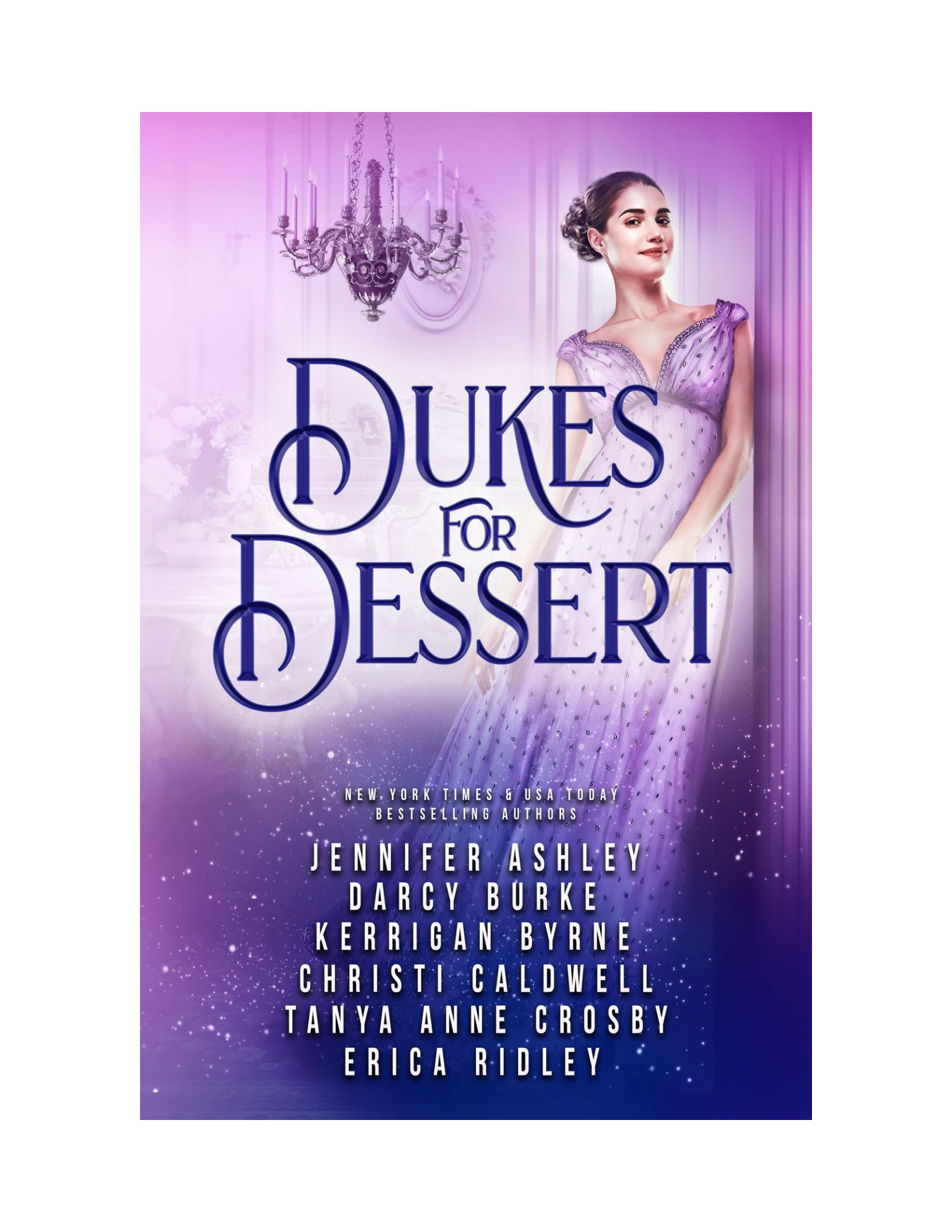


# DUKES FOR DESSERT

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY  
BESTSELLING AUTHORS

JENNIFER ASHLEY  
DARCY BURKE  
KERRIGAN BYRNE  
CHRISTI CALDWELL  
TANYA ANNE CROSBY  
ERICA RIDLEY



The book cover features a woman in a long, elegant, light purple gown with a subtle pattern, standing in a grand ballroom. A large, ornate chandelier hangs from the ceiling. The background is a soft, purple-toned room with a chandelier and a table with flowers. The title 'DUKES FOR DESSERT' is written in a large, blue, serif font, with 'FOR' in a smaller font between 'DUKES' and 'DESSERT'.

