



He's not exactly the catch
of the winter season, but
then she's not the
proper *ton* miss
she's led him
to believe.

Dashing Through the Snow

USA Today Bestselling Author

SANDRA SOOKOO

Author of the Colors of Scandal series

Dashing Through the Snow

**a standalone Regency
Christmas romance**

Sandra Sookoo



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Author's Pledge and Promise

You have my promise that I have never used AI technology to produce any part of the books I write and publish, and that I never will. Each and every word is mine. I spend copious hours every day outlining my books and then writing them. I refuse to use AI technology because then that product isn't writing. That is cheating and asking a computer to do the work for me.

So much of writing is organic, and computers simply can't make a reader feel the things a hero and heroine go through. I absolutely love connecting my characters with my readers, and letting my readers have a fully immersive experience while reading my stories.

Rest assured that I will still write every single word in each one of my books, and you have my guarantee that what you have purchased is the genuine book and not artificially created.

I adore my readers far too much, as well as the craft of writing, to cheat them in any way.

Thank you for your continued support.

Dear Readers,

As many of you know if you've been reading my work for any length of time, writing Christmas romances is my jam. It's my hobby within my job of being an author. So many readers ask me to do multiple Christmas romances a year, and 2023 is no exception.

Dashing Through the Snow kicks off the first of five holiday romances from me this year. I hope you love this one because I wanted it to be both spicy and sweet, and I also wanted readers to know that it's okay to not want to be with family for the holidays, especially if they're not good for you. Above all, the magic of the holiday season shines through, and makes the romance that much more lovely.

Enjoy this couple! They were certainly fun while they were with me.

Happy reading!

Sandra

Dedication

To Kelly Price. I hope the magic of Christmas always flows through your relationship and may you always find the joy of your happily ever after every day you're together with your love.

Blurb

When two disillusioned people accidentally meet, finding a common bond in scandal will give them back hope.

The Honorable Laurence Bannerman lingers in London to avoid joining his family at his father's country estate in Surrey to celebrate Christmastide. As the third son and a fourth sibling, nothing was ever expected of him, so his behavior has been quite scandalous. That is until he meets a woman who makes him long for a wife and wish for a change... but leopards don't change their spots, do they?

Miss Eleanor Comerford hasn't exactly been a darling of the *beau monde*. Though Christmastide brings with it naught but guilt and regret, there is the glimmering hope her family might forgive her past transgressions and take her back into their fold. Pretending to be someone she's not is tiring, but when her path crosses that of a stranger, a plan begins to form... for she still dreams of belonging.

Forced to share the same traveling coach, when Eleanor asks Laurence to enter into a fake engagement with her to lend legitimacy to her story, he agrees merely to protect her and see her safely home. Perhaps a friendship would stave off loneliness during the journey north. As they come to know each other, hurts and secrets from their pasts bubble to the surface, and with acceptance comes a budding romance. Only with a holiday miracle will they have the chance to realize they never needed lies or proper images to grasp love... for they were worthy of it all along.

Chapter One



December 14, 1817

The Albany

London, England

The Honorable Laurence Bannerman frowned at the letter in his hand. Dated almost a month past, it was from his mother asking him to join her, his father, and his three siblings at Bannerman Grange in Surrey for the Christmastide holiday and stay through Twelfth Night.

Not only did that sound like the dullest thing anyone could ever put forth, he refused to subject himself to the misery that being the only unmatched member of the family could provide. Everyone would be gathered around with their loving spouses and their growing broods, and they would all wonder what the devil was wrong with poor Laurence since he hadn't yet found a lady to leg-shackle himself to for the remainder of his life. Then his siblings would wax poetic about how he's missing out on the greatest love life could give—children. They would all look at him as an object to be pitied because he hadn't started to fill his own nursery, let alone found a townhouse to either rent or purchase that contained a said nursery.

Bah. I would rather walk on hot coals than go home for the holidays.

“What seems to be the trouble now, sir?” his valet—Watson—asked with a frown as he came into the drawing room of the set Laurence rented at The Albany in London. “You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, and you are not happy about it.”

“Ha! Perhaps that’s a good way of thinking about it.” Laurence passed the letter to his friend, who’d been his valet for more years than he could count. Certainly, since university. While Laurence was the fourth and last child of the Viscount Deerfield, Samuel Watson was one of a few illegitimate brats got off by an earl. He was given an education, but nothing else, so when the men met through a mutual professor, it was an instant fast friendship.

“And? Will you expand on the subject, or shall I wonder about it?” Amusement danced in his brown eyes as he folded a fine lawn cravat.

Laurence blew out a breath. He tossed a decorative pillow at the man, who threw it back with a snort. “I’m not certain I wish to attend the holidays in Surrey this year.”

“Why not? You haven’t seen your family in a few years. It might do you a world of good to be amidst the familial fold once more.” The valet scratched a finger into his dark hair. “Might give you a new direction, so to speak.”

“I rather doubt I need a new direction, especially if it’s one where my family wishes for me to move into.” With a sigh, he rubbed one eye with his fingers while the valet quickly read through the letter. “The more I think about it, the more I remain convinced I don’t wish to gather together with my successful, married siblings or my cousins of the same ilk at the Bannerman country estate in Surrey for Christmastide.” He shook his head as a shiver went down his spine. “And I certainly don’t wish to field a handful of lectures from all of them who want me to be the same.”

“What? Happy? Content? In love?”

“Not helpful, Watson.” They both smirked. “It’s not that I don’t want to have those things in my life, but perhaps I want them aside from being thrust into parson’s mousetrap before I’m ready.”

The valet snorted. “You are rapidly approaching five and thirty, sir. How much more ready should you need to be?”

“There is that.” He hadn’t had cause to think about his age much before, until now. “I would rather linger in London where I’m most comfortable, where my sins and scandals don’t matter, and my failures won’t be dragged out and discussed at the dinner table. If I step foot in my father’s manor house, everything that I am will be used against me.”

“I hardly think that’s true.”

“Come now. You know my family well enough. And now, I have a few failed investments that have really dented my income. I’m a hopeless disappointment, I fear.” Perhaps that was much his stumbling block. The only way he would go back home is if he could do so as a seemingly successful man, one who either had a lady in hand or a fortune about to be dropped upon his head.

“I do, but don’t you think they are only trying to help because they have all found the very things that you scoff at and want you to experience them too?” One of Watson’s eyebrows rose. “They care for you, even if you think they meddle.”

“Oh, they meddle. Haven’t my parents been responsible for my meeting countless women of the *ton* who are completely wrong for me over the years?”

“Perhaps it was your generally sour attitude toward marriage that doomed those potential matches before they could start.” The valet continued to putter about, tidying the rooms of the set. “What is the worst that could happen if you spent a few weeks in Surrey?”

Laurence gawked at him as if his friend had grown a second head. “They could finally succeed in matching me with someone!”

For one second, Watson’s eyes widened, then he shook his head. “Well, that is quite to the point of living a successful life.”

“No. I truly need an heiress, or some other miracle to land in my lap,” he muttered. Truly, why did everyone care about his damned future? It wasn’t as if those worries didn’t

sit heavy in his gut like lead. How would any woman worth her salt wish to be serious about aligning herself with him when he was rubbish at keeping his own life afloat?

“Agreed. Those Adonis looks of yours will soon start to fade, and then you will truly have nothing to recommend you.”

“Ah, well, thank you for that.” Laurence infused sarcasm into his response. Yes, he was rather fond of his blond locks which were always kept in a popular style and his hazel eyes trended more toward green than brown, to say nothing of the aristocratic features that hinted at noble blood, yet none of those things had ushered in a woman who might wish for more from him than an occasional tryst. “I’m not naïve to think that love is enough to get by in this life. Women want stability, which means coin, and I’m afraid I’m rather low on that. Always have been.” For he’d made it a point not to take funding from his father in order to get by.

“I’m glad to know you have at least some wisdom in that brain of yours.” The valet shot him a cheeky grin. “However, and perhaps more to the point, don’t you *want* to be a husband and a father? Leave a legacy in this life?”

“To be honest, I’ve not thought about what I want from life beyond what I have been doing in the moment.” He frowned as Watson passed the letter back to him. His mother’s familiar handwriting stared back. For a while, he’d been coddled and pampered as the baby of the family, but as he’d grown older and his siblings had made achievements or advantageous matches or generally had the potential to change the world, everyone had forgotten about him more and more.

...we would really adore having you home, Laurence. Family is family, and this Christmastide, I want all of my children with me. Your father isn’t growing any younger, and he’s recently had a few health concerns...

Of course, she would throw in something like that to force his hand. Knowing his hale and hearty father, the health

concerns could run the gambit from a splinter in a finger to a mild case of indigestion. Yet there was still that niggle at the back of his mind that if something were truly wrong with his father and he died, Laurence might wish to see him again one last time.

Then he looked at the valet, who clearly expected an answer to his question. “I would like to become a changed man. No longer do mistresses and empty liaisons satisfy me. And the longer I continue to do that, the more risk I take that I’ll catch the pox or something equally nasty.”

In fact, one of his good friends had written to him just yesterday saying the end was near for him because his syphilis had advanced to the point where the physician had told him to gather his family ‘round and make his goodbyes. The man was the same age that Laurence was now. They’d gone to the same clubs, gambled at the same tables, enjoyed the same sort of lifestyles, and yet his friend lay dying while Laurence had been spared that same fate.

Why?

“Half the time, women who are only interested in being bedded, are either scheming bitches looking to milk their protectors, or they wish to rob a man blind outright.”

“Yet you have not enjoyed success going the usual route of society events?” Of course the valet would ask that question. “When was the last time you even accepted one of the invitations that come your way?”

“It has been some time.” The thought of having to do the pretty, to follow the rules, to know that every eye was upon him watching while society matrons whispered and sized up his failures, steering their daughters or charges away from him sent a chill down his spine. “For far too long I’ve gotten by in this life on the reputation and name of my father. Society doesn’t see me for myself, and if they do, I’m always a disappointment. I suppose there is a valid concern of why I’m not considered a catch any longer.”

Not that I ever was.

“Ah, now you’ve sunken into maudlin territory. I’m sure that will help your cause.” The sarcasm in his friend’s voice had a grin tugging at the corners of Laurence’s lips. “You simply need one run of good luck and everything will come out right again. We have all been where you are currently.”

“Perhaps.” While he appreciated the valet’s sunny outlook, he heaved out a sigh of regret for the time he’d wasted. “Perhaps I don’t wish for children—I have never liked having a passel of brats around me—but having a woman of my own, someone to talk with, do things with, possibly go on adventures with—if I ever accumulated enough coin for such things—would be... pleasant I think.”

“That is understandable enough, and there is no reason to believe you cannot have that.”

“Ha! Aside from the not having a fortune or any prospects?”

“Well, there *is* that, but it’s not permanent. I mean, you are two months behind on *my* pay, but do you hear me complaining?”

Which made the situation worse. “I’m sorry, old chap. As soon as I come by some coin, you’ll be the first I catch up.”

“It is neither here nor there. I enjoy a life better than others, and I remain grateful for that.” Watson peered out the window, but he didn’t let on to where his own funding came from. “Don’t they say having a romance during the Christmastide holiday makes everything that much cozier? It is raining now but that doesn’t mean it won’t be snow soon.”

“Bah.” Waving the comment away, he balled up his mother’s letter and then tossed it into the fire where it immediately caught fire. “As if I wish for a return of the winter after the disaster last year was.” The previous year’s weather was a fright, and the headlines had billed it as the year without a summer, all due to some random eruption of a volcano—had anyone heard of something so outrageous before?—in some faraway place he’d never known existed. The sun hadn’t shone much of last year due to the clouds. It

was cold for much of the year with snow existing well into the summer months. Crops failed and food had been scarce. No wonder many men had taken comfort in the arms of courtesans and prostitutes depending on the depths of his pockets. Daily living had simply not been tolerable. “No, I am not a lover of the snow or cold, Watson. If I had my druthers, I would seek out the sunshine and warmth of Rome during this time of year.”

“But your pockets are near to let, so you are here, contemplating going home.”

“Yes, thank you for that equally dismal reminder.” He stared at the fire behind the metal grate. “I don’t wish to pass from this life without accomplishment or even love, but there is apparently a trick to all of that and I’ve never been fortunate in either arena before.” Feeling restless and needing to do something to alleviate it, Laurence launched from the chair if only to pace about the room. “I need to make a change before fate comes for me as it has done for Mr. Thomas Farley.”

God, the thought of death’s cold fingers reaching out for him, taking him to the Great Beyond terrified him as much as never being remembered for doing... anything of value.

“Those are all good things, of course, but again, if I may remind you, Christmas is nearly upon us, sir. Why don’t you travel to Surrey and visit with your family. Spend some time with them, understand them if you can. Come to know your nieces and nephews. Don’t let their well-meaning picking bother you, but perhaps ask your mother for advice on which ladies of the *ton* are available and who she might recommend you call upon.”

He blew out a breath. “Are you certain that marriage is what I absolutely need? I could try my hand at working with a few charities for a bit to see if that doesn’t improve my situation.”

“While that is all well and good, my friend, if you are truly lonely then finding a companion to court is what you should do, but if what ails you is your soul, then by all means, immerse yourself in charitable causes, for you are too far gone

to suddenly become a monk.” Watson’s gaze was steady as he looked at him, but there was that tiny hint of amusement on the man’s face that brought a certain levity and lightness to what could truly be a grim situation. “Only you can decide which affliction is the cause of your current ennui.”

Travel to Surrey in order to visit with family who may or may not be sympathetic to his situation or linger in London where he felt most comfortable, where there was always some form of entertainment and life and try to throw himself into a worthwhile charity that had nothing to do with furthering his own?

“And there is also the possibility that your parents have invited others to their country estate, which would make it a true house party,” the valet was quick to remind him. “Even now there could be a young lady suffering from the same discontent with life that you are. If you don’t go, you’ll never meet her to see if you would suit.”

Well damn. “I’d not thought of that before.” Had his parents tired of him making a match of it on his own that they would take such liberties now? In some ways, the assistance in finding a wife brought with it a swath of relief. “That would make things easier.” For all of his charm, he was complete rubbish approaching women he didn’t know for the purpose of a dance or even to pay his addresses. It was as if his tongue became glued to the roof of his mouth and his palms started to sweat.

That was why it was much easier to indulge in a courtesan. Expectations were clearly laid out. No hurt feelings, just coupling and paying for the transaction.

“As I said, it’s a possibility, and your siblings do have a wide network of connections as well. Don’t discount what they can do for you.”

Another fair point. “Perhaps I shall indeed do that.” Why not? At least he wouldn’t have to pay for his own meals or the coal to heat his rooms, and the bills he owed to a few creditors could be postponed for a few weeks. It would certainly reduce the stress that he carried on his shoulders,

give him the chance to make alternative plans. “Go ahead and pack our belongings, Watson. I shall secure my father’s traveling coach. Since they went to the country a month ago, it has since been sent back to Town. We’ll go out to Surrey, suffer through whatever horrors the family can find, do the pretty with my parents, and then return to London after the holidays with a new outlook.”

At least that was the hope.

“It is a sound plan, sir.” Watson nodded. “Your parents will be delighted. Perhaps the trip will be good for you.”

“I don’t know if I would go to that extreme, but they certainly won’t be cross with me—much.” All he needed was one stroke of fortune for his investments to turn about and make him solvent again. If there was ever a time to believe in miracles, now was the time. To be fair, he wasn’t an overly religious man. He went to church whenever he remembered or was feeling bad about himself, but there again, none of that stimulated his mind or ignited his soul. It was merely a formality expected of him. “Seems a good time to make—or find—a change.”

“Indeed, sir. I shall dedicate myself to packing soon.”

“Thank you.” Still, he peered out the window and watched the rain come down.

If you are listening, God, please let this be the lowest point of my life. I need a change, something that will shake up my life and send it in a whole new direction.

Chapter Two



December 14, 1817

London, England

Lady Eleanor—or rather Miss Comerford as she was known to most people who weren't aware of her pedigree—frowned at the three gowns in various stages of development laid out on a worktable in front of her. Though the lush fabrics and miles of embroidery and hundreds of tiny seed pearls, glass beads, and spangles would make each gown a work of art, it had meant countless hours with a needle, developing callouses on her fingers, and many nights short on sleep huddled near a candle's flame. All for women with more coin than sense, and all of those women needed the gowns in time for Christmastide entertainments.

Bah! What a frivolous, silly life.

For she had once been part of that, had adored it, and she well knew how ridiculous and shallow it could become. As the youngest child and fourth daughter of the Earl of St. Devere, she had easily been pampered and coddled and spoiled as she'd moved through life. The baby of the family always had whatever she wanted, and from a young age, she'd learned how to manipulate others in order to get her way. Nothing was off limits to her. Gowns, fripperies, sweets, anything she could possibly desire was hers, whether from parents who didn't wish to hear her fuss, or from potential suitors who didn't want to lose her to some other man. And later, from protectors for the same reasons. Because of being rewarded for that sort of outrageous behavior, she'd been a bit of a rebel, did things that she wanted to do or brought her pleasure, and she certainly chased scandal as much as she

could, for that was the only way to gain notice from her parents.

But playing with fire inside the *beau monde* also came with its dangers, for there was always someone willing to take advantage of a wide-eyed innocent intent on sin.

In a roundabout way, that was how she'd fallen out of favor with her family as well as the more respectable parts of the *ton*. But that life was well and truly over, for now she toiled for a mantua maker as a seamstress, earning naught but twelve shillings per week, which was barely enough to pay the rent, secure coal, or feed herself at times. Certainly, it was far below the income she'd earned before as a courtesan, but the lifestyle was more respectable.

Somehow, though, she was supposed to be grateful for that life.

“That embroidery won't be done if you're mooning about, Miss Comerford.”

“Apologies, Madam Favreau,” she mumbled and turned back to her work at embroidering tiny holly berries between green holly leaves on the hem of a white lawn dress. The woman who owned the shop—Madam Favreau—was neither French nor from a respectable upbringing. The secret was, the woman was as sullied in reputation as Eleanor was, but she'd made herself into something else entirely by inventing herself as a seamstress of considerable talents. Not that she wasn't skilled with a needle, for she was, and her creations were exquisite, but everyone within the *ton* had been hoodwinked and fooled, not wishing to see the woman for who she'd used to be.

Which oddly gave Eleanor hope for herself.

The older woman pulled a brass candleholder closer to where Eleanor and a few other seamstresses clustered as they worked while the gloom from the rain and the gathering twilight put a damper on the late afternoon. “Woolgathering about Christmastide, are you?”

Eleanor snorted. “Not if I can help it.”

Knowing the Christmastide holidays were bearing down on all of them made her sad. It was always a time for remembrance, a time to long for things she could never have. In the days before she'd met scandal, before she'd willingly let herself be led astray by horrible choices and charming men, before her family disowned her, she had adored Christmastide. Oh, it was such a marvelous time filled with happiness and entertainment. The time of year when her whole extended family would come together for a house party in Norfolk County, near the town of Breckland at her father's country estate. There were always games and food and secrets and stories and presents and mischief, but that was before everything changed.

Before her life shifted and she became a woman of misfortune, someone to be pitied, someone unworthy of any sort of goodness.

"That is disheartening. Why is there such bitterness there, hmm?" The modiste crossed her arms at chest level. The candlelight sparkled on her upswept golden hair, highlighted her cheeks made rosy from rouge. "I would think every young lady pines for the wonders of Christmastide."

Acutely aware of the gazes from the other two seamstresses resting on her, Eleanor kept her own focus on the task at hand. "Perhaps that is true for those of the upper classes when there is sure to be food on the tables, new gowns wrapped in pretty papers, or the surety of handsome young men coming to call, but as for me?" She slowly shook her head. "It is simply another string of days where I must fight to survive."

Soft murmurs of agreement chased between the other two seamstresses, for times were hard for everyone, especially after last year, when there was not much call for new gowns or fripperies since the weather had been so horrid. Needlework had been difficult to come by, which meant coin had been all too precious, but throughout that struggle, she could hold her head high with pride, for she hadn't gone back to making a living on her back.

“I would be more apt to believe that of you, *Lady Eleanor*, if you were of the lower classes like these girls, but you are an earl’s daughter.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “A *disgraced* earl’s daughter, a former member of the *ton*, but neither of those connections claim me any longer.”

The other woman chuckled. “There are many women like you in London. Your case is not unique.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.” Knots of worry and shame pulled in her belly. “I’ve met scandal too many times over the years, enjoyed myself far too often during said scandals, so now I have nothing except this position.” She sighed and laid the gown in her lap to glance at her employer. “I wake up every morning, and after a cup of tea, come here. Then I work until well after eight o’clock for very modest wages, all so I can do the same thing six days a week.”

“There are a handful of other women who would give up much more than you have to have this position,” her employer gently reminded her.

“I know.” While heat filled her cheeks, the same despair that always welled in her chest did so now as she talked about it, found sympathy on her fellow seamstress’ faces. “Quite frankly, it is more than worth trying to go back home and hoping my family will forgive me for not being as perfect as they are.”

A dismal life to be sure, but it was hers alone, and if she succeeded or failed, it was by her own power. There was small freedom in that knowledge.

The modiste frowned. “A lady, no matter her circumstances, needs her family around her, especially during this time of year.”

“While I would dearly love to believe in that sentiment, reality has made it clear life doesn’t work quite like that.” She took up her needle once again. “I shall endure like I always do.”

“Ah, to be as young as you are and think everything is a matter of black and white.” The modiste clucked. She came close enough to pat Eleanor’s head as if she were a child instead of a grown woman of six and twenty. “If you change your mind, I wouldn’t blame you. Though travel is exhausting, there is every chance your family will have had a change of heart.”

“Perhaps.” In order for that to happen, there would need to be a Christmastide miracle waiting around the corner, and she’d never put much stock in such things. A person made their own luck in the world, and her decisions—though pleasurable—had been highly disastrous. “To be honest, you and my landlady are closer to me than any of my family members have been.” They weren’t exactly the nurturing types, but they did care about what happened to her and were both a bit protective of her.

It made such a difference. If she couldn’t have her own family, there was a modicum of comfort that she had managed to put together her own.

“At least you have someone. Everyone needs that,” the modiste said with a nod.

Should she scrape together enough coin and travel the five days up to Norfolk County, throw herself onto her father’s doorstep and his mercy, and beg for her parents’ forgiveness knowing all along she wasn’t sorry in the least for the life experiences she’d had?

“Promise me that you will think about,” the modiste said as she turned away to gather a few gowns and take them into the back room presumably to press them.

“What do I want more?” Eleanor asked softly to the other seamstresses. “Possible acceptance back into my family or keeping this position, which allows me to remain independent, but only just?”

The youngest seamstress glanced at her with worry in her eyes. “If it were me, I’d keep the position. It’s too hard to go it alone out there, and at least you have a room to yourself in your boarding house. I have to share with another girl.”

“True.” Eleanor nodded as she worked at the embroidery on the gown.

“Madame Favreau is right, though,” the other seamstress said. “Family is important. I don’t know what I’d do without mine.”

A trace of tears filled her eyes, but she quickly blinked them back. “Your family is different than mine. They are very accepting and know everyone is different. Whereas my family is disappointed if anyone isn’t perfect or doesn’t fit in with the impossible standards laid out by society.” She kept her concentration on her needle as she drew it in and out of the fabric. “That life isn’t for me; I don’t wish to live by arbitrary rules or meet boring men.”

The first seamstress snorted. “If a man showed up who was interested in me, I’d jump at him in the hopes he’d come up to scratch. It’s easier to survive with help than by yourself.”

“That largely depends on the man.” The only way her family would take her back is if she came with a rich, successful, titled fiancé in hand. And that wasn’t likely to happen now that she worked in a modiste’s shop. Even though that was a step up from being a courtesan, which is how she’d found herself ultimately disgraced with a child and had been disowned in the first place. “Some men only wish to get off their jollies.” A sigh escaped her. “It is not a bad thing if one enjoys the act of coupling for the exercise, but if one wishes to form a connection, I’m afraid you’ll be wildly disappointed if you think men would ever want that with women like us.”

“True.” The second young woman nodded. “Men think nothing about having their fun, but women who wish for that as well are not the sorts they marry.”

Eleanor snorted. “Isn’t that the truth.” None of what had happened in her life had ended like how she’d hoped. Now she had nothing to show for those wild years except the memories and perhaps a few lessons. It didn’t matter anyway, for there was no going back and changing those decisions. “But at least I got out of that trade before I was either killed or died of a disease.”

For that she was thankful. Far too many women succumbed to the residual horrors that went along with making a living on one's back. Men didn't value the lives of prostitutes, and high-class courtesans were only slightly more fortunate, and all too often men were violent with their bed partners, and they didn't care if they spread disease either.

The younger of the two stared at her. "Why didn't you become some man's mistress? At least then you would have your own house and a staff, and you would be showered with gifts."

"Oh, I did that for a while, but I soon grew bored, and suffered a broken heart, for I'd stupidly fallen in love with one of those men. He maintained that he had certain obligations and images that must be maintained, and that I was naught but an afterthought, a hobby of sorts, but he could never spend most of his time with me nor could he share in my affections."

Those had been terrible days, and the precursor to why she'd left that sort of life behind her, even though it was lucrative at times. It was too hard on her psyche and heart, and she'd learned that most men were not to be trusted.

With anything, the least of which emotions.

"I'm sorry. That must have been difficult." The candlelight flashed on her needle as it disappeared and then reappeared above the fabric of the gown she worked. She was skilled with beadwork, and it always amazed Eleanor how quickly she could add the tiny glass beads.

"It was. Every once in a while, I think about it, but then I find myself grateful for going through it. I now know what sort of a man I don't want." If a gentleman's attentions were split, that meant there would never be a future between them. Though she hadn't wanted any of that life for herself once the scandal and the fun of it had worn off, things had caught her up in their whirlwind, and without the support of her family, she'd had no recourse and no hope once everything had fallen apart. A bit of her old spirit welled within her chest. "And if my family cannot appreciate that I'm different from them and love me for who I am, do I truly need them?"

The older of the two seamstresses sighed. “I admire your strength. I don’t think I could have gone through all of what you did without wishing to put an end to my existence.”

Who says I didn’t?

“Perhaps my will is stronger than fate.” That was all she would say on the matter, but that hadn’t been a happy or proud time in her life, and it certainly didn’t reflect well on her. For long moments, the three of them sat doing handiwork in silence before Eleanor spoke again. “Though Christmastide makes me all too maudlin, I certainly hope the two of you find some happiness during that time this year.”

They both nodded.

“You need a miracle, Eleanor,” the younger of the girls said with a faint smile. “You might have given up the faith in such things, but *I* have not.”

“I hope you hold on to that resolution.” She flashed what felt like a tired smile. “As for me, I think I have grown too old for such things.”

And now that another Christmastide was swiftly coming upon her, she *was* hoping for a secret miracle and perhaps a change that might make her feel as though she was worth something beyond her mistakes and indiscretions. Would that ever be possible?

The other seamstress snickered, but there was a decided twinkle in her eyes that indicated she, too, had specific dreams for the upcoming holiday season. “What Eleanor truly needs is a man who is kind to her and will show her that not all of them are horrid.” She winked at the other seamstress. “Perhaps she will even find so much favor with him, she’ll marry him.”

Eleanor snorted. “I rather doubt anything like that would happen.” Truly, she was finished with men, regardless that they might offer a few minutes of pleasure. It was fleeting and no good could come from any of that.

Not anymore.

“You never can tell. From all I’ve seen of men, they can be pesky and determined.”

“Some of them can, of course, but I’m more stubborn.” Despite her resolve to not become maudlin, emotions got the better of her anyway. “If I had my druthers for the holiday and I wanted a man—not that I do—I would wish for a different sort of man to come into my life. He wouldn’t be the typical man and would absolutely sweep me off my feet, steal my heart through his actions, and show me he was different.”

An impossible wish, of course, for there was no such man, and she had met more than most women did.

The two seamstresses exchanged looks and then giggled.

“Perhaps he’ll change your mind with a few kisses.”

From sheer willpower alone, Eleanor stopped herself from rolling her eyes, but her hands shook as she held the fabric in her lap. “I haven’t felt magic in a man’s kiss for more years than I can remember, but it’s certainly something to think about.”

“For all of us,” the youngest woman said, and they all dissolved into giggles once more.

More likely, she would work all the way through Christmas Eve in order to get the finishing touches done on the gowns that still needed attention. If there truly was a God, she would fall exhausted into her bed at the boarding house and sleep through Christmas, and perhaps her landlady would have a nice stew on the stove and some lovely fresh baked bread.

“Well, if you have figgy pudding, remember me when you are eating it,” Eleanor finally said and hoped to goodness she was successful at keeping the tears in her voice at bay. “It used to be one of my favorite things about the holiday.”

That and the gingerbread cake their cook used to make because she loved it so, but all of that was in her past. It was time to forget about those things and look forward, and to find some way to be content in this life now.

Chapter Three



December 16, 1817

Laurence whistled a happy tune as he walked the pavement in front of a cluster of Bond Street shops. He'd come out tonight to purchase a couple of new cravats for the trip, and even though it was raining, his mood was actually quite jaunty. After his shopping had concluded, he'd treated himself to dinner at his club—with the promise to catch up his dues as soon as he was able—and they had once more extended him credit. It was both delightful yet concerning.

After his talk with Watson regarding making the journey to Surrey, he was almost looking forward to it. He could only be who he was, and if that was continuing to be a disappointment to his family, so be it. This was his life, and he couldn't make it into anything else.

Could he?

Since his head was in the proverbial clouds, he crashed bodily into the slight form of a woman coming out of a modiste's shop. Inside, the windows were shuttered, and no candlelight shone forth, so it was obvious the shop had closed, but why had she been there at this late hour?

“Oh!”

“Argh!” Instinctively, he wrapped his arms about her to keep her steady and on her feet as her reticule fell to the damp pavement and the hood of her rather worn black cloak fell backward to reveal her raven hair and pale, round face.

“My apologies. Are you injured?” Beneath his gloved fingers on her upper arms, her muscles went taut as if she would take flight the second he let go.

“No, I don’t think so. Just startled was all.” When she gazed up at him in the winter darkness, he caught a glimpse of lake blue eyes in the illumination from a nearby gas lamp, and was instantly reminded of happy summer days in his childhood spent fishing a lake on his father’s Surrey property. “I didn’t see anyone as I left. It *is* rather late.”

He frowned. “Do you work there in that modiste’s shop?”

“Uh...” The woman roved her gaze about his face, looking for what, he couldn’t possibly say. “I was there to, ah, examine a gown needed by Christmas.”

“I see.” Now that he looked more closely at her, there were aristocratic features about her eyes, nose, and chin. Did that mean she was part of the *beau monde*? “Do you have a carriage nearby? I’d be more than happy to escort you to the vehicle.” The rain had slowly intensified, and with it a cold shiver danced down his spine. For that matter, where was her maid?

“Not exactly. There was, uh, some confusion regarding the carriage so I thought to hire a hackney cab.” With firm pressure, she pulled out of his hold, stooped, and then retrieved her dropped reticule.

“It’s foul weather out here, and there’s no need for you to garner such expense.” Once she stood, he offered his arm. “My carriage is waiting. I would be happy to drop you wherever you should need to go.” Thank goodness his father still allowed the use of the family carriage. Where Laurence hadn’t wished to rely on the family coin by maintaining a residence at the Bannerman townhouse, he wouldn’t say no to the transportation, which made getting around Town easier.

