being with Jacques could compare to the quick, rough handling she’d known before.

“I am delighted to hear it.”

Suddenly shy, she couldn’t meet his gaze. “Can I give you the same pleasure?”

“Do you want to? We could just sleep and leave my satisfaction for another night. I am happy to have given you release.”

Release was a good word for the glory he’d provided, yet there was more, and she wanted it all. “I want you. If I soar with angels all alone, then it is only half my pleasure.”

If she could have bottled the expression of tenderness and desire in Jacques’s eyes, she’d have drunk it every day for the rest of her life.

Lifting off the bed, he kept his gaze locked with hers. He removed his breeches and let them fall to the floor.

She knew she was staring. Despite her experience, she had never seen a man naked before. Jacques’s shaft stood proudly against his stomach, calling for her touch.

Rolling to her side, she reached out and touched the soft, warm flesh.

It jumped and a low moan pushed out from deep in Jacques’s chest. Dangerous and exciting, he was like a lion teased by a mouse. “Diana.”

She loved the way he said her name, his French accent rounding the vowels. She ran her palm from the base to the tip then gripped it full in her hand on the way down.

A long growl told her Jacques liked her touch, or he was about to devour her. Either way, the notion pooled delight between her legs. “You are quite beautiful.”

“You are driving me mad.”

Not sure if that was good or bad, she stilled. “Should I stop?”

He wrapped his hand around hers. “Not because I do not like it, but because I do not want this to end too soon.”

Lord, she wanted more of him, all of him. She longed to make him lose control as he had done to her. “It is more satisfying to please you than I

would have imagined. I sound like an idiot.” She hid her face in the pillow.

The mattress sank as Jacques climbed back in the bed. The warmth of his skin against hers, from her shoulder to her toes, was like coming home. For a girl who had no home to speak of, it nearly brought her to tears.

Jacques ran his hand along her throat, cupped her cheek and coaxed her to face him. “You most definitely do not sound like an idiot. It is gratifying to give pleasure when emotions and feelings run deep. I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than watching you climax.”

When she touched his cheek, he kissed her palm. The sensation of his lips was as filled with delight as their first kiss. “I don’t know what to do, Jacques.”

His warm smile sent sparks through her. “May I make love with you, Diana?”

“Please.” It was the only word she could push out through her emotion-clogged throat.

Despite expecting pain and perhaps shame, she wanted to give herself to this wonderful, loving man. It was the least she could do. Closing her eyes, she waited.

When nothing happened, she peeked out of one eye.

Propped on one elbow, Jacques frowned down at her. “You look as if I will murder you.”

“It’s all right, Jacques. I can endure the pain to give you pleasure.”

In a flash, she was under him.

She gasped, then stilled and braced herself.

He remained perched on his elbows with his pelvis pressed to hers. The thick base of his shaft nudged at her folds. “Diana, I will not hurt you. I will never hurt you. It would be nice if you could forget everything about your earlier encounter. While that was sex, it was not lovemaking.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t fathom what he meant. The act was unpleasant, but what they had done before made it worth it and she wanted him to have the same pleasure he’d given her.

The more she tried to relax the tighter her muscles became. When Jacques rolled away, she missed his weight.

He aligned his body to hers again and caressed her from breast to belly. “I think we shall try something else.”

“I’m sorry. I know I’m not good at this. It’s only the pain and embarrassment. I promise it will be all right.” She rolled to face him. He was

so beautiful with the firelight shining on his skin. She touched the smattering of hair on his chest, hoping that giving herself would keep him from abandoning her.

“Diana, you are all I have thought about for months. This moment is one in thousands of moments we will share. It is not the beginning and the end. It is pleasure, not pain. I just need you to trust me.”

“I do trust you.” How could he think she didn’t? She was making a mess of everything.

His lips touched hers and thinking became harder. Keeping her wits about her stopped being as important when his tongue mingled with hers. Wet, warm delight started that now-familiar tightening low in her abdomen.

Moaning and gasping filled the room, and Diana had a vague notion that those sounds were coming from her as Jacques’s fingers slid between her thighs. She bucked and pressed against the delight he recreated. The rapturous pull edged closer.

Jacques’s weight shifted, and he pressed her thighs farther apart. Their hips met, and his fingers were replaced by firm pressure. “Diana, look at me.”

She opened her eyes.

Intense desire filled those dark eyes.

Her core tightened, wanting him to fill her. There was no pain as she lifted her hips to take him.

He stilled while her body adjusted to the fullness. Pleasure spread from where their bodies connected. Nothing had prepared her for the sense of completion. Together they made something perfect. Heart pounding, she relaxed and brought him in deeper.

Jacques moaned and closed his eyes but didn’t move.

Pulling her hips back created another wave of delight. She arched her hips off the mattress, taking him in again. With a mind of its own, her body pulled him in and released him over and over.

“Diana, you are too wonderful for words.” He met her thrust with his own, changing the tempo.

There was nothing but Jacques and her as the world slipped away. Ecstasy bloomed in a slow rise. Then she tumbled over the edge.

Jacques’s thrusts intensified, drawing out her pleasure. Deep and warm, his seed spilled, and he collapsed on his elbows.

It was the most beautiful moment Diana had ever experienced. She wrapped her arms around his back and pulled him down on her.

Rolling to one side, he took her with him.

When he slid out of her, she missed the fullness, but exhaustion and satisfaction were too intense to complain. “Is that normal?”

He smiled against her forehead. “It is for us, goddess.”

“Will you leave me now?” She’d meant for the night, but also forever. He might love her, but the good sense of Middleton’s warning would eventually hit him. At least she would have a beautiful memory to hold on to.

“I will never leave you, but I will have to go back to my own bed before the servants wake.” He kissed her nose. “Sleep, Diana.”

As if his words held some magic and his arms were her perfect blanket, sleep took her into its warm embrace.

Chapter Seventeen

The weather had forced them inside for days. Diana missed the walks with Jacques, even if they were a vain attempt to draw Victor out of hiding. It had been weeks, and no one had seen any sign of the French spy. Perhaps he had come to his senses and returned to France, though she doubted it. His obsession with her was far too strong.

It was the first day with low winds and sunshine since before Christmas, so when Jacques asked if she'd like to take a walk in the garden, Diana jumped at the chance to be out of the castle.

They informed Alex they were going to walk the gardens, donned warm clothes, and Diana took his arm.

"Is it too cold for you, Diana?"

So many thoughts scrambled around in her head. She'd almost not heard his question. "No. I like the cold. It reminds me we're still alive."

The snow-covered path wound around the outside of the larger garden. Unlike Mrs. Fallcraft's garden, the castle gardens were not walled. They spread out and merged into the surrounding hillside and woods. They managed the six inches of snow without issue.

"You are very quiet."

"Just thinking about what I will do when this is all over." She stared at her feet, hiding her worry with the hood of her cloak.

The formal gardens ended, but she followed Jacques along the path through a grove of evergreens.

"What would you like to do when you have your freedom?"

There it was. He would go about his life and she hers. He would take care of his parents and find a nice mistress and she would make some life for

herself. "I enjoyed working with Mr. Edgebrook."

"Then you should continue to do so."

The tree in front of them rustled.

"I do not see that as a possibility." Victor Caron stepped around the tree. He pointed a pistol at them and had a sword and dagger strapped to his waist. His tattered clothes indicated he'd had a difficult few weeks waiting for this opportunity. His wide stare spoke of insanity beyond what she already knew of him.

Diana's heart pounded. She couldn't let Victor harm Jacques. No harm could ever come to the man who'd saved her in so many ways.

Jacques stepped forward, forcing Victor to shift his aim toward him. "You are a fool, Caron. You should have fled for France as soon as you could. Now you will hang. Why would you remain in England when it was clear you had no options here?"