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JENNIFER ASHLEY   DARCY BURKE   KERRIGAN BYRNE  
CHRISTI CALDWELL   TANYA ANNE CROSBY   ERICA RIDLEY



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Thank You For Reading

Thank you...

# **A ROGUE MEETS A SCANDALOUS LADY**

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**JENNIFER ASHLEY**



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FEBRUARY, 1893

When the pistol flashed down Regent's Park's green, David Fleming realized his life truly needed to change.

He danced aside as the bullet whined past him, but his unsteady body took him down to the earth, coating his pristine black cashmere suit in mud and grass. David tasted dirt as gravel cut his cheek.

"What the devil are you doing?" Pickering, his second, shouted down at him. "Get up, man. Return the shot."

David groaned as he rolled over, his finger well away from the trigger of his revolver. He felt little pain, because the whisky he'd drunk all night, neat, erased almost all sensation.

"Anyone hit?" he slurred.

Pickering glanced around at the small crowd of gentlemen gathered in the dawn light, his fair hair twitching in the breeze. "Don't think so."

David tried to get his legs under him, couldn't, and stuck up his arm to Pickering. "Help me."

It took Pickering a few moments to realize David was talking to him. Idiot. Finally Pickering hauled David to his feet. Their cronies, young and old, waited without much concern.

"You forfeit," said an older gentleman with side-whiskers, who should have known better than to be in Regent's Park at the crack of dawn,

encouraging duels. “Griffin wins.”

David scrubbed at the mud on his silk waistcoat. “What the hell are we doing, gentlemen? A *duel*? In this day and age? You were expecting to watch us kill each other.”

“An honorable way to settle differences,” the older gentleman said calmly.

He was interrupted by a roar as David’s opponent, a hothead called Oliver Griffin, rushed at him.

“Coward!” Griffin bellowed. “Cheat! Stand still and let me shoot you.”

He waved his pistol in a shaky hand, which Pickering, in alarm, yanked from his grasp. Griffin swayed mightily, as drunk as the rest of them, but he managed to lock his hands around David’s neck.

“Settle it like gentlemen, you said,” he seethed, his spittle showering David. “I’ll settle *you*—”

Griffin held on like a leech. David scrabbled at Griffin’s impossibly tight grip then decided it was time to forget about being a gentleman.

He brought up his fist in a perfect pugilist move to crack Griffin’s chin. If David jerked that chin to the side he could snap Griffin’s neck, but he had no intention of being hauled in for murder this morning. He pushed Griffin off balance then followed up with a smart punch to the man’s eye.

Griffin howled. David slid from him and steadied himself on his feet, using Pickering’s shoulder for support.

“It is done,” he proclaimed to Griffin in a voice men had learned to obey. “We met, you shot. Honor is satisfied. Rules of the game.”

Griffin turned, his face bloody. “You have no honor, Fleming. I’ll kill you! How do I know my sons are even mine? Cuckoos in my nest ...”

David slid his handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the cuts on his cheek. Futile, because the handkerchief was just as grimy as his face.

“I never touched your wife, Griff. She’s an honorable lady and loyal to you, Lord knows why. Be kind to her.”

Griffin only snarled. He'd been so convinced that his wife was having an *affaire de coeur* with the notorious David Fleming that he hadn't stopped to ascertain whether it was true. Griffin's wife was the friend of the Duchess of Kilmorgan, and when the duchess had instructed David to look after Mrs. Griffin at a ball a week ago, David leapt to obey.

If he flirted with the woman, he wasn't to be blamed. She was lonely, unhappy, and married to the boorish Griffin. She'd enjoyed being the center of attention for a few hours, but neither of them had had any intention of taking it further.

Griffin closed his mouth but a look of cunning came over his face. "I don't believe you, but it doesn't matter. I've had my revenge. Ask your darling countess where *she's* been this past week." Instead of leaving it cryptic, Griffin jabbed at his own chest. "With *me*. I've had her, Fleming. In every way possible." He thrust out his pelvis and his friends laughed.

"Poor woman," David said feelingly. He carefully folded his muddy handkerchief and tucked it into his breast pocket. If Griffin wanted his vengeance using David's current mistress, a countess from Bavaria, he was welcome to it. She was an amorous lady, not bothered by which bed she slept in of nights. "No wonder she's been looking peaky. Do give her my best when you see her again."

Time to tip his hat and walk away. Except David couldn't find his hat. Blast it all, he hated to lose it—it was a fine piece of headgear.

He heard another bellow, and damned if Griffin wasn't coming at him again.

How the devil had he let himself be talked into this duel, of all things?