“I really don’t need assistance. My destination isn’t far.” Though her tones were soft, there was an undeniable trace of culture there.

“That doesn’t matter. Escorting a lady in need is the gentlemanly thing to do.” He kept his crooked arm out and widened his eyes. “And do remember, that every moment spent out in this rain will soak us both.” Already, water

dripped from the brim of his beaver felt hat and seeped into the shoulders of his greatcoat while it wetted her exposed hair.

“This is true.” With a frown, she put up the hood of her cloak and finally laid a gloved hand upon his arm. “Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome.” Though it was silly, he swore he could feel the heat from her fingers through the sleeves of his garments as he set them into motion and guided her along the pavement toward his carriage that waited a bit away. “What is your address?” When she mumbled something and he heard the word “Cheapside,” his eyebrows rose. “Surely that’s not correct? Cheapside isn’t the best of neighborhoods. You look like you’re part of the *ton*.” Was she making jest of him and his offer?

“Oh.” Her chuckle sounded entirely too forced. “Silly me. My mind is scattered in a hundred directions just now.”

“Understandable. With the holidays nearly upon us, there is much to think about.”

“Yes, that must it be.” Emotions flitted over her face, stark beneath the gas lamp they passed, the least of which was strain and sadness. Why? She was quite the mystery, and that only made her all the more intriguing. “You may direct your driver to Grosvenor’s Square.”

When she gave him a street name and house number, he nodded. “Very good. Not far from me in Portman Square.” Now why the devil had he lied? The Albany where he rented his set was located in Piccadilly, which was across Mayfair from Portman Square.

“I’ve heard that’s a lovely neighborhood. With a garden that is lush and captivating in the summer months. A true oasis from the noise and bustle of Town.” There was a certain wistfulness in her voice that gave him pause, and suddenly he wanted to know more about this woman of contrasts he’d accidentally run into.

“Yes, I suppose it is.” He peered down at her, for she only stood perhaps a few inches past five feet while he was a

good half foot taller. “I don’t know that I’ve had cause to properly explore the square or other environs of the neighborhood since moving there.” Apparently, the lie would keep growing, all in a bid to impress this stranger. *What the devil is wrong with me?*

“Well, it is a very busy time,” she said and kept her focus on the carriage ahead.

“Indeed.” Once they arrived at the vehicle, he gave the driver the address she’d told him and then assisted her into the carriage. Moments later, he climbed up, slammed the door shut, and then dropped onto the bench across from her. A sharp tug indicated the vehicle had begun to move, yet a tension-filled silence brewed between them. “Do you remain in London for the Christmastide season? Many of my friends will be in Town this year, so it won’t be dull.”

Remembering Watson’s words from a couple of days earlier, he told himself not to be so quick to dismiss the machinations of fate. Perhaps he would remain here if she had plans to linger as well.

“I’m not certain.” Finally, she looked directly at him, and in the illumination from the lamp burning inside the carriage, the blue of her eyes was even deeper than he’d previously assumed. Naturally arched and feathered brows gave structure to her face. A strong nose gave way to an expressive mouth whose lips were nearly full and the Cupid’s bow well defined. Lips that were definitely made for kissing. “What of you?”

What a nodcock I am. He shoved that thought away as soon as it had formed. “Uh, I’m contemplating it, but I’d rather *not* be in Surrey. It sounds dull, and the family drama doesn’t appeal.” Even though he’d already made plans to go exactly there.

Why the need to lie again?

Surprise jumped into her expression. “I feel the same.” Though she clasped her hands together tightly in her lap, it didn’t escape his notice that her kid gloves had been darned in a few places. Was she frugal, were they a particular favorite

pair she couldn't bear to part with, or was she telling half-truths like him? "I might try traveling north to my father's country estate, but it's a five-day trip and at the end is my family, and since I'm the youngest—"

"—no one cared about you earlier, but since you're not married, or have a family, or have found success in your own right, you'll be the center of all conversation as if you're the damned Christmas goose at the table." Though he interrupted her comment, it did set his mind at ease to know she was indeed part of the *ton*. Now it was only a matter of discovering who she was and why she presented such a mystery.

"Yes. Exactly." A bit of relief showed on her face. "That isn't something I wish to immerse myself in just now."

"Or ever, I'll wager, if your family is like mine." A chuckle escaped him when she nodded, and the corners of her mouth lifted in a very faint grin. It was something, and it gave him a thrill. So much so that he wished he could see a real smile from her.

Unfortunately, all too soon, the carriage pulled up in front of the specified address, of a townhouse that was dark inside and had an air of being vacant, but he said nothing.

"Well, thank you for the ride. I do appreciate being out of the rain."

"My pleasure." Laurence sprang to his feet. He opened the door and vaulted down, then turned to assist her out. Taking the liberty of putting his hands at her waist, he swept her from the vehicle and kept her close until she found her footing. The faint scent of lilacs drifted to his nose—a rather pleasant smell, that. "Goodnight and best wishes for your future."

"I hope you have a happy Christmastide." She moved away from his reach and offered him a small wave.

"Yes, you as well." With a frown, he resumed his seat inside the carriage and closed the door, watching her the whole time. Belatedly, he realized he hadn't introduced himself nor had he given her a reason to do the same. Not having an

excuse to linger, he rapped on the roof. “The Albany, please.” He kept his gaze on the young woman until the carriage drove away and he could no longer see her.

Just as he was about to recline against the squabbed bench, movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. When the carriage turned a corner out of the square, the woman darted through the gardens. She ran back the way they’d come, toward the very neighborhood she’d mentioned before. The address she’d said had been a mistake.

“What the deuce is afoot?”

It was odd indeed, and far too chilly, dark, and miserable for her—or any woman—to walk the streets alone. A wave of protectiveness welled within his chest for her. For the brief time she’d been with him in the carriage, she’d seemed unsure and ill-at-ease, as if she’d wanted to run and hadn’t trusted him by half. Had anything she’d told him been the truth? He snorted. Not that he hadn’t given her a couple of bammers, like an idiot. However, the closer to Christmastide the calendar marched, the more desperate people grew. Perhaps she suffered from the same feelings of inadequacy or ennui that he did.

It only made the mystery surrounding her all the more intriguing.

Again, he rapped on the roof of the carriage. “Peter, follow that woman up ahead on the street, but do so at a discreet distance. There is something not quite right about her story.” And if she truly was heading to Cheapside, it would be quite the walk, if she wasn’t able to hire a hack.

“As you wish, sir.” The carriage’s pace slowed.

Laurence rolled down the window glass and risked dampness by sticking his head out the vehicle to follow her progress. She walked with a determined march with her head down and her body hunched into the cloak. Every once in a while, she would cast a glance over her shoulder.

What was she afraid of?

This went on for a few blocks before he lost patience. With a huff of frustration, he once more rapped on the roof. “Pull over. I’m going to hail the maddening woman.” As soon as Peter did so, Laurence shoved open the door. He climbed down and immediately put up the collar of his greatcoat to keep the rain from going down his neck. “You there! Miss, please stop!” It was the height of rudeness, but he didn’t know her name.

When she continued on as if she hadn’t heard him, he cursed softly beneath his breath and went after her.

“Miss, please! This is too foul a night for you to be walking in it.” At least that was true. As for himself, he wasn’t best pleased to be wet once more, but there was nothing for it. The woman exuded an air of helplessness or sadness, and he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t at least see her home.

Finally, she glanced over her shoulder and came to a halt. Turning, she groaned. Already, she was rather worse for wear due to the rain. Too much more time in the weather and she would resemble a drowned rat. “Leave me alone. I’m doing quite well without you.”

He snorted. “I won’t, and you are not. Just look at you!” With a gesture, he indicated her wet state. “Why did you lie to me about where you lived?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I rather think it does.”

The woman clutched the folds of her cloak tighter about her person. “Not that it was a full lie. My family did indeed once live at that address. Before things... happened, we had called that townhouse home. I guess my father must have sold it and moved elsewhere. Probably didn’t need such a large house.”

Another odd statement. If he took her words as truth—and he had no reason to do that—then she and her family were estranged, but why? It only brought forth more questions. When all she did was shrug and looked so defeated, he wanted

to immediately bundle her into the vehicle, take her home, give her a cup of tea. Approaching her position slowly, he asked, “Where *do* you live, then?”

“Why, so you can follow me there and murder me in my bed?” The words were no doubt meant to be sarcastic, but there was an underlying note of fear there that alluded to previous struggles.

“Of course not. I’m not that type.”

She snorted. “All men have the ability to be monsters. In my experience, only a handful keep those appetites under control.”

And the mystery deepened. His interest had been well and truly piqued, even if the damned rain was rapidly souring his good humor. “I can assure you, I’m *not* that man.” Though he’d had a string of empty liaisons in the past, he was never violent. “The weather is not conducive to conversation, so I’ll ask again. Where do you live?”

A sigh of defeat escaped her. “Not far from here, in a boarding house in Cheapside. Smallest room there, but it’s clean and affordable.” She sighed again. “Barely.”

Ah, which meant she, in fact, was *not* a client of the modiste’s shop. She probably worked there. “Get in.” He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder toward the carriage. “I will take you there so you aren’t drowned.” Not that they were so far from that state now.

She eyed him with a mixture of annoyance and speculation. “I wouldn’t be had you left me alone. I could have been in a hired hack by now.”

For whatever reason, her tart-tongued response pulled a chuckle from him. “Fair enough but—”

“On second thought, just go.” The woman waved him away. Had she had a change of heart? “I’m sure you have a club to attend or something else to do instead of helping a pathetic woman such as myself.”

“You are not that.” He couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes. “And I can make time.” Even though he

hadn't been able to pay the dues for his club for at least six months, she didn't need to know that, and he suddenly didn't wish to seem a failure in her eyes. And still the rain continued to come down. "Please, get into the carriage." He glanced at his driver, who shrugged.

She bounced her gaze between the vehicle and Laurence. "I can manage by myself, *have* managed for years before you came along, so thank you but no." There was a certain firmness to her reply that didn't brook argument.

"Very well." Obviously, he couldn't stand there and argue with her, this stranger, in the rain, even though she presented a rather interesting picture and he wanted to know so much more about her. "Good night, then, and I hope you arrive home safely." It went against everything he was not to physically lift her up and toss her into the carriage, but if she didn't wish for assistance, he wouldn't force the issue.

"Thank you." The woman nodded. "I hope you pass a pleasant night."

How could he when he would worry about her until the morning? Damn it all, even though he'd planned to leave Town for Surrey after breakfast, he would make it a point to visit Bond Street and keep an eye on the modiste's shop for a glimpse of her, merely to reassure himself she hadn't been molested. "I appreciate that, but before you go, would you grant me another question?"

For the space of a few heartbeats, she stared at him. Then she nodded. "I suppose I owe you at least that."

He took a quick breath of relief. "Will you tell me your name?"

Uncertainty flickered over her face. What the devil was she afraid—or ashamed—of? An odd camaraderie and compassion for her flared in his chest, for she reminded him of his own less than ideal situation. "Uh, Miss Comerford."

"Is that the truth?" When she nodded and earnestness reflected in her eyes, he relaxed slightly. "Good. Glad to meet you, Miss Comerford. I'm Mr. Bannerman. The Honorable,

that is.” He tacked that on at the last moment to appear more than he was. “Don’t let me keep you longer, but don’t be surprised if I seek you out on the morrow to ease my own conscience.”

Did that make him seem like an unsavory sort? Perhaps, but damn it, she needed someone to look after her.

Surprise warred with pleasure in her expressive eyes. “Thank you. I must go now.” Then, she turned and fled along the road as if the hounds of hell were after her.

As he walked back to his carriage, Laurence shook his head. “You know, Peter, the longer I live, the more I’m afraid I will never figure out women.”

The driver snorted. “We all feel like that, sir. It is the way of things, I’m afraid.”

Chapter Four



December 17, 1817

At least it wasn't raining. That was about as good as she could say about the day.

Eleanor glanced once more out the shop's front window. Darkness had set in nearly three hours before, and all she wanted to do was go home so she could think about meeting that mysterious man the night before. He had been overly concerned with her well-being, had wanted to drive her home, and though that had been flattering, at the last second, she'd been frightened that someone wished to do something nice for her.

And she couldn't help but wonder why, for she didn't deserve such special treatment.

In the end, it didn't matter, for she would probably never see Mr. Bannerman again, but it had been a lovely distraction, if only for a moment.

"Miss Comerford, I demand that you attend me." The snapping of fingers coupled with the annoyance in the feminine voice brought her crashing out of her thoughts to focus on the angry visage of the client who stood before her, clad in the red gown that had just been finished last night.

"My apologies, Lady Firestone. What were you saying about the gown?" Eleanor fussed with how the satin draped over the woman's body. The golden embroidery at the hem and the bodice was exquisite and had been worth the countless hours with the needle. Here and there, nestled within the embroidery, were holly leaves made out of tiny emerald chips glued to the fabric with equally tiny ruby chips to resemble the

berries. Each one of the stones twinkled and glimmered in the candlelight. “If I may, the gown only enhances your natural beauty.” She glanced at one of the other seamstresses and widened her eyes.

Quickly, the other woman nodded. “Oh yes. Every woman in the ballroom will be jealous with how you look, my lady.”

“I am not convinced it’s the creation I’d envisioned.” The lady peered once more at herself in the full-length cheval glass as the modiste observed from the doorway to the back room where yet another client was trying on her gown.

“What seems to be the issue, my lady?” Madame Favreau asked, with one finely arched blonde eyebrow up in challenge.

“The gown is just too... red.” She turned this way and that, her gaze fixated on the glass. “And the holly is so small.”

“The red is quite a Christmas color,” Eleanor said from around gritted teeth as she tried not to unleash her temper on the woman, who had been in the shop over the past month for many fittings and consultations of the decorations. “And you did agree to the holly adornments after we explained and showed you what they would look like.”

“Yes, I am aware,” the woman snapped with a look to Eleanor that clearly said she was so much farther beneath her on the social ladder, which was funny since Lady Firestone was also the daughter of a viscount. That made them societal equals, but the woman neither knew nor would care. “But perhaps now that I’m seeing the effect on the gown, I should have liked flowers or feathers more.”

Heaven help me. “This is what you ordered, and the color goes well with your complexion.” Eleanor would have given much in life to own a gown such as this one. In fact, as the piece had come together in various stages, she had tried it on herself to get a feel for how the embroidery would lay and what it would look like on the bodice. During those times, she had imagined how she would feel in that gown on a ballroom floor. She bit her tongue to keep from saying what she truly

felt. “The embroidery and jewels alone took forty-eight hours to create.”

“Hmph.” The lady sniffed. She shook her head and waved a hand in dismissal. “It isn’t what I want after all, so I shall not be buying the gown. Perhaps green would have been a better choice.”

The modiste came into the front room. “While I understand and respect your decision, I’m afraid we cannot help you with a replacement gown as there is not enough time, but you are welcome to look through the other rejected gowns clients refused to pay for.” A fair amount of frost sat in her employer’s voice. The holiday season, especially, was the time for clients to either not pick up their gowns or refuse to pay for them.

“No, thank you. I shall make do with something I already own.”

Annoyance stabbed through Eleanor’s chest. All of that work for nothing. “Enjoy your holiday season, then. I will help you out of the gown.” For she didn’t trust the woman not to rip the fabric then blame it on the shop.

A half hour later, the other customer in the shop enthused about *her* gown and paid for the piece right there while Lady Firestone left in high dudgeon, even slammed the door after her.

The seamstresses in the shop giggled.

Madame Favreau shook her head. “Some women have no taste.” She tsked her tongue even as she folded the gown and packed it among tissue paper inside a box. “We are nearly to the holiday season, and it would be a pity for this creation to go to waste, so you may take it home as a gift.” She nodded and smiled when Eleanor began a protest. “I have done the same to the other girls this season. You all know of the gowns we have in the back without homes.”

“Thank you.” A lump of emotion rose in Eleanor’s throat, for she couldn’t remember when she’d been fortunate

enough to have a new dress let alone a garment of any sort. “It is a beautiful gown, and I did work so many hours on it.”

“Then you know the value it has. I hope the gown will usher in some happiness for you during Christmastide.” The modiste met her gaze and gave her a meaningful look. “I also hope you dance in it and find joy in someone’s arms.”

Tears misted her eyes, and though she doubted that would ever happen, she nodded. “I appreciate this so much.”

“It is better than letting the gown languish.” Then Madame Favreau clapped her hands. “Enough of this, girls. Go home. We can do no more today.”

As the seamstresses prepared to depart, Eleanor contemplated her plans while closing the lid on the box that contained the gown. “Perhaps I *should* go home.” At least now she had something decent to wear for Christmas dinner and church services.

The modiste nodded. “I had hoped the gown would make that decision for you.” She seemed overly pleased by the decision.

Eleanor allowed a tiny grin. “If I leave tomorrow, there is every possibility I won’t return to London until after the first of the year. Will I retain my position here?” If not, there was no way she could leave, for she needed to get a living more than the possibility of making up with her family, and neither were assured.

“Of course, Miss Comerford. You are a vital member of my team.” The older woman nodded. “It is good to be with family, so enjoy your time with them without worry.”

“Thank you.” Though she thought very differently, the modiste’s insistence gave her a tiny twinge of hope that perhaps all would be well. If her family took her back, then she wouldn’t need to work her fingers raw with a needle any longer. She could finally have a future that didn’t involve toiling and scraping to survive.

But fate would need to play a large part, and when had it ever been kind to her?

Most of the meager coin she'd managed to save would be eaten up securing seats on the mail coach on the journey north as well as meals and spots in a crowded bed at posting inns. A shudder rippled down her spine as she prepared to depart. She was most definitely not looking forward to anything that traveling would entail, but it was a necessary evil.

Eleanor's musings were still uppermost in her mind when she exited the shop with the gown box in her arms. Almost immediately she recognized a pair of broad shoulders covered with a stylish greatcoat and the gleam of golden hair beneath the brim of a beaver felt top hat.

Flutters danced through her belly, which was an odd sensation, for she assumed those feelings were long gone, and that she'd had her fill of troublesome men. Yet, he had paid her a kindness yesterday that not many would anymore. Suddenly, the glimmer of a plan began to form in her mind. It was insanity, of course, and he would probably not go along with it, for that would mean breaking his own, but if he did? It would certainly lend legitimacy to her and might be exactly what she needed to gain acceptance back into her family.

It was worth trying, no matter how outrageous it sounded in her mind. "Mr. Bannerman? Why are you here?" He certainly didn't have the look of someone who had been enjoying the shops, and the possibility of a male doing exactly that two days in a row were highly unlikely.

He turned about at the sound of her voice, and his expression lit when he saw her. "Ah, Miss Comerford! There you are. I thought you might enjoy a ride home, or at the very least, perhaps you might grant permission for me to take you to dinner."

"Oh." Cold threads of disappointment wrapped along her spine. "Surely you are aware that women aren't allowed in the hotel dining rooms, and especially not women like me."

His chuckle was a merry affair that tickled through her chest. "What, ladies of the *ton*? Don't be silly."

Oh, dear. Guilt rose in her chest in a hot tide, for she hadn't told him the full truth yesterday. "You know how society is." She shrugged and let him form his own decisions.

Amusement twinkled in his hazel eyes. "Perhaps you misunderstood. I would like you to share dinner, with me. The location is irrelevant."

"Ah." A good amount of wariness poured into her being. Did he think she still did *that* sort of work? For that matter, was that something a man could tell merely by looking at a woman? "I must decline."

A sigh left his throat as he shook his head. "Why are you impossible?"

She didn't need this sort of badgering. "Why are you annoying?" Shoving past him, she began the walk toward the nearest hackney stands.

Of course he followed. "Perhaps we started off wrong. I merely wanted to know why you lied yesterday and make certain you got home safely tonight." Without her permission, he gently but firmly tugged the awkward box from her arms and tucked it beneath one of his. "I'm sorry if I managed to offend you."

"Why?" She added a huff of annoyance for good measure. "I'm no one to you." Yet his concern was so lovely, tears filled her eyes, and she was perilously close to becoming a watering pot. "In fact, I am no one to anyone these days." The knowledge was quite humbling. Depressing even. Why did she think her family would ever forgive her and take her back when she was so unworthy of love from anyone?

"You seemed so miserable yesterday talking about your family, that I wanted to know why. And I thought doing something nice for you might keep you from worrying for a bit."

Oh, he could be trouble to a woman who was naïve. Luckily, that wasn't her lot. "Don't you have somewhere to go, or a trip of your own to prepare for?" She shouldn't

antagonize him, for she needed him, but what did she have to offer him in return?

He hooted with victory. “Ah, then you plan to flee to your family in the country as well!”

Drat. Why did she give so much of herself away around this man? “I am thinking about it.”

“Excellent!” His grin was all too contagious, and she fought her own. “Then if you won’t come to dinner, let me drive you to Hyde Park. We can walk about and eat from the hand cart vendors, but I’m not leaving until I have answers.”

“The park isn’t exactly safe after dark.” Even a nodcock would know that, and she rather doubted he was that.

“True.” A frown tugged at the corners of his sensual lips. “Then I shall take you driving there. Along the way, we shall stop, and I’ll procure edibles that we can share within the safe confines of the vehicle. Will that suffice?”

Why he would go to such trouble for her, she couldn’t fathom, but he *was* making an effort, and it *was* slightly flattering. “Fine.” A long-suffering sigh escaped her, for she rather doubted he would leave her alone soon. “That is acceptable.” Especially since her stomach was growling and she couldn’t spare the coin to eat tonight. At times, surviving in London on one’s own meant making difficult decisions.

“Wonderful!” With a jaunty energy to his steps, he easily escorted her to his carriage, and as he handed her inside, she hoped he wasn’t some sort of insane killer of low-class women. Once he laid the gown box on the seat next to her, he settled on the opposite bench, rapped upon the roof, and ordered his driver to Hyde Park.

Without making it obvious, Eleanor relaxed into the squabs with a stifled sigh. The luxury was quite lovely. She’d missed such things since she’d fallen from grace. Shop girls were seldom given the opportunity for pampering. As the carriage rolled through Mayfair, she covertly studied her companion even as the scent of him filled the interior. A mixture of pine woods, the winter air when it snowed, and just

a tiny hint of citrus, that scent put her in mind of Christmastide.

Ironic, that.

Eventually, they reached the park, and Mr. Bannerman directed his driver to the more populated sections of the park. It wasn't long afterward that he left the vehicle to procure an eclectic collection of various foods—savory, meat-filled hand pies, some sort of cheesecake she remembered from the days when her family visited the park, a bit of fried fish wrapped in newspaper, and lastly a mug of what smelled like mulled wine.

“This ought to put a dent in our hunger.”

All the competing smells made her stomach rumble ever more loudly, but Eleanor didn't wish to show her desperation, so she waited rather impatiently until he offered her one of the meat pies, and when their gloved fingers brushed at the hand off, odd tingles danced up her arm to her elbow.

“Thank you. It has been an age since I enjoyed such fare.” After the first bite, a sigh of repletion escaped her regardless of her urge to hide it. “This is wonderful.” With each chew, the savory beef and its mixture of potato and carrots with a thick gravy filled her palate. Again, she wanted to cry, merely because he'd given her such a pedestrian treat.

Stop that this instant, Ellie. You need to be strong.

“It is, rather.” He ate as if guided by his stomach, and she couldn't help but feel an affinity for that enthusiasm. “Been an age since I did anything at the park.”

“For me as well.” The last time she'd been here was perhaps four years prior, on the arm of her last protector. He, of course, had led her to one of the more hidden, dark paths where they had done unspeakable things to each other because that's essentially what he paid her for.

But she shoved that memory from her mind in order to concentrate more fully on the man eating in happy silence across from her. She knew nothing of his pedigree aside from the fact he came from a family within the *beau monde*. He was

handsome enough to impress her family, and was probably charming if he really put his mind to the problem, and he possessed all of his teeth. His form was lovely, there was no paunch of belly to speak of, he was clean and well-groomed, his clothes obviously tailored and of fine fabrics, and best of all, there were no discernable traces of pox or any other horrible diseases one could have.

Would he agree to her plan, though?

“Why do you look at me like that?” The question, in his pleasant timbre, reverberated through her chest with the tiniest of thrills.

“How am I looking at you?” Truly, it had been an age since she’d interacted with any sort of intimacy with a man.

“As if you wondered about me, had plans for me. It is both mysterious and disconcerting,” he said as he finished his hand pie and then took a sip of the mulled wine from the cheap ceramic mug.

Heat seeped through her cheeks. “As a matter of fact, I *am* concocting a plan. Perhaps ruse is more the correct term, and I did wonder if you might play a part.” Eleanor accepted the mug, and when she took a sip of the warm beverage, she thrilled as the spiced red wine made its way down her throat. To say nothing of the fact that the heat from the mug warmed her cold fingers.

“I have been intrigued since meeting you. This is no different.” He kept his gaze on her while biting into the square of cheesecake.

“Right.” With a nod, Eleanor launched into her thoughts. “If I am to be more readily accepted back into my family’s fold, I need to have a respectable man of the *ton* by my side.” Not wanting to give away her whole tragic, scandalous life, she rushed to continue. “We would need to pretend an engagement is imminent, only until my family has forgiven me, and I can return to some semblance of my life... before.”

“In which case, we will concoct some reason for the engagement to be broken, thereby leaving us both free.” For long moments, he remained silent as they passed the mug of wine as well as the cheesecake back and forth over the narrow aisle. Slowly, he nodded, and she gawked at him. “Truly, it’s an ingenious plan, and will allow me to avoid my family and help you at the same time.”

She hadn’t expected him to agree, and certainly not so readily. “Why would you do this? You know nothing about me. I have no money to give you or anything else... except my body,” she whispered as cold disappointment flooded her chest. Wasn’t that what all men wanted?

“Bite your tongue, Miss Comerford.” An aghast expression lay stamped across his face, as if she’d manage to offend him. “Not that you aren’t attractive enough for such activities.” A bit of ruddy color crept up his neck above his collar. “Consider this my way of contributing to a charitable cause. Lord knows I have turned a blind eye to all of that over the course of my life, which is one reason my family no doubt worries for the state of my soul.”

They shared a laugh, which only eased her worries slightly.

“I am not some woman who needs a savior.” She wanted that perfectly clear.

“No, I don’t suppose you are, for you are far too stubborn for all of that.” Mr. Bannerman gave her a grin that had flutters once more moving through her insides. “To be perfectly honest with you, I haven’t much liked the man I see in the cheval glass recently, which is why I tend to avoid them.”

She took a bite of the fried fish, and it was so lovely that she took another one, but confusion sat heavy in her belly. “Why is that? You *are* an upstanding member of the *beau monde*, are you not?” Had she made a mistake in judgment?

“Uh, that doesn’t matter.” He tugged at his cravat. “Some of my more recent decisions haven’t made my life better, and perhaps doing this for you will illuminate a new

path for me. I have found myself contemplating life and am now at a crossroads of sorts.”

“Ah.” If only redemption was that simple, but he was her only chance to change *her* path, so she tried one last time to convince him. “Does that mean you’ve agreed to entering into a false engagement for the course of a five-day trip north? Perhaps another two days after that once we reach my father’s manor house? Once my family accepts me back, you’ll be free.”

“I have never had an exciting holiday season since being a child, so perhaps this bit of Drury Lane fiction will be just the thing to lift my ennui. And it’s not as if you don’t have looks, so traveling with you won’t be a hardship.” He nodded and again gave her that grin which had flutters dancing through her lower belly. “Miss Comerford, will you pretend to marry me for the pretense of convincing your family you aren’t deserving of the treatment they’ve given you and that who you are is perfectly acceptable?”

The words he’d uttered had tears springing to her eyes. “I will.” If only she could be assured that bringing home a faux fiancé would do the trick. Of course, the only way she could land the rich son of a titled gentleman was to lie. “Thank you,” she managed in an emotion-laded whisper. “There is no way I can ever repay you.”

“Some things don’t require payment.” The man across from her shrugged, and she wished he weren’t wearing the greatcoat that hid most of his form from view. “I know what it is like to be considered unworthy. No one should be made to feel less than,” he added in a soft voice that matched her own. “And perhaps in doing this, my father will see I have something to offer the world that isn’t restricted to his narrow views.”

Unable to say anything else, she nodded and continued to nibble at the dinner offerings he’d procured. Eventually, the silence proved too much. “Shall we meet at the nearest post coach stop tomorrow morning?”

“Good heavens no.” Mr. Bannerman eyed her as if she’d suddenly grown an extra head. “I intend to borrow my father’s traveling coach. If we are to do this trip, we should at least be comfortable on the journey north.”

“Ah.” She allowed herself a tiny, pleased smile. Already saved a good bit of coin thanks to this man’s generosity. “Then I shall expect your call just after dawn. Best that we make use of the light, hmm?”

“Of course.” He raised the mug. “Here’s to a successful partnership.”

Please let this be the miracle I so desperately need.

Chapter Five



December 18, 1817

First posting inn on the journey north

Laurence couldn't stop the yawn from happening even if he'd wanted to, for already the first day of travel had stolen some of his strength.

He and Miss Comerford had the good fortune to secure a private dining room where they'd eaten dinner upon arrival, and now they were in an equally private room. Both had been offered for a rather hefty price, which he'd paid in order to give credence to the assumption she thought he was a well-to-do member of the *ton*.

How long would his coin last? That remained to be seen.

Currently, his pretend fiancée sat at the foot of the only bed in the room, staring out the dirt-streaked window at the rather dismal sight beyond. Cold and damp, though it wasn't raining, the air held that feel, and he hoped the precipitation would hold off, for that would delay the trip. Since they'd both slept on and off in the coach, there hadn't been much in the way of conversation, but he was curious about her.

"Miss Comerford, how did you find yourself estranged from your family?" The woman had kept details about herself private, and though they were able to converse between them as well as if they'd been in a drawing room, she had the air of one who has been much disillusioned by life.

A huff escaped her. She glanced at him as he began the task of removing his jacket. Though Watson had been given the option of traveling with them, once the valet was told

about the bit of fiction they were putting forth, he had declined the trip, citing there was only one hero needed, and that was Laurence. No amount of pleading would change the man's mind.

"It is a long, convoluted tale, I'm afraid, and please, call me Eleanor. If we are to lend legitimacy to our pretend engagement, we should cease being formal in private." Her words held a tired edge that he sympathized with.

"Very well." He draped his jacket over the back of a wooden chair while eyeing the bed askance. It looked to be a worn and lumpy mattress tick beneath the tired bedclothes. "You may refer to me as Laurence."

For a few seconds, she visibly brightened. "What a lovely name." Then her customary mask of worry returned.

"Do you think so? I always thought it too stuffy."

"It is hardly that, and it somehow suits you." When she shrugged, the dress of a brown lightweight wool pulled across her bosom and left him wondering what she might look like if she weren't wearing such an ill-fitting garment. "Unlike Eleanor, which is rather too haughty for someone like me."

That tugged a grin from him. Each tiny thing he learned about her made him appreciate her companionship even more. "Then I shall call you Ellie."

Delight danced in her eyes. "I would like that. Thank you."

"My pleasure." He nodded. "Now, please answer my question."

Once more, wariness took hold, and her expression grew shuttered. "Order me a bath. I shall tell you whatever you'd like to know then."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Why not?" One of her feathery black eyebrows lifted in challenge. Oh, yes, the woman had aristocratic blood in her veins. "I haven't had the luxury of that in a long time."