Victor's maniacal laugh sent a chill up Diana's spine. He said, "I have options. You didn't think I would let you go, did you, Diana? You and I have unfinished business. You have an obligation to France. You made promises that you must keep."

"What are you talking about?" Jacques demanded.

"It's a lie." Not that it mattered, but she wanted Jacques to know she was innocent. He'd stood by her through so many doubts. Now Victor's lies would ruin everything.

Victor laughed again and waved his pistol between the two of them. "She actually had you fooled. You really thought she was innocent. She agreed to help us with the rockets, just as her traitor father had. You stupid English did not want his information, so he sold it to France, so we can win the war, and the emperor can take his rightful place as world leader."

Jacques inched to his left, blocking Diana without any overt action. "Then why has your government not destroyed England already?"

Rage filled Caron's eyes and he drew his dagger. "One small delay with her stupid father dying."

"You killed my father." Diana stepped next to Jacques.

Victor shrugged. "An accident, which I have paid for. But when I bring you back to France, all will be forgiven. My rank and honor will be restored, and I will live in glory next to the emperor."

"I see." Jacques tried again to put her behind him. "You have lost what little mind you had, Caron. No one is going to forgive you for killing a man

they spent years torturing to give them a better rocket. You've cost Napoleon money, and he'll never forgive you."

"Maybe not for her alone, but when I bring your traitorous head back to be paraded around Paris, I will be called a hero." Victor raised his dagger in victory.

Jacques sighed dramatically. "Let me see if I understand this. You killed both Mr. and Mrs. MacLeod, whom your government coveted for his scientific knowledge?"

"The woman was always expendable. Only the girl and the old man were valuable. The woman was only brought along to use to make the old man work." Too crazy to notice he was poking holes in his own lie, Victor smirked.

"My mother was a wonderful woman who did not deserve to die at the hands of a filthy pig like you." Too angry to cry, she longed to strangle the man who ruined her quiet life.

"Do you remember her screams when I cut off her little finger? That got your father working." Victor laughed like a child remembering his first toy.

"That will be quite enough." The ferocity in Jacques's tone must have sparked something in Victor.

He sobered and turned the barrel of his pistol on Jacques. "You have been a burr under my saddle for too many years, Laurent. It is divine providence that you found your way to this whore, and now I have you both together to dispose of as I like. I am going to kill you and cut off your head while your woman watches. Nothing will ever give me as much joy, which is rather sad. However, I will mark this day and celebrate it for the rest of my life."

Heart in her throat, Diana wanted to scream. "Just take me. I will be more than enough to show your loyalty to the Emperor. I'll make your rocket and you will be a French hero and live your life in luxury. Just leave Jacques here. He's not important. It's me you want."

"Be silent, Diana," Jacques bit out.

A slow, terrifying smile spread across Victor's face. "I am having a very good day. It is a fine offer, but no. I will have his head and you in France making rockets. I have no reason to make anyone a deal. Not today and not ever."

Victor leveled his pistol at Jacques. "Goodbye, Laurent."

Diana waited as long as she could. As Victor's finger pulled back on the trigger, the world slowed. She leaped in front of Jacques. Nothing could

happen to him. She'd rather die than watch him bleed.

She screamed as pain erupted in her shoulder and back. Jacques's arms came around her and all she could see were his beautiful dark eyes. "I would never betray you. I'm no spy."

Voices sounded as if they were coming from every direction.

Then silence and darkness.



"Diana!" Jacques held her limp body in his arms.

Horsemen and Preston rushed in from all directions.

Preston said, "Oh God, she's been shot. Call for a surgeon."

Warmth seeped over his hand. Holding her with one arm, Jacques ripped his cravat off and handed it to Preston. "Press this on the wound."

He did as told but stared at Jacques. "Are you hurt?"

Diana trembled in his arms and he realized her trembling was his own. "She jumped in front of me. She took the bullet meant for me."

Victor cursed in French and babbled nonsense. Alex ordered him taken to the dungeon.

A footman rushed over. "I can carry her, sir."

"I have her. You can go for the surgeon."

He must have looked about to drop because the footman pursed his lips. "Mr. Bates has already sent for the doctor. I'll just stay with you until we get Miss MacLeod inside."

Preston turned to the footman. "See if you can find Mrs. Fallcraft. She has some medical knowledge and may be able to help. I will follow Mr. Laurent and make sure his strength holds."

At a run, the footman took off across the garden toward the school side of the castle.

Jacques lifted her in his arms while Preston kept the cloth pressed to her back.

"Do you want me to carry her? You look a bit worse for wear." Preston tucked the cravat into Jacques's hand and pressed both on the wound.

"No. I have her." The snow was stained red around them. Jacques's stomach churned. Diana's moan gave him hope. She was alive and she had to stay that way.

As he rushed toward the castle, people ran past him, but Jacques only saw them in his periphery. He focused on getting Diana to warmth and finding a surgeon to make her well.

Footmen opened doors and maids rushed about with linens and wash water. Inside the parlor, Jacques placed her on the couch.”

Cecilia touched his shoulder. “Here, sir, I’ve got her. I’ll get her out of the coat.”

Honoraria flew through the door. “My girl. What happened? I saw that fiend taken to the dungeon. They should take him to the pits of hell. Missy, go and fetch Miss MacLeod’s nightdress and more sheets. Oh, my girl.”

Mind spinning out of control, Jacques backed away. Diana’s declaration that she had not betrayed him played over in his head. How could she have thought it needed saying? He’d never believed a word Victor said against her. It was a ploy to divide them and create doubt. Just as he’d told Preston, he had no doubts about her; he knew her heart.

Missy, a redheaded maid of perhaps fifteen, rushed in with tears streaming down her face. Five other maids surrounded Diana and removed the cape and overcoat. They took off her boots, all the while pressing new, clean bandages to the bleeding wound.

So much blood in the snow and on the bandages. His cravat lay in a basin, covered in her blood.

Preston’s grip on his shoulder startled him. “I cannot lose her, Pres. She has to be okay.”

Mrs. Fallcraft rushed in with a black bag and took over the caregiving. “Good, girls. We’ll need more water and bandages. Has the surgeon been called?”

“Yes, ma’am. He’s on his way,” Preston said.

Honoraria stood watch but allowed Mrs. Fallcraft to take over.

“The snow will keep him. This ball is too deep. We’ll have to stop the bleeding until he gets here. Bank the fire and open those windows. The cold air is better.”

As if she were a general, her orders were instantly obeyed by footmen and maids. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fallcraft held Diana in her arms and pressed a bandage to her back. “Preston, take Jacques out of here. If he falls ill, my attention will be divided, and that will not be good for Miss MacLeod.”

“Come on, Jacques. We’re not doing anyone any good here. Let’s go and see about Caron.” Preston wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and they left

the parlor.

Calling over his shoulder, Jacques said, "I want to know the minute the surgeon arrives."

"I will find you." Honoria closed the parlor door.

"When your lady awakens, I shall owe her an apology and my thanks. I would not have thought she would take a bullet for you or anyone. Bravest thing I've ever seen."

"What were you doing there?" With all that had happened, Jacques just realized he and Diana had not been alone on their walk.

"Just in case there was trouble, Alex and I followed. When we spotted Victor, Alex sent me to fetch the others. We arrived just as he pulled the trigger. Alex looked a bit shocked, if you want my opinion. He'd not expected Caron to be insane and shoot you. He thought he'd try to find a way to bring you both back to France." Preston opened a thick wooden door with iron strapping, revealing narrow stairs down to the castle's original dungeon.

The air grew damp and cool as they descended. Caron's mad rantings filled the stone cavern.