He'd been drunk, that was how. Drunk, weary, and bored, and decided shooting at Griffin would be good fun. But now he was aching and wanted to go home.

David sidestepped as Griffin lunged at him, got the man in a headlock and tidily flipped him onto his back. He'd learned that move from Hart

Mackenzie—after Hart had done it to him.

Griffin cursed and howled. Griffin's friends, cretins, the lot of them, decided David was being unfair, and as one, they threw themselves at him. David went down in a scrum, blows landing on his face, back, arms, his ribs creaking as boots connected with his side.

Above the shouting and swearing came the shrill, piercing whistles of Peelers with arrests on their minds.

The men jerked upright and then dispersed, bolting into the mists. Even Pickering and the older gentleman deserted David, leaving him to the mad rush of dark-suited, helmeted men who pounded toward him.

A muscular arm hauled David to his feet. "You're under arrest, sir," the bobby told him cheerfully. "Causing a disturbance and discharging a firearm."

"If you'll note, constable, *my* firearm wasn't discharged," David began, but the words slurred into nothing as the constable closed a metal cuff around his wrist.



AS JAILS WENT, it was not too bad, David decided. The lockup on Marylebone Road consisted of one small room where the arrests of the night waited for the magistrate's decisions in the morning. David had commandeered a place by the wall, bribing the inhabitants to not steal every piece of clothing on his body by parting with all the coins in his purse. His watch would be next. A man with only one eye kept that eye on it.

The place stank and was filthy, the bodies of sleeping men heaped on the floor. Vermin scratched in dark corners. But at least there was a window, high above, that let them know the sun had fully risen.

Any request that word be taken to David's solicitor, his valet, his very good friend the Duke of Kilmorgan—or even a random person in the street—

had been ignored. The constables who'd dragged him from the park had pushed David in with the other arrests of the night and left him. Now here he lay.

Did the bottom of the slope feel like this?

David's head pounded, his throat was on fire, and his stomach roiled. All he wanted was more whisky to soothe the pain. That and a soft bed, a beautiful woman, and perhaps a cigar.

No, the thought of smoke brought on more nausea. He'd leave the cigar until he felt better.

The door creaked. "Mr. Fleming!" The turnkey bellowed the name without interest.

David climbed painfully to his feet. "Here I am, my good fellow. Have you brought my breakfast?"

A few of the inmates guffawed. "Aye, fetch me a mess of bangers and a bucket of coffee," one croaked.

The turnkey ignored them, his balefulness all for David. "Come on, you."

A bit early to see the magistrate, David mused, though perhaps the man wanted to make a start on his cases for the day. Thieves of apples, handkerchiefs, and children's clothes; ladies selling favors; and David.

He followed the turnkey through a dank passage to a larger room that was empty but for a table and chair. A burly constable joined them and pushed David into the seat.

"Thank you, sir," David said to the turnkey. "Kind of you to show me to my parlor."

"Shut it," the constable said as the turnkey growled and left them. "When the Super comes, you be respectful."

"Superintendent, is he?" David said. "My, I am moving in high circles now."

The constable hit him. A blow across the mouth, not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to make David's head rock back. "I *said*, shut it."

David heaved an aggrieved sigh. He held up his hands as the constable bunched his fist again, and made the motion of turning a key over his lips.

The door opened once more to admit a tall man. David's first instinct was to rise, because the gentleman who entered was one of distinction, but the constable's warning glare kept him to his seat.

Hazel eyes in a hard face met David's, hair that was just touched with red glinted in the bad light. He had the height, the build, and the manner of Hart Mackenzie, the Duke of Kilmorgan, but he wasn't Hart. It was his half-brother, Detective Superintendent Lloyd Fellows.

David relaxed in relief until he saw the frost in Fellows's gaze.

"Oh, come now," David said, giving him his most charming smile. "You don't truly believe I was trying to shoot a man in Regent's Park, no matter how much he goaded me. If you examine my pistol, you'll find it fully loaded and un-fired."

Fellows's face remained granite hard. "Griffin has brought charges of assault and attempted murder on you, and his earl uncle is calling for your blood."

"For pity's sake." David pointed to the bruises on his face. He was plastered with mud, still a bit drunk, and spattered with dried blood. "Does *this* look like I assaulted myself? A solicitor would be a fine thing, Detective Super."

"I have recommended that the magistrate let you return home until this is sorted. He does not like the idea, but he bows to the might of the Duke of Kilmorgan."

David heaved a sigh of gratitude. God himself would bow to the might of Hart Mackenzie.