From her clothing and cultured tones, she was from the *beau monde* but from her lodging and being in the modiste's shop probably as a seamstress instead of a client as well as the telling calluses on her fingers, it appeared she worked for a living, and not a good one. Perhaps she did deserve a bit of pampering. "All right."

Gratitude filled her eyes. "Truly?"

"Of course. I'll return in a twinkling." How could one act of kindness transform her so much? He didn't know, but it was something else he hoped to discover.

It took less than two minutes to make his way downstairs and gained the attention of the innkeeper behind a polished wooden counter.

"Excuse me, my good man, but could I order a bath brought to room seven please?"

"It'll cost extra."

"I figured." Laurence forced a swallow into his suddenly dry throat. "How much?"

"Half pound, which includes heating the water, having someone carry it up, as well as rent on the tub." The man's tone echoed with boredom.

Damnation. He gritted his teeth. Since he wasn't well off, all the coin he had was to cover the other inns and meals on their trips. "Would you consider this cravat in lieu of payment? It's silk and I purchased it days ago from a shop in London." When the innkeeper didn't appear convinced, he quickly untied the knot and unwound the length from about his neck. "Truly, the silk is worth more than four baths." Besides, he had two others in his luggage, so giving up this one wasn't that much of a hardship.

"I'd rather have the coin." But the innkeeper grunted as he fingered the length of silk. "I'll take this in trade though." Quickly, he snagged the cravat and it disappeared beneath his frock coat. Then he picked up a handbell and rang it. When a matronly woman came forth from a back room, the innkeeper ordered the bath.

“Thank you,” Laurence mumbled. He quickly returned to the room, and when Ellie lifted a hopeful gaze to his, he grinned, for the sacrifice was more than worth it. “The bath will be here imminently.”

“Oh?” Surprise creased her brow. “How much did it cost?” Her gaze fell to his neck. Did she note the missing cravat? If she did, she said nothing of it.

“That’s not important.” He waved the concern away as if he were accustomed to tossing away coin on frivolities all the time.

Which he had been, and that needed to change.

Before she could answer, a knock sounded on the door, and when Laurence opened it, two burly men he assumed were footmen came in carrying a porcelain bath tub with lion’s foot shaped legs. It was scratched and had a few divots in a few places, but it was serviceable. A line of maids followed. All of them held wooden buckets full of steaming water, which they then dumped into the tub the footmen had set in front of the fireplace where a cheerful if small fire danced behind a plain grate.

Eventually, the inn staff departed and left them alone once more.

Ellie looked at him with round eyes before darting to her trunk and rummaging inside it. When she withdrew a small burlap bag, she offered him a tentative smile that nearly transformed her countenance. “I cannot wait to make use of that.”

“Right.” That spurred him into action. “Let me move the privacy screen for you.” Quickly, he relocated the silk screen from the side of the room and placed it between the tub and the bed. “Enjoy.” Damn if he didn’t want to see her with a full smile.

“Thank you.” She wasted no time slipping behind the screen, and soon after began the task of undressing while he took out a banyan of navy silk and rested it over the top of the

screen. Perhaps after she had no more use of the bath, he would.

Not knowing what else to do, Laurence removed his waistcoat as well as his boots. Then he fell onto the bed, and it was just as lumpy as he suspected, but when he happened to glance at the dingy silken privacy screen, his breath caught, for the silhouette of her form was clearly visible on the screen due to the fire behind her.

Dear God.

And without the frumpy clothing, it was clear she had a stunning body. The curve of her hips and breasts were emphasized by the nip of her waist, and when she let down the mass of her hair, the shadow on the screen tantalized his mind. It would be a long time indeed before he forgot those images.

“Damn,” he said on a barely audible whisper before he could recall it. He was a gentleman to a point, but since the room was small and there was nowhere to go, he couldn’t help but intently watch that screen as he tried to find a comfortable position on the bed. Already, his shaft twitched with the beginnings of interest, for he hadn’t had a woman in his bed in over a month. Reminding himself Ellie wasn’t that sort, he tried to ignore the fact she was naked behind that screen.

“Ooh.” The veriest of splashes followed the utterance of pleasure.

His member shuddered to more prominent life. “Can I assume you find the bath pleasing?” Would she even know if he peeked around the screen to peer at her?

“It feels like heaven and reminds me when times were grand.”

That was all to the good. If he could keep her talking, he could concentrate on her words instead of what she looked like *sans* clothes, lounging in that water... “Who are you, really?”

This time her sigh was less luxurious. “I am the youngest child and fourth daughter of the Earl of St. Devere. I have one brother and three sisters. Of course, all of them are

perfect, have led perfect lives, have borne perfect children, have perfect spouses.”

“Indeed?” His eyebrows soared into his hair line. “I knew you must be part of the aristocracy. The look is in your blood.” And such a lofty pedigree, too. How interesting, and somewhat disconcerting. If her family truly wished to have her back within their fold, his very presence in her life, gallivanting about the English countryside on what amounted to a lark... Well, her father would have his head.

She snorted. “Such bloodlines mean nothing if one is abandoned.” The sound of water dripping followed the statement. Perhaps she had moved within the tub.

Again, he attempted to remove the image of her naked and wet from his mind. *Focus on the conversation, old man.* “Shall I call you lady?”

“Please don’t.”

Fair enough. “Why do you believe your family doesn’t want anything to do with you?”

Silence met his inquiry, but he didn’t push. Instead, he put his hands behind his head on the pillows and waited. Obviously, the problems went deep, which was something he understood. Finally, Ellie spoke. “Since I’m the youngest, I didn’t exactly want to conform to anyone’s rules. I was a bit of a hoyden when I was younger.”

“I wish I had known you then.” It was a far cry from the woman he did know, the woman so defeated by life that she no longer trusted anyone.

“Oh, that would have been sure trouble, I’m afraid, for both of us.” The tiny chuckle had awareness crashing over him. “Regardless, being wild led to some bad decisions and wicked men, and then before I knew it, I was ruined and not properly devastated about it as I apparently should have been.”

“Ah.” He grinned at that. “You no doubt shocked society with that attitude.”

“Society, my parents, my family, my friends.” A giggle followed, and the sound was so unlike her that he desperately

wished to hear it again, merely because it had been slightly magical. “All joking aside, those decisions destroyed my chances of making an advantageous match.”

Laurence sobered a bit at those words. “What about a decent match?”

“I, uh, wasn’t ready to have a man tame me.” Splashing, dripping water filled the stretch of silence. “And I was quite headstrong. To make my father angry enough to take full notice, I became someone’s mistress. It, uh, didn’t go as planned.”

The story wasn’t unique to many young ladies of the *ton*, but that didn’t make it less difficult to hear. “Your protector didn’t want you?” Just like the day he’d met her, a wave of protection welled in his chest for her.

“Oh, he did, but I was naïve back then. I thought I could change him, that he would fall madly in love with me, or that by some miracle his wife would just... disappear. We could live out a happy life.” Her sharp bark of laughter held no mirth. “Obviously, none of that happened, and so our relationship continued in the only way that it could. He provided me with rooms in a lovely building, gowns and baubles aplenty, but as I said, I was stupid and didn’t know there were ways to prevent pregnancy.”

A gasp escaped him, and he sat up. “You were increasing.”

“Yes.” The word was propelled into being as if pulled from a tight throat.

“Ah.” Yet he frowned. She didn’t have a child with her. Had she given up the infant? Despite the fact he didn’t wish to pry, curiosity raged. “What happened?”

For long moments, silence reigned behind the screen before she spoke. “What usually happens to women like me who don’t have support. Complications during the birth. Perilous delivery. I nearly hemorrhaged to death.” When her voice broke, his chest tightened, and he moved to the edge of the bed. “The babe lived for a day before he died.”

“I’m so sorry.” He was nearly off the bed, but he forced himself to stay put and allow her the privacy.

“So am I,” she managed to gasp out. Then there were no more words, for soft crying issued from behind the screen, and there was nothing he could do to offer her comfort. Eventually, she must have rallied, for she said, “Please don’t ask me more questions tonight. I don’t have the strength for it; I don’t wish to relive that time in my life.”

Fair enough. “I apologize for bringing you new pain.” It was a tragic tale and one that happened far too many times, he’d wager. Without a family to sweep those indiscretions beneath the rug or pay someone to deflect them, the poor woman had no choice but to go it alone. “For what it’s worth, you are safe with me.” And damn if he didn’t mean every word.

A round of sniffing followed. “It is worth much. Thank you. I haven’t had that—or a friend—in so long.” She sounded so forlorn it was all he could do to *not* come around the screen and gather her into his arms.

“Then I am glad you and I met as well as embarked on this journey together.” What else was there to say?

Eventually, Ellie left the tub, wrapped in his thin banyan, and came around the edge of the privacy screen. Damnation, but he nearly shot his wad as he scrambled to his feet, for seeing her clad in one of his garments was the height of erotic. “I hope you don’t mind me using your robe. I... I don’t have anything like that.” Her hair was damp and hung to her waist in a tangled, raven waterfall.

“You are welcome to whatever I have,” he said once he unglued his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

“Thank you.” A blush stained her pale cheeks, but her skin had been scrubbed clean and she smelled faintly of lavender. “I’m going to comb out my hair and then go to sleep. It has been a trying day.”

“That it has.” Laurence nodded as if he were a marionette on strings. *God, what a nodcock I am!* “I might as

well make use of the bath water while you settle in.” It would be a long week, and he couldn’t keep her in baths without new funding, but he was glad indeed he could provide her with such luxury tonight.

“You may use my soap if you do so sparingly. Finely milled soap is quite expensive, but it simply one of those things I cannot bear to part with from my former life.” She came close in an effort to move about him as they jockeyed for the tight floor space. Then she went past him and pulled a silver vanity set from her trunk.

“Thank you.” Like the coward that he was, Laurence fled behind the privacy screen and quickly undressed before he could change his mind. As soon as he lowered his frame into the scented water, he uttered a half-stifled groan. The water was still a bit warm and did feel nice combined with the fire in the grate.

Over time, he nearly fell asleep, but he roused, and since Ellie didn’t seem inclined for conversation, he quickly washed himself then stood up out of the water. Once he’d toweled himself dry, he peeked around the screen, and his chest tightened again. She had dressed in her shift and had fallen asleep over the covers with the damp tendrils of her dark hair spread out over the pillow like spilled ink.

“Well, damn.” But perhaps fortuitous. While still naked, he moved the screen back to its original place near the wash basin, shucked into his discarded pair of breeches, had enough energy to give his teeth a quick brush, and finally slid into the narrow bed next to her. After blowing out the candle, he tucked them both beneath covers and tried to settle in for sleep. The driver had advised that they would leave shortly after dawn the next morning.

What would become of her if her family wouldn’t accept her? It wasn’t right she was alone in the world, but then families were strange. His most certainly was, but the knowledge that she was under his care for the week gave him a modicum of comfort. He wouldn’t fail her, and he hoped to God she never caught sight of his damned cockstand while in intimate company with her.

God, how embarrassing would that be? Yet, he grinned into the darkness. A lovely woman was a lovely woman, and it didn't matter what her social background was for him to appreciate that. This would be an interesting Christmastide indeed.

Chapter Six



Eleanor came awake with a start. It took a few moments in the dark to orient herself to where she was. Then it all came tumbling back to her. The trip north in the coach with Laurence Bannerman. The fact they'd put forth the bit of fiction of their engagement. What she'd shared with him while she'd been ensconced in the heavenly bath he'd arranged for her.

Regarding that, there was still some mystery clinging to exactly *how* he'd procured it. Though he hadn't said how much it had cost, all she knew was that he'd left the room wearing a cravat but returned without the neck wear. Perhaps he'd offered it in trade, for the fabric had been silk, and quite expensive quality at that.

Since it was still early in the morning, the room was plunged into darkness and shadow. Occasionally, from the rooms around her, odd thuds, scrapes, snores, or the murmur of voices drifted to her ears. As a whole, it was an unsettling experience, and perhaps that was what had led her to wake, but now she was restless, and sleep eluded her.

She glanced to her left where Laurence slumbered beside her in the narrow bed. At least he didn't snore. The heat of him called out to her, for the fire had long ago died, and it wasn't that grand to begin with. Since she'd shared some of her history with him earlier that evening, it was only fair that she have some of his, and perhaps a tiny part of her wished to know what he thought of her. Though he'd seemed sympathetic when she'd revealed her shameful tale, she couldn't be certain, for some men were gifted liars.

As she turned onto her side to regard him better in the gloom, the dip and valley in the old mattress ensured she

rolled toward him. Soon enough, her body brushed against his, and oddly, he was far too tempting only being clad in a pair of breeches. Firm in all the right places a man should be, he hadn't yet developed a flabby stomach, nor did he have jowls or other loose skin some older men developed due to inactivity or excessive alcohol.

Daring much, Eleanor rested a hand on his chest, and for one moment of insanity, she let herself imagine how it might feel to experience his arms around her or how his lips might feel pressed against hers. Flutters danced through her lower belly when he stirred slightly and one of his hands went to her hip. It had been a long time indeed since she'd last been with a man, and though her life had been ruined by one, the urge for that intimate connection, that fleeting feeling of belonging bubbled to the surface once more.

It was a dangerous prospect and one that would further complicate her already convoluted life. Needing the distraction of conversation, Eleanor rested a palm to the side of his face. The slight shadow of stubble tickled her hand and worked to further bring awareness of him to her. "Laurence."

"Hmm?" Yet he didn't awaken fully.

"Laurence," she said with a bit more volume in her voice as she trailed her fingers along his cheek to the side of his neck.

"What? What's wrong?" The words were slightly muzzy, but he startled awake and rose onto an elbow. As he peered down at her, he heaved out a sigh. "Ellie? Is all well?"

"Yes, but I couldn't sleep."

"Ah." He settled into the bed once more then immediately attempted to put space between them, but the worn mattress fought his efforts, and they slowly drifted toward one another. "Damn, but that skinflint innkeeper really should spring for a new mattress tick." Amusement rumbled through his voice to tickle her chest.

"Agreed." She couldn't help but giggle, for the situation *was* quite comical. Every time either of them tried to

move away, the sagging mattress pulled them back to center.

When he slipped his arms loosely about her, no doubt for no other reason than there was nowhere else to put them, she stifled a sigh. “Why can you not sleep? Strange place?”

“Perhaps, but one of the overwhelming reasons is that I’m hungry.” Her stomach let out an unladylike growl at the same moment, which provoked soft chuckles from them both.

“Nothing we can do about that right now.” Amusement lingered in his tone.

“I know.” The hand she’d rested on his naked chest moved of its own volition, and she relished the crisp rasp of the mat of golden hair at her palm. “Yet here I am, feeling unsettled.”

“Why?” His fingers at her hip twitched. “You bared part of your soul earlier. I thought you’d have no issues falling into exhausted slumber.”

“I was for a while, but now I’m awake, my curiosity about you won’t quiet.”

“Oh?” The word was guarded. He found her gaze in the darkness, but she couldn’t see much of the emotions reflected there.

“Why didn’t you answer me when I asked if you were an upstanding member of society?”

His body tensed. “You’ll think less of me.”

Eleanor snorted softly. “Do you think less of me for essentially being a prostitute to men in the *ton*?” Hot shame poured through her chest at the mention of her former life. Never had she regretted those choices more than she did now when she actually hoped she had worth in someone’s eyes.

“Of course I do not. Everyone has a past.”

Did she believe him? It was difficult to know. “Well then. Tell me your story. Perhaps it will help me return to sleep.”

“Because I am dull?”

She playfully thumped his chest. “No, because I... I enjoy listening to the sound of your voice.” Being so close to him—more than traveling in the coach allowed—the scent of her lilac soap wafted to her nose, but there was still a tiny vestige of his cologne there that made him far too interesting.

“Well, then I shouldn’t delay in telling the tale, hmm?” His grin flashed in the darkness, and he relaxed by increments. “I’m a third son but fourth sibling. My father is Viscount Deerfield who is quite popular within the *ton*. Where my oldest brother is the heir and followed in my father’s footsteps with a real head for numbers, my second oldest brother is the spare. He went into the military and came home a hero missing an arm, so people fawn all over him.” There was a note in his voice that spoke to telling this story many times.

“Oh, dear.”

“Indeed. My sister is the beauty of the family. She made an advantageous marriage to a marquess, and you’d think she was the savior of all mankind for how my parents treat her. All three of them are married and are working to fill their nurseries, so again they are living charmed lives.”

“Your family sounds much like mine.”

He idly strummed his fingers along her hip, and with each pass, tingles played up and down her spine. “And then there’s me.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Eleanor snickered, for he had a way with words that made her laugh, and lord knew she hadn’t done that in far too long. “What were you in that mix?”

“Well, my parents suggested I go into the church.”

That also struck her as funny, and she smiled. “I cannot see you as a vicar.” Being pressed so tightly against him was both comforting and arousing, so she tried valiantly to ignore those feelings that would lead her down a very wrong path.

“Yes, neither could I.” His chuckle sent delicious gooseflesh over her skin. “I fail abysmally when it comes to memorizing texts, and I’m always misplacing my Bible

whenever it does occur to me to attend services.” For long moments, he was lost in thought as one of his hands drifted up and down her spine. “Most of the time attending church is dreadfully dull unless there’s a real looker in attendance to hold my interest.”

“At least you are honest.” She appreciated that about him, but even more she wondered about his romantic history. Did he currently have a lady he was paying his addresses to? Probably not if he agreed to escort her north. No woman would have agreed to let a suitor do that. She certainly wouldn’t have.

“I wasn’t one for the military either. As much as my brother enjoyed it, that sort of life wasn’t for me. Keeping such regimented hours and sticking to a schedule sounded horrid, to say nothing of the pious sort of life I would need to lead.”

“So you became a diletante or a rogue.” No, he wasn’t a man of mystery, but she appreciated that his history hadn’t been filled with drama or heartbreak as hers had.

He snickered. “I *did* try to become a patron to an artist... but then I ended up bedding her so that didn’t work.” Eleanor could almost imagine his expression, for he didn’t sound too repentant. “Being a rogue was easy. I adore women, drinking, gambling, and not taking responsibility. For years I’d made a career of being that man, of living on the fringes of society, blowing through my father’s coin, getting by on *his* reputation and never taking any consequences for anything.”

That sounded all too familiar, and in that moment, she bonded with him. “What happened?”

In his attempt to shift position on the bed, they were more firmly wedged into the dip in the middle of the mattress. “Uh, my best friend who lived much the same life I did, found himself facing a slow and torturous death by syphilis, brought on by his lifestyle.” Emotion graveled his whispered voice, and she patted his arm in sympathy. “Each month that passed saw him wasting away with more and more hideous symptoms. Finally, on his death bed, he admitted to me that if

he could go back and live his life all over again, he wouldn't have been the same man. He would have lived for others instead of himself."

Such a death, though not uncommon, was all too horrible. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. That was last winter, and it made a deep impression on me. I miss him every day." Laurence remained quiet for a time as he stroked a hand up and down her back. In such close quarters, with every point of her body smashed against every point of his, there was no mistaking how her proximity, her touch, affected him. It both excited and dismayed her. "Whenever I look in the cheval glass, I see my friend's fate for me in a few years, and it terrifies me. So much so that I took to my bed for a week not long ago with worry."

That explained much about his recent actions. "Which prompted you to help me."

"Indeed." One of his hands drifted far too close to the curve of her rear. "I was happy to do it."

Briefly, she closed her eyes as warm tingles filled her belly. Oh, but she craved more of his touch! It had been so long since she'd felt wanted by a man! Yet his words rankled. "Then you consider me little more than a charity work." No matter how much she admired his efforts to better himself, she refused to be used in any sort of way. When she tried to remove herself from the dip in the bed, he pulled her back down, ever closer.

"I do not." When he cupped her cheek, gently tilted her head back so he could meet her gaze in the dark, she trembled. "I merely wanted to help. You needed me; I needed you. For the moment, we both have a purpose."

"Until our respective families get hold of us." She snorted, for the real world beyond the relative safety of this room waited to pounce. "I don't need a knight in shining armor to rescue me."

Much. Though she would welcome the chance to let someone help shoulder the burden for a while.

“Good, because I am *not* that.” Humor wove through his words. The warmth of his breath—faintly scented of mint—skated across her cheek. “My armor has been dented long ago and I’m not in the habit of rescuing damsels. If I ever fall in love, I’m of the mind we would be equals, as partners in everything we choose to undertake.”

What a lovely concept. Longing for something she’d never had speared through her. Would she ever be married, after the mess she’d made of her life, or was the constant struggle to be her eternal lot? A trace of tears filled her eyes, and she sighed in defeat. There were no easy answers. “What am I doing for you?”

“Providing your company to make me feel less lonely during this time of year.” For long moments he remained quiet, but the hand on her back continued its gentle glide up and down her spine. That rhythmic lull would soon send her to sleep if she wasn’t careful. “I didn’t wish to go home to lectures and be told I’m naught but a disappointment whose father is going to cut him off financially, yet I made plans to do so before I met you.”

“And you broke them. For me.”

“My family will understand.” He sighed so deeply she felt his frustration. “But I’m not an idiot. I have a head for investments. I’ve stuck with coal for a bit and now steel. Things are moving toward more industrial happenings in England, and I’ll be right there when it explodes. Eventually, those investment will pay off, and then I’ll be my own man.”

“That *is* interesting. And it’s true that England cannot remain where it is. The world is constantly changing, striving for newer and better things.”

“Yes, to better all our lives.” The excitement in his voice was contagious. “Yet my father won’t hear of it. Thinks a man of the *ton* shouldn’t dirty his hands with work. I don’t mind the physical labor, and will gladly put my back into it if that means I won’t land in debtor’s prison.” His huff ruffled the curls on her forehead. “I am also good with management.

I'd like to try my hand at running an estate if I should ever know of anyone with such a position."

She admired him for his goals and willingness to do whatever it took, for she had that same drive. "Away from London?"

"That depends. Or I can travel to and from Town if the estate was close."

Perhaps it was better he wasn't a titled or rich lord. With him being who he was, they were indeed equals and both knew about struggle. "It's good you have dreams." Knowing he wasn't afraid to do the work impressed her. Not that their association would continue after they reached their destination.

"For the moment, dreams and goals cost nothing, so why not invest in them?" He brushed tendrils of hair away from her face, for she'd fallen asleep before she could braid the tresses. "Do you have them also? Surely you do. Wish to do something beyond working at the modiste's shop?"

"I do, but I'd rather not tell you just now. It will make me too emotional." Already, she was seconds away from becoming a watering pot in his presence. "To be clear, though, there is no shame in making a living with a needle. Remarkably, I do have some talent for embroidery and beadwork, even though it's sometimes detrimental to my fingers."

"Of course. What you are doing to make a better life for yourself is admirable, and for what it's worth, I'm proud of your determination." He took one of her hands in his, brought it to his lips, and then kissed two of her fingertips where callouses had formed despite the use of thimbles. "Never let anyone make you feel small for how you live your life."

"Oh." This time, it was her heart that developed a rather odd tremble. She pushed the reaction away. He was only being lovely to her due to their situation. There was no future between them. "I appreciate that more than you can know," she managed in a shaky whisper.

“I only speak the truth.” Once more, he shifted—or tried to change—position on the bed, but they were well and truly stuck in the rut, so he settled her more comfortably in his arms. “I’m glad we were able to have this talk.”

“So am I.” With the comforting circle of his arms in the dark, she didn’t feel so alone, didn’t need to constantly worry over what the next day would bring. Being with Laurence in this way made her feel safe, and that was something she hadn’t had in a very long while.

“Thank you for listening to my rambles. I swear I’m not a layabout.”

“I never thought you were. Good things are on the horizon for you, if fate is kind.” Though she yawned, knowing what she had been in the past sent little niggles of shame and doubt through the pleasant respite she’d found with him.

“I’m of the opinion that we each make our own fate.” Then he brushed his lips over hers and paused, waiting for her reaction.

Eleanor froze as her heartbeat raced. Though she was uncertain as to his intent, in an odd way, she trusted him. With a soft sound of acceptance at the back of her throat, she allowed her body to melt into his as she lifted her chin.

His hands stilled on her back, and he kissed her with more authority this time but didn’t push. The man seemed all too content to merely introduce himself to her through that medium, and he leisurely moved his lips over hers without intensity or assumption.

It was all too lovely and made her think that perhaps she wasn’t as broken as she thought. Against her better judgment, she kissed him back in that same tentative way for a few minutes before she broke the connection even as her body remembered how pleasurable coupling with a man could be.

“Goodnight, Laurence. Thank you for this interlude.” Since it was impossible to squirm away from him due to the state of the mattress, she contented herself with being tucked into his arms for the duration.

“Goodnight, Ellie. While we travel together, you needn’t worry about a thing. I hope you realize that.” Then he encouraged her head against his shoulder and simply held her.

With more than a bit of gratitude, she allowed her eyes to close while her mind and imagination executed a freefall. To be sure, the man could be trouble in the most delicious way if she let him, but that would only complicate everything.

And that wasn’t who she was any longer, was it?

Chapter Seven



December 19, 1817

Second posting inn on the journey north

Though it was raining, the precipitation wasn't heavy, nor had it been going on for any length of time, so hopefully that meant it wouldn't impede tomorrow's ability to travel.

Laurence had much to think about while in the coach all day with Ellie, for last night had contained unexpected intimacies he hadn't thought to share with a woman. Usually, his liaisons had consisted of using women only for physical pleasure and then letting them go from his life, but with Ellie, nothing was the same, nor was she in his life for any of those purposes.

Apparently, he'd lost his mind last night when he'd kissed her. Who did that to a woman he was merely escorting to her family? Thank goodness she'd had the presence of mind to break it off else he might have done something entirely too stupid. What was wrong with him that he couldn't control himself around her? Was he so desperately addicted to bedding women?

They'd held desultory conversations throughout the day, but nothing in-depth was discussed, and they certainly hadn't mentioned the kiss or the confidences that had been exchanged the night before.

At some point after they'd stopped for luncheon and to change out the horses, he'd taught her how to play faro. Ellie had an affinity for it, and soon enough they'd entered into a lighthearted competition wherein they'd played for buttons, coins, peppermint candies or whatever small things each of

them had in pockets or bags. It had passed the time and served as a distraction, but now, he needed a new one.

Once more, he sat in a private dining room with Ellie, and though he'd tucked into his dinner of roast beef, some sort of potato mash, carrots that had seen better days, and a rather stale bread that wasn't bad once it had been softened with a bit of the meat's juices, his companion sat across the table from him, pushing food about her plate. Certainly, she hadn't listened to a word he'd said for the past fifteen minutes.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked as he dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a linen napkin.

"I suppose it's well enough." She frowned at her nearly untouched plate. When she raised her gaze to his, a mixture of sadness and longing sat in those blue depths. "It's five days until Christmas. Oddly enough, I'm beset with old memories and older feelings, and I cannot help but wonder if I will ever know such happiness again."

"If you persist in thinking like that, you will drive yourself mad." Briefly, he touched her hand then pulled his away as if he'd been burned. "Life will never be what it once was. For better or for worse, we must move forward and make our own happiness."

"Perhaps, but these days, there is precious little to find that might prompt such an emotion." The smile she offered him was a weak and watery affair that tugged at his chest.

"I believe I'm offended." With over-exaggerated movements as if he were on stage, Laurence put a hand over his heart even though he still held his fork. "You and I have been on a journey for two days, and I believe we're coming to know each other quite handily." He winked. "It's a lovely prospect to have a friend, hmm? Even if he apparently is rubbish at lifting her spirits?"

"Do stop." She dismissed his comedy with a wave of her hand, but her grin was stronger this time. "You are quite goofy. Did you know that?"

The fact she teased him meant she was coming out of her brown study. He maintained his grin. “We cannot both be maudlin.”

“True. I’ll try to do better.” Yet she still pushed her food about her plate with the tines of her fork. Every once in a while, she would put a bite of potato in her mouth.

What the devil could he do to pull her from the doldrums? As he eyed her plate, the answer came to him. “If you’d like, I can regale you with an embarrassing story from my childhood that happened around Christmastime.”

Interest lit her eyes. She straightened her spine and nodded. “Oh, yes. Please do that.”

For half a second, he was distracted, for those words could be applied to a very different context between them, but then he thrust those potentially naughty thoughts from his mind. “One year when we went to the Surrey property at Christmastide, my brothers and I were dispatched to the attics in order to locate the decorations that were drug out every year.”

“Why didn’t the servants do such a task?”

“Because my mother said we were trying her patience as well as God’s and we needed something to focus our energy on, so up we went.” When he grinned and snagged a carrot from her plate, she rolled her eyes. “In any event, we wasted many hours in the attics, which I suppose was my mother’s intent to begin with. Eventually, we found a window with a faulty latch. After a couple of dares, we all snuck outside, but when it came time for the dare part, we weren’t as brave as we thought. The window slammed shut behind us, and of course the faulty latch decided to hold.”

“Oh no!” She’d planted an elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand. No society rules for Ellie at the moment, not when she was immersed in his tale.

Did she know how attractive she was, with her eyes sparkling, concern on her face, and the whole of her attention on him? “Our family wasn’t aware we were missing or in

peril, for according to them later, they assumed we'd given up the search and left the attics."

"That's horrible. What happened?"

He shrugged. "My brothers and I were stranded out there on that ledge for three hours. Because it's England, rain returned." So well did he remember that day, swore he could even now feel the chill on his skin and the trickle of raindrops going beneath his collar. "Finally, a groom riding on the back of a carriage coming up the drive spotted us and alerted someone inside the house."

"Thank goodness you were all saved." She pressed a hand to her heart as if the incident had just recently happened.

"Indeed." Though he tried to bite back a smile, it was a difficult endeavor. "It took a bevy of servants to haul us up into the attic." God, that had been embarrassing. "There was no fight left in us, for we were cold and wet and tired."

"I can only imagine."

"Afterward, we were lectured but then popped into warm baths and given dinner. Once that was accomplished, we were allowed to play games until bedtime. Not once did my parents punish us." Perhaps that had been the lesson all along. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that his parents—though strict in many ways—were always there, loving him and his siblings, quietly showing them how to grow into the people they needed to be.

Did that mean his assumptions on how they might think of him now were erroneous? That needed more pondering.

A sigh escaped Ellie. "Your family sounds wonderful and loving. Always forgiving."

"I suppose they are, though I couldn't see it back then." He'd been a nodcock about many things. "They might have come the crab with me and my siblings, but they always forgave even if they were disappointed in our actions." A ball of emotion lodged in his throat as a wave of homesickness swept over him. It was entirely possible he'd been wrong.

Damn it all. After clearing his throat, he said, “It’s one of the good things about my family.” When it appeared he might be too close to emotional territory, concern buzzed at the base of his spine. Fork in hand, he stole a bite of her roast. “My parents have a solid marriage. Whenever I think about being domesticated, I think I’d like a union such as theirs.”

Where the hell had that thought come from?

Gently, she laid down her fork. “My parents are like that too. Which is why they cannot understand how I never married like my siblings.”

“Is that, uh, one of the dreams you didn’t wish to tell me the other day?” Why did it matter? Once he’d escorted her to her family’s home, his responsibility to her would be over.