"Then Alex was there. He could have made himself known and perhaps Diana wouldn't have been injured." Jacques couldn't bear the thought that her injuries might be fatal. The pain tearing through his chest could not be eased until he knew Diana was going to live.

"Or he might have stepped out and caused Caron to shoot sooner. Caron might have shot you and taken his dagger to Diana in an effort to escape the Horsemen. If the rest of us had arrived sooner..." Preston shook his head.

"It's not your fault, Pres." There was no way of knowing how Victor might have reacted to one more person stepping into view. It could have been as Preston said or worse. Insanity had taken over Victor's mind.

At the bottom of the stairs, Preston put his hand on Jacques's shoulder and the muscle in his jaw ticked. "I didn't truly believe in her as you did. I still had doubts about her loyalties, both to you and to England. My wretched disbelief could have gotten you both killed, and there is no way to apologize for such a slight."

The weight Jacques had carried for months over his closest friend's mistrust of Diana lifted. Loving Diana meant ignoring the feelings of anyone unrelated to them as a couple, but it also meant straining his bond with the man he considered his brother. Jacques hadn't realized how heavy it had been until it no longer held him down. "You are the one person in this world who

need never apologize to me, Pres. We have known each other too long to worry about such things.”

With a long sigh, Preston met Jacques’s gaze. “How will I make up such a grievous error to Diana?”

“You will have a lifetime to make amends.” Jacques hoped he was telling the truth. She’d looked so fragile lying pale and listless on the couch. None of the vibrant woman he knew remained in that moment.

Preston nodded, but worry shone in his eyes. “Yes, of course.”

The dark passage brought them to an open area with a barred cell. Inside, Victor was raging like a wild beast. Sweat poured down his face despite the coolness of the dungeon. Spit flew from his mouth with a barely coherent mix of French and English blather about killing them all, treason, and the glorious emperor. His height left only inches between his head and the low stone ceiling. Each time he flailed and jumped, parts of him would bash against unyielding rock. A gash bled on his forehead and one on his hand.

Alex leaned against the wall watching, while Oliver stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest and his legs apart.

“Has he been like this since you brought him here?” Preston ran his hand through his hair.

“He’s actually calmed a bit.” Oliver pointed and shrugged. “I’ve never seen anything like him. You knew him before, Jacques. Was he always a madman?”

The idea of wrapping his hands around Victor’s throat made Jacques’s hands twitch. Insane or not, he’d hurt Diana on more than one occasion, and now she was above stairs fighting for her life. “He has always been obsessed with his emperor, but no. It would seem losing Diana for a second time has snapped something inside him. If I did not wish so intensely to kill him, I might feel sorry for the bastard.”

Alex turned his head but kept his relaxed pose. From the way his shoulders bunched, he was nowhere near as relaxed as he looked. “How is she?”

Heart in his throat, Jacques swallowed several times before he could answer. “Mrs. Fallcraft is with her. When the surgeon arrives, we will know more.”

“I hope she dies a miserable death.” Victor’s English suddenly perfect, he stared with wide, vacuous eyes at Jacques.

Jacques’s wrath boiled, and it took a great effort not to become as crazed

as Victor. Slowly, he approached the bars. “If she dies, you will be next. I would rip your arms off one by one and watch you bleed to death. If they would let me, I would kill you now. You should be happy you are on the other side of these bars, and I do not have the key to your cell. You had better pray Diana MacLeod lives. Otherwise, nothing will save you from my fury.”

Preston’s hand on his shoulder broke through the disturbing escalation of Jacques’s emotions. He strode out of the prison and climbed the stairs two at a time.

At the top, an out-of-breath Mr. Bates stopped short. “Mr. Laurent, I have been looking for you.”

Jacques’s heart stopped. The butler looked ready to drop. Had he lost her? “Is it Miss MacLeod?”

Catching his breath, Mr. Bates nodded. “The surgeon is here.”

Jacques strode down the hall to the parlor and opened the door.

A plump man in a gray suit, with long sideburns and a powdered wig, stood over Diana. He held her wrist and looked at his watch. “I need to get that bullet out, but her heart is beating strong. It might be the pain that keeps her unconscious. Probably a good thing.”

“Will she live?” Jacques demanded.

The doctor hemmed and hawed, looking around the room and avoiding Jacques’s gaze. “Her condition is grave. She has lost blood.”

“Will she live?”

“I... I can’t say for sure. She is young and strong. If we can get the bullet out, and she does not contract an infection in her blood, perhaps. The bullet didn’t invade any organs that I can tell. I see no reason she’s not awake. I shall do what I can to save her, Mr...”

Mrs. Fallcraft stood. “This is Mr. Laurent, Dr. Page. He and Miss MacLeod have been courting. He is understandably upset by today’s events.”

Dr. Page gave a solemn nod and his expression softened. “I understand. I assure you I will do what I can to help the young lady.”

“How can I help?” Jacques wanted to be of use. Finding Diana was a miracle. Never had he expected to need someone as he did her. Losing her now was not possible. He couldn’t bear it.

“I have to cut away her dress. I imagine when I go fishing around, she will wake. Do you think you can hold her still while I work? I’m concerned that the ladies will not be capable of the strength required, and I would guess you would not favor one of the other men holding her in such a way.” Dr.

Page raised an eyebrow.

Jacques looked around the room at Honoria and Mrs. Fallcraft. "I will hold her."

Sebastian and Nathaniel stood to the side watching, but left the room when Dr. Page turned to cut Diana's dress. He pulled a blade and some kind of tweezer from his bag before washing his hands in a basin.

Seated on the couch facing Diana, Jacques pulled her torso toward him and wrapped his arms around her lower back exactly as the doctor instructed.

Her head lolled then settled against his shoulder. She moaned a weak protest.

Jacques whispered in her ear, "Diana, the doctor must remove the lead ball from your shoulder. It will be painful, but I have you. Stay with me."

Dr. Page said, "She cannot hear you, sir. She's not conscious."

"We don't know what she hears. Besides, it can do no harm." Jacques looked at Mrs. Fallcraft, who stood ready to assist the doctor.

She gave him a smile and a nod.

Her moan must have meant she had some sense of what was happening. It didn't matter if they thought him mad. She was a part of him, and if there was a chance she heard, and his words could soothe her, he would continue. Jacques took a breath. "Let's get this thing out of her, shall we?"

Dr. Page gave a nod and stepped to Diana's back.

Mrs. Fallcraft removed the bandages she'd packed around the wound to stop the bleeding.

Where her flesh had been perfect and beautiful, the back of her shoulder was marred by blood and a nasty entry wound. She had done it to herself in an effort to protect him. He would rather have died than see her hurt.

Honoria gasped and covered her mouth. "My poor girl."

"If anyone feels they will faint or become ill, they should remove themselves from this room. I'll not be distracted." Dr. Page made a good point.

Two maids rushed from the room, but two more stayed as did Honoria, who kept her worried gaze on Diana.

Mrs. Fallcraft poured strong spirits over the wound.

Diana stiffened.

He couldn't bear her pain, but still thought her reaction a good sign. Holding tight, he told her how brave she was and how much he loved her.

Dr. Page cut Diana's skin and blood ran down her back faster than Mrs.

Fallcraft could swab it away. He dug around with his tweezers.

Diana jerked and tried to pull away from the pain, but Jacques held her in place. All the while his heart was in his throat and he wished it was him the doctor was poking around inside. Jacques closed his eyes, trying to absorb her agony.

The clank of steel indicated the offending bullet was removed.

Wrapped in his arms, Diana relaxed until Mrs. Fallcraft began stitching up the wound.

When it was over, Jacques was exhausted and angry at everyone and anyone who had caused his goddess pain.