He rose. "Good old Hart. Thank you, Fellows."

"Sit down." Fellows pointed at the hard chair. David obediently sat, wincing from his bruises.

"It's a serious accusation, Fleming. One that could get you hanged, or at



the very least, sent to Dartmoor. Doesn't matter who your connections are—you're not a peer, so you'll be tried at the Old Bailey with everyone else."

"Griff has to prove it," David said. "I do know that much about the laws of jolly England. Innocent until a jury says I'm guilty." He spread his hands on the unclean table. "I did not discharge my pistol, I promise you. I ducked when Griffin discharged *his* at *me*. I don't know why I bothered—he's a rotten shot."

"I convinced the magistrate there was no immediate evidence to suggest you tried to kill Mr. Griffin. However, many witnessed the ensuing fight. You can bring counter charges against him, of course."

"Bugger that." David once again surged to his feet. "If I'm not being charged, I believe I am free to leave."

Fellows gave him a nod, but a grim one. "Don't flee to the Continent. I have a friend in the Sûreté, and he'd find you, but you'd rather he didn't. I hear you have an estate in Hertfordshire. Perhaps lying low there for a time is a good idea."

David shuddered. His ancestral home—Moreland Park—held too many foul memories. "I will retreat to my London house, pour coffee down my throat, soak in a bath, and sleep for a week. With that satisfy the magistrate?"

"I doubt it." The dry tone in Fellows's voice was something he shared with Hart—that edge that told its recipient he was a damned fool. "Before you withdraw from the world, the duchess requests that you call upon her."

David sank to the chair again, his strength gone. "She does, does she?"

Fellows, David could spar with. Hart Mackenzie, he could face. Hart's wife, Eleanor ... that was another matter entirely.

"Please tell her I am suddenly stricken with a dire disease and must quarantine myself in my house with a cask of whisky."

Fellows regarded him in some pity. "Tell her yourself." He tapped the table once, turned, and walked out.

"Heaven help me," David muttered. It was some time before he made

himself rise and follow the impatient constable out.



DAVID KEPT a stash of Mackenzie malt in his carriage for emergencies. He imbibed a little now to clear his head as his coachman took him to Grosvenor Square.

The Duke of Kilmorgan owned a tall house on one side of the square, which dominated all others around it. The house had been in the family since the late eighteenth century, when the Mackenzie family had begun to prosper once more. The Battle of Culloden, in which they'd fought on the side of the Jacobites, had nearly wiped them out. But the canny Mackenzies had managed to regain their title taken from them as traitors to the crown and recover their fortune. They'd bought the house that had been owned by the Marquess of Ellesmere, and swarmed in.

David was distantly related to the family through his ancestor aunt who had married Angus Mackenzie, the son of the glorious Malcolm Mackenzie and his English wife, Mary.

The distance was everything, David thought as he stared up at the house. Hart was a duke, and his brothers had courtesy titles, large houses, and plenty of money. David, the shirttail relative, was still in his evening dress from the night before, thoroughly coated with mud, and coming tamely to the house when sent for.

Eleanor would be waiting in her parlor, rustling in some silken gown Hart would have bought her. Her red hair would glisten, and she'd have a secret smile on her face that betrayed she was a woman in love—with Hart, of course. There had never been anyone else for Eleanor.

She'd gaze at David with her cornflower blue eyes and ask bluntly what sort of scrape he'd gotten himself into now.

David wouldn't mind, except that once upon a time, he'd been madly in

love with the dratted woman. He'd asked her to marry him, and she'd turned him down with a speed that had made his head spin.

He still cared for her, but the burning passion had subsided. Eleanor and Hart belonged together, and no one could tear them asunder. So be it.

David took another gulp of whisky, which burned to his empty stomach.

He held up the flask in salute. "Apologies, dear El, but you are the one thing I cannot face today." He rapped his stick on the roof. "Hinch!"

A tiny trap door opened, and the eye of his large coachman blinked at him. "Yes, guv?"

"Change of plans. Take me ..." Home? No. His valet, Fortescue, would fuss, and his housekeeper would try to bring him soup, like an invalid. Someone would send word to Hart, and Eleanor would corner him. Or his solicitor would pop by to discuss the grave charges, or Griffin would send his solicitors to threaten David.

London wouldn't do, and neither would Hertfordshire. Scotland? No, too many Mackenzies in Scotland.

There was only one place in the world David could think to go, and he wasn't certain of his welcome even there.

"To Shropshire," he finished.