“Some days I truly would enjoy that life, to have people of my own who might love me for myself and not for what I can do for them or give them.” Ellie concentrated on folding her napkin in her lap. “Then there are other days when I think the reason why I haven’t married is as a sort of penance for all the scandalous and sinful things I did in my past I haven’t regretted. That because I’ve enjoyed men outside the bonds of such a holy institution, that I don’t deserve one to love.”

“I rather don’t think fate or even God works like that. Finding love or romance is merely a game of chance.” Was that true, though? Did every action build their future fate? If that was so, he wasn’t any more well off than she, and that chilled his blood.

“None of us know for certain.” Her shrug only lifted one shoulder. “In the end, it doesn’t matter. I would need to find a man I got on with well enough, a man I could trust, a man who didn’t mind what I was in the past, who wouldn’t hurt me or abuse me merely for my body.”

Oh, God. Her honesty and vulnerability that was clearly on display had his protective instincts surging to the forefront. For the first time, Laurence realized the toll her past must have taken on her. With him, it was an easy enough thing to say that he’d given up his vices in an effort to be better man,

but in Ellie's case, she was a woman and would have formed an emotional bond with each liaison, every decision she'd ever made.

Especially the one that had resulted in a child she'd never had the chance to see grow.

No longer was this merely a trip to escort her north to the bosom of her family. This was an opportunity to make her see she was worthy of love regardless of what life had taught her. And perhaps in that process, he would find his own worth too. "All I can say is that when you find the right man, you will know he's true, that he would only have your best interests at heart, and then you will realize why none of your other relationships felt so easy or as sure."

At least that was the hope, and he desperately wanted that for her.

Yet, he was rubbish at that sort of thing as well and felt completely overwhelmed in how he should help, so he touched his free hand to hers. "Love and romance have often escaped me, so if you're looking to me for advice, I have none." With a rueful grin, he shrugged. "However, I *can* tell you what I admired about my parents."

Slowly, she nodded. "I would enjoy that."

"Good." Again, he eyed her plate of food, but he had enough manners to not take it from her. "Every Saturday night my father gave my mother a bouquet of flowers because he wanted her to wake on Sundays—when there weren't visiting hours or so many tasks to accomplish—to a burst of color and something pretty to usher in her day of relaxation."

"How wonderful!" Ellie let loose a sigh. "Your father is a good man."

"Yes, he is, and even though I remember that, it makes me maudlin."

"Why?"

"It never occurred to me to give a woman flowers, never assumed the women I was with were that sort." God, what a nodcock he'd been.

She rolled her eyes. “Just because a woman works a certain trade doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a feminine soul. We *all* enjoy flowers.” Again, she focused her gaze on her lap. “I don’t believe a man ever gave me any. Jewelry and other things sure, but not flowers.”

“Damn.” He tucked away that tidbit. “At least I’m not the only man who has inadvertently made that mistake, and on behalf of us all, I’m sorry for the oversight.” Finally, he couldn’t wait any longer and stole another bite of her roast, quickly popped it into his mouth, and chewed while she laughed. “Sorry, I’m starving. Sharing such personal things must do it to me.”

“You are quite hopeless, Laurence.”

“So I’ve been told multiple times by multiple people.” But the sound of his Christian name in her voice unexpectedly gave him a thrill.

“Here.” Though she held back her bread, Ellie pushed her plate toward him. “I know I’ll probably regret it at midnight, you might as well enjoy the food while it’s still moderately warm.”

“Thank you.” Once he’d eaten a few forkfuls of potatoes and carrots, he grinned. “Oh, and before I forget, I need to give you this.” After setting down his fork, he delved his hand into his waistcoat pocket and withdrew a simple band with tiny rubies and diamonds embedded in the gold. “It was my grandmother’s, left to me in her will.”

She frowned. “Why do you have it with you now?”

“It’s the only thing of value I personally own, so I carry it everywhere. Thought about hawking it a time or two when things were bad, but always kept hold of it.” He held it up between his thumb and forefinger. The gems winked in the candlelight. “I figured I’d need it for something other than coin someday.” Then he shrugged, dismissed what he’d just said lest he once more got too deep in emotions. “Now we can officially say we are unofficially engaged.” Scooting his chair nearer to hers, he took up her left hand and then slipped the band onto her fourth finger.

“I cannot believe it fits.” Surprise filtered through her expression, but there was a catch in her voice that endeared her to him, as well as the blush that stained her cheeks. After her life’s experience, this tiny thing put her at sixes and sevens? “It’s so dainty and pretty.”

“That’s how my grandmother was. I’m glad you can make use of it.” Damn it all, but the ring looked quite natural and right sitting on Ellie’s finger. “She always told me not to settle and not to marry for position or wealth. To follow my heart.”

“Which was the direct opposite of what your parents wished for you.” When she swept her gaze upward, he was struck with how dark and long her lashes were and how pretty they’d looked fanned against her pale cheeks.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “But then, I suppose if I were a father, I’d worry over my children’s futures. It’s a conundrum indeed. Are your parents the same?”

“They are, but then a woman’s position is more dire.” She looked at him with shadows and secrets in her lake blue eyes. The longer she stared, the more a light sheen of tears lingered in those pools. “Men can make their way in the world; women are helpless and without rights, dependent on the whims of so many.”

Again, he’d never had cause to think about that... until Ellie had come into his life. “I suppose you’re right.” His chest tightened to realize he’d been part of the problem all along. “It’s a terrible place to be in, which is why I admire you so much for your determination to survive.”

“I had no choice.” Her laugh sounded far too forced. “When the time comes for you to follow your heart, don’t select a downtrodden woman.” Faint amusement had her lips curving into a small smile. “Both people in a couple shouldn’t be poor. It will make for a hard and difficult life.”

“Ah. I’ll bear that in mind.” Was she speaking about herself? For that matter, did she think *they* could be well matched? The notion brought him up short as he worked his way through her plate of food while she nibbled on her bread.

Did he? She'd certainly shown herself for a decent traveling companion thus far, went through each arduous day on the road without complaint or tears. He had no answers, but it was interesting to contemplate. "Regardless, I don't think that's how love works. I rather suspect the heart chooses who it will, and it's up to our heads to go along with it."

For long moments, she gazed at him, and finally nodded. "You might be correct."

He took another bite of her roast. "I'm of the opinion you have to also have faith that fate will make everything as it always should have been." He had always believed that fate played a large part in guiding his steps, and since he'd only now begun to take his existence seriously, it was far more important to believe now.

She uttered a huff but there was another budding smile in the offing. "I'm far too realistic to not have a plan."

"Ah." He couldn't help his grin. "It's good we met. We balance each other. You are a pessimist and I remain an optimist regardless of never having known victory in my life. Between the two of us, it should be interesting to see what happens."

When her budding smile burgeoned into a full, genuine one, it was as if the heavens had opened and poured down their light. Every portion of his body reacted to that gesture, and damn if he didn't want to kiss her merely for the hell of it.

"What am I to do with you?"

Laurence shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, but the possibilities are endless, hmm?" Why the hell did it suddenly feel as if that were indeed true?

Chapter Eight



Oh, dear heavens.

As Eleanor climbed the stairs after Laurence to retire into their room for the night, she caught a glimpse of a young woman who had two small children in tow, and from the excited chatter between the girls, it was apparent they were looking forward to the holiday season as well as the adventure of travel they were currently on.

She gasped and was obliged to pause on the stairs as she leaned against the wall. Pain and longing stabbed through her chest, and it might only be her imagination, but her womb contracted with the knowledge of its emptiness. There was no baby to fill her arms; never would she hear sweet words in a child's voice whispered in her ears.

When Laurence paused at the top of the stairs and glanced backward at her with concern on his face, she pulled herself together. Perhaps she was ungrateful for not enjoying being with the first man who treated her like a princess, yet outside of that one chaste kiss they'd shared the night before, he didn't appear interested in her as a woman. Looking at the situation from her background, that caught her by surprise. Truly, it worried her. Yes, they were only together for the purposes of the trip and to convince her family she wasn't a lost cause, but had she lost her appeal? If she came back to London to find she truly didn't have her position at the modiste's shop any longer, what other recourse would she have to make a living except to return to being a courtesan?

"Is all well?" he inquired in a quiet voice as he led the way to their room on the second floor. "You looked as if you'd seen a ghost back there."

Perhaps she had. The ghosts of a life she could never know. “Oh. I... uh...” She heaved a sigh then more or less collapsed into the one wooden chair in the room. “There was a young mother downstairs with two children. It caught me by surprise, and I thought about my own babe...” Her chin trembled. “...that I would never have the chance to hold.”

Why she’d admitted to the weakness, she couldn’t say, but there was something about this man that invited confidences, encouraged her to lean upon his strength, both physically and emotionally.

“Ah, Ellie.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss into her hair, which felt as natural as if they’d known each other all their lives. “I know there aren’t words I can say to make the situation better, but I’m here if you wish to talk.”

The gesture was so sweet and unexpected, a lump of emotion rose in her throat. “You’ve managed to surprise me every day we’ve been together since we met.” Then she waved him away before she did something truly foolish like ask him to kiss her. “Go downstairs to the tavern and enjoy yourself. I’m going to clean up as best I can then lay down. Perhaps try to read.” She’d brought two books with her. They were some of the only things she had left of her previous life as an earl’s daughter. No matter how bad life was, she would never give up her books. They were much like old friends.

“Are you certain?” Concern shadowed his eyes.

“Yes. I would like a moment alone.” Needing something to keep her busy, Eleanor set about to light the two candles in the room. One on a bedside table and the other on the bureau top. It had been a long time indeed since she’d shared any portion of her life with a man, and no matter how lovely Laurence was, she simply needed a moment to breathe and order her thoughts.

“All right.” At the door, he glanced back at her with emotions in his eyes she couldn’t read due to the dim light. “If you should have need of me...”

She nodded. “I’ll come find you. I promise.” *Dear God, please go! I don’t deserve such kindness.* And she

certainly didn't know how to act while he bestowed it. Gone were the days when she'd been out in society to flirt or exchange pleasantries with a man. That life had been left behind the first time she'd decided to invite one of them into her bed. There was no going back... was there?

By the time Laurence returned to the room two hours later, Eleanor had scuttled beneath the bedclothes. The mattress was more comfortable than the last one, and at least there wasn't a deep rut, but the room itself had a chilly ambient temperature, for there wasn't a hearth in this one. He held something behind his back and the sheepish expression on his face as he came into the room made her all too curious.

"Did you have a good time?" She struggled into a sitting position and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"I did. Spent some time talking to a few of the guests. Seems everyone is traveling, the same as us. Had a couple of pints while I indulged in a few hands of cards with some of the gents. Sometimes, the best way to come to terms with your own situation and where you're headed is to have a handful of conversations with strangers."

"I'm glad you had a lovely time." When he came around the bed, still holding whatever it was behind his back, Eleanor eyed him with suspicion. "What have you there?" With her chin, she indicated his hand. "Why are you acting so secretive?"

"I was able to procure you a small gift. A token, really, in the hopes it would cheer your mood and remind you that bad times fade to good like the ever-movement of the tide."

"What?" Was he trying to be poetic?

"Nevermind. I'm rubbish at making gestures or apparently explaining them." Then he took a bouquet of hothouse flowers from behind his back. "I heard one of the men say there was a flower shop in the village who had some blooms left over from a hot house delivery." He held the bouquet out to her. It was wrapped in pretty pink tissue paper and tied off with a white satin ribbon. "So I paid a footman to

secure one for me. Sorry it's small. I'm afraid I didn't have enough coin to spring for a larger one after everything else."

"Oh, Laurence." A wash of tears welled in her eyes as she stood up from the bed. "It matters not how large or small a bouquet is. It's the simple fact you thought about me at all." Her hand shook as she took the flowers from him and gazed at their riot of white, red, and pink blooms enhanced with a couple of small fir boughs. "They are quite beautiful, and what a special treat."

"I remembered you saying you'd never received flowers and thought you might like these. You've been so sad of late." Delight lined his face, either from her reaction or the flowers, she couldn't tell. "They don't eclipse you, though."

Eleanor scoffed as heat went through her cheeks. "You must be in your cups." Surely, he was making jest of her.

"Not nearly enough, for I rather think I might do foolish things soon." He stared at her with a curious expression. "I'm quite serious, Ellie. I don't overindulge in liquor any longer. Trying to be a changed man, remember."

"Well, you are doing a lovely job of it." She brought the blooms to her nose and inhaled their lovely floral fragrance. He was so different from any man she'd met, that she completely let down her guard and hoped she could trust him. Suddenly, the kiss they'd shared last night hadn't been enough to sustain her. Carefully laying the flowers on the bureau, she closed the distance between her and him, curled her fingers into his lapels, lifted onto her toes, and then brought her lips crashing against his.

He froze. His hands were on her shoulders, but instead of taking her into his arms, he immediately put space between them. "Damn it, Ellie, none of that. I refuse to tumble you into bed simply because you assume that's the only way you can think to thank me, and I certainly won't couple with you merely out of gratitude."

Flutters chased through her lower belly. That noble attitude made him all the more adorable. The men she'd known before would take her to bed or have her do other

scandalous things to them sometimes out of boredom. They considered it their right as long as they paid her.

“That is not what this would be.” She stepped close to him once more, laid a trembling hand on his chest. “I’m asking you to do this with me because *I* want it as well.” After forcing a hard swallow into her throat, she added, “I want *you*, Laurence.”

“We can kiss, of course, but—”

“No.” She slipped her fingers into his cravat and gave the fabric a tug. “More than kisses. We have both felt the connection between us.” Or was that merely her past talking?

For the length of three heartbeats, he stared at her as if he couldn’t quite puzzle her out. “I have, of course.” There was no mistaking the desire in his eyes. “You’re certain?”

Frissons of need went down her spine. “I am, and since I haven’t been an innocent for years, believe me when I tell you that I know my own mind on such matters.”

Again, he studied her. Did she have what he searched for?

She tried again to convince him. “There is no scandal in it, for my reputation was destroyed long ago, and you have admitted to regularly taking strange women into your bed.”

He snickered. “And my family *is* already disappointed in me.”

“It *is* a lovely way to pass the time and keep the chill at bay.” That reasoning sounded pathetic when spoken aloud, but she couldn’t help it. Obviously, she was out of practice with flirting.

“While I would have agreed with you four days ago, if we do this, *everything* will change between us.”

She didn’t care. “Perhaps it already has, and that is very lovely indeed.”

“Ah, Ellie.” When Laurence took her into his arms, settled her into an embrace that felt so much different than anything she’d ever experienced. As his lips covered hers,

moved with exquisite care in an effort to tell her who he was, she was in danger of being lost, for he wasn't one of those men who took what they wanted and then left her bed without caring if she'd been satisfied.

Just for this night, she would immerse herself in the sensual world she'd gained so much pleasure in before her fall from grace, and she hoped he would have a memorable experience instead of coming away thinking she was nothing but a prostitute after all.

Then she pulled herself out of her own head to concentrate on kissing Laurence. She looped her arms about his shoulders and shamelessly layered her body against his. When he held her closer still, she smiled. Her heartbeat thrummed a rapid tattoo, and she once more applied herself to kissing him. It was such a lovely thing, and he was as enthusiastic about it as she.

Oh, it had been so long since she'd felt wanted, since she'd felt the reassuring strength of a man's arms around her, of his hard form pressed against her body. Eleanor set out to nearly devour him, nipping, licking, encouraging, enticing—hoping that he would continue to travel with her after they did this irrevocable thing. With a groan, Laurence responded by mimicking her overture, and she was only too happy to let him assume command of the embrace. Had actually hoped he would. Right now, she wished to be taken care of, to let him pamper her, as had been his wont since they'd met. Desire simmered beneath the surface, fairly crackled between them, but he didn't give into it. Instead, he kissed her as if they had all the time in the world.

I need air!

With a gasp, she wrenched away, her breathing labored. "I didn't realize how potent you would be," she whispered. "How?"

His chuckle worked to further her undoing. "Perhaps I merely know what I'm doing."

"So I am beginning to see, and I'm also convinced I had no idea how life truly is." She forced moisture into her

suddenly dry throat with a swallow. “I appreciate that you don’t push me.” Daring much, Eleanor lifted onto tiptoe once more. She kissed him. “Laurence, please touch me, for I might perish if you don’t,” she whispered, and hoped she didn’t sound as desperate as she felt. It was the most honest statement she’d ever made.

“Bloody hell.” His eyes rounded and he cupped her cheek, slipped his hand down her bare arm until he reached her fingers. “Do you trust me?”

Did she? Seconds went by, marked by the beat of her heart. Though her life hadn’t been ideal, there was something about this man she found intriguing and quite endearing. “Yes.” She twined their hands together, and when he curled his fingers around hers, she shivered. “I am having the devil’s own time fighting the attraction for you, because, well, you have been exceptionally kind since we met,” she admitted in a soft voice.

“That is the baseline of what you deserve from everyone in your life, but I don’t want you in that way if you think the *only* thing I am is kind.”

Her heart beat a bit faster. “You are also determined to succeed where other men would be content to flounder.”

“Mmm, better.” He lifted her hand, brought it to his mouth, flipped it over, and then kissed the pulse point at her wrist. “Let’s see what we can do about bringing that attraction to the forefront.” Laurence tugged her across the floor, and with every step, Eleanor feared her heart would beat out of her chest.

Why was she so nervous? Hadn’t she done this very thing many times before?

“Keep going,” she pleaded in a low voice.

“Oh, there’s no doubt that I won’t, but I am trying to decide how I’d like to pleasure you.”

Eleanor frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, tossed in the bed or trapped against the wall, for one.” While her mind spun with possibilities, he gave her a

cheeky wink, then maneuvered her between the window and the tall, narrow bureau, not stopping until the wall against her back ceased her movement. “If you wish to cry off, please tell me now.” He stroked his knuckles along the curve of her cheek. Tingles raced over her skin from the point of contact. “I’m not in the habit of forcing myself on women.”

“No, I need this intimacy.” Wanted to feel wanted, wanted to fly, wanted to forget... wanted to pretend regarding things she had no right to dream about. Daring much and hoping he didn’t think her too forward, Eleanor pulled him to her, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and once more took possession of his mouth. The dear man returned her overture with a matching enthusiasm, and as he caressed her cheek, the side of her neck, her bosom, and traced the neckline of her bodice, she trembled with both desire and a hint of apprehension.

“Ah, Ellie, I have never met a woman of such contrasts as you.”

With him, the whole act of sex would be more than one of mere pleasure. Already, she felt close to him, shared a connection with him that made her feel comfortable or as if she’d slipped into a warm, welcoming bath. Being with him went beyond adoring the sound of his voice or listening for his laughter in the hopes it might tug some of the same from her. He had a knack for cheering her when she’d fallen into a maudlin stretch. And he’d nearly reduced her to tears with the gift of the flowers.

“In the event you are worried, I haven’t been with a woman in over a month, and I’m still in fair health. No diseases, lice, or other infections.” The concern in his eyes pulled at her heart.

“Thank you for the honesty. If you need the same assurance from me, I will gladly give it, for my last liaison ended years ago.” Tremors of need fell down her spine when he plucked the ribbon from the end of her braid and shook out the tresses so they flowed freely down her back.

“I didn’t think the modiste would have hired you otherwise, but I appreciate the candor.” His fingers felt all too lovely as he massaged her scalp, yet when she attempted to manipulate the buttons on his jacket, he batted her hands away. “Patience. Tonight will not be a quick tupp for the release. Let me show you how a joining can be with mutual respect involved.” He followed the shocking statement by treating her to tender, exquisite kisses that set her mind reeling and lit tiny fires in her blood.

For the first time in her life, Eleanor teetered on the edge of wonder. Easily she surrendered to his care and let him take the lead, for there was no pressure for her to perform or see to his immediate pleasure. She sighed as he nibbled and nipped a line of kisses down the side of her neck. Every stroke of his fingers—gentle as the brush of a bird’s feather—over her flesh had her gasping for breath. Each lick of his tongue left her quivering for more.

How had such things never been as sweet as they were now?

When he encouraged her shift up and off her body, baring her form to his gaze, Eleanor took a shuddering breath; it felt as if she were drowning. As his lips closed around a hardened nipple, swirled his warm tongue about that tip, she feared her knees would no longer support her weight.

“Steady, Miss Comerford.” He chuckled, and the intimate sound sent tingles dancing along her skin. “You are gorgeous, and if the men you’ve been with never told you that, they are all nodcocks.” Then he applied himself to the task of pleasuring her breasts so thoroughly, she could barely remember her own name. Once he was done and she was a quivering mass, Laurence returned to her lips, where he spent endless moments kissing her, basically encouraging her to relearn everything she thought she’d already known. “This is how a gentleman should show a lady the depths of his regard,” he murmured against her lips, and still he kissed her, seeking, asking, claiming?

Merciful heavens. Unexpectedly, and like a ninny, she lost a piece of her heart to him. Despite being lost in a cloud of

desire, Eleanor forced her eyes open to find his gaze. “It has been my experience a gentleman *wouldn't* indulge in this sort of activity. The men who offered me their protection were certainly not that even if they had been titled.” Being in this moment with him showed her just how degrading some of those relationships had truly been.

“Society’s rules are meaningless, and most men don’t even know how to respect themselves let alone the women in their lives.” With his lips against the side of her neck, there was nothing she could do except hang onto him and enjoy the experience.

“How are you so wise when your roots have been much like mine?” It was odd, this carrying on a whispered conversation while he did such delicious things to her body, but with him it seemed... right. Yet a niggle of concern, of shame, worked its way into her chest. In an effort to bury it, Eleanor wrapped her arms about his shoulders and explored his face, his neck, every piece of flesh she could find that didn’t require manipulating complicated clothing that would only frustrate her. All the while, she drew up a leg and curled it around his hip, offering herself, giving into him, made herself completely vulnerable.

Please don't disappoint me.

“It’s the people I’ve met and the experiences I’ve had.” Laurence was always a step ahead and certainly thinking along the same waves that she was. As he communed with her by way of the most gentle of kisses, he slipped a hand between them to manipulate the buttons on his frontfalls. As much as she wished to work him over and bring him to the heights of pleasure, she didn’t want to disturb the warm cocoon of wonder he’d woven around her. “Yet *you* have been a conundrum that still challenges me.”

Before she could say anything in response, he strummed his knuckles over the swollen nub at her center, and when she caught her breath, squirmed at the sensations that danced along her skin, he fit the head of his hardened length to her opening, and holding her gaze with his hands at her hips, he slowly thrust inside. Inch by inch he filled her with such

care and exquisite teasing that tears stung the backs of her eyelids.

Never had anyone made the act about her or her enjoyment, and yet here was this one man who she'd met four days ago, making an effort no one else had.

“Oh, dear.” A moan shuddered from her throat when he paused.

“Exactly. You're so damned... welcoming.” Laurence placed one hand, palm flat, on the wall near her head, then he encouraged her leg higher upon his waist with the other and leaned into her.

That was akin to what she felt about him while he penetrated her body. *Something* fluttered deep inside her as she continued to stare into his eyes, and suddenly she wasn't quite sure who she was any longer. Against her better judgment, the path before her shifted and she didn't know where her future would lead. With tears in her eyes, Eleanor framed his face in her hands and kissed him, imploring him with all that she was to continue.

And when he *did* move... An unexpected half-moan half scream left her throat. She would break apart and the act had hardly started. What was wrong with her? He would think her silly as an untried schoolgirl. Sensations of pleasure danced through her, growing stronger with each stroke he made. Need and desire changed her blood into fire as she held onto his shoulders and tried her best to mirror what he did. For all her experience with this sort of thing, doing it with Laurence was suddenly new and surprising.

“Oh, oh... Oh goodness,” she whispered in some urgency as she lost her grip on reality. The only thing she could do was enjoy the swelling feelings crashing over, around, and through her. With every push, with each slow thrust Eleanor fell under his spell, yearned for something she'd once thought could never be hers. Deeper and deeper, he went as if he wished to touch her soul even though they'd barely gotten to know each other, but it didn't seem to matter the longer she held his gaze.

“You feel so good.” He nuzzled the crook of her neck, slid a hand up to fondle a breast.

She couldn't think, couldn't talk, could do nothing except cling to him. All too soon, her breathing quickened as did her pulse. Eleanor drew in a ragged gasp while his strokes grew more urgent. Faster and faster, he moved, and as his fingers at her hip tightened, she slipped a hand between their bodies, rubbed her fingers over the slippery pearl at her center. That was all it took to send her over.

When she shattered and a scream climbed her throat, Laurence claimed her mouth, taking her surprised cry into himself. The kiss went on and on as did the rolling, contracting bliss, and with a final powerful thrust, he fell into his own release. Miraculously, she went flying over that edge again, and it was all she could do to cling to his neck, layer herself to him in order to remain upright as tears wet her cheeks. “That was...” She buried her face into the curve of his shoulder. “I have no words for what that was. It shouldn't have been that...”

“...seamless or surprising?” he finished for her, and his voice was as breathless as hers.

“Yes.” The coupling was so different than the previous acts she'd shared with the various men in her role as a courtesan that she cried as the waves of pleasure ebbed away. Her foot slipped to the floor and still she sobbed, because it was over, because her future wasn't settled even after this wonderful interlude, because they were only sharing this fake engagement for one reason—to have her family accept her back into their fold. “I don't understand.”

“Perhaps it is one of those things that fate hands us and we're not meant to understand why,” he whispered against the shell of her ear. Those words brought a modicum of comfort. He held her head between his palms and pressed feather-weighted kisses to her closed eyes, her nose, her chin, her cheeks, taking away her tears and warming her from the inside. The brush of his lips over hers had her eyes fluttering open. “Thank you for the gift you've given me.”

“It was nothing, and I truly do adore the flowers.” Eleanor nodded. “You were quite... something.” And she was so incredibly tired.

“It *was* rather a good night.” The man sounded all too smug. As he chuckled, the warmth of his breath skated over her cheek. He released her, pulled from her body, but just when she mourned the loss of that intimate connection, he guided her to the bed and then tumbled them both into it. The candles flickered. “I hope you are able to have a night of uninterrupted sleep.”

“So do I.” Yet she rather suspected being next to him, reliving what just happened between them over and over in her mind, and thinking about the future would undoubtedly keep her up, at least for a little while. “If I can let myself relax.”

Laurence tucked the bedclothes around them. “Try. I’ll do my best to keep all your worries at bay, at least until I hand you off to your family.”

Tears welled in her eyes, but she laid her head on his chest so he couldn’t see. “That assumes they’ll take me back. If they don’t, you and I are both in a heap of trouble.”

What would happen then, if she lost both the family and the man?

“That is not for us to ponder right now, though. We’ll trod that path when we meet it.” Then he wrapped an arm around her waist and held her.

It was enough for the moment, and certainly more than she’d had a week ago.

Chapter Nine



December 20, 1817

Once more on the road

Laurence remained gobsmacked for much of the morning as he and Ellie shared the coach for day three of their journey north.

They'd unexpectedly coupled last night, and he still wasn't quite sure how such a thing had come about, with them only knowing each other a handful of days. Dear God, but it had been a singularly defining moment in his life. It didn't matter he wasn't a stranger to such an act, but sharing that intimacy with Ellie had been so different—sacred almost—that he wasn't certain how he was supposed to move forward.

From her own admission, she wasn't an innocent, and also from her history, she certainly hadn't been ruined by what they'd done, so where did that leave him? He'd promised to protect her for the length of the trip, but he'd had no idea that she needed such protection from *him*.

So he hadn't said anything, couldn't until he could wrap his head around the whole scope of what such a tryst might mean. To her credit, Ellie remained quiet during the first few hours of the trip today, electing to read a book she'd taken from her reticule. Was she angry, disappointed, pleased? It was too difficult to know. With the overcast skies outside and the relative gloom filling the coach's interior, combined with the lethargy that accompanied a midnight coupling, Laurence was hard pressed to keep his eyes open.

Eventually, he couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Ellie?" He cleared his throat when his voice had sounded like

a rusty gate... or a green boy just out of university who'd had his first taste of physical intimacy. "Uh, Ellie, we should, ah, probably talk about what happened last night."

"To my way of thinking, there isn't anything to say." Carefully, she set aside her book and laid it on the bench beside her next to the bouquet of flowers still wrapped in their pretty pink tissue paper. When she met his gaze, the emotions in her blue eyes were difficult to read in the grayness. "You and I came together intimately last night. That is all."

Except, her tone held slight annoyance and her words were somewhat clipped. He frowned. "Do you regret that it happened?" Above all, he didn't want to think she'd only done such a thing merely out of gratitude for the flowers. It seemed wrong, somehow, and would cheapen what they'd shared. "Are you angry with me?"

"No, I don't regret what we shared." She turned her face to the window as if there was something more interesting in the slowly passing dull countryside than there was talking with him. "Despite what I did formerly as a profession, I do still enjoy having a physical relationship with a man." A snort of derision left her. "I suppose I never did learn the lessons life was supposed to teach me."

Well, that wasn't the most flattering speech. "Then why do I have the feeling you aren't best pleased with me this morning?"

An hour or so after he'd tucked them both into bed last night, Laurence had woken by the needs of his body. He'd left the bed long enough to attend to them behind the privacy screen and finally he'd stripped down to his breeches. When he'd joined her in bed once more, she'd turned onto her side with her back to him and didn't respond when he'd put a hand on her shoulder. That left him with no recourse except to settle on his back and stare at the shadows dancing on the ceiling until slumber claimed him once more.

To say nothing of the fact she'd barely said two words to him as they'd readied themselves to depart that morning.

Neither had she broken that silence over quick cups of tea as their only breakfast.

For the space of a few heartbeats, quiet reigned inside the coach. Finally, Ellie sighed and once more looked at him. “Last night was so unexpected, so different than what I’d previously known...” She shook her head. “...I have been at sixes and sevens since then.” When a soft smile curved her kissable lips, Laurence’s world tilted. “I didn’t know coupling could be gentle and tender, almost as if you worshipped my body instead of using it for your own pleasure.” The last sentence was said in a barely audible whisper that he had to lean forward in order to hear it.

“As I said before, a gentleman should treat a woman with respect, and being with you in that way took my breath away. It was almost as if I were with a goddess. That’s how transcendent the experience was.”

She snorted. “Transcendent?”

Heat crept up the back of his neck. “I’m not one for words, but just know it felt different for me as well.” It meant more than a quick joining that wasn’t profound, or he would never remember. With Ellie, what they shared had been... special. “Then why are you keeping me in frosty silence?” So, had it truly come to this? Pleading with a woman to talk with him after they’d trysted?

“I didn’t mean to. I was merely lost to my thoughts.” She sighed and clasped her hands in her lap. “But I *am* slightly annoyed with you.”

“Why?” Surprise went through his chest. “Did I hurt you? Offend you? Should I have done those unspeakable things to you in the bed instead of against the wall?” It never occurred to him that women might have preferences on location.

When she giggled, he relaxed by increments. “No. I rather enjoyed the unorthodox position. It made me think you had wanted me so badly you needed to claim me right there.” Remarkably, a blush stained her cheeks. “I’m annoyed because I was the only one of us naked last night. You had the ability

to explore the whole of my body whereas I had no access to yours.”

“Ah.” So that’s why she was in a snit. He wanted to laugh, but he feared she would think he made jest of her. The reason for her annoyance made her more adorable. “Well, if your fondest wish is to see me *sans* clothes, I can surely indulge you whenever you’d like.” Daring much, he winked. “I wouldn’t mind, either, if you explored my form.”

“Perhaps I will, and soon.” Her grin was quite on the more satisfied side, and that made him feel more out to sea in her presence.