Mrs. Fallcraft bandaged the wound, then wrapped Diana in a sheet. "You should carry her to her bed. The maids will have prepared her room so we can care for her."

Obediently doing as he was told, Jacques carried her up the steps and eased her into her bed. He hesitated at Diana's bedside. The room was buzzing with Mrs. Bates, Honoria, and two maids. Diana's muscles had relaxed, but she was still deathly pale. He hated to leave her, but the doctor was waiting in the hall.

Outside Diana's room, Jacques faced Dr. Page. "How is she?"

"The ball hit bone. I didn't detect any fragments, which is good. The bone will still give her a great deal of pain and may well have cracked. It will take some weeks to heal, and she should remain here until she is fully recovered. That arm will need to be kept immobile while her shoulder heals. Bouncing around in a carriage is the last thing she needs. Mrs. Fallcraft and the maids will watch for fever and call me should she exhibit signs of a blood infection."

"What can I do?" Jacques needed to help in some way.

Dr. Page frowned. "Nursing is for the ladies to attend to. Perhaps you might sit with her and monitor any change. Keep her calm if she becomes agitated. We don't want her tearing those stitches. She's already lost too much blood."

Jacques was grateful to the man. "Thank you, Doctor. I will see that she is well cared for and does not tear the stitches." He shook his hand and walked back into Diana's room.

Jacques watched from the shadows while the women fussed over Diana. When they needed to put a clean nightgown on her, he stepped in and lifted her. Despite the maids blushing over Diana's state of undress, Jacques would

help take care of her.

At ten o'clock, Honoria sat dozing in the chair next to Diana's bed. She was tired and upset, but had refused to go to bed an hour earlier when Cecilia had said she would keep watch.

Jacques stepped forward and knelt next to the chair. "My lady, go to bed. You will do her no good if you make yourself ill. I will stay with her."

A tear slid down Honoria's cheek. "I failed in my duty to keep her safe."

"I share your regret, but Caron's madness was unpredictable. We could not have known he would attack here at Buckrose. No sane person would attempt to carry her out of this fortress."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" She cupped his cheek much like his mother always had when he'd been upset as a child.

"I never dreamed she would launch herself between me and that gun. I allowed my own desire to be a man and protect her cloud her strength. I should have known. She is not an ordinary woman by any means." He loved all the things that made Diana unique, but he wished she were a bit less brave.

"I believe she would do it again given the same circumstance." Honoria's smile was sad. "She loves you that fiercely."

It pained him and gave him great joy. Monique's betrayal had forced him to discard any hope of love. Falling under Diana's spell broke the dam and left him drowning in a sea of emotions he thought he'd banished forever. "Go and rest, my lady."

Nodding, she rose. "You will call me if anything changes?"

"You have my word." He helped her up and saw her to the door, where she looked back at Diana one last time before stumbling to her own room.

Closing the door, Jacques closed his eyes. He felt as ragged as Diana looked. He could not take the hurt from her, but he experienced it just the same. No longer caring about rules of propriety, Jacques climbed into the bed on Diana's uninjured side and took great care not to jostle her as he lay beside her. "I am very vexed with you, Diana. You had no right to injure yourself on my behalf. How can I live if you do not survive? You will have to fight to come back to me. I refuse to accept any other outcome."

He kissed her cheek. "You might be the bravest woman I have ever known. That is saying quite a lot. Still, you should not have tried to protect me. I should be protecting you. Perhaps that is arrogant of me, but you cannot fault me for wanting you safe. We shall have a long talk about this when you

wake up.”

Losing Diana was not an option. His heart couldn't survive it. She was too much a part of that organ's ability to beat. She was too fragile to hold, so he settled for resting alongside her and placing his hand at her waist.

Several hours passed and rain tapped against the window. Heat emanated from Diana more fiercely than normal body heat. Sitting up, he felt her cheek.

Clammy and hot. Jacques rolled from the bed and rang for a maid.

Not two minutes passed before Cecilia stood in the doorway. Her cap was askew, and her dress crooked at the shoulder, but she curtsied. “What do you need, sir?”

“Miss MacLeod has a fever. Send someone for Dr. Page and see if you can awaken Mrs. Fallcraft.” Jacques was glad he sounded calmer than his racing heart. He'd prayed, but the result was not as he'd hoped.

Diana moaned behind him.

Cecilia ran from the room and her footfall sounded on the stairs a moment later.

Jacques walked to Honoria's door and knocked.

A shuffle sounded from within before the door flew open. In her lace-trimmed and ruffled gown, Honoria demanded, “What has happened?”

“She has a fever.” He hadn't intended to sound forlorn, but his voice betrayed his emotions.

With a nod, Honoria said, “I'll be a moment.” She closed the door.

Jacques went back to Diana's room. He took the cloth on her dresser and soaked it in the bowl of cool water, then pressed it to her forehead.

Moaning, Diana turned her head from side to side.

Hoping to chase away whatever demons haunted her dreams, he leaned down and pressed his lips to her ear. “Diana, you must be still, or you will tear those stitches. You do not want to have to go through that again. Frankly, I do not think I could take it.”

She stilled, but pain etched lines on her forehead and around her eyes.

Jacques kissed her nose. “Do not leave me, Diana. I need you and cannot live without you in my life. Please.”

Chapter Eighteen

The haze around Diana faded and a throbbing pain took its place. She focused on the voices around her and pulled herself out of the fog. Blinking through the heaviness of her eyelids, Diana forced herself to wake.

She moved her arm. Pain scorched through the right side of her body, taking her breath away.

Jacques's handsome face came into focus. There were dark rings under his eyes and his hair hung loose instead of being pulled back in a neat queue. Lines formed around his frown. "Be still, Diana. You are all right, but you should try to relax."

"Jacques." Her dry throat wouldn't allow much more.

"I am here. We have been very worried about you." He ran his fingers down her cheek.

Memories bounced around the periphery of her mind. Walking in the snow, Victor, danger, pain. "I was shot?"

Honorina leaned over her. "Yes, but you're going to be fine. Dr. Page said the fever is abated and your blood is clean. He wanted to bleed you, but Jacques wouldn't have it after you'd lost so much blood."

"Fever?" Had she been ill? "I don't remember."

"I am very angry with you." He didn't look angry. Tired, relieved, and maybe loving, but not angry. Pushing her hair from her face, he said, "You should not have tried to protect me, but we will talk about that when you are stronger."

Exhausted and still foggy-brained, Diana closed her eyes. "Good, because I have a thing or two to say about that."

Honorina laughed. "Oh, thank heavens, there she is. She really is going to be all right."

It was an effort not to fall asleep. Diana opened her eyes again. Jacques still hovered over her, his face just inches from hers. She needed to touch him but moving hurt too much. "How long?"

"You were injured five days ago. You lost consciousness almost immediately, then took a fever. It broke last night. We've been very worried. Do you think you might take a few spoons of broth?"

Had his eyes not been filled with pain and worry, she would have said no to any food. "I will try."

"I'm going to lift you to sitting. Do you think you can wrap your left arm around my neck?"

The scent of him filled her as he leaned in and wrapped his arms around her lower back. As if her arm weighed twenty pounds, she heaved it over his shoulder and gripped his neck.

Jacques whispered, "Are you ready?"

"Can't we just stay like this?"

Honorina cleared her throat.

"I would not mind, my love, but the room is less than private." He chuckled near her ear.

She gripped him tight as he hauled her to a sitting position. Pain forced a cry from her lips.

Jacques held her close until the agony declined to a throb. "Is it better?"

"Yes. You can let go, if you must." Brazen words flew from her mouth. Perhaps she was delirious from lack of food or some draught she'd been given.

For an instant, he tightened his hug before releasing her. Despite him looking done in, he gave her a smile before backing away.