Hinch's eye widened. "Guv? Ye want me to drive you all the way to Shropshire?"

"Yes. If we make a start, we'll arrive early tomorrow morning."

"But it's me wife's birthday." The red-rimmed eye held pleading.

David heaved a sigh. "You're right, Hinchie. I'm being selfish. Take me to a station and get me on a train heading west. Then do as you please."

"Thank ye, guv." Hinch vanished. The carriage jerked forward, nearly dislodging David from the seat, and made at a swift pace for Euston Station.



DAVID HAD little recollection of the journey. He swayed in the first class carriage alone, finishing off his flask before a waiter helpfully brought him champagne. He had little to eat, as he doubted his ability to keep anything down.

The Shropshire hamlet he aimed for lay well south of Shrewsbury. David had to change trains several times, assisted onto the last, small chugging train by a stationmaster who more or less hoisted him aboard and dropped him into a seat.

By the time they reached the village three miles from David's destination, he was well inebriated and mostly asleep. He vaguely remembered being escorted from the train and pushed onto a dogcart as he mumbled the direction.

The jolting, sickening cart finally halted then listed as the driver climbed down. "You're here, guv."

*Here* was very, very dark, and utterly cold. David had no recollection of what he was doing or where he'd been trying to reach.

Light shone in his face, and David cringed. The driver and another man who'd joined them hauled David out of the cart and to his feet, but David promptly collapsed as soon as they let him go.

He fell on wet paving stones with grass between them. The boots in front of him drew back, and a face bent toward him. The head was shaggy and a white noose encircled its neck. David flung up his hands, crying out.

"Good heavens," a rumbling voice said, and the face resolved into one of comforting familiarity. The white noose, David realized, was the collar of a country vicar.

"Sanctuary," David whispered.

The vicar stared at David for a time before he let out a sigh. "Help me get him inside," he said to the driver.

The next memory David had after that was light.

Far too much light, pounding through his eyelids and searing at his

temples. He groaned.

The sound was loud, and David cut it off. He lay for a long time in dire misery before he realized he was in a bed piled high with quilts, a rather comfortable one at that.

The bedroom was tiny, with whitewashed walls, the ceiling sloping abruptly down to the eaves. David discovered this fact when he sat up and banged his head on a roof beam. A window about four feet square let in the dazzling sunlight.

His coat and waistcoat had been removed, but not his trousers. He tried very hard to remember where he was and why he'd come here, but at the moment, all was a blur.

When he at last dragged himself from the bed, David couldn't find his coat, but a dressing gown had been draped over a chair. Ah, well, the inhabitants of this house would have to take David as he came.

David struggled with the dressing gown, only managing to get one arm inside before he found the door to the bedroom and opened it. This led onto a landing, no other doors around it. If he hadn't hesitated on the threshold, he'd have plunged straight down the stairs.

Recollection about where he was grew as he went down the staircase, its wood dark with time. At the bottom lay a whitewashed passage that ran the length of the cottage. If David remembered aright, *this* door led to a dining room. He didn't particularly want food, but Dr. Pierson would have thick, strong coffee, and at the moment, it was all David craved.

He chose the correct door, stumbled into the room, and collapsed onto a chair on one side of the table, eyes closing. He slumped forward, forehead resting on the polished table, and let out another groan.

A hot beverage slid toward him. David could tell by the scent that curled into his nose that it was tea.

"Coffee," he mumbled. "For the love of God."

"Tea might be a wee bit better in your condition," a light voice said. "I've

read books on the matter.”

The speaker was not Dr. Pierson, David’s longtime friend and sometime mentor, a burly man with a beard and a rumbling voice. This voice held a clarity that slid through David’s stupor and touched something deep inside him.

He raised his head—carefully.

And beheld the most beautiful woman in the world. She sat across the table from him, surrounded by a halo of light, and gazed at him with unblinking green eyes.



Is he quite all right?" Sophie asked her uncle.

Lucas Pierson, the vicar of this parish, shook his head and raised a cup of tea to his bearded lips. "Not really."

Sophie studied the lump of humanity who'd landed at Uncle Lucas's breakfast table. He'd managed to get one arm into Uncle's best dressing gown but no more. The other arm lay on the table in a soiled shirt sleeve, the cuff open to reveal a sinewy hand and part of a well-muscled forearm.

A tangled mess of dark brown hair covered the head partly raised, as did dirt and bits of grass. His face was brushed with a shadow that said he'd missed a shave for two or three days. The rest of the face was interesting—square shape, nose not too long but not small, skin rather pale, the lightness of the far north, Scotland perhaps.