“Good.” Not quite sure how to act in a woman’s presence after they’d shared physical pleasure, he attempted to relax on his bench.

Thoughts swirled through his mind. Was there a future between them? After spending so much time with her, the thought of merely leaving her at her father’s country estate turned his stomach. The woman held secrets in her eyes, and he wanted to know every one of them, wanted to be the man that would put a permanent smile on her face, the man that would be there for her in support or solace. Perhaps more to the point, now that he thought he might enjoy having a wife and family, *was* Ellie the perfect match for that?

It was certainly something to consider.

“I can almost hear you thinking.”

“Oh?” He cocked an eyebrow. “What about?”

“You think you should marry me because of what we did, as if I’m now an obligation.”

He strove to hide his shock. “I was thinking nothing of the kind. What we did was merely give in to mutual attraction and desire. Right?” When he slid his gaze to hers, he was disconcerted to see sadness warring with longing in her eyes and face.

“Of course.” With one of her fingers, she touched the flowers. “Besides, I’m quite certain finding myself married is

not one of the dreams I can have after how I've lived the life that I have."

"You don't know that." His heart tugged for her and the silent struggle she battled with. How could he convince her to see herself as he saw her? "You can't let past experiences cheat you out of a future."

"You are a sweet man, Laurence, and I have no doubts you will make some fortunate woman a wonderful husband." Her voice broke. "Just don't tell her about the time you were escorting a fallen woman to her family estate one Christmastide when you bedded her out of a lapse in judgment." But she tempered the words with a tiny grin.

"Such gammon." Did that mean she wouldn't ever consider a union between them? "It matters not what happened in your past. You deserve every good thing, just as I would hope someone would say to me for the same reasons."

Perhaps they were only two people desperately searching for connection and longing after all, so why couldn't they have that with each other?



"Of course they would." A trace of waspish tones filled her voice. Why must he be so lovely to her? It was beginning to make her skittish. Almost, Ellie would have preferred him to act boorish or slightly abusive. That, she understood, but this? This noble sheepishness? It left her reeling and adrift with confusion. "Any woman with one eye and half a brain could see what a wonderful man you are."

Oh, why had she said that out loud? Now he would be even more insufferable.

A grin curved his lips, and she couldn't stop staring. He was far too charming for her peace of mind, and coupled with his care and protection, she was in danger of losing her

heart. That was a singularly bad idea, for she was absolutely not worthy of someone of his caliber.

“That assumes a one-eyed nearly brainless woman would wish to fall all over me.” Amusement rang in his voice and danced in his eyes. “Thank you.”

She shrugged. “You’re welcome, and they would. You are easily the most compassionate, courtly man I have encountered.”

“Ha.” His short bark of laughter held little mirth. “What do I have to offer any woman, let alone one with one eye and half a brain?” The same amusement lurked in his eyes. “To my way of thinking, a man should be well off before he decides on courting.”

So then what they’d shared last night wasn’t an extension of that. And why should it be? They were only together for one purpose—a lie. The temptation to give into silly tears still lingered, but she tamped it down as best she could. “Security and a future are all well and good—I learned a difficult lesson there—but it is not the most important thing when selecting a man.” Why was it the longer she was in his company, the more emotional she became? Perhaps the long hours on the road and spent in strange posting inns were chipping away at her sanity. “Might I ask you a question?”

“Of course. I’d even encourage it.” Again, that charming grin was in place, and suddenly his presence seemed way too large for the interior of the coach. It was as if she couldn’t avoid him; he was everywhere, consuming her... comforting her.

“Did you, uh, enjoy what happened last night?” Eleanor couldn’t bear to see the pity in his face, so she quickly glanced out the window. “Or were you disappointed due to my, uh, knowledge in said area? That I didn’t use some of the skills I’d learned during those years?” They were highly embarrassing questions, but she couldn’t quiet her mind about it, and if she didn’t have answers, she would always wonder.

“Your past had no bearing once I had you in my arms.” There was such honesty in his tone that she had to once more

peer at him. The concern in his expression almost broke her reserve. “I simply enjoyed you and what you offered me.”

Oh, heavens. A piece of her heart unexpectedly flew into his keeping even though she’d kept a tight guard around it. “What a lovely sentiment.” She glanced at the flowers on the bench next to her. The man was far too good for her. Even if a miracle occurred and they somehow became closer than they already were and they didn’t wish to break their false engagement, she would feel compelled to decline based on that same past he said didn’t matter. Because it *did*. He needed to be proud of the woman he would marry, and how could he knowing her story? How could he introduce her to his family without hinting at what she’d done? No doubt when they heard her name—or her father’s—they would remember the old gossip, the scandal.

Is that my punishment, then, for the choices I made?

“It’s much more than that.” He leaned forward and this time, he caught one of her hands in his, and ninny that she was, Eleanor clung to that lifeline. Though the illumination was anemic inside the coach, his blond hair glimmered like spun gold. “None of that was the reason I coupled with you. I merely wanted *you*, because of everything you have already shared with me, because we were both feeling maudlin, because a personal connection with someone makes us feel not so alone, and you must admit, this trip is somewhat on the dismal side with no guarantees of a welcome at the end.” When she nodded, he gave her fingers a squeeze, and she held her breath. “There is nothing I regret from that, and I hope you don’t either.”

“I don’t.” She blinked away the damning tears in her eyes. “Of course I don’t.”

“Good.” Though he released her hand, he kept his posture, and she appreciated that added closeness. “Stop doubting your worth, Ellie. Any man who refuses to see the real you is a first rate fool or they have bats in their upper stories.”

A laugh escaped her, for he always knew how to pull her out of a maudlin mood with that easy charm. “It is difficult and a work in progress when everything around me screams at properness and decorum. Society doesn’t accept any sort of deviations; women must be perfect.”

He snorted. “Except society’s veneer is much like glass. It can shatter easily and beneath that surface teems all sorts of scandal and sin. Truly, I believe perfection is overrated and you’d be hard-pressed to find it anyway.” When he touched her knee, heated tingles danced up her thigh. “Why would you wish to be that image anyway? It is quite dull.”

Every word that came out of his mouth should have soothed and calmed her inner demons, but she couldn’t let herself give in. Didn’t men lie to get what they wanted? In the end, no one would care about her. “I have never met anyone like you, Laurence. Too much lingering in your company will give me back faith in my fellow man.” At least that was the truth.

“Then I count myself as fortunate, for no one should be without hope.” He leaned back on his bench with a grin flirting about his lips.

“Perhaps, but you should truly turn your attentions to finding a woman to be by your side for the rest of your life. You are too good a man to play the part of chivalrous knight to strangers.” A sigh left her throat, for men like him were difficult to find. “I’ll wager you’d make a lovely father.” The longing deep in her core throbbed once more, for that was something she could never give him even if they were to make a go of their false relationship.

“Ah, an interesting topic indeed.” Surprise flitted over his face. “Does this mean you will reveal another secret about yourself to me?”

Well, drat. But he was owed the truth. “Perhaps.”

With a nod, he settled more comfortably into his bench. “Honestly, I never thought of myself as a man who would enjoy domestication. I rather liked having my freedom too much, but that life grows stale, and dodging creditors

should only be done by bachelors instead of putting a family at risk.” There was more than a little honesty in his voice as he rested his dark gaze on her. “It wasn’t until recently, after a candid talk with my valet, that I began to change my mind.”

“Oh?” Those renegade flutters danced through her belly again. “Why?”

“Why not?” He shrugged. “I’m lonely and I’m growing older. It’s time to try my hand at being a proper fellow, for I’m confident my investments and business ventures and my talents *will* come out right soon.”

“I so admire that conviction.” She only had a few more days with him, and then he would leave her life to find his happy ending. A tiny stab of jealousy worked its way through her chest.

Why can it not be with me?

“It’s so important, and my valet also thinks fate will play a hand in finding the woman I do eventually take to wife.” A dreamy expression went over his face. “Imagine, me a husband and father.” Laurence shook his head. “I’m looking forward to a new challenge, though, even if it means succumbing to the very thing my parents want for me.”

In the end, didn’t everyone want to belong and to find happiness? Acceptance? Eleanor forced a swallow into her suddenly tight throat. “I wish I could share that enthusiasm.”

Immediately, he sobered. “That *can* be your life too, Ellie, except you are the one keeping yourself from it.”

“Perhaps on the marriage aspect of it if I receive several miracles, but I will never know what it feels like to be a mother.” When his forehead crinkled with concern and confusion, she sighed. “I told you about my babe that perished.”

“Yes.”

“Directly following the birth of my child, there were complications. Things didn’t go according to how they should. I lost copious amounts of blood. In order for the midwife and the other attendants to encourage that to stop, they were forced

to perform an operation...” Emotion choked her, climbed her throat to the point where tears flooded her eyes, and she could no longer see him across the aisle. “Because of that, the midwife told me I would never be able to bear children again.” A sob left her throat. He was the first person she’d told the terrible tale to, the first time she’d largely given the matter any serious thought, and the implications gutted her. “If I could ever find myself increasing, the sad fact is, the pregnancy would kill me.”

“Oh, Ellie. I’m so sorry.” Then he was across the aisle and settled onto the bench beside her. “That is a horrible diagnosis, and one you should never have had to go through alone.”

“Yet I did, and still am.”

“Hardly.” He slipped an arm about her waist and encouraged her head onto his shoulder. At the same time, he pressed his handkerchief into her hand.

“For the space of a few days, perhaps. Then you will leave, and I’ll be right back where I started while you chase a life you’ve always wanted.” Another sob escaped, and she mopped the moisture from her face with the handkerchief.

“We shall see.” The low rumble of his voice in her ear was comforting. “You could adopt a child if being a mother is one of your absolute dreams.”

A sound that was a snort and a cry escaped her. “I’d have to marry first, and I’m just a throwaway rubbish sort of woman no respectable man would wish to align himself with.” There. She’d said it out loud. It was up to him what he chose to make of that.

“Would that you saw yourself as I see you, as your friends see you,” he said softly and held her a tad bit tighter. “This is why I despise society and all its arbitrary rules, because it makes perfectly lovely people feel less than, and then they are lost before they can realize how special they truly are.”

She didn't answer—couldn't. This was why she should never indulge in physical pleasures. It always messed with her head and made her want things she had no right to want. Instead, she rested in his hold and softly cried out her grief, for she hadn't had an opportunity to do that since her babe had died. Perhaps everything would be better once she was back with her family, and they forgave her. Then she could properly heal in spirit before needing to take on the world once more.

When she was strong enough to come to terms with letting Laurence go.

Chapter Ten



Third posting inn on the journey north

That night, they'd chosen to have dinner in their room, for there were no private dining rooms available. It was a more intimate way to eat, and oddly enough, Laurence looked forward to doing exactly that. After spending the day inside the coach and with her admission looming between them, the protective instincts he had for her since the day they'd met had only grown.

"Let us hope the offering is better than tough roast beef," Ellie said in a quiet voice as she came into the room. They'd been put in on the third floor, in a room at the end of a corridor. When she went to the window and opened the drapes, she sighed. "There is a wooded area back there. It's so eerie and beckoning in the moonlight. Makes me want to disappear into the trees and never come back. Perhaps start my life over as someone else."

Well, that was odd, even after her tearful admission in the coach. After maneuvering around their trunks, he stood at her shoulder. "What would you gain if you ran away? You'd have even less to your name than you do now, and it would be more difficult for you to find a living."

"True, but no one would know who I was or what I had done in the past." She shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms as she continued to peer out the window. The sun was beginning to set, and all too soon the world would be engulfed in darkness. "I wouldn't constantly be facing the future while dragging the past with me. I would be... free." Her voice broke on the word.

The lower Ellie's confidence dropped in herself, the more heartbreaking it was. She'd been handed a few setbacks in life, this was true, but her fight and determination to survive and to do it well spoke volumes to her spirit, to the woman she was.

"I could argue that you have a fair amount of freedom right now," he said softly as he rested a hand on her shoulder. "Don't discount who you are, Eleanor. You have fought for the life you lead now where other women in your position would have given up, plunged into the Thames, or let disease and other horrors take control."

The sad fact was he couldn't imagine what she'd struggled with. He might be a disappointment and a man who was months behind on his debts, but he still lived in a luxury set in London, had food for every meal, employed a valet and a housekeeper, and he didn't need to depend on getting a living.

It was damned unfair what society did to women.

Slowly, she turned to face him. Tears streaked her face. Moisture pooled in her eyes made them luminous and so blue he wanted to dive into those pools. "Is that only who I am, then? Some high-class woman down on her luck who is too intelligent and spirited to die?"

Oh, she had a way with words. Not knowing how to comfort her or even how to understand how she felt, he framed her face with his hands. "That might be who you are in the eyes of society, in the eyes of your family."

"But?" That tiny sliver of hope at the backs of her eyes nearly had him on his knees before her, willing to pledge everything if only she would smile at him.

"But to *me*, you are brave with dreams of your own. You made no mistake of what you enjoy and find pleasure in despite what anyone thinks. When you allow someone past that wall you've built around yourself, your true spirit shines, and it makes you radiantly beautiful." Daring much, he brushed his lips over hers even though it was madness. They didn't need more of a connection, for it would mean far too

much pain when they parted, yet he couldn't help sipping from her lips. "Never change that." Perhaps showing her who she was, who she had always been, was the reason fate had brought them together.

She needs me as much as I need her.

Her lips formed a perfect "o" of shock, but before she could utter a word, a distinct knocking at the door interrupted the spell that had been woven around them.

"It would seem our dinner has arrived." With reluctance he released her, moved across the room, and then opened the door. "Thank you," he murmured as the footman brought in a large tray filled with plates, glasses, and all the cutlery they needed. Once everything was placed on the small table in the room, Laurence nodded and slipped the man a few coins and sent him on his way. "I appreciate it." He gestured to the food, that filled the air with a handful of savory scents. "We'd best eat, and I want you to give it some stick since you haven't eaten well since we've been on the road."

"I *have* been out of sorts, I suppose." Ellie came toward the table. When she sat at the only chair, she sighed and pulled her shawl more tightly about her. "It's difficult being on the road. Nothing is the same."

"Agreed, but there is a bit of excitement in the offing as well." He snagged his own plate and then perched on the edge of the bed near her location. "Looks like roasted chicken, creamed potatoes, boiled peas, and what dinner wouldn't be complete without a piece of day-old bread?"

An anemic smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Hush, you. This is lovely. We should be grateful. It is merely days to Christmas, after all."

"Oh, I'm thankful for the ability to have this. Make no mistake." As he tucked into his meal with gusto, he sent up a silent prayer that she ate a few forkfuls of food with more decorum.

The smile was a good sign, but he wanted to do something nice for her, in addition to what he'd already done.

Her flower bouquet now rested in a glass of water, looking a little worse for wear after being in a coach all day, but the slight wilt only made them more dear. Life was a fragile thing, and everyone made mistakes, but should they eternally be held accountable for them?

Absolutely, they shouldn't. He believed wholeheartedly in that, especially since he'd made mistakes that he didn't want following him about. Now how to convince her of that truth? She'd been entirely too lost to moping on this trip, and though he could hazard a few guesses as to why, the biggest concern was no doubt her family's reception.

Conversation was desultory while they ate, but that was just as well. He didn't wish to distract her from the task. She needed the nourishment to keep up her strength, for if her family *did* forgive her, he didn't want to incur their wrath that she was wasting away under his protection.

Slight panic filled his chest. They were two days from their destination and possibly needing to separate, which meant having to concoct a story that would break their false engagement. Since meeting her, he'd been steadily intrigued by her. How could he leave her to fate now?

Damn. Now it was him in danger of sinking into maudlin thoughts.

Once he'd finished and pushed his plate away, he took his wineglass in hand and watched her. The breeding and manners she possessed were obvious in the way she ate, in how she moved or pronounced words, the little gestures and mannerisms she possessed. No matter what she may think, Ellie *was* a daughter of the *beau monde* and always would be, and that perhaps superseded the scandals of her past.

"Have you danced since being thrown from society?"

That brought her head up. Surprise reflected in her eyes. "No. I'm not respectable any longer; my name is tainted. No hostess in her right mind would invite me to her event." With dainty movements, she dabbed the corners of her mouth. "Quite frankly, no man ever thinks that his mistress might like dancing."

“Oh, I don’t know. There have been a handful of men who have brought their mistresses out into society in flagrant disregard of the rules.”

“That’s because men are judged differently—if at all—than women.” She sopped up the last of the juice from her chicken with the last bit of her bread then popped it into her mouth and chewed.

God, how much did he adore her sharp tongue and intelligence? “Did you enjoy the exercise?”

“Of course.” She washed the bite down with a swallow of wine. “It was quite entertaining, and it was a lovely way to get close to interesting men.”

An unexpected stab of jealousy went through his chest at the thought of her with other men. Perhaps he was losing his grip on sanity, but after what they’d shared last night, he wasn’t of a mind to relinquish his protection. “Come.” Quickly, he stood and then held out a hand.

“What?” She frowned at him. “Where?”

“Indulge me in a waltz.”

“Here?” Her eyes rounded as if he’d grown two heads.

“Yes, why not?”

“There is no music for one.” Yet she glanced from his hand to his face with a trace of longing on her face.

“Do we truly need it?” Laurence wriggled his fingers. Why did he care so much to see her happy? Though he didn’t want to admit it to himself, he had a glimmering, an inkling of the answer, and it rather confused him, for he’d never had his feet knocked out from beneath him by a woman before. “Besides, it will be fun, and it might make you smile.”

“Why are you so hellbent on seeing me in a better mood?”

“Because that’s what a fiancé does, even if he’s a pretend one.”

“Fine.” A blush stained her cheeks, and she gave in, slipping her hand into his. When he gently tugged her into a standing position, a slight gasp escaped her, and she glanced away as if she were suddenly shy.

It was highly intoxicating. If he wasn’t careful, he could become all too addicted to her. “Thank you for indulging me. I find waltzing with beautiful women to be a splendid way of passing the time.” Laurence took her into his arms, encouraged her into the correct position for a waltz. “And what else should we do with Christmastide so near? If all goes well with your family, you might be glad you brushed up on those skills.” When she tried to pull away with a protest, he tsked his tongue, held her gaze with his, and something in the depths pulled him in. If she was lost, he wanted to be the one to lead her into the light... even if he’d spent the last several years being lost himself. “Be warned, though. I haven’t waltzed for a few months, and this will need to be abbreviated, for there is not enough floor space for the elaborate steps or swirls.”

“Then I feel doubly honored.” She stood looking up at him, for he hadn’t set them into motion yet.

“Oh? What is the other reason you are honored?” Without waiting for her response, Laurence led her into the first steps. Since the space of the room was so compact, their circles weren’t large.

“You chose me as a partner.” They were simple words, but powerful, and they robbed him of breath. Then she smiled, and he nearly expired on the spot. “You have managed to surprise me every day that has gone by on this trip. Not many people are able to do that.”

His chest warmed. “At least you don’t consider me dull.”

Around and around, he whisked them over the floor. The flames in the two candle holders flickered and bounced from the air they disturbed. Ellie easily matched his steps, followed wherever he led. The raw feel of her hand in his kept him anchored in the moment while the steady press of her

other hand on his shoulder made him wish for impossible things. The swish of her skirts over the wood and about their ankles lent a dreamlike quality to their impromptu dance. Without society's watchful eyes, he slipped a hand to the small of her back. A tiny shiver shook her frame. From the room's chill or his proximity? Every glide of their feet over the scarred and scuffed floor brought her closer and closer to his body until her thighs, her torso, her chest brushed his with a delicious, heated friction that had nothing to do with the dance.

Laurence was thoroughly lost. While her gaze never left his, and the longer he stared, the deeper he tumbled into those lake blue pools. "For whatever it's worth, you make a lovely dance partner. I wish we had more time to indulge in such exercise."

Her hand crept from his shoulder to his nape. "Perhaps we could fit in a dance the next two nights we have together." Another blush spread over her cheeks. "Somehow, while we're dancing, I don't feel like such a failure." Her smile, so intimate and exclusive, had his insides knotting and his shaft tightening with need.

"You are not, but I understand what you mean." Slowly, the circles they covered over the floor became smaller and smaller. He held her closer, bringing the hand that he held to his chest then he leaned his forehead against hers. "While two people are dancing, nothing else matters except only them. It allows the couple to fly, to exist in a private bubble of sorts where they can commune without words if they so desire."

"That is exactly why waltzing is so attractive to participants and so horrifying for society matrons. Scandal and sin are often begun in a ballroom." The warmth of her breath skated along his chin. "I adore how I feel just before I leave the floor with my hand on a man's arm."

"I used to adore securing a woman's promise to meet me somewhere more private while I escorted her back to the sidelines." It had been an age since he'd done that, but now? The only woman he ever wished to dance with was Ellie.

Hell. What is happening to me? Surely a man couldn't change his mind so drastically over the course of a week.

Eventually, Laurence brought them to a halt where they'd started. "If you continue to look at me like that, we'll both be in trouble." Not that he minded wrapping himself around her in bed, but he didn't want to take advantage of their forced proximity.

A bit of throaty laughter issued from her. "How am I looking at you?" Her fingers tightened slightly at his nape, bringing him closer still.

"As if you wish to do unspeakable things to me." Heightened awareness of her shivered through him, and his member strained against the front of his breeches.

"Ah, but then you'd be wrong, for I want to do unspeakable things *with* you." Tilting up her chin, she cupped his cheek. "However, I don't wish to be that woman, the one who falls into bed with any man who offers her a kindness or buys her dinner. For once in my life, I would like there to be more between me and a man than desire." Longing and honesty mingled in her eyes.

"I know the feeling." He slipped a hand into her hair and steadily plucked the pins from the tresses until the locks tumbled about her shoulders and back. "If you want to know the truth? There *is* something between us beyond that."

"I know. It both frightens me and gives me hope." Her lips slightly parted as she stared at him. Was she waiting for a kiss?

"Good." For that's what he battled as well, but he wanted to be very, very certain of his reception and his plans for the future before he did anything else. They stood together, every portion of their bodies touching, his hand still holding hers, with her fingers hot at his nape. With each breath, they shared inhalation and exhalations until he couldn't stand it any longer. Slowly, he lowered his head, and when he finally claimed her lips, they both sighed.

Then his hands were in her hair, his fingers tangled in the thick tresses as he framed her skull and held her steady so he could move over her mouth with more authority. How was it possible that two pieces of warm flesh could cradle his lips as perfectly as they did now? The tart taste of the wine they had at dinner came away on his palate as he nipped and nibbled, drew the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips.

Almost immediately she opened for him. Her fingers at his nape furrowed through the hair there while she slipped her other hand up his chest to his shoulder. As she layered herself to him, he slid one hand down her body to pause at her hip, holding her steady, bringing her flush to him to relieve some of the ache in his groin.

Over and over, Laurence fenced with her. There were times when she attempted to take command of the embrace, but he put down her rebellion, for he suspected he'd be powerless to resist such an onslaught. Above all, he refused to disrespect her by taking her to bed without having something substantial to offer her.

After more than a few minutes, he pulled away and set her at arm's length. His breathing was as labored as hers. "We should, ah, put some space between us before we find ourselves in a situation where bigger decisions will need to be made."

"Agreed." She rested the fingers of one hand over her lips briefly before going to the window and shoving it open a bit. "Perhaps after we retire for sleep, I could read to you from one of the books I've brought."

It was one of the first overtures toward domestic companionship she'd made, and he silently thrilled at the prospect. "I cannot think of anything I would enjoy more." Then, because he once more suffered a cockstand in her presence, he quickly moved behind a rather worn and battered privacy screen in one corner of the room. "Let us hope the weather holds. Otherwise, we'll be stranded." Except that would give him more time with her.

Did he wish to offer for her? At the moment, he couldn't watch her walk out of his life merely to be back under the thumb of her family, who might crush her spirit, yet was he completely ready for a wife and everything that would entail?

I need to ponder further.

But he couldn't shake the sensation of falling. Wherever he landed, he hoped a certain blue-eyed woman would be at the bottom waiting for him, but she wanted forgiveness from her family first and foremost. He wouldn't get in the way of that.

Chapter Eleven



December 21, 1817

Fourth posting inn on the journey north

Eleanor yawned. They were nearly to the fourth posting inn, and if nothing else, travelling had allowed her the time to rest and to sleep. Lord only knew such a thing was precious, and with working in the modiste's shop, there was precious little of that allowed during the mad rush to complete all the gowns before the Christmastide season.

The skies were once more gray and overcast, but it lent a coziness to the atmosphere, and she enjoyed his company perhaps more than she should. "Where are we?" she asked as she came fully awake from her doze and sat up straighter on her bench. If she'd been traveling via the post coach, she certainly wouldn't have had this luxury.

"Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty," Laurence quipped with that dratted charming grin that did delicious things to her insides. The fact he was acquainted with fairy stories made her heart squeeze, for they were some of her favorite things to read. "As for where we are? Well, we are less than an hour from our destination. I'm not sure of the name of the nearest town or village. Geography never was my strong suit." He flashed another grin. "I don't know about you, but I desperately need to stretch my legs."

"Where?" She glanced once more out the window. There was nothing but wooded areas on either side of the road.

"Look around you. There is nothing but space to roam." The amusement in his voice was infectious.

“Very well. Do what you must.” She leaned back against the squabs, fully prepared to tumble again into slumber.

“You are coming with me, Miss Comerford.” He rapped on the ceiling. “Pull to the side of the road, if you please. I’d like to stretch my legs.”

A few minutes later, the coach rocked to a halt at the roadside. When one of the drivers opened the door and put the steps down, Laurence was out of the vehicle before she could even stand. Then he turned and offered her a hand in assistance.

She thanked him with a smile, and the moment her gloved fingers went into his, warmth tingled up her arm to her elbow. It was pure insanity, of course, this pretending to be engaged to him and him acting so lovely toward her, yet she couldn’t help but enjoy it. Never had she been treated like a queen nor pampered as much as she was in his company.

Was it an act merely for the journey, or did he truly feel that way about her?

Laurence glanced at the driver. “We will only be a few minutes.”

“Take all the time you need, sir. We are nearly at our destination for the night.”

“Thank you.” He took her arm and then went off the road to walk into the woods.

The trees swallowed them up, and all around was the scent of pine, of the earth, of the dampness of the rain, of decaying leaves that had fallen from the trees in preparation for winter. She held the folds of her cloak more closely about her, for there was a decided chill in the air.

“Perhaps it will snow soon,” she said as she clung to his arm, for his stride was quite determined.

“While I hope for the same for nostalgia’s sake, I’d like for it to hold off until we’ve reached your father’s estate. Snow will cock up the journey and cause delays.”

Eleanor frowned at the note of concern lingering in his voice. “You don’t wish to be in my company any longer than you need to be, correct?” An ache set up around her heart.

“Oh, that’s not it at all.” He glanced at her while pulling her deeper into the woods. “Delays mean more nights at inns, and that requires more coin, of which I am rapidly running out of.” His wry grin and sheepish shrug were akin to embarrassment. Where she had forgotten that every step, every perceived luxury they’d enjoyed on their journey had cost money, he obviously had not. “I’d rather arrive at your father’s estate knowing I’ve done my best to take care of you instead of looking like a beggar on his doorstep.”

Another tiny piece of her heart flew unexpectedly into his keeping. “I think you’re doing a marvelous job of it.” It was the truth and he needed to hear it. She squeezed her fingers on his arm for reassurance. “Most men would never have done what you have this week.”

He grunted. “Most men are fools,” he muttered beneath his breath, but he didn’t break stride and neither did he slow on his intent to move through the woods. “Ah. There is what I seek.” Then he pointed upward into one of the trees. “Do you see that?”

“Not really.” Try as she might, Eleanor stared into the tree’s branches but had no inkling of what he meant for her to look at. “What is it?”

“Mistletoe.” As he waggled his eyebrows in a comical way, he approached the oak tree. “Shouldn’t be too difficult to climb up there.”

“You truly mean to retrieve it?” Knots of worry pulled in her belly, for it was at least twenty feet off the ground.

“Of course. The closer we draw to Christmas the more we shall be in need of a few decorations for our rooms.” When he glanced at her from over his shoulder, wicked intent danced in his hazel eyes, but she couldn’t fathom what his plans were beyond what he’d said. “And look over there.” He pointed to a grouping of shrubbery near what used to be a hedgerow of

some sort. “I think I spy red holly berries. Go over and see if you can’t snap off a small branch of the stuff while I do this.”

“And leave you? What if you fall?”

He snorted. “I won’t. As a youth I climbed many a tree.”

“You haven’t been a youth for a long while.” She crossed her arms at her chest.

“Here I am trying to impress you, and you give me nothing but doubt.” As he edged closer to the tree, he shot her a mock frown. “I’m wounded, Lady Eleanor.”

It was the first time he’d referred to her societal status, and it took her by surprise. “I think I’d rather that you call me Ellie. I haven’t been a lady in far too long.”

“Exasperating girl.” Laurence shook his head. “The sooner you fetch the holly and I bring down the mistletoe, the sooner we can return to the coach.” So saying, he took a running start at the tree and then made quick work shimmying up its wide trunk until he gained access to the nearest branch. The sole of a boot only slipped once.

Oh, dear. The man was insane. He had to be. They truly didn’t need decorations for their rooms. Why was he doing this? With worry playing up her spine, Eleanor hastened over to the hedgerow. Indeed, there were holly bushes growing between the brambles, and with half her attention on him as he climbed the tree, she selected a branch that featured shiny dark leaves with plump red berries. It was easy enough to snap it off, and once she had a few of them in hand, she returned to the tree where Laurence sat jauntily on a sturdy branch, pocketknife in hand. He cut through the mistletoe. Two sprigs of it fell to the ground, and Eleanor quickly scooped them up to add to the plants she’d already accumulated.

“That’s enough. Stop playing the hero and come down from there,” she called up to him.

“Ah, Ellie, you flatter me with your persistence that I’m a hero.” He returned his knife to a pocket of his greatcoat.

When he gave her a grin, flutters went through her belly. “But for your delicate sensibilities, I’ll come down.”

“That’s the most logical thing you’ve said since we met.” She crept closer to the tree as he removed himself from the branch.

“Can I help it if I have dreams and visions for the future that transcend the ordinary?” As he slowly made his way down, the unmistakable snap of a large branch rent the air. “Ack!” Though he scrabbled for purchase with both hands and feet, he tumbled from the tree.

“Laurence!” Eleanor rushed over to the place on the ground where he fell hard on his back. She threw herself to her knees at his side, and the plant life scattered over his chest. “Are you hurt?” With her fingers, she explored his head and neck. “Can you speak? Draw breath?” Her heart beat so quickly she feared that organ would burst from her body.

“Leave off, woman.” There was a definite wheeze in his voice, but he brushed her hands away. “I believe I’m well enough.” He gasped. “Just had the wind knocked out of me.”

“Don’t do that to me again.” Eleanor peered down at him with a ball of emotion firmly lodged in her throat. “You gave me quite the fright.”

“Well, at least I know you care.” The cheeky man lifted a gloved hand and cupped her cheek. “Guess I’ve put on a few more pounds than I thought, but I think I’ll rest here for a few minutes.”

“Your back will pain you for a few days, no doubt.” She hadn’t realized until this moment just how much she’d come to rely on him. Even if he wasn’t a rich or titled man, he didn’t deserve someone like her in his life, yet that didn’t stop the odd connection that had sprung between them.