Cecilia stepped forward with a steaming bowl in her hands. She put a napkin under Diana's chin and sat at the edge of the bed. "I'm so happy you're awake, miss."

"Thank you." Diana took a spoon of soup, and while she didn't much like being fed like a baby, she could not have lifted the bowl and managed the spoon. Her right arm was strapped to her side with her hand free but unable to move beyond an inch off her middle.

Honorina stepped to the bed and sat on the chair. "It has been a difficult few days." She turned to Jacques. "Take yourself to bed, Mr. Laurent. If you

fall ill, we'll all be lost.”

Worry pressed his brows together. He met Diana's gaze. “I will be back in a few hours. If you need me, send for me.”

“I will. Go and rest.” She drank another spoon of soup. It was bland but warm as it slid down to her stomach.

Once Jacques was gone, Honoria said, “He has barely left your side through all of this. I don't think he's had three hours sleep in five days. The rest of them have had little sleep, what with that man in the dungeon, but Jacques refused to leave you.”

Lids heavy, Diana tried to process everything Honoria said. “I couldn't let him be killed.”

“Of course, you couldn't. He's rather angry at you about it, though. Still, he watched you like a hawk and insisted on caring for you. He even held you while that Dr. Page removed the ball from your shoulder.” Honoria cringed at the memory.

Jacques's whispered words of love echoed inside Diana. She tried to pull the memory forward, but only hazy sounds of his voice remained. Managing another spoonful, she forced it down. “I think I've had enough for now, Cecilia. I'm very tired.”

Putting the bowl aside, Cecilia smiled. “You can drink some more when you wake. I'm happy you took a little nourishment.” She poured a spoon of something and held it out for Diana to drink. “Dr. Page said you'd need the laudanum for a few days more.”

Diana took the medicine and winced at the sweetness covering the bitter drug. “That is terrible.”

“It will keep the pain manageable so you can rest.” Honoria sat back, smiling.

Cecilia helped Diana lay back, then covered her to her chin.

Honoria said, “Cecilia, you can take the bowl down. I'll stay with Miss MacLeod.”

With a nod, Cecilia gathered the napkin and bowl on a tray and left.

“My lady, I have many questions, but I'm afraid I cannot remain awake to ask them.” Diana's lids closed despite her efforts to remain lucid.

“That's all right, my dear. You may ask them later when you wake up. I will be here or close by. Sleep now.”



Waking the next time was far easier. The sun shone through the westerly windows of Diana's room. She was still on her back and her muscles ached from inactivity. Jacques sat to her right. "You look better."

He smiled. "As do you."

Using her left arm, she pushed herself to sitting.

Jacques jumped up and added his strength while propping her pillows up behind her. He frowned as he returned to the chair.

Heart pounding, she broached the subject haunting her dreams. "Victor lied. I never betrayed you. I never betrayed England."

Letting out a long sigh, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Diana, I have never thought you had, not even for one moment."

"But why, Jacques? I don't know if I could believe me after all that has happened." Besides the throbbing of her shoulder, her chest ached with emotion.

"Because I know your heart. You are everything to me, my goddess of the moon."

A knock on the door ended the conversation and preceded Preston Knowles's entry. As a duke, he generally looked proud and poised. Today his expression was contrite. "You're awake. I'm very glad to see you, Miss MacLeod."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Preston rounded the bed and knelt beside her.

Stunned to silence, Diana could only stare at him. Dukes did not kneel, and this duke didn't like her very much. She looked to Jacques for some explanation, but he only shrugged and grinned.

Preston looked at the floor and then up at her. "You must forgive me." He stopped and turned his gaze down again. "No. I'm sorry. I'm begging you to forgive me."

"Your Grace? I don't know what you should be forgiven for."

"Preston or Pres, please. I need no titles when with true friends. I doubted you, Miss MacLeod. I thought you might be using my friend, my brother, to get information, or trying to get him sent back to France to save yourself. I

was a fool.”

It was not a revelation. She’d heard him say as much in the parlor, yet her heart pounded. “And now?”

“I was wrong. No one jumps in front of a bullet unless they have love in their heart for the person they’ve saved.”

Truth or not, it was not enough. “I could love him and still be a traitor.”

Nodding, Preston acknowledged her logic. “That is true. Still, I was convinced by your noble act. However, the Horsemen have had five days with Victor Caron and he has confessed to more things than he was asked. Of course, he’s completely mad and obsessed with you to the point where we can no longer mention your name without sending him into hours of incoherent babble.”

Sweat beaded on her forehead and upper lip. “He’s still here?”

Jacques stood and hovered over her. “He is shackled in the dungeon. He will never harm you again. Word has been sent to France that he will face trial in London. We await Napoleon’s response, but we assume he will deny any part in Caron’s actions.”

“Does that mean I am free from them?”

Jacques looked at Preston then back at her. “I do not know, my love. We will have to wait for a response and gauge the answer.”

The idea that this might never be over churned her stomach. Living the rest of her life with the fear of being captured was no life at all. She returned her gaze to Preston still kneeling on the floor. “Of course, I forgive you. There is nothing to forgive. You wanted to protect your friend, and no one can fault you for that.”

He leaned forward, took her hand and kissed it. “Thank you. I’ve been distraught with the notion that you would never forgive me for being such an ass. I’ve written to my wife. She has been very worried about you and sends you prayers for a quick recovery, Miss MacLeod. I think she will join us here at Buckrose soon.”

“Diana. You must call me Diana. I will be happy when I can walk out of this castle on my own feet. Now, please, get off the floor before you damage yourself.”

Jacques laughed. “It is good for dukes to kneel from time to time. It keeps them humble.”

A loud rumble of Diana’s stomach shot Preston to his feet. “I will send for something for you to eat. Thank you, Diana.”

She smiled as he left. “Jacques, it is a very strange day.”

Leaning down, he kissed her forehead. “It is a great day. You are alive and will recover.”

The fact that the Duchess of Middleton was coming didn’t bode well. “When can I leave here?”

He frowned and sat back in the chair. Crossing his arms over his chest, he glared at her. “You have to heal that bone. It will be a few weeks. I am curious, where will you go?”

It was a fair question. She had no family, but she did have a home—or whatever was left of one—in Scotland. “I will go and check on my parents’ house and find out what happened to the servants. Of course, that will have to wait until the snow melts a bit. Traveling to Scotland would be difficult for me with the harsh winter.”

“I see.” His frown deepened.

At least she would have a few more weeks with Jacques while she healed. She picked up her chin, but her voice remained small. “When will you leave Buckrose?”

“You are the most infuriating woman.” He stood and stormed across the room, grabbed a fire iron and poked at the fire.

“I am? What did I do?”

The flames grew, and Jacques put another log on. “First you step in front of a bullet and get yourself injured, nearly killed. Totally unacceptable behavior, you should know better.”

“I saved your life.” She shook her head. “I assume there is a second reason.”

He turned, and while his lips were pulled in a tight line, his eyes had filled with admiration as he approached the bed. “Second, you still assume I will leave you after I have told you I never will.”

Emotion pushed up from her throat. “You also told me you were not the marrying kind of man.”

“I also told you I have changed.” He sat on the edge of her mattress.

“In my experience, people don’t change.” She tried to stay the stream of tears, but they still dripped down her cheeks.

He leaned in with a hand on either side of her head. Very careful not to touch her right side, he pressed a kiss to her lips. “Diana, perhaps I have not changed. Perhaps I have always been the marrying kind, but a bad experience sent me down another path. It is not a path I am particularly proud of, but it is

the path that brought me to you, so I shall always cherish its memory. I love you, not just for today, or next week, or a year. I love you for all time. I want to marry you and make a life and family with you. You are the smartest, kindest, bravest and most beautiful woman I have ever known. Tell me you will be mine.”