His eyes, though. Sophie's teacup hesitated on the way to her lips. She was not certain of the color just now—blue, she thought, or gray, or some shade in between. A lake on a cloudy day.

Those eyes were intense and, even though now bloodshot, held strength of will that kept Sophie from glancing away from him.

"Does he speak at all?" Sophie asked.

Uncle Lucas chuckled. "Sometimes far too much. My dear, this sorry specimen is my old friend, Mr. David Fleming. I look upon him as a

reprobate son or younger brother, as my mood takes me.” He raised his voice and directed his next words to the motionless, staring form. “David, if you can understand me, this is my niece, Sophie ... er, Tierney.”

Sophie tried not to flinch at Uncle’s hesitation, and held her breath, waiting for Mr. Fleming’s reaction. Uncle Lucas hadn’t used Sophie’s married name, but as everything about her had been dragged through the newspapers sideways, Mr. Fleming must certainly have read her history.

The gray-blue eyes blinked a few times, no recognition in them. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Tierney.” The deep voice grated somewhat, as though he’d not drunk water in a fortnight. “Forgive my present, deplorable state. I ...” He slumped to the tabletop. “It is a long story.”

Sophie let out her breath in relief. Mr. Fleming hadn’t heard of her, or at least did not remember in his wretched condition. Odd, but she’d be grateful for it. She’d sought sanctuary here, in Uncle Lucas’s out-of-the-way parish in a corner of Shropshire. Here she could be merely Dr. Pierson’s niece, not the notorious Lady Devonport, the Whore of Babylon.

She studied the man across from her with more interest. Sophie had heard of her uncle’s friend, Mr. Fleming, but she’d never met him. He was a colleague of the Duke of Kilmorgan, a scandalous Scotsman who dressed in kilts and vowed to make Scotland an independent nation.

Sophie’s husband, Laurie Whitfield, the Earl of Devonport, was in a decidedly anti-Scots faction, and she’d never been invited into the Duchess of Kilmorgan’s circle.

Mr. Fleming had a breathtaking presence, even in this stage between inebriation and illness. His half-dressed state fascinated her—Sophie’s husband remained completely clothed at all times, except when he became babe-naked for his half hour attempt to beget an heir on her.

Mr. Fleming would be a handsome gentleman if he cleaned up a bit, not that Sophie was interested in handsome gentlemen. They could stay far, far away, thank you very much.

She lifted her teacup, managing to take a sip this time. “Did you have a wrestling match with a lawn?” she asked him.

“Very amusing.” Mr. Fleming’s slurring voice was touched with Scots, but only a touch. “It was a close-run thing, but the lawn finally let me go.”

Sophie chuckled. He was so self-deprecating that she couldn’t help it. She’d had her fill of arrogant men who could do no wrong.

A fleeting smile touched his mouth, increasing his handsomeness. A dangerous man, Sophie concluded. No lady would be safe with him. She sipped tea and felt momentary envy for those ladies.

“I had no idea you had company, Pierson.” Mr. Fleming attempted to lift his teacup, but his fingers shook so much, the tea slopped over. “I beg your pardon. I can take myself off.” He sucked tea from his fingertips, mouth puckering in inadvertent sensuality.

“You’re in no condition to take yourself anywhere,” Uncle Lucas said sternly. “I imagine you were running from the law or an angry husband or furious MPs. Or all three. Stay until you’re in fighting form again. I imagine that’s why you sought me out.”

Mr. Fleming winced at his blunt speech. “Delicate ears, Pierson.”

“I keep no secrets from my niece. If I allow a man to stay under the same roof as she, she deserves to know the truth about him.”

“I have no wish to cause a scandal.” Mr. Fleming sat up straight in an attempt to draw his dignity around him. A lock of hair fell over one eye. When he tried to brush it back, the loose sleeve of the dressing gown caught on his saucer and sent it to the floor with a crash. “Damnation.” He started to reach for the saucer, then grabbed his head and righted himself, falling back into the chair. “*Bloody* hell ... Sorry, Miss Tierney. I am a lout this morning.”

Sophie was laughing again. “Drink the tea, sir. All of it. It’s oolong. It will do you good.”

“No wish to cause a scandal?” Uncle Lucas asked Mr. Fleming in surprise. Uncle took a hearty bite of his eggs and toast, which made Mr.

Fleming go a bit green. “You mean one different from the others you’ve caused in your lifetime?”

“Miss Tierney is unchaperoned.” Mr. Fleming’s admonition, like a maiden aunt’s, was so out of place that Sophie’s amusement grew.