“Perhaps it will, but I know one thing that will help, and we *do* have mistletoe... somewhere.” Slowly, he brought his hand to her nape and then dragged her down until he could claim her lips. The kiss was clearly designed to tease, for he moved over her mouth as if he had all the leisure time in the

world and they weren't almost indecently sprawled on the forest floor with two drivers waiting for them not far away.

In this moment, Eleanor didn't care, for he truly thought he'd injured himself, and never had she cared about any of the men in her life as she was coming to with Laurence. Not even the father of her dead babe had managed to breach the walls she'd erected around her heart. So she kissed him back with abandon, and all too soon, passion entered the embrace. She wanted him more than she perhaps should, but this wasn't the correct venue, and the ground of far too soft from recent rains.

With a sound of regret, she pulled away and broke the kiss. "We should head back to the coach before your drivers come searching for us." Desire made her voice into a sultry, smoky sound, but that same emotion was reflected in his eyes that were now more green than brown. "I'd rather not cause a scandal here."

"Ah, then that assumes you wouldn't mind doing so elsewhere?" One of his golden eyebrows rose in challenge, but he gave her that same cocky, charming grin he always did. Casting about on his chest, he grabbed a sprig of holly. "You are the best of companions, Ellie, and some days I can't believe fate tasked me with escorting you." Then he tucked the plant matter behind her ear. "The berries compliment your complexion."

It was a sweet gesture, and her heart squeezed. "Why must you be so agreeable?" She gathered the scattered mistletoe and other holly sprigs and then scrambled to her feet. "It would be so much easier if you were grumpy."

"How so?" When he gained his feet, a groan issued from him, and he put a hand to the small of his back. "That is going to bruise tomorrow."

"In two days, I will hopefully be taken back into the fold of my family and will then be forced to part with you. If you were a growly sort, it would be much easier to send you on your way." The thought of the looming separation brought a rush of unshed tears to her throat, and she quickly turned so

he wouldn't see them. The truth of the matter was that she couldn't keep him after the journey was over, for he wasn't a puppy. If her family refused to take her in, then she'd really be in a pickle, and she supposed if he would still have her as a traveling companion, they could make alternative plans at that time.

He sobered quickly enough. "Let us not think of that at the moment." After a bit of a stretch, Laurence held out a hand, and when she slipped her hand into his, he threaded their gloved fingers together. "We have two days yet. To my way of thinking, there is plenty of adventure left to be had."

Is that what he considered this trip? An adventure? And once he'd done his duty toward her, he would gallivant off to the next one? She tamped down on the urge to cry, for she rather liked having him around. He was an interesting sort. Charming and intelligent. Had plans which weren't merely lip service. Why shouldn't she have the chance to see how his story would end?

But one question persisted to pace through her mind. "If my parents should refuse to forgive me or take me back..."

"I will escort you to London... or we'll continue on to the Lake District where we'll live in anonymity, take assumed names, and start our lives over. Hopefully with no mistakes in them," he said with a wink.

That cheered her by increments, but at least she wouldn't be bereft of his presence so soon.

In silence, they made their way back to the coach. If the drivers noticed the spots of dirt on his greatcoat or the fact he winced when climbing into the vehicle or her disheveled hair or the holly behind her ear, they said nothing about it.

Eleanor laid the Christmas greenery on the bench beside her. When they'd set out this morning, she'd been forced to toss her rapidly wilting flower bouquet, but she'd managed to press two of her favorites into the books she'd brought with her. A glance across the aisle had her gaze crashing into his. "Promise me you won't take it into your

head to climb a tree again. That was sheer madness to take such a risk.”

“I promise, for I’m not as young as I used to be.” He frowned as the coach lurched forward to resume the journey. “Also, I have a feeling deeds of daring don’t impress you as much as little gestures, such as the flowers or the bath from the first night.”

Heat filled her cheeks. “Many men can perform lavish actions, but not many pay attention to the small details of life, to the little things that make a lady’s heart beat faster.” Did that mean he was deliberately trying to court her without announcing the fact he was paying his addresses? It was too difficult to tell.

“How many times must I remind you I’m not most men?” he asked in a soft voice. There was an odd intensity in his eyes that she refused to put stock in lest it merely be her own fanciful imagination. “I may not have anything to recommend me, but that doesn’t mean I’m without value.”

“More than anyone else you could meet, I understand that statement completely. And for what it’s worth, never once have I thought that about you, Laurence.” In fact, one of the things she’d adored most about him was the fact he couldn’t rely on a position, title, or coin to go through life. He relied on his intelligence and talents, and she appreciated that more than anything else. Yet she didn’t dare let the conversation continue, for fear she would have answers to her questions, or she wouldn’t. Instead, Eleanor peered out the window for long moments as she carefully thought of nothing in particular.

“Thank you. Sometimes, a fellow needs to be reminded.” He didn’t try to talk of nonsensical things, so they settled into companionable silence, as if they’d been around each other for years instead of just a handful of days. When he maneuvered himself into a prone position on his bench with another wince, her heart went out to him.

“Here.” She picked up her reticule from the floor and handed it to him. “Use this as a pillow of sorts. It might make you more comfortable.”

He nodded his thanks and arranged the accessory beneath his head. “Let us hope the mattress tonight is comfortable. I fear my back will need that.”

Poor thing. “Perhaps one of the servants will give us a salve I can rub on your back to soothe the muscles. At least then you can sleep.” It was the least she could do for him since he’d already done so much for her. With a sigh, she contemplated the window once more. Wasn’t that how a relationship should work? A simple give and take?

Well, bother. If I don’t mind myself better, I am going to tumble tip over tail for him.

But she would ponder that problem later.

Chapter Twelve



Laurence sat with Ellie at a table in the common room. There wasn't a private dining room available tonight, and since neither of them wished to retire upstairs so early, they'd opted to eat dinner in the common room with many of their fellow travelers.

The beef roast hadn't been the worst he'd ever eaten but it wasn't the best. However, it had a good flavor, and there was enough gravy provided to help the dry meat along. The boiled root vegetables added visual interest to an otherwise bland dish, but it wasn't something he would remember months from now.

Overall, it didn't matter, for as he sat sipping a mug of warmed and spiced red wine, he was overly aware of Ellie by his side. Over the course of their time together, they'd managed to converse on a variety of topics, whether they knew much about them or not. The fact she liked to read made him glad, and one of the books she'd brought with her was a collection of fairy stories from around the world. He'd read to her from that volume last night, and she had promised to do the same for him tonight.

It was alarming how quickly he'd become accustomed to this modified domesticity, how much he'd come to depend on her to help him out of periods of doubt and depression. When she was all-too concerned for him after he'd taken the spill out of the tree, he'd lost a piece of his heart to her. The women who had come in and out of his past would never have shown that much compassion for him. Hell, they'd only liked him well enough while twisted in the sheets, but once they found out his pockets were nearly to let, they put space between them as if he'd contracted the plague.

The low buzz of conversation that filled the air gave a certain coziness to the room. On one side of the open space, a cheerful fire burned in a large stone hearth. Beams ran across the ceiling, made dark from centuries of smoke and age. Scents of fire, ale, candlewax, leather, bodies, and the lingering savory aromas from dinner wafted through the air.

“Once, when I was a young man, I took a trip with a few of my friends, bound for a house party in Scotland,” he said in a whisper meant strictly for her ears. “We stayed at inns much like this, but once we arrived in the Highlands, we were in a castle. This inn was built in that same style, and being here today, smelling the smells, listening to the people, makes me remember that trip.”

“That sounds like a lovely time.” Her lips curved into a faint smile as a dreamy expression lined her face. She stared at a man making his way through the crowds with a fiddle in his hand. “I have never been anywhere except my father’s country estate.” A sigh escaped her. “I always thought when I married, my husband would take me abroad or perhaps escort me to America for a wedding trip, but...”

“...fate took your life in other directions.”

“Yes.” She nodded and then focused her gaze on him. Once more there was longing in the blue depths of her eyes, and he suddenly wished he were rich so he could take her away from all of this, show her his favorite places in the world, or merely England. “It is still a dream, but a far one now. I am no one except a seamstress who earns barely enough to survive on. Where would I go, hmm? I shall have to content myself to traveling through the pages of a book.”

“That is nothing to sneeze at. Many people in England are illiterate.” Wanting to see her smile again, he grinned. “Don’t give up on that dream. I have a feeling your story hasn’t ended.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Because a woman as interesting as you still has a tale to tell.” Then his attention was taken up by the man with the fiddle, who went to stand in front of the hearth. With a look

about the room, he began to play a lively country reel. Seconds later, a handful of couples came away from their tables and came together to perform the dance.

“Oh! How lovely! He truly has a gift.” As she watched, Ellie clapped her hands in time to the music. A laugh left her throat, and Laurence stared, for she had laughed hardly at all during their time together. “Music is a wonderful way to forget your troubles, don’t you think?”

“I absolutely do.” Giving into the emotion of the moment, Laurence pushed to his feet. With a wink at her, he joined the set that had formed, and seconds later, he partnered a few of the women from the common room, changing often as the steps of the dance allowed. When he glanced over at Ellie, she was following him with her gaze.

“Is that your woman?” one of the men moving around behind him asked.

He considered those words. They didn’t know anyone here, so it didn’t matter what he said. “She is. My fiancée, actually.” Pride welled in his chest as he uttered the words, but his spirits plummeted because it wasn’t real. It was naught but pretend for one specific purpose.

“Well, she’s a real looker.”

“That she is.” Again, he glanced in her direction. She’d stood, the better to see him, no doubt, and the folds of her navy dress fell in elegant lines around her form. In the back of his mind, he couldn’t help but wonder what she would look like bedecked in the trappings of a woman from her station. Perhaps with jewels around her neck, and suddenly he wanted to be the man to give her such.

All too soon, the dance ended and everyone in the common room clapped with enthusiasm. It was a wildly different scene from the cool politeness of a *ton* function. Someone called for another song, and the fiddler obliged. The notes of his song tripped jauntily through the air and even more onlookers got to their feet to join in the dance.

Laurence swiftly crossed the room to Ellie's location. He held out his hand. "Come dance with me."

"Oh, I couldn't. I haven't danced in front of people for far too many years."

"Nonsense. It's much like dancing with me in the privacy of our rooms, only with music." The second she put her hand in his, he tugged her into a standing position. "The only time I'll leave your side is when the steps of the dance call for it."

"But..."

Then it was too late for her to protest, for they'd joined the set. The more lively the fiddler played, the faster the reel went. Steps became a blur. Skirting flared. Laughter echoed in the room. Each time the steps took him back to Ellie, their hands clasped a bit tighter, their gazes lingered a little longer on each other, her lips parted in an unconscious mimic of what she wanted most. His pulse pounded in time to his quick breathing, and there was nothing more that he wished to do than tug her into an empty corridor and kiss her senseless.

Why couldn't he stop thinking about her? His sole purpose was to escort her to her father's estate, perhaps linger awhile to make certain they would take her back, and though he hoped that she could make amends with those people, there was a part of him that assumed they wouldn't, which would leave her alone once more.

For him. For them to take life by the horns and carve a brand-new path. Into what, he didn't quite know yet, but that little glimmer of an idea he'd had the other day was constantly growing and maturing. There was no sense in talking about it unexpectedly, but before any of that could come to the forefront, he needed more coin.

Was this a good enough reason to write to his father, tell him that he would visit the Surrey estate for Old Year festivities, and then perhaps ask to take out a small loan or at least a connection that would allow him to interview for an estate manager?

I'll start that letter tonight.

When the dance came to an end, he plucked Ellie from the circle of admirers she'd gained. "I think it's time we retire for the night. Early morning travel, hmm?"

She nodded. The poor woman looked ready to droop. It was difficult enough being well-rested while traveling. "I *am* a bit fatigued." The look she leveled on him suggested she had other things on her mind than merely resting in that bed.

Dear God, how was he to survive the remainder of the trip without going mad? After forcing a swallow into his dry throat, Laurence nodded. "Let me see you settled, then I'm going to come back down for an hour or so."

"Why?" Eleanor frowned as he guided her toward the wooden staircase at the back of the room. "I had hoped you might wish to settle in with me," she added in a soft voice.

His shaft tightened against the front of his breeches. "Oh, I do, more than anything, but I need to try my hand at one or two of the gaming tables. Our cash reserves are dwindling, and you are still under my protection, remember?"

"You needn't do that. I have the money I saved to pay for the seats on the post coach. And didn't you tell me you were trying to be a reformed man?"

Heat crept up the back of his neck. "I did, but what sort of a gentleman would I be if I took a lady's coin?" Tonight, they were on the second floor in a room at the front of the inn. "Besides, if I win enough, then tomorrow night, I'll secure you a bath again."

Ellie's eyes lit, and he always wanted to keep her as delighted as that. "That would be lovely." At the door to their room, she turned and laid a hand on his chest. "Promise me you'll be careful. It's nearly Christmastide and people are desperate. Trust me."

He nodded. "Don't worry. All will be well." Then he pressed a fleeting kiss to her forehead. "I'll be back before you know it."



Two hours later, he sat morosely at the card table. He'd played three rounds, lost the first two but won the third. Unfortunately, one of the things he'd lost had been the pocket watch his father had given him when he'd graduated from university. The man he'd lost it to was already gone. No doubt he knew what he had in the solid silver piece.

God, I'm such a nodcock.

He shoved a hand through his hair. It had been the only thing of value he'd owned—besides the ring he'd given Ellie—and beyond that, it was the only gift his father had given him that meant anything, and he'd been irresponsible, had gambled it away as if it had meant nothing. Truly this was a horrible night.

One of the men he'd wagered against rose from the table. "I recognize your name, Mr. Bannerman."

"Oh?" Truth be told, Laurence didn't much care. "Odd to come across anyone who knows me this far from London."

The other man—a tall man with dark hair and dark eyes—nodded. "Know your father so it was easy enough to recognize your name." He bounced his gaze between the table and Laurence's face. "Recognized the watch you lost too. Was at the club the night your father procured it for you." The man shook his head, tsked his tongue. "Seems you haven't done much to better yourself, have you?"

Annoyance stabbed through his chest like hot knives. "I have done much to make myself a better man. Just because my father doesn't approve doesn't mean it's not true."

"Ah." Pity reflected in the other man's eyes. "Be that as it may, he always hoped you'd do something he could be proud of. The behavior you showed tonight is not it."

One of his hands curled into a fist before he relaxed it. "An aberration, surely."

“Many men say that about their chosen vices.” Briefly, he laid a hand on Laurence’s shoulder. “Do yourself a favor and marry that girl you were dancing with earlier in the evening. She’ll make you a good man and you can start rebuilding your life. Otherwise, you’re nothing, just as your father used to say.”

His spirits sank. There had been a few other times when he’d felt as low as he did right now. He had no pocket watch. Only ten pounds in winnings. Nothing to recommend him. No prospects. And his fiancée was pretend. Feeling lower than he had in many years, Laurence slowly left the gaming room. “My father doesn’t even know the real me. I’m not like him, but there is nothing wrong with that.”

“Perhaps, but Christmastide is approaching fast, and you are a long way from Surrey. He had hoped to see you this year.”

And the mental beating continued. Laurence’s shoulders drooped. “I am accompanying my fiancée to her father’s estate this year instead. We thought this trip was the more important one.”

“Well, I wish you good fortune in the future.” Then the man left to meld into the crowd of the common room.

Dear God, am I the image of pity?

At least the ten pounds would help with the remainder of the journey—as well as buy a bath for Ellie tomorrow as promised—but he was sick about the loss of the watch. As he passed through the common room, he bought a red satin ribbon from a match girl and stuffed it into the interior pocket of his jacket. It would be a Christmas gift for Ellie. Perhaps she would wear it in her hair; he could look forward to that.

Slowly, he climbed the stairs to the room he shared with her. The muscles in his back ached from the fall out of the tree, but his head ached from the need for a bottle of brandy. This had been the longest he’d abstained, but losing tonight at the gaming tables practically begged for something to bury his frustration and disappointment in.

Ellie was in bed, reading by candlelight when he came in. Her dark hair was in a thick braid hung down her back. Her customary shawl was over her shoulders, for the temperature in the room was chilly, and this room didn't have a fireplace, but it was near enough to the front staircase that some of that warmth would eventually rise. As she glanced up, her eyes were as dark as sapphires in the dim light. "Did everything go well?"

"Not exactly." In some annoyance, he shrugged out of his jacket and then threw it over the back of the only chair in the room. A few tugs helped his cravat come undone. "I, uh, played a few hands of cards."

"Did you win any money?"

"Yes. Ten pounds."

"That's wonderful!" Then she frowned. "So why do you look as if you lost your best friend?"

He huffed while he wrestled with the laces of the waistcoat at his back. "I lost the pocket watch that my father gave me."

"Oh, Laurence." Ellie set her book next to her on the bed, threw the covers off, and then scrambled off the piece of furniture. "I'm so sorry."

"So am I." After he finally rid himself of the garment, he tossed it toward the chair. "It would seem I'm not the changed man I had hoped."

"Things like this take time. No one improves their life overnight." As she came close, clad only in her shift that was far too revealing, Laurence eyed her warily. "What sets you apart from other men is the fact you are trying."

Absolutely not would he try to bury his disappointment in himself with the distraction of her. "I don't know." He wrenched his shirt tails from his breeches.

"You didn't drink yourself into a stupor after that, so you *are* showing growth." She took one of his hands and led him over to the edge of the bed. When she sat, she pulled him down beside her. "Just because you lost a watch doesn't make

you a horrible person.” Honesty shown in her eyes. “As you continuously tell me, my mistakes and my past don’t define my future. The same is true here.”

Was this what it was like, then? A true relationship was a give and take? When he was maudlin, she would cheer him and vice versa? If so, he rather adored it.

“Thank you for that, but the loss will hurt for a bit.” Did she even know how wonderful she was? Probably not, for they both seemed trapped beneath poor opinions of themselves and the weight of society’s judgment. That needed to change, but just now, he didn’t have the strength.

“That is to be expected.” Ellie brought his hand to her lips, put a kiss into his palm, and then curled his fingers around it. “Go attend to your nightly ablutions. Afterward, come to bed. I’ll read to you a few fairy stories, and then we’ll make up some of our own and pretend all of those imaginings will come true.” She shrugged when he scoffed, and her shift stretched taut over her breasts. “It was a game my sisters and I used to play in our childhood when we put forth our ideals of what we hoped our future husbands would be like.”

“That sounds lovely. My father brushed fairy stories aside, but my mother used to say to us that fate sometimes intervened in impossible situations, and it sometimes felt like magic. That’s when you knew it was love.” Quickly, he tugged off his boots and sighed in relief. “It’s been a long day.” Only then did he realize she’d put a holly sprig into her book as a page marker. The mistletoe she’d strung over the top of the bureau. Both of them cheered him exponentially. “You are just a brick of a woman.” Because he could, he kissed her cheek.

More and more he was becoming convinced he might like to have her by his side for the rest of his life, but the forever of that thought was slightly disconcerting. More thought was needed, but each time he did, warmth filled his being.

It was something.

Chapter Thirteen



December 22, 1817

Last posting inn on the journey north

As steady rain drummed against the window glass and upon the roof of the last posting inn they would need, Eleanor concluded her business with a stranger in the common room.

“Ellie, are you coming?” Concern threaded through Laurence’s voice as he glanced back at her location from where he waited near the stairs.

“Yes. Be there in a minute.” She quickly delved into her reticule and gave over the requested two pounds the man wanted for the watch. It would make the perfect Christmas gift for Laurence, for he was still devastated over the loss of his father’s. “Thank you so much for this kindness,” she whispered to the man as she dropped the coins into his palm. It put a sizable dent in the precious coin she had saved, but the look on Laurence’s face would more than make up for the hardship and lack of security.

“Thank you.” Then he gave over the brass watch and chain. It was tarnished in spots, but the mechanism still worked, and that was all that was important. “I hope it helps you.”

As she stuffed the gift into her reticule, she hurried over the worn wooden floorboards toward Laurence’s location. “I apologize for the delay. That man had a question about the area, and since I’m moderately familiar, I was trying to give him directions.”

“You’re a good sort, Ellie.” He nodded in approval. “I’ve ordered dinner be brought to the room so we can save

some coin.”

“Clever.” She held all the tighter to the strings of her reticule, but she couldn’t help the pleased smile that curved her lips. He’d already done so much for her that it would be lovely to give back to him.

“Also, I kept my promise.”

“Oh, what’s that?” They had reached the second floor and were obliged to go to the end of the corridor for their room.

“I ordered you a bath for after dinner.”

Flutters danced through her belly, for he was entirely too thoughtful. “You didn’t need to do that. It’s such an expense.”

He unlocked the door and then pushed the panel open, standing back to allow her to enter the room first. “Remember, I’m taking care of you for the duration of this trip. If indulging in a bath is what will make you happy, then you shall have a bath. Don’t worry about the money.”

“Thank you.” Tears prickled the backs of her eyelids. “You have managed to quite spoil me this week.” As soon as she stepped into the room, she began the task of lighting one of the candles. “It will be difficult to return to my life before I met you.”

“Well, the hope is you won’t have to. Perhaps your family will realize how wonderful you are, how much they’ve missed you, and will welcome you back with everything you have ever wanted.” His voice was graveled with emotion, but when she glanced at him to see what he struggled with, he’d turned his face away. “It truly would be the best outcome.”

Not exactly. The best outcome, and one she didn’t wish to think too hard upon lest there was no chance of it coming to fruition, was that they should fall in love with each other and realize they should make a go of it, make the false engagement real. “Well, that is the purpose of this trip, isn’t it?” Suddenly, gaining the approval of her family—who had left her to the

wolves years ago—wasn't nearly as important as what she was discovering the longer the journey north continued.

“Indeed.”

A knock at the door prevented either of them from saying more. When Laurence admitted a footman into the room, who brought in a tray of cold cuts and a carafe of wine, he nodded and gave him a coin for his efforts. Once they were alone again, he looked at her.

“We'd best eat before exhaustion claims us.”

Eleanor snorted. “It seems all I've been doing on this trip is sleeping.” That was because at night, slumber came fitfully. Either the mattress ticks were uncomfortable, or awareness of him kept her awake with thoughts of him running through her head. And sometimes she worried and wondered over her future. That led to napping in the traveling coach when they ran out of conversation for the day.

“It's your body's way of saying you have worked it too hard.” He shrugged. “You have to fill the time somehow. Might as well relax any way you can. Besides, your bath will be brought up soon.”

As her stomach let out a rather loud growl, she snickered. “At the moment, my body is demanding I eat.” She joined him at the small table, accepted a glass of wine that he'd poured out. The heat of him, the smell of him, the very timbre of his voice all worked to draw her closer to him. Awareness skittered over her skin. Apparently, food wasn't the only thing her body wanted this night, but she had already coupled with Laurence, and that intimacy had done much to bind them together. Knowing she'd have to tell him goodbye as early as tomorrow evening left her in a mild panic. God, that would hurt so much. Yes, she'd parted ways with men in the past, but the difference there was... She had never fallen in love with those men, except one.

And he had tossed her away like rubbish, which had hastened her falling out of that state and hiding her heart away.

Until Laurence had popped into her life to shine a light on the dark parts of her soul. He'd pulled her out of herself, showed her that she still mattered, and had given her back hope.

That was in imminent danger of being shattered far too soon.

They made quick work of the cold cuts, cheese, bread, and wine. As meals went, it was decent enough to fill the belly and satisfy hunger but didn't give off the feeling of a traditional dinner. It was always interesting what different posting inns came up with to feed their guests.

A half hour later saw a bath set up behind a linen privacy screen. There was no fireplace in this room, but Eleanor didn't care, for the water was pleasantly hot when she slipped her tired body into it, and it had the slightest hint of roses. That was a lovely addition, but the more she tried to relax in the scratched and scarred porcelain tub, the more acute the awareness of him grew. Fabric rustled in the silence, a sure sign he was undressing for the evening. Need crawled over her skin to tighten her nipples. It would be so easy to invite him to share the bath, to do delicious things to him while they were both naked, but wouldn't that further complicate their already confusing relationship?

In an effort to gain a distraction, she focused on the upcoming Christmas holiday. "What was one thing you enjoyed about the Christmastide season when you were a young man with your family?"

"Well, my brothers particularly liked telling scary stories while we sat in a darkened room." His chuckle worked to further push her toward the edge of need. "If we had guests joining us at the Surrey property and it became a right proper house party, then there were all sorts of parlor games played each night."

"I remember the fun of those," Eleanor said as she drew her hands back and forth through the steaming water. "My favorite was Blind Man's Bluff."

He chuckled. “That is largely because you are daring, and you probably used it as an excuse to sneak in a few caresses to unwitting men.”

“True.” She couldn’t help her giggle. “There were so many attractive young bucks in those days, before the war claimed so many.”

“I would have adored knowing you when you were younger.”

“Why? Because you would have preferred me before I made so many mistakes?” She frowned at the small bar of finely milled soap she’d used throughout the trip from where it rested atop a thin towel on the nearby chair.

“No, because we would have probably had grand adventures together, and there would have been a chance that we would have gotten on well enough to...” A sigh interrupted whatever he would have said. “It doesn’t matter. We are together now, if only for one day more.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. What a dismal thought. “Perhaps,” she finally managed to whisper. Then she sank briefly beneath the water until her hair was drenched. Only then did she come up. After shoving the wet hair from her face, she reached for the soap. “Did you have a favorite food from the holidays?”

“I adore gingerbread cake. It can be my downfall, but there’s truly no second to a lovely roasted goose straight off the fire with crackling skin browned to perfection and so juicy inside all those savory flavors coat your palate.”

“Ah yes. One of the cooks over the years made a wonderful velvety cream soup with mushrooms that I particularly enjoyed. I could eat bowls of it—did, in fact—before my mother told me I would do damage to my waistline and that men wouldn’t choose a plump young lady on the Marriage Mart.”

“What a bit of gammon that is.” Laurence’s huff of annoyance made her smile as she drew the soap through her hair. “There is nothing wrong with a lady who has some extra

flesh on her bones. That merely means more curves to delight and distract a man.”

And here they were, back to where her thoughts started, and once more she couldn't help thinking about how his hands had felt on her body and how his form moving against hers had been so heavenly.

Well, drat.

For long moments, she busied herself with washing and rinsing her hair. Then she did the same with her body. By then, she could no longer delay. Eleanor stood up in the tub. After she climbed out of it, she wrapped the towel around her person while the damp locks of her hair hung heavily about her shoulders. The mass would be a bear to comb out, but there was nothing for it. Finally, she came out from around the privacy screen and sucked in a breath. Laurence stood at the window with his back to her, clad in only his breeches, but the candlelight and shadows played over his skin, burnishing it, calling far too much attention to the motion of his muscles each time he moved.

To say nothing of the collection of bruises on his back gained from his fall out of the tree yesterday.

Though her fingers itched to caress that skin, she tamped on the urge. “Did you, ah, wish to make use of the water before it cools?”

Slowly, he turned. Desire glittered in his eyes as he looked her up and down. “In a bit.” When she assumed he would prowl toward her, he went first to the bureau top where he picked up an ivory handled silver comb. “I thought to help with your hair before it dries into tangles.”

“Oh.” What a lovely thing to offer. “All right.”

“Come.” Laurence perched on the edge of the bed. When she didn't immediately move, he held out his free hand. “I won't bite, Ellie.” A wink set flutters through her belly. “Unless you ask.”

Dear God. It was becoming more difficult to keep herself under control. In silence, she put her hand into his. He

tugged and pulled her into his lap so that she faced away from him, with her back to his chest and her legs straddling the outside of his thighs while the hem of the towel rode up her legs as awareness shivered down her spine.

“Perfect position for combing hair, hmm?” His deep voice rumbled against her ear.

Briefly, Eleanor closed her eyes merely to enjoy being so close to him as she clutched at the towel to keep it in place. “Yes, of course,” she said in a whisper, for his presence threatened to overwhelm her.

Seconds later, his hands were in her hair, and he drew the teeth of the comb through different locks. He said nothing as he utilized the comb, smoothing out the tresses until there were no more snags. The methodical passes lulled her into a state of complacency, and a sigh escaped her when he left off with the comb in order to massage her scalp with both hands.

“Your hair has always fascinated me,” he said in a hushed whisper. “So long and silky, like spilled ink yet with a vibrancy that gives it life. In some light, it appears to have an almost blue hue.”

“I often wished my hair was naturally curly. It’s so dull being stick straight.”

“Hardly.” Then he left off with her hair and his fingers were at her shoulders, kneading and massaging the tension from the muscles. “You are like a creature of the woodlands, an elf-maiden straight from fairyland with this curtain of hair.”

“You are a sweet man.”

“Mmm, perhaps. I have also been told I’m a rogue.” He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, and as he did so, he encouraged her fingers to release the fabric of the towel. When she did so, he parted the edges of the covering. Slowly, so very slowly, he drew the fabric down her body until it pooled at her lap and hips, leaving her torso bared.

The coolness of the air seeped into her skin and tightened her already sensitive nipples, and she gasped. “Laurence? We shouldn’t...” Oh, this wasn’t a good idea, not

at all, for she would only want him more, but she didn't bid him nay as he lightly danced his fingers over her breasts, teasing her as if he had all the time in the world, circling her nipples until she thought she might go mad if he didn't touch her.

“Of course we shouldn't, but isn't that the exact reason why we should? Or at the very least have a bit of fun before retiring?”

“Oh.” The word dissolved into a moan, for she desperately agreed with that reasoning. Her back arched of its own accord, which put her breasts more firmly into his hands.

“I'll take that for consent.” A chuckle followed, which only loosed more tingles into her lower belly. With his palms, he caressed those buds, teased and tormented until pleasure zipped between them and her core. “So beautiful.” His words coupled with his actions sent need pulsing between her thighs.

She wanted him to take her in a firmer grip, but he never did. The man continued to tease her breasts with the lightest of touches, apparently in a bid to drive her insane. “Laurence.” The word came out on a dreamy whisper as he continued to bring her to the brink of pleasure through her breasts alone. No one had ever taken the time to do such a thing, except maybe herself with her own fingers when she craved those feelings and there was no man around. “This is lovely.”

“Only lovely?” He chuckled, clearly amused, but the insistent press of his aroused length against her rear betrayed how much he was enjoying this session as well. “Obviously I'm not teasing you correctly.” With his lips at her nape, Laurence caressed her breasts, her nipples all over again, in a never-ending cycle, and this time, the friction and heat from his skin, the callouses on his fingers added another layer of sensation to the play.

“Oh, oh!” Eleanor squirmed on his lap. Her eyes shuttered closed and once more her back arched. Need throbbled through her core; her breath came in shallow pants. Blissful tingles darted over her skin. Fires replaced her blood.

Good heavens, she was nearly at that edge, hovering, waiting, teetering, seconds away from flying. “More,” she gasped out and lifted a hand to wrap around his nape, encourage his head closer to hers. “Play more.” This was sheer folly to do this again with him, but she couldn’t help it. Ever since that first coupling, she’d craved his touch again.

“I adore watching you when you are in the throes of pleasure, and I can’t help but imagine sliding my shaft deep into your hot, wet passage.” Each word of that suggestive whisper worked to hurtle her closer to that edge, and he’d barely done anything to bring her to that state.

“We shouldn’t.” Once more she tried to talk him out of this, for it would just mean heartbreak and disaster when they were forced to part tomorrow night, but then his hand was between her thighs, moving the towel aside as if it were nothing.