His declaration rolled through her and settled in her heart. “You still want to marry me?”

“More than anything.” He kissed her cheek.

She couldn’t stop her tears. Pure joy was impossible to contain. If she could have jumped up and down, she would have. “I can think of nothing I want more than to be your wife, but what of your business? There are many people who will always think the worst of me.”

“I do not want to marry them. I only care about what you think.” He kissed one eyelid then the other.

A swift knock on the door, and Cecilia brought in a tray. Spices and chicken scented the room.

Jacques stood and moved away from the bed.

Cecilia blushed at having caught them during an intimate moment.

“I will return when you have finished eating.” Jacques’s smile simmered with promise.

Spotting the brown bottle on the nightstand, Diana stopped him. “One thing more, Jacques. And this is for you too, Cecilia. I do not want any more of that.”

“But, miss, the doctor said the laudanum would help you get better.” Cecilia put the tray down on the table and carried the soup bowl over with the spoon and napkin.

“It will not make me better. It just makes it so I don’t care about the pain. I would rather suffer than feel like I’m in a fog. No more.” As if in defiance, her shoulder pain increased. She relaxed and the pain eased.

Jacques took the bottle. “You are a grown woman. If you do not want the laudanum, you shall not be given it. If you change your mind, you need only say so.”

“Thank you.” So many more things needed saying. He treated her like an equal, he loved her, he wanted to marry her. She wanted to jump into his arms and never let go. “I’m relieved you didn’t make me fight you on this.”

With a smile that melted her heart and a brief nod, he left the room.

Cecilia sat with the bowl of soup and gave her a lecture about following

the doctor's orders, but she also told her about how Jacques had been with her the entire time she was unconscious. She went on and on until Diana was convinced the maid was as in love with him as she was.

Still grinning after her bowl of soup was empty, Diana drifted back to sleep.

Several times in the night, she rolled over the wrong way and the pain was excruciating. Honoria was there once and Mrs. Fallcraft another time. She never woke and found the room empty. She had many people to thank when she recovered.

Mrs. Fallcraft said, "I know it is uncomfortable to lie on your back, but that shoulder will require it for a while."

"I think I forgot while I slept," Diana offered in explanation, which was probably unnecessary.



A commotion in the hall woke her. Sunshine shone bright through the window. It was the first time she'd woken up with no one watching over her.

Men were shouting, and the door burst open.

Victor Caron ran through the door. Drool ran from his mouth and sores marred his lips. Red-rimmed, sunken eyes sparked with madness and malice. "I will kill you."

Rolling to her left, she put the bed between herself and the madman coming for her. Her feet hit the floor hard, and her legs shook from lack of use. Screaming pain shot through her shoulder. She grabbed the glass from the bedside table and threw it left handed. She hit Victor on the forehead, but the shattering glass had no effect on him.

Skirting the bed, Victor kept coming, with his arms outstretched and hands like claws.

Alex and Jacques rushed in.

Grabbing the candlestick, Diana backed into the corner.

Screaming her name, Victor rushed forward and wrapped his hands around her throat.

Diana bashed his head with the candlestick, but her airway closed. She gagged. Pain racked her body. She beat his head and back, but it had little

effect.

Alex grabbed Victor and pulled him away.

The sight of Jacques renewed Victor's madness. He charged forward.

Jacques grabbed for something on the washstand. He lunged back to avoid Victor's punch.

Undaunted, Victor raged forward, pinning Jacques to the wall.

Diana screamed.

Victor collapsed on the floor with a pair of scissors lodged in his chest.

Jacques ran over and lifted Diana from the corner. He took her out of the room, stepping over Cecilia, who was just rising from the floor, and Sebastian who remained still in the hallway.

She hugged him around the neck and a wave of nausea overtook her. "Jacques, I think I may be sick."

Picking up his pace, he turned into his room. He put her down on the bed, grabbed a washbasin from the washstand and held her while she retched.

Heaving made the pain worse, which made the nausea worse. Diana wondered if dying at Victor's hand wouldn't have been better. Finally, the room stilled, and the queasiness subsided. She allowed Jacques to wipe her face and ease her back on the bed.

He went to the table and brought her something to drink. "Just a sip, then spit it in the bowl."

How would she ever face him again? She did as he said, but wiped her own face this time. "Is he dead?"

Jacques pushed her hair back and dabbed her forehead with a cool towel. "I certainly hope so."

"What happened?" Her stomach settled, but the pain from her shoulder stabbed like a knife and radiated across her back and down her arm.

"The Horsemen were ordered to transport Caron to London. He broke free, determined to get to you."

"Is Mr. Turril badly hurt? How is Cecilia?" More people hurt on her account. Diana wanted to scream.

"I do not know, but I will find out. This is not your fault, Diana."

"Perhaps not, but I feel responsible."

"We're going to have to look at that wound. I fear your stitches could not survive the last few minutes." Jacques got up and grabbed another towel from his washstand.

"You are quite good at nursing." Despite all that had happened, a little

giggle emerged. Perhaps she was becoming hysterical like one of those ladies one read about. It was possible she'd lost her mind.

His wry little smile said he appreciated a bit of levity after what had come before. "Nursing you is my honor, Diana. Do you think you can lean forward?"

Nodding, she did as he asked.

Jacques sat behind her. "I am going to pull the ribbon at the top of your gown."

Why she should feel embarrassed when he had seen her completely naked, she didn't know, but heat flushed her skin from head to toe. "I understand."

She gripped the top of her nightgown while he pulled the back low. He cut the bandage away and let out a breath. "The stitches held. It is a miracle. There's just a little bleeding."

A cool towel soothed the ache in her shoulder.

Mrs. Fallcraft rushed in, out of breath. "How are you?"

It seemed the fact that her back was bare in the company of a man didn't shock Mrs. Fallcraft in the least. Diana clutched her gown tighter. "Mr. Laurent says that my stitches are intact."

She collapsed against the doorframe. "Thank God."

"How are the others?" Diana asked.

Mrs. Fallcraft straightened and color rushed back to her face. "Sebastian has a lump on his head and is in a bad temper, but is otherwise fine. Cecilia has a few bruises. It could have been much worse. That monster who attacked you is dead. There was nothing I could do."

Jacques covered her wound, pressed the bandages back in place and retied the bow of her nightgown before helping her ease back against the pillows, which filled her with his scent.

"Mrs. Fallcraft, Diana will need new bandages."

"I will see to it," Mrs. Fallcraft said.

"I suppose there will be questions," he said.

Rushing into the room with blankets, Cecilia was followed by Alex. Cecilia covered Diana from her bare feet to her neck. "I'm so sorry, miss. I tried to stop him. I wasn't strong enough. He was filled with the devil. I'm sure of it."

"Are you all right, Miss MacLeod?" Alex remained near the door.

"Yes. Thank you. He did not have long enough to do much damage." She

pressed her hand to her throat, trying to dispel the memory of Victor's hands there.

"Then we were lucky. It could have been much worse. He should never have been moved so soon. I will write to His Majesty and explain that the prisoner died due to his own actions." Alex looked at Jacques. "I'm confident there will be no investigation."

"If there is, I will stand by my actions."

The two men stared at each other for a long moment. Alex nodded. "And the Horsemen will stand behind you. In the meantime, I suggest that those of us who were present keep the details to ourselves."

Cecilia bobbed a curtsey. "I was not of clear mind to see or hear anything once the madman knocked me down."

"I wasn't even there," said Mrs. Fallcraft.

"Very well." Alex turned to leave, but stopped and came to Diana's bedside. "Miss MacLeod, the Buckrose Horsemen owe you a great deal. You have acted in good faith and great honor. I cannot make up for our inept protection, but I offer our services to you or your family should you ever need us." He made a low bow.