“*I am her chaperone,*” Uncle Lucas said emphatically. “Besides, she’s a married woman. Also seeking sanctuary.”

“Why?” Mr. Fleming at last got the teacup to his mouth. He took a gulp of the contents and swallowed, the green tinge leaving his skin. “Is her husband a boor?”

He truly hadn’t heard of her. Sophie sent her uncle a warning look before she rose from her chair. “If you’ll excuse me one moment, I’ll bring you something to soothe your ills, Mr. Fleming.”

Mr. Fleming realized she was standing and hauled himself to his feet.

He was tall. Very tall. Laurie stood shorter than Sophie by a good inch, which always made her feel awkward and others titter. She made certain never to wear high-heeled slippers near him. Mr. Fleming would not make his lady feel awkward, and she could wear as high a heel as she wished.

At the moment, his height didn’t agree with him. Mr. Fleming swayed mightily, and Sophie skimmed from the room so the poor man could sit down again.

She bustled to the kitchen and through it to the larder beyond. Mrs. Corcoran, the cook and housekeeper, gave Sophie a nod, asking if she could be of any help. The lady was used to Sophie running in and out to mix her herbal concoctions or ask for a recipe.

Sophie’s happiest times in girlhood had been her visits to her uncle in Shropshire. Uncle Lucas, a lifelong bachelor, lived a simple life tending his parish, writing sermons, and researching Britain’s deep past.

Sanctuary indeed. Here, the intervening years fell away—the giddiness of Sophie’s debutante days, the strange excitement of her grand wedding, the disillusionment that married life brought. Next had come the disappointment

when she didn't conceive, and finally anguish when Laurie decided to exchange her for a new wife.

The divorce case had yet to commence—the solicitors were putting arguments together for the long and complicated process. Laurie had decided to blame everything on Sophie and drag her through the mud.

Unable to take the betrayal in her own household, Sophie had fled to Uncle's vicarage, to the one place she could find peace. Even visiting her parents brought no relief, as they were sorrowful and upset about the whole turn of events. Uncle, upon her unexpected arrival, had merely said, "Ah there you are, my dear. Have a look at this map—a survey from the seventeenth century. It plots the old Roman settlements excellently."

Mr. Fleming appeared as though he'd been dragged through the mud, quite literally. As Sophie mixed her potion, making certain to put in plenty of cayenne, she realized that for the first time in a long while, Mr. Fleming had made her interested in another person. She'd been so sunk in her own defeat that even conversing on the weather had been a chore, and she'd avoided her friends—the ones still speaking to her, that is.

She shook the herbs, egg, and spices together, poured the concoction into a glass, and carried it out, thanking Mrs. Corcoran as she went.

"There." Sophie set the glass in front of Mr. Fleming as he struggled to rise upon her entrance. "No, please do not get up. I believe it would be quite dangerous for you."

Mr. Fleming sank from the half-standing position he'd managed and eyed the gray-green mixture in the glass with suspicion. "What the devil is *that*?"

"A cure for your condition. Or at least a palliative. You'll feel much better once it's down."

Sophie resumed her seat and finished her last piece of toast—loaded with butter, the way she liked it.

"I'd take her advice," Uncle Lucas said. "Her little potions do amazing things for me when I take cold."

Mr. Fleming tapped the glass. "It looks like sick. Smells like it too."

"Perhaps Uncle should hold your nose while I pour it into your mouth," Sophie said as she munched.

Mr. Fleming glared at her. "Did *you* raise your niece to be so cheeky, Pierson? Or does it run in the family?"

"Drink the potion," Uncle Lucas ordered. "As you are staying in my house, I would like you to be less bearlike and more amenable to bathing."

Mr. Fleming looked hurt. "I told you I'd take myself off."

"And I know you have nowhere to go, else you'd have gone there instead. You only seek me when you're at the end of your tether." Uncle gave him a severe look. "Drink."

Mr. Fleming eyed Sophie again. She took a noisy sip of tea, meeting his gaze squarely.

Mr. Fleming heaved a long sigh. He held his own nose and took a large swallow from the glass.

He had to let go of both nose and glass to cough. He fumbled for a handkerchief and didn't find one, so he coughed into the sleeve of Uncle's dressing gown. But the potion stayed down.

"What did you put into this?" he rasped at Sophie. "Oil of vitriol?"

"Only things growing in Uncle's garden. And from the market—wherever Mrs. Corcoran obtains her comestibles."