He furrowed his fingers through her curls while the other hand he kept at her breast, rolling a nipple. “Tell me how you like to be pleased.” As he strummed those talented digits along her flesh, she whimpered. How could she possibly think right now?

Unable to form words, Eleanor put a hand over his guiding him to where she needed him to be most, and straightaway he found her swollen button, encouraged it out of hiding, and then applied friction to that nubbin as if that was his only purpose in life.

“Dear God.” Shivery sensations raced along her spine, pushed into every nerve ending. “Yes, Laurence, just there.” She held his fingers to her pearl, clutched his nape with her other hand. He kissed her neck but didn’t leave off with his frenzied friction, glided his lips over her cheek, and when he bit her earlobe, streaks of need slammed through her core to heighten the feelings already crashing through her body.

“Sweet, sweet Ellie.” The warmth of his breath drifted over her cheek.

“Oh, oh...” Again, she squirmed on his lap. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed against her bottom. “I’m nearly

there... Just a little more..." Words proved too much for her. If he didn't finish her, she'd ooze right off his lap into a puddle.

"Exactly where I want you." The cheeky man pinched her nipple, rolled that hardened tip. The pleasure-pain sent her hurtling toward that glimmering edge. His chuckle was all too satisfied as he increased the pressure... everywhere. "Take that fall. Let me see you come undone."

Those words made her shatter, and the more she melted into his care, the greater the wave of ecstasy smacked into her, picked her up, and then carried her into that sparkling world where sound and light didn't exist. "Oh!" Eleanor screamed out her pleasure, for the moment forgetting they were in a posting inn that had very thin walls. She writhed on his lap, held his hand tighter to her button while familiar contractions pulsed through her core.

Never will I tire of meeting this moment.

"So beautiful," he murmured and once more dragged his lips down the side of her throat.

After a few lovely, blissful moments, she came back to herself with only enough strength to slump against him. "How do you manage to send me flying so quickly?" Residual shivers danced through her body.

"Perhaps it's fate." Laurence nuzzled the crook of her shoulder again before he eased her off his lap. "But I'm not nearly done." He stood, caught her hand, and let the towel and the comb drop to the hardwood. Before she could speak, he tugged her into his arms and claimed her lips in a series of gentle kisses that left her reeling and as weak-kneed as if she were naught but a debutante experiencing her first embrace.

Lost in a haze of passion, Eleanor trailed her fingers down his chest, that glorious expanse of naked flesh with its sprinkling of coarse dark blond hair. "Perhaps I should enjoy a turn at teasing you, hmm?" She edged her hand downward, traced the outlines of his hard arousal with her fingers then watching him the whole time, she cupped his equipment through the fabric of his breeches. "How would you like it? Brought to the brink by my mouth or fingers?"

“Damnation.” He gave into a shiver as his eyes darkened with the same intense desire that coursed through her veins. Pulling away, he took her hands and set her a bit away from him. “As you said earlier, we shouldn’t do this. It will drop too much confusion to whatever this...” he gestured between them with a hand, “...is, and I would rather not damage that.”

“Oh.” Never did she think he would call a halt to the proceedings. Though she teetered on the edge of fracturing again merely from his being a gentleman, as hot frustration tightened her chest, understanding swooped into temper that. His never-ending protection made her love him all the more.

For yes, she was almost certain that she loved him and could no longer deny it to herself.

“Please don’t think that’s a sign that I don’t want you,” he said as he brought one of her hands to his lips and kissed the back. “It’s exactly the opposite.”

“Thank you.” Still, tears rose in her eyes. She tried to be strong, didn’t wish to show such emotion in front of him, so she sniffled. “That’s sweet, and you’ve been nothing except noble this whole trip.”

“Trust me, I’m more than happy to be a rogue, to take what I want knowing we’re parting soon, but I’m not that man any longer.” Easily, he bundled her into his arms, doing nothing but holding her. “Things will turn out right as rain. Just watch.”

Chapter Fourteen



December 23, 1817

Mid-day

“Well, damn it all to hell.”

Laurence shoved a hand through his hair as he stood staring out one of the windows in the common room. Heavy rain came down in sheets. In the distance, the rumble of thunder growled through the air. Occasionally, a flash of lightning would catch his eye. Aside from the storm, the rain had been steady before that since last night.

A man just arrived at the inn with the news that the roads are too rutted with mud and flooded with the excess rain for travel. For the time being, everyone was stranded at the inn, but if the rain halted by the evening, they could be on the road again by the morning.

Which meant an additional night here in this inn. He'd secured their room as soon as he'd heard the news. Though that had meant the unexpected expense strained the remaining coin he had on him, it wouldn't do to have the thing sold out right beneath them, for he wouldn't enjoy bedding down in the stables.

However, there was a bright side. It meant having a reprieve from bringing Ellie to her family's estate. One more night with her, but it was also dangerous to his peace of mind. Last night, he'd sent her flying with his fingers, stopped her when she would have done the same to him or before he could once more bed her.

Yet now? Not only was he randy as hell and full of frustrated sexual tension, he would be tempted beyond

reprieve to have another night alone with her, and he could all but guarantee he didn't have the strength to play the gallant and noble hero and abstain from claiming her body. *Oh, no.* At the first sign of teasing, the first time she flashed that smile she usually reserved just for him whether she was aware of it or not, he'd break, and into bed they'd go.

Once that happened, it would fairly kill him to give her up on the morrow.

When he finally turned away from the window, it was to find the common room had filled with more travelers to mingle with the people already there. The buzz of excited and angry conversation reached his ears. Porters and footmen ran to and fro, for the inn bustled with sudden activity. It was time to tell Ellie the bad news. Part of him hoped she would enjoy the reprieve, while part of him assumed she would be sick over the delay.

Wanting to reconnect with family was a powerful motivator.

For her sake, her damned father had better accept her back with open arms and apologies on his lips. If he didn't, Laurence might just take the man to task himself, for Ellie didn't deserve to be made continually to pay for her past sins.

No one did.

On his way up the stairs, he passed a maid coming down who smiled at him.

"I just delivered a pot of tea to your fiancée, Mr. Bannerman. She is easily one of the loveliest guests I have ever waited upon. So helpful and doesn't want me to do for her."

His heart squeezed, but he offered the maid a grin. "Miss Comerford is one of the best people I know."

Truly, it was a crime that no one knew her real identity as an earl's daughter. She should claim that station—that title—regardless of what had occurred in her life. "You are lucky to have her," the maid said, and then with a bob of her head, she continued on her way down the stairs.

Yes, I am, but for how much longer?

As if he were on the way to meet with doom, Laurence slowly completed the stairs then made his way along the corridor. Every step he took brought home how unworthy he was. No position, no prospects, no fortune, and no hope. Finally, he stood at the closed door to his room with a hand resting on the latch. Not able to delay further, he pressed the handle and gently swung the panel open.

And his heart squeezed again, for Ellie sat demurely at the table with a teacup in her hand while reading a book that rested on the table in front of her. Her black hair was caught back in a loose chignon, and though she wore the same navy dress he'd seen a couple of other times, today it seemed the trappings of a queen. That was how regal she was to him. "I've some news." As his gaze fell to her feet, his heart trembled, for stocking-clad toes peeked out from beneath the hem of her dress. It was adorably vulnerable, and his chest tightened.

"Oh?" When she rested her gaze on him with expectation, all he wanted to do was fall into those blue pools and drown. "Will we leave soon?"

"No." He couldn't help his chuckle. "It's raining buckets, which has made the roads too hazardous for travel." As quietly as he could, he closed the door behind him. "If, and that is a big *if*, the rain ceases by this evening and it remains dry overnight, we could possibly set out by midday tomorrow."

"Which would put us at Papa's estate just in time for Christmas Eve dinner." Oddly enough, there was no excitement in her voice, only the same glum sadness that he felt. "I suppose that is acceptable. Any later, and it won't matter. Mama and Papa are adamant Christmas Day is for family only. They never entertain visitors on that day. Once Christmas Eve services come up, that's the line drawn." A frown tugged the corners of her mouth downward.

Well, damn. It would seem once again he was destined to be a disappointment, and this time to her. "Why is it that

whenever the holidays come closer, we feel even worse about ourselves?” As he edged toward her, he had the most honest realization he’d ever encountered. In Ellie’s company, he didn’t feel like a cock up, like a nobody, like a man no one ever expected to do anything worthwhile. She had a way of looking at him as if he could do anything, as if he were the cleverest man she’d ever met, but was that merely because he’d agreed to escort her north or because he’d been kind to her where everyone else hadn’t been?

How depressing.

“There is so much pressure in families to be the proper images our parents wished we were. Perhaps they are even thinking of the mistakes in their pasts and that is why they hope for better for their children.” A shrug lifted only one shoulder. She took a sip of tea and then laid the teacup into its saucer on the table. “Regardless, our journey together is nearly complete.”

If her voice hadn’t broken on the last word, if she hadn’t peered up at him with a sheen of tears in her eyes that made them luminous, if her chin hadn’t trembled and betrayed the emotions she hadn’t shared with him, he would have been able to tamp his own feelings. But she *had* done all of those things, and they shredded his resolve to remain a gentleman.

“Then we shouldn’t waste the time we have left.” Quickly, he closed the distance between them, scooped up her hand, brought it to his lips, and then kissed the back.

As she stood, her smile sent desire shivering down his spine and into his member. “What did you have in mind?” The look in her eyes suggested she might eat him up with a spoon.

And he would let her with enthusiasm.

“Does it matter? Whatever fills the hours, and leaves lasting memories, hmm?” He snaked a hand about her nape and then dragged her against his body. “God, but I need you, Ellie.” There was no pride in admitting it, for this was the last day she would be his.

“I don’t believe I have bid you nay,” she said as she rested her palms on his chest. The hunger in her gaze fed his own. “As long as you don’t end things prematurely this time.” She cocked an eyebrow in challenge.

Instead of answering with words, he brought his mouth crashing down on hers. As always, her lips cradled his as if she had been made exclusively for him, and when he put his hands on either side of her head to hold her steady, a tiny sigh left her throat, and she kissed him with more intensity. His fingers slipped into her hair. Pins fell to his insistence, and when her tresses tumbled down her back, he buried his hands in the mass, curled his fingers into it and lightly tugged so that her chin lifted, and he could better kiss her senseless.

It took less than thirty seconds for him to tumble them both onto the bed in a flurry of skirting. He laughed with delight to see her nestled amidst the ruffled bedclothes. “You are easily the most delicious sweet of the holiday season.” As he lay on his side next to her, he put a hand beneath her skirting, drew his fingers up her leg to rest on her knee. Inch by inch, he encouraged the navy wool up her legs along with the petticoat with the lace on the hem.

“Such gammon you speak.” Ellie’s breathing quickened. He chuckled, for her interest was piqued. “But you are charming, so I’ll forgive you.”

“So gracious.” Laurence righted himself merely to move down her body. He pressed a feather-weighted kiss to each of her adorable knees, slowly spreading her legs as he went. Her beribboned garters tempted him, but he left them and the silky, ivory hosiery alone. “Hmm, shall I have you naked or just take you immediately?” He danced his fingers along her thigh.

She gazed at him with heavy-lidded eyes. “You are an intelligent man. I’m certain you can puzzle it out.”

“Indubitably, so perhaps I should enjoy you both ways.” He caressed his fingers along the inside of her thighs, let his knuckles rub at her center. All he wanted to do was bury his face between those satiny ivory thighs and taste her.

“I’m waiting, Mr. Bannerman.” Urgency and a hint of command rang in her tones, and she arched an eyebrow.

Damn, but that attitude spurred him onward. “Minx.” Deciding against oral stimulation for the moment, Laurence came back up her body. He nibbled a path along the side of her neck. When he reached her shoulder, he followed her lace edged bodice with his lips and tongue while cupping a breast through the fabric of her dress. Not long after worrying that nipple with the pad of his thumb, the bud hardened, and she gasped from the attention.

“I’m going to need much more from you than that.” Apparently not content to remain passive, Ellie plucked at the buttons of his jacket. One by one they fell open to her insistence. “I must see you. All of you, for the last time we came together you were fully clothed.” She reached around him to work the laces of his waistcoat. With her every movement, the scent of lilacs drifted to his nose.

“There is no rush. I intend to savor this.” In fact, they had all afternoon and well into the night. Dear God, would they spend that time lost in each other’s bodies? The thought helped to harden his shaft. He let her shove the waistcoat from his body and then, anticipating her inclination, he pulled the lawn shirt up and over his head. The chill in the air kissed his skin, further ramping his desire. The garment was soon tossed away, and he spent a few precious seconds toeing off his boots. They fell to the floor with two separate thuds.

“Perhaps, but you certainly teased me last night, so I am already primed.” Her low-pitched laughter sent awareness skittering through him. When it became apparent she couldn’t manipulate the laces at her back by herself, he took pity and pulled at the ribbons. Soon, the bodice gaped open. “Touch me.” She drew her fingers over his chest, casually tangling those slender digits in the mat of hair there. He hissed out a breath when she lightly gave some of them a tug.

“Gladly.” Laurence cupped her face between his palms, entwining his fingers into her hair while he knelt at her side, pulling her head back to expose her neck. Such trust and desire reflected in her eyes it humbled him, then he claimed her

mouth. He treated her to long, drugging kisses that went deeper and harder each time, robbing them both of breath. With his tongue, he hinted at exactly what he would do to her body in mere moments, but she surprised him by trying to boss him with her own. When she clutched his shoulders and molded herself to his form so they were both more or less on their knees, he tugged the dress up and off her body. Once he'd thrown it to the floor to join his shirt, he put his fingers on the ties that held the petticoat to her waist.

“Let me help. I want no more delays having you naked.”

How much did he adore this woman? With a grin, he assisted her out of the garment and then did the same with her stays. Again, he kissed her, couldn't have enough of her. It was an easy enough feat to slip the chemise from her body only to pause in order to pay her homage with his gaze. “I'm so glad I met you.” That was nothing except truth.

“Fate was actually kind to me when I stumbled into your path. Would that such good fortune continue.” Ellie settled onto her back and reached for him. “No more delays, Laurence. I only want to feel you against me.” When he covered her body with his, she smoothed her hands down his bare back and sighed. “There is something about having a man's weight on top of me, sharing in his warmth.” She caressed his backside, and he nearly shot off his wad prematurely. “If coupling and intimacy were encouraged as a part of Christmastide, perhaps more people would celebrate.” The cheeky woman giggled as she squeezed one of his buttocks.

“Damn.” Sensation streaked through his member and tingled into his stones. Laurence groaned and nipped at her collarbones. “While that is probably true, at the moment, my only focus is on you.”

Several moments went by as they each exchanged fondling, licking, nipping and suckling various portions of each other's bodies. Eventually, he gained the upper hand, laying her back onto the mattress and latching his lips onto an

erect, rosy nipple. A light bite had her both crying out and gasping.

Ellie arched her back. “More. Dear God, I need so much more. I want to feel you so hard and so deeply I will never forget you.” She wrapped a hand around his nape and encouraged him closer. “Let me not forget this week.” Again, her voice broke, and the forlorn sound went straight to his heart.

“Never, for I won’t forget you either.” His shaft throbbed painfully against the front of his trousers. “I’ll return in a twinkling.” With a lingering kiss to her mouth, he lifted off her body. Never had he yanked off his breeches faster. There was something about her that would forever captivate him. “You’re certain you don’t want me to wear a sheath,” he said as he joined her on the bed once more.

“There is no need, for I won’t become pregnant.” A trace of sadness flitted through her expression, but it vanished the second he fondled a breast. “I don’t wish to think about that right now.” As she bent her knees and opened her legs, she sighed when he settled in the cradle of her thighs. “Let me touch you.”

“Not now. This time is for your pleasure.”

She huffed. “Sometime this afternoon, I *will* explore you to my leisure until I’ve had my fill of you.”

“I look forward to that.” Laurence caught her hands in his and brought them up over her head while he held her gaze. “And I’ll no doubt go insane under your torture, but it can wait.” He pressed her hands to the pillows on either side of her head. “In this moment, my only goal is to claim you, make you realize how damn worthy you truly are.” Though he hadn’t meant to admit even that, he wished to hide the emotion that prompted the statement. Slowly, to tease and torment, he thrust into her warm passage.

“Oh... you.” With a wash of tears in her eyes, she attempted to free her hands, but he threaded their fingers together and held her steady. With a tiny huff, she canted her hips, sending him deeper. “What should I do with you?”

“This.” The second he withdrew from her welcoming body, he penetrated her all over again, just as slow as before even though the friction hurtled him closer to the edge because it was so damned lovely.

“Oh!” She matched his movements and soon they worked together in a leisurely, unhurried rhythm that brought pleasure but in a deliciously exaggerated fashion.

Moans broke the silence and blended with the sound of the rain beating against the window. Sweat rolled down his back and along his skin from his exertions. And still, he didn’t rush his thrusts. Neither did he close his eyes. He held Ellie’s gaze, lost himself in those endless lake blue pools, and that intensified, soul-binding connection gave a renewed edge to every jolt of bliss that shot through his veins. In this he would savor his time with her, extend the pleasure for as long as he could, because soon he might lose her.

Damnation but I love this woman. The knowledge made this act so much more satisfying.

“Laurence.” Her breathless utterance brought him out of his thoughts. She tightened her fingers in his, wriggled her hips, which sent him even deeper. “Finish me. I want all of you.” She squirmed beneath him in an effort to make him hasten his pace, no doubt.

“Eventually, we will arrive at that point.” Yet his chuckle died quickly as need swept up his shaft. Release was near, which was far too soon, but it only meant they would do this again. “In this moment, you are mine,” he said in a barely audible whisper, didn’t even know if she heard him. He increased his pace as urgency tingled through his stones. Each thrust went deep, penetrated hard, and irrevocably joined them. For these handful of seconds, they were one. “Ellie, please say you’re ready.” Desperation ravaged his voice. It wouldn’t be long.

“Yes, soon.” She drew her legs up toward her chest. “If I could just touch my pearl...” Before either of them could do just that, a gasp escaped. Her eyes widened, and a keening wail came forth. Her eyelids shuttered closed. The tremors

flooding her body transferred to him and further dragged him into the storm they'd created. "Almost." Her breathing changed to pants. "Please. More."

"Yes." He adored it when she begged for release. Need tightened his stones, making them heavy and pulling close to his shaft. Awareness raced up his member. It throbbed, primed and ready. "Come with me."

For the rest of my life.

Once.

Twice.

Three times he stroked while she undulated her hips, meeting him as a partner should. A scream ripped from her throat before she muffled it by burying her face in the crook of his shoulder. Her muscles fluttered around him, squeezing his length, drawing out his descent into madness. Laurence stifled his own shout and thrust deep one last time. His grasp on reality shattered. The release surprised the hell out of him, and he ground his hips into her to prolong the pleasure as well as the emotional connection they'd formed.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her what was only now forming in his heart, but in the end, he wasn't brave enough. Not yet. Instead, he released her hands and collapsed on top of her body, wrapping his arms about her and then he brought them both onto their sides.

Her breathing warmed the side of his face and neck. The heat of her palms from where they rested on his chest had awareness ramping again. "I wish we never had to leave this day. It is nearly perfect, and would be that if you had played between my thighs before sending me over just then."

Of course she would mention that. He chuckled. "Did it matter? You were so primed from what I did to you last night that you fell into bliss rather quickly today."

"Give me a chance to recover and then we'll see if such teasing matters." Ellie uttered a shuddering sigh and relaxed next to him. "And in the event you wondered, for this day, while we are in this bed, you are mine as well." Then she

surged up against him and claimed his mouth in a kiss that seared her memory into his mind forever. And damn if his shaft didn't shudder to life once more. When she paused to breathe, she smiled at him, and it was the most genuine and lovely gesture he'd had from her over the whole week. "Just... thank you." Then she kissed him again, and this time she let a hand drift between them to stimulate his half-erect shaft.

Laurence was lost, and he didn't care. He was too far gone to worry about tomorrow.

Chapter Fifteen



December 24, 1817

Christmas Eve

St. Devere Hall

Breckland, England

Eleanor's nerves felt strung too tight as the coach lumbered up the lane that would eventually put them onto the circular drive in front of St. Devere Hall.

To say nothing of the fact she truly didn't want to do this any longer. As she glanced across the narrow aisle at Laurence through the gloom of sunset, her heart trembled, and a wad of unshed tears rose in her throat. After the wonderful day they passed yesterday—ensconced in bed doing all sorts of delicious, naughty, wonderful things—she was even more confused than ever. Whenever she was in his company, nothing else seemed to matter, but one couldn't live one's life wrapped in a fairy story.

For years, coming back into the family fold had been the one thing she'd wished for above all others. Now that she was literally on the cusp of doing it, a different dream had materialized along the way, a small hope that she'd given up long ago.

Yes, she'd fallen in love like a ninny, to a man vastly unsuited to the daughter of an earl. In her disgraced state, *he* was the one too good to be with *her*. It was a muddle that left her breathless and shaking, but out of fear and regret. There were no good decisions, for someone would be hurt.

Then the coach turned off the lane and made its ponderous way up the long drive.

“Merciful heavens, I’m so nervous,” she whispered into the silence as she clasped her hands together in her lap. “What if they don’t take me back? What if they don’t offer forgiveness?” She gasped. “Or worse, what if they do?”

“Settle else you’ll make yourself sick.” The deep rumble of Laurence’s chuckle washed over her and gave her a modicum of calm. “If they don’t do any of that, then you will know where you stand with them and can continue on with your life. You are a seamstress of some talent.” He shrugged. “If they take you back, then your dreams will be realized, and you can resume your previous life.”

“But I rebelled against that life for a specific reason.” She huffed in frustration. “I don’t enjoy the rules and restrictions of society and think the *ton’s* excuses for not taking paying work are ridiculous.”

“I think those things are mutually exclusive, though,” he said in a soft voice. “While you are struggling with everything, why not ask yourself if *you* intend to forgive your family for abandoning *you*.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of the issue from that perspective before.” It was just one of the reasons she adored the man across from her. He made her think, and he refused to allow her to talk badly about herself. There was so much confidence oozing from him, she hoped that sooner or later she might absorb some of it. “I mean, they *did* have a choice, but they chose to turn their backs. They chose their reputations above their love of their daughter.”

“Exactly. You have been so concerned about winning back their approval—or surviving—why aren’t they needing to do the same with you?” He rubbed a gloved hand along his cheek. “If it will make you feel better, I won’t leave until you tell me to. My protection is still in force and will be unless you direct me otherwise. After all, I am still your pretend fiancé for as long as you need me to play the part.”

Would you consider making that relationship real?
“And you will take me back to London if things go horribly wrong tonight?”

“Absolutely.” He leaned forward, rested his forearms on his knees with his hands dangling between his splayed knees. “Whatever fate has planned for you, Ellie, you will know soon enough.” A pause rose up and his jaw worked as if he were trying to figure out his next words. “But if that isn’t with your family, I, uh, will be more than happy to be your new family.”

“You have always been sweet to me.” Flutters scudded through her lower belly, for he was every bit a gentleman. Beyond that, he was a lovely protector, a wonderful lover, and a loyal friend—everything needed in a husband—if only he were in love with her, and they were compatible... or if either of them could actually afford to stay together as a couple.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t said anything in actual words. In deeds, perhaps, and certainly during intimacy, but she barely trusted people, and perhaps her head had been turned by his charm. He might just be a lovely man who considered her nothing more than a charity... who let him bed her because it was convenient, because she was already ruined.

“I truly mean it.”

There was no more opportunity for conversation—or baring the contents of her heart—for the coach rumbled to the top of the curved drive and lurched to a halt where the half dozen steps led up to the double doors of the hall. Soft golden illumination glowed from almost every window in the manor. Pine wreaths with big satin bows had been hung on both doors. Lanterns sat on every step and lent even more cheerful light to the scene. Here and there on the rooftops and on some of the shrubberies, patches of white snow served as a reminder that winter was upon them, especially this far north.

“Oh, God.” The urge to retch grew strong in her throat. A few hard swallows tamped the reflex, but it was still there, lurking. “I don’t want to do this,” she admitted in a whisper.

“I respect that if such is your decision, but we’ve traveled all the way here. At least set your worries to rest, for you’ll know either way. There will be no more wondering for the rest of your life.” He touched her knee. Warm tingles made their way up her leg.

“Thank you.” All she wanted to do was burrow into his arms and let him fight off the bad things of the world.

Then the coach rocked as one of the drivers climbed down. The door swung open then he lowered the steps. “St. Devere Hall, Mr. Bannerman.”

“Thank you, Peters. Go around to the stables. You both deserve a long rest. When I know more information, I’ll advise you of our next direction.” Laurence stood. He exited the vehicle and turned back to assist her out. As soon as he grasped her hand, he asked, “Ready?”

No. “Yes.” As they stood there, the first flurries of snow began to fly. “Let us see how long we will be allowed to set foot in these hallowed halls.” With a tight grip on her reticule in one hand and his fingers in her other, Eleanor squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and slowly made her way up the stone steps.

Seconds later, they waited at the doors, for Laurence had used the brass knocker to announce their arrival.

He turned to her. Anxiety creased his face. Sadness pooled in his eyes. “Ellie, I really need to tell you—”

The door opened, interrupting whatever he would have said, and an older man, probably in his late fifties, stood in the frame. He wore a somber evening suit with white gloves and peered down a long nose at her. “The family is not entertaining visitors.”

Dear God, her father had still retained the same butler, after all this time. She cleared her throat and screwed her meager courage to the sticking place. “Good night, Jeffries. We are not visitors. I am Lady Eleanor, and this is my fiancé, Mr. Bannerman. We’ve come for Christmas.”

The other man's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. "Welcome home, Lady Eleanor. Follow me. The family has gathered in the drawing room before dinner."

It was ridiculous that the words "the drawing room" sounded so fancy and haughty even though that world was exactly the one in which she'd grown up. At the double doors to that room she knew so well, Jeffries paused. He cleared his throat, and announced, "Lady Eleanor and Mr. Bannerman to see Your Lord and Ladyship."

With her fingertips resting on Laurence's arm, Eleanor came into the room only to pause halfway into it, for every person within the space had ceased talking and was now staring at her. Candlelight reflected off the pretty and luxurious fabrics of gowns and waistcoats. With her heart in her throat and her stomach in knots, she recognized her parents, who had aged significantly since she'd been gone. There were her three sisters and their respective spouses, all with children of varying ages—many of whom she didn't know—scattered about, and of course her brother stood at a window with a glass of brandy in his hand. Matching expressions of shock and disbelief were on all their faces.

Her mother was the first to break the silence. Slowly, she rose to her feet. Gray streaked her black hair, and the folds of her green velvet gown fell elegantly around her matronly form. "My baby has come home!" Then she burst into tears as she made the first steps toward Eleanor. "Oh, I'm so happy to see you."

Tears prickled the backs of Eleanor's eyes, for this wasn't the reception she had anticipated. Was it possible she would gain forgiveness this Christmastide? "Mama?"

"I absolutely forbid such a reunion unless the girl has changed." This from her father. He was on his feet as well, his expression stern, his eyes tired, but his head of graying brown hair was as thick as it had ever been. "What Eleanor did in the past harmed the family's reputation. I won't go back on my decision to throw her out unless I see some evidence she is no longer a scandalous sort and is contrite about what she did." Notes of authority rang in his voice.

At that point, the few governesses in the room ushered all the nieces and nephews from the space. No doubt they thought this reunion wouldn't end well and there was still scandal afoot.

“Papa.” Ah, *there* was the reaction she'd anticipated. Her father's continued bullishness gave her back some of her power. She glanced at Laurence, who had annoyance lurking in his gorgeous hazel eyes. He nodded, as did she. With a straightened spine, Eleanor took a few steps closer to her mother. “Though I have been away from my family—you—for more years than I anticipated, of course I'm a changed woman. Who wouldn't be as time has passed? I feel as if I've lived three lifetimes, have done things to survive none of you could ever have fathomed.” She paused, mostly to gather her thoughts, but a tad for effect as well. “Am I contrite? No, not about the choices I've made in my life, for it was exactly that—*my* life.”

“Oh, Eleanor,” her mother said with lingering disappointment as she brushed at the moisture on her cheeks.

She shrugged. “Why can you and Papa not acknowledge I'm not like my sisters? I want so much more from life than what is found within the tight strictures of the *ton*. I want to experience life, grab it by the horns and hang on.” A tiny sigh escaped. “That landed me into scandal, true, but that doesn't mean I'm not worthy of being loved by my family.”

Except that was exactly what she faced now.

Laurence nudged her arm. “Go on. I'll defend when necessary.” Then he gave her an encouraging grin, and her world tilted into rightness once more.

“Regardless of what happened in my life since I was forced to leave, I am now employed as a seamstress, and I have quite the talent for it. Eventually, I want to strike out on my own and take commissions from select clients.” Two of her sisters gasped in horror. She ignored them, for that was a tiny dream she'd not even told Laurence. “Also, I am engaged to a kind and decent man.” Her voice broke, for this part of the tale

was naught but a Drury Lane bit of fiction designed to play on their sympathies. “This is Mr. Bannerman, a son of Viscount Deerfield. He is the one who escorted me here.”

Immediately, a wave of sadness crashed over her, which only fed the feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness circling through her gut. The engagement was fake, he wasn't a man of sterling character or of fortune, she wasn't embarrassed of her life's mistakes, she still enjoyed physical intimacy—perhaps far too much with Laurence—and to finish off the performance, she was lying and forcing him to do the same merely to impress her family who, if they'd truly loved her, wouldn't have kicked her out to begin with, and they certainly wouldn't have put her on such lonely display now.

“Ha!” Her father crossed his arms at his chest as her brother crept silently toward them. “I know Deerfield, and I also know of *this* man's reputation. He's cut from the same cloth as you with nothing to recommend him, so whatever scheme you two have concocted, it won't work.” With a glance at Laurence that didn't bode well, he shook his head. “Thumbing your nose at society's rules still, I see, for there was no mention of a companion or even a maid during your trip.”

“This is true, but we didn't need such because we're engaged and...” The urge to retch had returned with a vengeance. *Dear heavens, I should never have come. These people don't deserve me, don't deserve him.*

“If I may, Your Lordship?” Laurence touched her elbow in support. “Ellie—Eleanor,” he quickly amended “—might not be the person you had hoped, but neither am I to *my* father. He still loves me. In fact, I was to attend Christmastide celebrations with my family in Surrey, but I opted to come here with your daughter instead, because she needed me more than my father did.” He paused, but she couldn't read the emotions in his eyes from her position. “There truly is no one like Eleanor in this world, and I can honestly say my life has been made better from knowing her.”

“Hush, you,” she murmured softly with a touch of her hand to his. “It was a lovely speech, but I rather doubt it will

thaw these hearts.” At that point, she didn’t care if they were offended all over again.

After everything she’d endured to survive through life, after the gambit of experiences she’d come through this week, Eleanor was racked with emotions and completely exhausted from them. She was hopelessly in love with her traveling companion, and because of that, she realized none of the drama her family had piled upon her head mattered. Not anymore, but she *did* wish she were a better woman for Laurence. He didn’t deserve a woman of her character, even though she wasn’t a courtesan any longer. Did her past sting? Of course it did, but it was hers alone, and she’d made those choices, for good or for ill, and what was more, she’d survived them. Grown from them.

How many people could say that?