Not knowing what to say to such a vow, Diana stuttered before she regained her wits. "I have no family, sir."

A warm smile transformed Alex's harsh features. He looked from her to Jacques. "I'm confident that is about to change."

Embarrassment, joy and something more bubbled inside Diana. How her life had changed in a few short months.

Cecilia spoke as soon as Alex left the room. "We are cleaning your room, miss. I shall inform you the moment it's ready."

"Thank you, Cecilia." It was an effort not to sound disappointed.

Mrs. Fallcraft said, "I'm going to check on Sebastian. I told him to be still and keep ice on that bump. I will gather fresh bandages and return shortly."

Honorina nearly bumped into Mrs. Fallcraft in the threshold. The ladies curtsied and smiled. "I went for a short walk in the gardens and all Hell broke loose inside. Are you hurt, Diana?"

"No, my lady. I am fine. Mr. Laurent has already seen to my stitches and all is well."

"Thank goodness. I'm going to make sure your room is clean. I don't want you to see a trace of that horrible man when you return." Honorina scurried out of Jacques's room.

The door was left open, but quiet descended and they were blissfully alone. Jacques sat at the edge of the bed and took her left hand in his. "I wish you could stay here with me."

"I was thinking the same thing, but I'm of little use with this arm and shoulder immobilized."

"Having you near would be more than enough." He leaned over and kissed her palm.

Diana wanted to tell him so much of what was in her heart, but with people rushing up and down the hall, it was not the right time. Despite her desire to be alone with Jacques, her body rejected wakefulness. Her eyes grew heavy. "I'm sorry."

He pushed her hair back from her cheek. "Sleep, my love. We will talk when you wake up."

Regardless of her efforts to remain with him, sleep claimed her, and with it came images of a madman strangling the breath from her.

Jacques's whispered pledges that she was safe and should rest easy chased the demon away.



Jacques couldn't sleep. Most nights he sat up watching the sky. Cloudy, starry or bright with the moon, he watched. Each day Diana grew stronger and endured less pain. She walked the hallways daily, regaining her strength. Dr. Page came twice a week to check on her progress. Jacques longed for the day he could take her away from Buckrose.

It had been three weeks since the last attack by Victor Caron. His body was long gone, hauled off to London. All that remained were Diana's nightmares about that fiend.

Giving up on sleep, Jacques pulled on his breeches and blouse and padded down the hall to see if Diana was resting easily.

The room was empty save for her sleeping form tucked into the bed. He sat beside her. All evidence of the mayhem that had transpired in the room had long been cleaned away. It had taken several times scrubbing to get the bloodstain out of the floor. Jacques would carry the blood on his hands much longer. Yet he couldn't regret killing Victor. He'd had no choice in the moment, and he would have always been a danger to Diana.

“Is that you, Jacques?” Her groggy voice made him long to hold her close and hear her speak for days on end before ravaging her from head to toe.

“Yes, my goddess. I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“I can’t sleep. When I close my eyes, I see terrible images.” Her complaint was sad, and she sounded lonely in the darkness of her room.

He sat on the edge of the bed. “Shall I hold you?”

“Someone might come in and find you.”

“Then I will marry you immediately.” He hoped someone would move up the date of his careful plans. He climbed under the covers and, lying on his side, wrapped his arm around her middle.

Her good arm wrapped around his, and she sighed a long, contented breath. “I wish we could stay like this forever.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. Why do you sound surprised?”

He’d wanted more from her but hadn’t pushed. All these weeks she’d been warm and flirtatious, but nothing more. “I am never sure what you feel, my love. You keep your emotions under such tight control, I struggle to read them.”

Rolling to her left, she faced him. With the fire nearly out and the curtains blocking any moonlight, he could only see the light of her eyes. “Forgive me. I have spent so long hiding my feelings, it is difficult for me to express them as others do. You have been a kind and wonderful friend and deserve more.”

“Is that what I am, a friend?” Disappointment sounded in his tone despite his attempt to remain unscathed.

“Friend, lover, are we engaged? I think we are engaged. Perhaps the laudanum fogged my mind. Did you propose?” She pressed her palm to his chest and petted him from neck to nipple.

The effect of her touch was immediate and damned uncomfortable. “I told you twice, I want to marry you. I also confessed to loving you.”

“It always seemed there was someone interrupting or rushing in at the worst moment.” She cupped his cheek.

“I wish I could see your face.” He ran his fingers along her braided hair, toying with the bit at the end.

Taking his hand, she pressed his palm between her breasts. “You might not be able to see my face, Jacques, but you can feel my heart. I love you. I need you. I never expected to marry, and your love is a miracle to me. When you said I could go and work for Francis if I wanted, I thought you meant to

go back to before and live my life as an Everton lady. When I realized you were a man who didn't mind if his wife pursued her own goals, I knew you were the only man whom I could ever marry."

It wouldn't surprise him if his heart exploded with too much happiness. "I am the happiest man alive."

"My joy is equal to yours, sweet, sweet Jacques. You saved my life, too many times to count."

"You saved mine as well, my love. More than that, you saved my heart when I thought it was dead to such emotions." Careful not to put pressure on her right side, Jacques leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers.

She sighed and threaded her fingers through his hair. She tangled her tongue with his in a dance as close to making love as they could come in their current circumstance.

She tasted like heaven, and he could snack on her all day. Never had anyone else's kisses been so sweet. If he wasn't careful, he would become a poet and bore all his friends.

Jacques longed for all of her, but feared hurting her.

Tugging her right arm from its sling, Diana cupped his cheek and deepened the kiss.

About to lose his mind in the passion of her kiss, Jacques pulled back. "You will hurt yourself, or worse, I might hurt you."

"You won't hurt me. That is the one thing I can always be certain of. I think you should go and bolt the door and then come back to bed."

Unable to resist and truly not wanting to, he sucked her bottom lip between his and then the top. Her response was a low moan as she clutched at his blouse. "Do not move and do not change your mind."

Her giggle was like bells. "I won't change my mind."

After an uncomfortable walk across the room, Jacques slid the bolt home. He took the candlestick from the table and lit it with a stick from the fire. It wouldn't do to be deprived of seeing his goddess.

Placing the candles on the nightstand, he removed his clothes and climbed under the covers.

She rolled to him and her lips pressed warm and seductive against his neck. She ran her good hand up and down his chest while keeping the other still at his shoulder.

Easing along her waist, he found one perfect breast and caressed just under before molding her in his palm and toying with her hard nipple.

With a gasp, she turned her head and kissed him, her lips and tongue boldly asking for exactly what she needed.

Groaning, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against him. “You have to tell me if you are hurting or even uncomfortable, Diana.”

She gripped him just as tight and pressed her center close, trapping his shaft between them. “I will tell you, but right now, my only discomfort is in wanting you.”

That needful desire was the most potent aphrodisiac. Running his hand down her thigh, he reveled in her softness. At her knee, he lifted so that her leg bent, then slid his hand along her inner thigh. Tiny gasps escaped her lips as he caressed between her legs. “You are all I want for the rest of my life, Diana.”

Arching toward him, she gasped. “I am yours.”

He rolled so that she lay atop him.

Her eyes widened before a smile pulled at her lips.

Helping her raise her hips, he positioned her at the tip of his shaft and let her choose the pace of their joining.

Slow and torturous, she slid over him. Her sheath tugged him in as she dug her nails into his shoulders.

Jacques pulled her down flat against his chest and kissed her mouth as she trembled with need.

Lifting her hips, she moved to the rhythm of her heart.

Pure delight spread through him from his center and a low groan emerged from deep in his chest.