Still, none of that calmed her racing heart or soothed her ragged soul.

“Please, Richard, our baby girl is home. Does it truly matter what she did years ago?” Her mother pleaded with her father as she bounced her watery gaze between Eleanor and him. “Shouldn’t we as Christians practice forgiveness and love instead of being harsh and unyielding? And it’s Christmastide besides, a time for family and charity.”

So then now she was considered charity by them? One of her hands curled into a fist, but Laurence was there, holding her hand, unclenching her fingers, her only support.

The silence was so thick it could be cut with a knife as everyone in the room stared at her father. Then everyone became animated at once, stating their opinions and talking over one another. Two of her sisters took up her cause, said she should be allowed to stay, even if it was just for one night, while the other sister looked on with lips pressed together so tightly, they were merely a thin white line. Her brother worried that Eleanor’s presence within the fold might damage their children’s chances for the future, but he agreed she should be allowed a reprieve merely for this night and for Christmas on the morrow.

Finally, her father held up a hand. "Enough." He looked about the gathering, and slowly nodded. "I agree that having Eleanor here once more is quite the sensation, and I also agree that her presence has brought questions and emotions with her we won't be able to process quickly. Because of that, she is welcome to stay the night here." With an inscrutable expression, he yanked on a brocade bell pull. "Both she and Mr. Bannerman shall have baths and be given rooms where they can freshen up. They will both have dinner with the family and then attend midnight services with us. Everything else can wait."

After that, the room erupted into a hive of activity as servants arrived. Her parents issued commands and suggestions, then Eleanor and Laurence were ushered out amidst a bevy of maids and footmen. Luggage was collected. Orders were given. Chatter filled the air.

Her immediate future was decided without one word from her. It didn't exactly give her the relief and hope she had assumed.

Chapter Sixteen



It took an hour for her bath and toilette to be accomplished, and through it all, Eleanor missed Laurence fiercely. After spending days on the road with him as her only companion throughout the hours, suddenly finding herself in the center of a veritable storm was a large adjustment.

However, she thanked Madam Favreau for her generous gift of the elegant red satin gown. It looked exquisite on her, and as she examined herself in the cheval glass while a maid attended to her hair, she sighed. The golden embroidery at the hem and rounded bodice was as lovely as when Eleanor had worked it. Here and there, nestled within the embroidery, were holly leaves made out of tiny emerald chips glued to the fabric with equally tiny ruby chips to resemble the berries. Each one of the stones twinkled and glimmered in the candlelight. It made her remember the real plants that Laurence had sought for her the day he fell from the tree.

Tears welled in her eyes. What sort of man would agree to her scheme of a false engagement without argument and then would be the loveliest gentleman she had ever met during the whole of their journey north? She'd been a stranger to him, but he had been agreeable to her plans, had done everything he could—even down to spending the last of his coin—on her to make her life better without ever being prompted.

Why would he do it? No one was that kind and compassionate to a woman they'd just met. Were they? Unless he was truly a changed man from the rogue he used to be.

Dear God, I don't deserve him. For deep down, she suspected she hadn't changed from that rebellious young girl she had been before fate had taken hold and gave her nothing

but struggle. She still didn't give two braces for anything regarding the *beau monde*, and in fact, now that she'd had to get a living, the class divides between the rich and poor gave her more of a sense of disgust now, which made her want to fight on the side of the have nots.

Everything was simply a tangle and there was no time to unravel it.

Finally, the toilette was finished. With dread filling her chest on every footfall, Eleanor made her way to the dining room where the whole of her family had gathered, except for the children. When she looked for Laurence, it was with some dismay that she'd found their seats were at opposite ends of the long table, which wouldn't give them the opportunity to converse.

Instead, she was seated between a brother-in-law and her own brother, forced to gaze at Laurence from feet away. Oh, he was so handsome tonight!

Dressed in the requisite black evening clothes, complete with a tailcoat, he was every inch a gentleman of the *ton*. Obviously, he'd been given the loan of someone's valet, for his blond hair, newly washed, had been arranged into a popular style. His clean-shaven face fairly gleamed from a scrubbing. His collar points were as high as fashion demanded, the folds of his starched cravat hung just so, and the red and black satin waistcoat called attention to his delicious torso. She tamped down on the urge to sigh, for she wanted nothing more than to relieve him of his clothing so she might go exploring. The deep rumble of his voice as he talked with his dinner companions never failed to bring her comfort even from a distance.

But she would have preferred an intimate dinner taken in one of their rooms at an inn over this spectacle of wealth, power, and privilege. Everywhere she looked, opulence dripped from the paintings on the walls, to the place settings at the table, to the thick Aubusson rugs on the floor. To the people gathered around, this was the only world they knew, and they probably would never be able to imagine having to

go through life scraping by, fawning and kowtowing to people like them just to make a living.

“So, what you’ve gone through must have been quite the experience, hmm?” her brother-in-law at her right asked her as he sliced through a thick beefsteak smothered with a creamy mushroom sauce. “My wife tells me you live in Cheapside in London.” He visibly shivered. “Horrid place. Can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

“Yes, well, one does what one must to survive when one’s family has withdrawn their love and support,” she said without looking at him. Though she didn’t know him very well—her sister married years ago—he didn’t need to know the details of her life or how she’d felt while living it. Those were hers alone.

Apparently oblivious to sarcasm, he continued. “Must be consequences to our actions, though. Rather messy business, that.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes as the conversation around the table continued. When she happened to glance at Laurence, their gazes met. He gave her the charming grin he always had, and some of her apprehension melted away, but then his attention was claimed by her mother on his other side, and once more she was alone.

At *her* other side, her brother nudged her elbow. “Despite the sticky wicket you’ve landed in and the societal morass we’re all facing because of your return, I have missed you.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrows rose with surprise, for she hadn’t expected that.

He nodded. “You were always good for adventure and took the notice off my own indiscretions.” While she glowered, he chuckled. “Now that I’ve been domesticated for so many years, I long for those days again.”

“Of course you do.” Done with the inane conversations, Eleanor feigned exhaustion. She pushed the bulk of the food about her plate.

As course after course marched onward, she became lost in her thoughts. How did she ever think such a scheme between her and Laurence would work? Now that she was back with her family, she didn't want to be a part of it any longer. If they couldn't accept anyone for who they were instead of who her family hoped someone could be, then there was no place for her here. As for Laurence, what would they say about him for not being rich, successful, or titled?

She released a sigh. If she didn't remain with her family, she would have no choice but to return to her life in London where she would struggle as a member of the working class, dreams unmet. The fears of when she would eat or would she be evicted would return front and center. That was no way to life. Plus, her false engagement with Laurence would terminate.

The urge to cry rose in her throat. She didn't need a lofty position or an advantageous marriage, she merely wanted a life free from worry. She wanted a man she could curl her body around at night, who enjoyed being with her for nothing more than reading, who merely wished to be with her. The struggle would be so much better if she could do that with someone she loved by her side.

Everything was such a mess, and she couldn't find her footing.

Eventually, dinner wound to a close. In a half hour, the family would leave for the church in the nearby village, but in the interim, Eleanor was allowed a few moments with Laurence.

"I apologize for my family," she whispered to him as they stood a bit away from the bulk of them in the entry hall. "They are rather... much."

He snorted, but his ever-present grin lifted her flagging spirits. "Isn't that what all families are like?"

"I suppose." How was it possible she didn't know what to say to this man who'd been the center of her world for the last week? So much happened between them, but now they were here, and her future still wasn't certain.

It had all become a disaster.

“You are beautiful in that gown,” he said as he leaned close to her ear. “Red is most certainly your color, my dear. Did you sew this yourself?”

Warmth spread through her chest that he’d noticed. “I did. It was for a client, but she found fault with it and refused to buy it. The modiste let me have it since I spent so much time with it.”

“It was made for you instead of her. The care you put into it is obvious; the stitchery and embroidery sublime.” He touched her hand. “And I must say I wouldn’t mind seeing that fantastic gown in a puddle on the floor because you are naked in my bed, writhing beneath me as I thrust slowly in and out of your warmth.” When she gasped, he winked. “I had to say something that would make you smile, didn’t I?”

Heat went through her cheeks while images of him doing just that danced through her mind. “What would I do without you?”

There was no time for him to answer, for Eleanor’s mother bustled over to them. “Come, children. We are running a bit late. There will be two sleds that will take us into the village, and it will be chilly so dress accordingly.” She linked her arm with Eleanor’s. “You simply must tell me where you obtained that gown. The stitching and beadwork are exquisite.”

Though the praise made her feel wonderful, she glanced over her shoulder at Laurence, who shrugged and looked after her with confusion and a hint of sadness.

Chaos ensued as the family went down the front steps toward the large sleds waiting. Two horses were harnessed to each sled. Everyone had greatcoats, cloaks, or pelisses over their Christmas finery, for the snow flurries had changed over to a steady snow that dotted the landscape.

Eleanor shivered as she stood back from the activity. It was a tight fit to put everyone into the sleds, and when Laurence gestured to her to come and squeeze in next to him

and her father, she shook her head. "I'll take the gig and meet you there." At least then she would be allowed a few precious moments alone.

To sort out her thoughts.

"Are you certain?" Questions reflected in Laurence's eyes.

"Yes. All will be well." She waved to him. "I'll be directly behind you."

"I'll come with you." He half-rose to his feet.

"No!" Surprise flitted over a few faces from her exclamation. She modulated her voice. "I mean, there is no danger. It's a simple trip to the village. Go ahead."

Without delay, the sleds pulled away from the manor, and then Eleanor hurried to the stables. She did, indeed, ask for a horse and a small carriage, and when it was brought around, she clambered inside, took up the reins, and then set the horse on a course to the main road.

What she hadn't counted on was the persistence of the snow and the softness of the ground, brought on by days of rain, no doubt. A few times, the wheels of the vehicle stuck in ruts, but the horse was always able to pull them out. Then the inevitable happened. The snow came down so quickly and so thick, she could no longer see the road. Unfamiliar with handling the ribbons and unsure of how to guide the horse, the animal took control of the situation and bolted off the road into one of the fields. It took very little time for the wheels to sink into the snow-covered mud, which put a premature end to the trip.

"Well, drat." If that wasn't symbolic of her life up to this point, she didn't know what was. Since the horse wasn't inclined to move or even try to pull himself out, she released the reins, pulled the folds of her cloak more tightly about herself, and then gave into the tears that had threatened for days.

Why couldn't she be anyone but who she was? It would be better for everyone she'd ever known, and then no

one would be disappointed.

Chapter Seventeen



December 25, 1817

Midnight

Christmas morning

As the church bells rang out their joyous song that Christmas had arrived, Laurence frowned. Why hadn't Ellie made an appearance? He glanced at the crowded church interior, but she was nowhere in the room.

Where are you?

Since the village was barely three miles away from the manor house, he waited as long as he could near the door, but when the vicar stepped to the front of the room in order to begin his sermon, Laurence pulled her brother aside.

"I'm going out to look for Eleanor. While I know she's fully capable of taking care of herself, on the off chance she's met with peril or difficulty on the roads, I want to be there to help her." He shrugged further into his greatcoat. "Surely she hasn't decided to run away from the family." Being back was the only thing she'd wanted since they'd met.

Her brother huffed. "Who can tell with Eleanor. She's always had a mind of her own, and she's never done what's been expected of her." He held Laurence's gaze. "I have long envied her that conviction and freedom even though she's made a mess of her life."

Hot annoyance stabbed through his chest. "She has done the best she could with what she had to work with after you and her family turned your backs. Put yourself in her position. Would *you* have survived? Would *you* have had the

bravery and determination to make sure you beat those circumstances?”

Those traits were just the beginning of his admiration for her. She never failed to amaze him at every turn, and he desperately wished to see how she would fare in the years to come.

“I suppose you are correct.” At least the man had the decency to look embarrassed.

“You’re damned right I am. I’ll return her to the manor as quickly as I can once I find her. Whether she chooses to stay there is her right. No one else should think to dictate to her. Not again.”

Then he took his leave of the church. Though there was a tangle of carriages and sleds gathered around the front of the church building, he could make time much faster if he went on foot. It would allow him to cut across fields instead of taking the roads. The snow was a problem to be sure, but he would fight his way through anything in order to rescue Ellie.

To have one more moment in her company.

As he pulled the brim of his beaver felt top hat down toward his eyes, he strode through the first field. It wasn’t ideal to trek through the snow with his shoes instead of boots, but there was nothing for it. They’d all been hustled out of the house directly following dinner, and he’d been caught up in the madness. But he’d glimpsed how upset Ellie had been when they arrived and then stood in the drawing room while the family had passed judgment. All through dinner, she didn’t eat, and since she’d done that once before while in his company, it signaled her distress more than anything else.

His heart trembled for her. Now that he’d witnessed her within the folds of her family, he was sure more than ever that she didn’t belong there. If they refused to accept her as she was—faults and all—then she didn’t need them. Eventually, they would do more harm than good to her, and he feared if she remained, then she would be bound by the same gilded chains she tried so hard to escape from before.

To say nothing of the fact that he understood her confusion and anxiety, for he felt the same. He'd fallen in love with her over the course of the trip, was even now drifting tip over tail for her, but he had nothing to recommend him, no fortune or reputation, naught but a set of rented rooms and a handful of vendor invoices. Yes, he had investments, but until they matured or until England caught up with his vision, he would need to practice patience.

A huff of frustration caused the air around his head to freeze in a fleeting cloud. It was deuced cold, and if Ellie *had* encountered problems on the road, she would likely be frozen down to her bones. Even if he admitted to his feelings, he wasn't the man she deserved, for he wanted her to have a bright future.

Sadly, that couldn't be found with him. As she'd once told him before, the two people in a couple couldn't both be poor. It would never work, and eventually they would grow resentful of each other.

After nearly an hour of hiking through fields, Laurence located a small carriage that would only seat two. It had veered off the road and had been stuck in mud that mired on a front wheel up to the axle. Ellie sat there, half-sheltered from the elements with her head in her hands. The hood of her cloak had slipped down, and due to the wind and snow, the tresses had escaped their pins and her black tresses moved and waved about her shoulders, dotted with snow. The horse grazed from any grasses still poking up from the snow.

"Ellie!" The poor goose. This had probably been the breaking point in her life. Ignoring how cold his toes were, Laurence made short work of striding over the ground that separated him from her. "Ellie? Have you need of a rescue?"

She startled at the sound of his voice. When she glanced over at him, the silver tracks of tears streaked her face. Her eyes were red-rimmed and that same red mottled her cheeks, for she wasn't one of those women who cried prettily. And that only made her more dear to him. "Why are you always coming to my aid?"

“Possibly because I’m the only one who can see that you are in desperate need.” Not wanting to stand while his feet turned to blocks of ice, he came around the vehicle then joined her on the bench. Due to the tight fit, his right side was jammed against her left. “Were you honestly on your way to the church or were you trying to run away?”

“I don’t know.” She scrubbed at the moisture on her cheeks. “It is too confusing.”

“What is?”

“Having dreams, knowing exactly what you want from life, and then when you have it? The future suddenly shifts and that isn’t what you want anymore.” The sigh she heaved sounded as if it had come from her toes. “My family has only accepted me back provisionally. No doubt once Christmas Day is over, they will tell me I’m not wanted.”

“Then you will do what you’ve always done—survive.”

A huff mixed with a stifled sob escaped her. “I’m so exhausted from that, Laurence. Surely there is something more to life than trying to make ends meet and never knowing when the struggle will end. It’s such a lonely prospect, even if I adore sewing, but I refuse to go back to the woman I used to be when working as a courtesan.”

Perhaps it was time to say what had been etched on his heart from the first time he’d met her. There was no more reason to deny it; she would either believe him, trust him, or she wouldn’t. Daring much, he took one of her hands in his. Even through the kid fabric, her fingers were chilled. “I had tried to tell you this as we stood at the front door but wasn’t able to complete my thoughts.”

She looked at him with moisture-spiked lashes, which made him want to kiss the hell out of her. “Oh, no.” The shake of her head told him she had anticipated what he wished to betray. “Please don’t. It will only complicate everything.”

“Or make things better.” When he turned toward her, their knees knocked together. Something akin to electricity

jumped up his leg. “The day we ran into each other in Mayfair completely changed my life.”

“It was nothing more than chance.” Yet there was a tiny glimmer of hope buried deep in her blue eyes.

“Fate or chance, does it matter? You and I met that day and there was no going back for me.” He tightened his hold on her fingers. “When you asked me to pretend I was your fiancé in order to travel north, I’ll admit it shocked me at first. Not because I couldn’t imagine doing such a thing with you,” he rushed on when she opened her mouth to protest, “but because out of all the men in London, *you* chose *me* to help with your ruse.” That had caught him off guard, so he’d thrown himself wholeheartedly into the role. That and the fact that he’d wanted to protect her.

“What does it matter? Everything is falling apart.” Tears threatened in her voice.

“Or is it falling into place just as fate had intended?” Laurence took her other hand, drew the pads of his thumbs over her knuckles. “No one has ever needed me before—just me—and I was flattered by that.”

She snorted. “Ah, you enjoy playing the hero who goes around rescuing damsels in distress.” Then she blew out a breath that clouded about her head. “And since I’m apparently incapable of doing anything by myself, I’m the charity *you* needed.”

“That isn’t it at all.” Why was she dead-set on being obstinate? “When I look at you, I see a woman who has been forced to hide her heart behind walls for protection because she’s been hurt by too many people in life. You are fiercely independent, Ellie. I have no doubts you can survive anything fate throws at you, but you shouldn’t have to do that alone.”

“I am alone because society has made sure of that. In their eyes, I’m useless, rubbish, broken and without a reputation due to wanting to lead a life different from one they could imagine.” When she shrugged, her shoulder brushed his. “The choices I’ve made have led me here. For good or for ill, and no one else should need to bear that burden.”

“Unless someone wishes to do that by choice.”

“What?” Her nose wrinkled as she frowned, and he wanted to kiss the furrow between her eyebrows, wanted to bundle her into his arms, and make love to her until she believed him about everything.

“What I am trying to say, and thereby cocking it up so badly we’ve gotten off track, is that over the course of our week together, I have fallen in love with you. I cannot fathom meeting a woman who is better for me than you, and even though I have absolutely nothing attractive about my life to recommend me to you, I would adore it above all things if you would consent to make this engagement a real one.”

“I beg your pardon?” She gawked at him with her lower jaw sagging. “You want a real engagement. With me. Because—”

“—because I love you. It’s really quite a simple concept.” Though it was amusing to see her non-plussed, he wanted to hear the words said back to him. “You have shown me exactly what I want in a wife, and every day that goes by I am in awe of you, of what you’ve accomplished while tossed aside as if you don’t matter, of what you still wish to do if given half a chance.”

“Damn you, Laurence,” she said softly, and those were not the words he’d hoped she might say. “Why must you be so noble, so consistent, so... wonderful?” Before he could get in another word, she surged upward and pressed her lips against his in a cold kiss. When she sat back, her eyes rested on his face. “As it turns out, I have fallen in love with you too. I didn’t want it, I fought against it, I tried to ignore it, but you kept on being kind, charming, lovely to me—”

“—any man worth his salt would. You *are* wonderful.” The kiss confused him as much as her babbling. When she tried to free her hands from his, he tightened his grip. “We’re good together, Ellie.”

“You only say that because we have done naughty things together in bed. Things I would like to repeat, if I’m being honest.” The sadness had returned to her eyes, but her

words warmed him. “Once your head clears, you will realize there is nothing in the future for us, wed or not.”

“Not true.”

She huffed. “I’m no one.”

“You are an earl’s daughter.”

“I’m a fallen woman.”

“You are a talented seamstress who has the ability to design gowns for powerful women in the *ton* if you would trust your instincts.”

For the space of a few heartbeats, she watched him. “I cannot have children.”

If she thought she would convince him she was worthless, she was wrong. “As it turns out, I’m not in the market to be a father.” He cocked on eyebrow. “Will there be anything else in the way of excuses? Nothing will change my mind, Ellie. I love you. Every part of you—your past, your present, and your future. I want all of you. Now, will *you* accept *me*, even though I am a no one as well? A man with no prospects, no fortune, and nothing that any proper woman of the *ton* would find attractive in a potential husband.”

The corners of her mouth twitched with the beginnings of a grin. “You are everything a woman should want.” A huff escaped. “Never think you aren’t that, but good thing I’m not a proper woman of the *ton*.” She flicked her attention at something over his shoulder then met his gaze once more. “I suspect that you saw me—the *real* me—when I felt invisible.”

“I did, and sweeting, you sparkle as madly as a jewel in candlelight to me. You set my soul on fire and leave my body in a perpetual state of desire.” Excitement buzzed at the base of Laurence’s spine. “Does that mean you will be my wife?” After all these years, he was seconds away from truly being engaged, and it wasn’t the horror he previously thought.

“Oh, Laurence.” Her chin quivered. “I saw the real you our second day into the trip. Though you think you aren’t a hero, I beg to differ. You have more integrity in your little finger than everyone in my family put together. If rescuing me

is what you need to leave the hurtful things from your past *in* your past, then I am only too happy to play the part of the damsel... except after you rescue me, I want your promise that we will treat each other equally. As partners.”

“Done, and?” He could hardly breathe while waiting for her confirmation.

The proof of her feelings was reflected in her eyes. “Come what may, I cannot fathom my life without you by my side. So yes, Laurence Bannerman, the allegedly disappointing son of Viscount Deerfield, I *will* marry you. Not because I need to lean on a man, and not because I enjoy the physical aspects of a relationship, but first and foremost because I love you, and I’ve grown rather accustomed to having you underfoot.”

“Woo!” Shouting his victory to the midnight Christmas heavens wasn’t exactly proper behavior, but he couldn’t help it. When he went to embrace her, Ellie planted a palm against his chest.

“However, we should probably wed more sooner than later.”

“Why?” He frowned with confusion. “I rather think you are beyond gaining permission from your father, and we certainly don’t need the same from *my* father.”

“Oh, I am not worried about him, and once I negotiate things with my father, we should be able to walk away from the family with a very lovely dowry to help us start our new life together.” Then she winked, and he was able to draw breath again. “You leave *your* father to me. I can be quite persuasive when I want to, and if either of our families don’t wish us in their lives, we will not darken their doors any longer.”

Dear God, she was amazing, and he was slightly afraid of her, but then, she’d had years where she’d had to survive by herself, so he would let her do whatever she wanted. “So why do you want the nuptials precipitated?” Hadn’t she already told him she could never bear children?

A dear blush stained her already cold-reddened cheeks. “I don’t believe I can wait out the weeks of a long engagement without having you in my bed. You see, I am quite addicted to you. I want—no, need—your body against mine, need your mouth and fingers doing delicious things to me. Oh, and I adore it when you read to me from my book of fairy stories. It’s rather cozy doing that while tucked against you in the dark.”

Was there anyone as darling as her? “Ah, Ellie, I don’t know what the future holds, but I do know that we together will do amazing things and turn London on its head.” Then he bundled her into his arms and proceeded to kiss her senseless. Several moments passed while he was lost in the glory that was his soon-to-be wife. Eventually, he pulled away with a groan of regret, for he wanted nothing more than to mark this momentous moment by claiming her body. “We should get back to the manor. We have some plans to make.”

“Indeed, we do. And I have a specific Christmas gift for you I think you will enjoy.”

Was there anyone as lovely as this woman? “I have a gift for you as well.”

“I cannot wait.” Slowly, she removed her cloak. “Put this beneath the wheel to allow for traction.”

“Good idea.” When she shivered, he removed his tailcoat. “Put this on. I don’t wish to ruin it with mud, and you are cold besides.”

“See? You cannot help but be a hero,” she said with a smile as she slipped her arms into the sleeves.

His shaft tightened a bit more, for seeing her wearing his clothing was beyond erotic. What would she look like wearing nothing except that coat? “Well, if you didn’t always need rescuing, I wouldn’t need to be.” He jumped out of the carriage and collected the reins.

“I think we both know that will never change. There is something delicious about knowing a handsome man will always be at my beck and call if I’m desperate enough.”

“Never desperate, just in love.” He couldn’t help a grin. “I rather adore that about you.” With a pat to the horse’s muzzle, he sighed. “Let’s get out of this present pickle. We have a future to attend, and that requires us to go dashing through the snow to reach it.”

And he couldn’t wait to see where fate chose to lead this time, for there was something to be said for changing his ways. It had allowed him to win the hand of the woman he never knew he needed until he’d literally crashed into her on the street a week ago.

Epilogue



December 3, 1820

Liberty House

Portman Square

London, England

Laurence came into the parlor on the ground level of his townhouse in Portman Square—yes, he finally had his dream address—which had been converted into a modiste’s studio almost three years prior, soon after they’d come back to London from the earl’s country estate.

After he’d married Ellie on the last day of the year in 1817, life had begun to shift once more. True to her word, she had talked with her father, and once Laurence had been brought into the narrative, among the three of them, they had designed a settlement that would make everyone happy. The earl had given him two thousand pounds as a dowry for agreeing to remove Ellie from the Comerford family. In that, the earl was unmoving. He wanted nothing else to do with his youngest daughter. However, out of respect for the countess and two of Ellie’s sisters, those ladies were allowed to visit with her while in London.

As for Laurence’s family, they were overwhelmed and all too happy to take Ellie into their bosom with all the love and forgiveness he’d told her they tended to possess. There was much enthusiasm for the match, and they even helped Ellie plan the wedding breakfast after the nuptial ceremony. They’d stepped into the gap made by the earl’s uncaring actions.

His sweet, wonderful, business-headed wife had designed and sewn her own gown for the occasion, and he had never been more impressed with her skill with a needle.

With the princely dowry, Laurence had put a rather lovely downpayment on a modest townhouse in Portman Square. It was on the fringes of Mayfair, and tucked away enough that neither of them was in the midst of the *beau monde*.

The reason they'd converted the downstairs parlor as well as what should have been a library into the modiste's studio was that Ellie opened her own business. She'd been serious about designing gowns for the wealthy women in the *beau monde*. Since he'd married her, she hadn't suffered for clients, and her time was always in demand, which allowed her to charge steeply for her designs. They had even remodeled so the studio had a private entrance that went directly into the space.

That income had allowed them some breathing room regarding finances while he waited for his investments to mature. He'd been able to pay his outstanding invoices and catch up his club dues, not because his wife was London's newest sensation but because he was now officially his father's man-of-affairs, and what was more, he could attend the position in London. Being married meant his father was suddenly interested in Laurence's life, and quite frankly, it was good enough for all involved.

"Dearest, an envelope has arrived for you by special courier, and I believe it bears the seal of Kensington Palace," he said by way of a greeting. Throughout the large room, exquisite gowns reposed on wire dress forms while others were in various stages of development on worktables. Since it was a Sunday, the two seamstresses Ellie had hired were enjoying a day off from toil, but his dear wife could never manage to pull herself away from embroidery at any time. However, she had made him a promise to spend most of every Sunday with him, and since the longcase clock had only just struck eleven in the morning, they had plenty of time.

“Oh?” She stood up from behind her own worktable, brushed the lint and threads from her saffron skirting, and then came toward him. “What does it say?”

“I didn’t open it, for it’s addressed to you.”

Ellie scoffed. “We have no secrets from each other. Go ahead and crack it open. Then we should think about having some luncheon. I’m rather famished.”

“Right.” With curiosity bouncing through his mind, he quickly broke the seal and pulled out a heavy card of ivory vellum. “Oh, dear Lord.”

“What?” Apprehension shadowed her eyes. “Is it bad news?”

“Actually, it’s wonderful news.” He couldn’t believe what he was reading. “It seems news about your embroidery and beading skills have made their way through not only the aristocracy but also to royal ears. This, my dear, is an invitation to create a gown for Victoria, the daughter of the Duke of Kent, for the occasion of her second birthday next May. The representative of the palace says they want only the best, and that they will pay handsomely for it.”

“Is this another bit of teasing?” She joined him and took the card from him. Then she sucked in a breath as her eyes widened. “It’s real.”

“That it is.” His chest swelled with pride. “You have arrived, sweeting. I always knew you had talent, but now England’s first and foremost family has seen it and wants a part.” He tapped the end of her nose. “Your shop’s popularity will surge after this news gets out.”

“Oh.” She bounced her gaze between the card of summons to his face. “While that is a wonderful and unforeseen development, I had hoped now that I’ve become established to perhaps take a step back and concentrate more fully on you. I feel as if I’ve neglected you horribly for the bulk of our marriage.”

“I don’t know how, for I am quite satisfied.” From his perspective, they enjoyed a close and very spirited union, both

in bed and out of it.

“Are you certain?” She took the envelope from him and then laid both it and the card on a nearby table. “Nothing is more important than you in my life. Being married to a kind and compassionate man had long been my dream.”

“I’m certain, but one of your dreams was to own a modiste’s salon. No singular dream is more important than another, and I refuse to hold you back.” Unable to be separated from her, Laurence took her into his arms. “It seems fate is about to lend a hand once more. It’s your decision, though.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I will support whatever you wish.”

“Always the selfless hero,” she whispered before she lifted on her toes and fit her lips to his in a fleeting kiss. Lovelight twinkled in her eyes as she stared up at him. “I shall make the young Victoria’s birthday gown, but I will step back from being in the salon full time. After all, what is the purpose of owning a business if one cannot delegate to workers one has already trained?”

It was no wonder he adored her. “Will your mother visit during Christmastide?”

“No. She always spends that time with my father, so I’d hoped we could go to Surrey this year to see your family.” Her grin had blood surging into his shaft. “I rather like them, but I want to be back in London for our wedding anniversary, because that day belongs exclusively to us.”

“Agreed, but for now?”

“Yes?”

“Luncheon is going to need to wait. My appetites are craving a different sort of sweet.” So saying, he scooped her up into his arms and grinned as she squealed. “In the event your mind plays tricks on you, I love you, I’m proud of you, and you *are* worthy of every good thing.” It was something he tried to reassure her of every so often because he knew what it felt like to feel less than.

“Always so charming,” she murmured as she slipped her arms about his neck. “You have proven yourself more than worthy as well, a man among men, and the keeper of my heart. I love you too.” Then she laid her head on his chest. “Thank you for seeing what I couldn’t that day so long ago when we met on the street.”

“You are quite welcome, but you rescued me at that time, too. Never forget that.” Fate had known what he’d needed—what they had desired—all along. Thankfully, they hadn’t taken the wrong path to each other out of stubbornness or pride.

Every day that went by was a gift, and to live them with Ellie at his side was the sweetest pinnacle of success a man could claim.

A Christmas miracle indeed.

The End



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Author Bio

Sandra Sookoo is a USA Today bestselling author who firmly believes every person deserves acceptance and a happy ending. That is why her characters are not in the usual style and oftentimes struggle with things out of the norm. She's written for publication since 2008. Most days you can find her creating scandal and mischief in the Regency-era, serendipity and happenstance in the Victorian era, or historical romantic suspense complete with mystery and intrigue. Reading is a lot like eating chocolates—you can't just have one book. Give her the chance with one book and you'll be hooked.

When she's not wearing out computer keyboards or mice, Sandra spends time with her real-life Prince Charming in Central Indiana where she also runs a gourmet cookie business and makes moments count with the man because the key to life is laughter. Inspired to storytelling by Walt Disney since the age of ten, when her soul gets bogged down and her imagination flags, a trip to Walt Disney World is in order. Nothing fills the well and fuels her dreams more than the land of eternal happy endings, hope and love stories.

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