Quickening her pace, she rose higher and came down harder as he met every move with the rise of his hips. The pleasure intensified and cascaded. She stared into his gaze, love so plain in her eyes.

He covered her mouth with his to mute her scream as an orgasm shattered her. His own pleasure only an instant behind, he held in his cries of delight.

She collapsed on top of him and rested her cheek on his chest.

Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her hair and breathed in her warm floral scent. “You make me very happy, my love.”

“Will it always be like this?” Her breath became one with his as if they were inseparable.

The first light of day banished the night and peeked through the window. “In the future, we will be married, and I will not have to sneak down the hall before the servants rise.”

She kissed his chest. “That will be so much better.”

Heart in his throat, he kissed her again and regretted leaving. “It will, but know this, Diana, Goddess of the Moon. You make me the man I have always wanted to be. You are the part of my soul that has been missing.”

Her sweet mouth opened and closed several times and a tear rolled down her cheek. “I wish I knew what to say.”

“Saying you will be my wife is enough.” He took her left hand, wanting one last touch before he had to leave her.

Sitting up, she pulled his hand forward and kissed his fingers. “I can’t wait to be Mrs. Laurent.”

Heart swelling, he knew he was grinning like an idiot. “You can have anything you want, my love, and making you Mrs. Laurent will give me the most exquisite pleasure.”

Epilogue

Diana walked through the gardens at the Middleton country estate and pulled her cloak tighter around her throat. The temperature had dropped, and clouds foretold the coming snow.

“There you are,” Jacques called from the veranda.

Her husband always appeared whenever she needed him. “I just needed some time to think.”

Trotting down the steps, he jogged over to her. “Is all the Christmas celebrating too much?”

They had married as soon as custom would allow, collected Jacques’s parents, and come directly to meet Preston, Millie and Preston’s mother, the dowager duchess of Middleton, for a late Christmas celebration. It was a lovely sentiment, but Diana had dreaded the holiday without her parents. Spending Christmas at Buckrose Castle with so much distraction had been a relief.

Jacques wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Immediately warmth filled her as it only did from his touch. “What is wrong, my love?”

“Nothing.” The lie was for the best.

Jacques walked her to a stone bench and knelt down in front of her. “What, Diana? What is it you want that brings such sadness?”

Tears filled her eyes, but she met his gaze. Even the smallest untruths hurt when they were told to him. “There is something I want, but you will think it stupid.”

“I would give you anything. Tell me.”

Drawing a deep breath, she brushed the first flake of the coming storm from her lashes. “I want to bury my parents. I know it’s silly, we have no

bodies, but I hate that there is no marker, no ceremony, no one to mourn.”

He sat on the bench next to her and took both her hands in his. “It is not silly. I should have realized.” He shook his head, sorrow filling his dark eyes. “Shall we go to Scotland, or is there someplace else you wish to hold the ceremony?”

Tears slid down her cheeks. “I should be looking forward, but I can’t let them go with nothing.”

Drawing her into his arms, he kissed her cheek. “Oh, my sweet Diana, I have never been under some delusion that you were without a past. Not even when I was fortunate enough to find you on the road to London were you uncomplicated. The fact that you want to give peace to your parents just makes me love you more.”

The snow came down harder and a chill ran up Diana’s spine. She leaned closer to Jacques’s warmth. “You are the most indulgent husband.”

“I have a brilliant wife. She is far wiser and much smarter than I. It would be foolish to hold her back. Besides, I have promised to make you happy, and I always keep my promises.” He rubbed the cold out of her back.

Preston stepped out on the veranda. “You two are going to freeze to death. Come inside. Cook has made a sumptuous meal.”

Ignoring his friend, Jacques cupped her cheeks. “Do you want me to tell them you have gone to bed? I can bring you a plate if you wish.”

He was everything good, and part of her still didn’t believe she deserved him. “I have a family again. You gave that to me. Let’s go have Christmas dinner, then later you can take me to bed and make me forget my worries.”

He frowned. “I am happy to distract you, my love, but there is nothing wrong with talking through your troubles. I will not love you any less. You are my world.”

The way he always knew her heart was wonderful. “Thank goodness.”

Snow continued to come down. Preston had given up and gone back in the house. “Shall we go in?”

Arm in arm, they trudged through the snow and up the steps. Diana breathed in the cold air. “Perhaps we should wait for spring to head north.”

He patted her hand. “It would certainly be an easier trip.”

Heart lighter at knowing her parents would not be forgotten, she walked through the door held open by a footman. She handed over her outerwear and headed down the hall to the dining room.

Jacques pulled her into the room Millie used for writing letters and

greeting callers. It was a small parlor with a desk and sitting area. It faced the garden and the light filtered through high windows. “Tell me you are all right?” He kissed her.

Breathless from his lips, she held him close. “I am. It was just the worry of bringing up the past.”

“You should always tell me what you need without fear, Diana. I will never deny you.” He tucked the hairs that had come loose from her bun back behind her ear.

“Like a knight in shining armor, you continue to rescue me.” She wrapped her arms around him and drank in his warmth until she was drunk on all things Jacques. This was all she would ever need.



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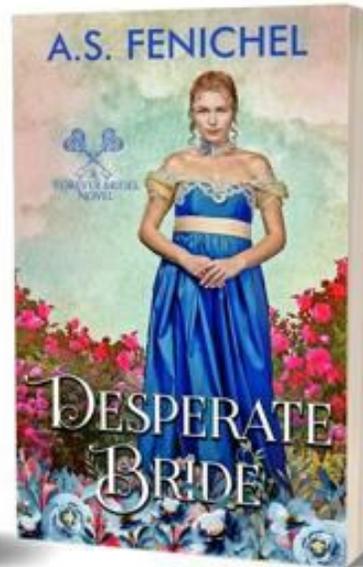
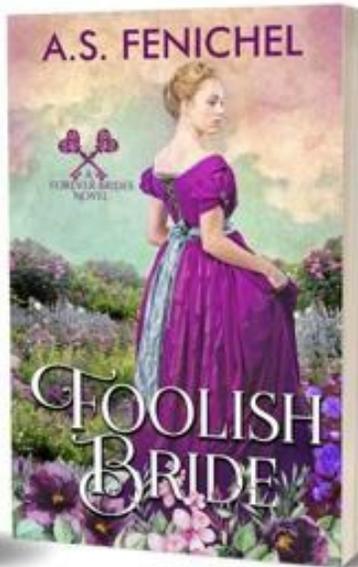
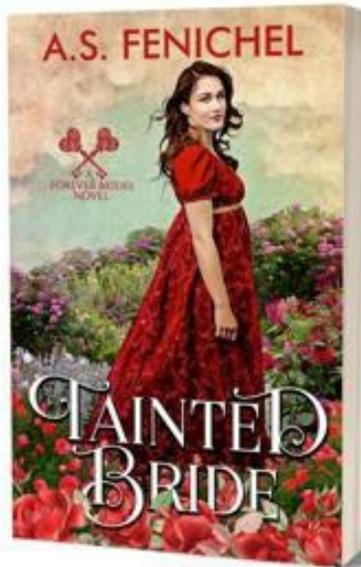
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A.S. Fenichel (Andie Fenichel) gave up a successful IT career in New York City to follow her husband to Texas and pursue her lifelong dream of being a professional writer. She's never looked back.

Andie adores writing stories filled with love, passion, desire, magic and maybe a little mayhem tossed in for good measure. Books have always been her perfect escape and she still relishes diving into one and staying up all night to finish a good story.

Originally from New York, she grew up in New Jersey, and now lives in Missouri with her real-life hero, her wonderful husband. When not reading or writing she enjoys cooking, travel, history, and puttering in her garden. On the side, she is a master cat wrangler and her fur babies keep her very busy.

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