"Belladonna?" he snapped. "I imagine that grows in the garden." Mr. Fleming drew another long breath and took a second swallow. "Oil of vitriol, I swear it."

"Nonsense. It's a bit of pepper to warm your stomach."

"Warm it? Or set it on fire?" Mr. Fleming coughed again, but already he sounded stronger.

"My mother swears by it," Sophie said. "Helped my grandfather no end."

"I can bear witness to that," Uncle Lucas said.

"He lived a long and happy life, your grandfather?" Mr. Fleming



growled.

“Indeed,” Sophie said. “Passed away at a ripe old age, falling off his horse.”

Mr. Fleming sent her a dark look. “Very encouraging.” Sophie noticed that he finished the drink.

Uncle Lucas leaned his elbows on the table. “Get some breakfast down you, Fleming, then clean yourself up. Now that you’re here, you can help work on my villa.”

Mr. Fleming groaned. “You’re not still hunting for *that*, are you? I thought you’d given up years ago.”

“Of course I haven’t given up,” Uncle said in a tone bordering on shock. “It’s there, mark my words.”

Sophie sympathized with Mr. Fleming’s dismay. Uncle had been scrambling around the knobby hills beyond the vicarage for years, convinced a Roman villa lay buried beneath the thick grass and scrub. He’d once found the remains of an ancient brooch of forged gold, and he was convinced that a wealthy Roman, or at least a Romanized Briton, had built a vast country estate somewhere nearby.

“A walk sounds lovely, Uncle.”

Mr. Fleming only glowered, but reached for a piece of toast from the platter on the table, scattering crumbs as he ate.



“ONLY YOU WOULD DRAG a man in my condition out into the freezing mist at the crack of dawn,” David grumbled as he trudged the familiar path past the village church and out into the fields.

The sun was shining in spite of the earlier fog, and the day would be fine, if cold. David knew he should rejoice in the chance of fair weather, should skip and hop as though thrilled to be out of doors, and any moment sing

along with the birdsong. He tramped forward, huddled in his coat, wondering why the be-damned birds had to sing so loudly.

He had to admit, however, that birds twittering in the trees, tiny lambs like puffs of wool on the green, and the clearing blue sky to show the ruined abbey on a far hill was a damn sight better than smoky London with dullards trying to shoot him, then banging him up for assault.

The company was much better too. Dr. Pierson was the sort of nonsense fellow David needed right now, and his niece ...

David realized Pierson had nattered on about his niece in the past, but he'd pictured a schoolgirl in braids and never thought a thing about her. David had even heard Pierson tell him she'd married, but again, he'd had the fleeting image of a simpering young bride and then forgot about her.

He hadn't been prepared for the black-haired beauty with green eyes and a straightforward stare who'd gazed at him fearlessly across the breakfast table. Still less prepared for her frank assessment of his half-inebriated, half-hungover state, which had obviously not impressed her.

David was used to women fawning over him no matter how he appeared. He did not confuse this fawning with delight or love or a natural reaction to the glory that was David Fleming. The ladies usually wanted something from him—money, favors, escape from their narrow lives for a few hours.

Sophie Tierney didn't need anything from David. He was her uncle's old friend, and that was all. She saw past his flummery and sardonic sneer to the very sad man behind it. And again, was not impressed.

She'd dressed sensibly for the outing, he noted. Female fashion had discarded the massive bustle, replacing it with sleeves so ballooning that David expected the ladies to be lifted off the ground at the first puff of wind. Miss Tierney, however, had eschewed the new style, at least for this country tramp. Her blouse was plain over a narrow skirt, and she wore a long jacket against the cold, and stout boots. No billowing sleeves in sight. Her wide-brimmed hat was large enough to keep off the sun and any rain that might

fall.

David had left clothes at the vicarage over the years, which Mrs. Corcoran kept clean for him, so he had a suitable ensemble for slogging through muddy fields. It wasn't often he had the chance to wear gaiters laced to his knees.

Thus, three mad folk trudged forth to dig up the past. At least, one mad Englishman and two people who humored him.

Unlike society ladies David did his best to avoid, Sophie didn't fill in the space with inane chatter. No inquiries about his family, how his country estate fared, what he thought about gardening, or Gilbert and Sullivan. She was refreshingly quiet.

Of course, this meant he learned nothing about her. Who was this husband she avoided, why had she decided to hide with Dr. Pierson, why hadn't Pierson mentioned she was breathtakingly beautiful?

He tried not to watch the way she walked, head up, back straight, her skirt swaying. She was a married woman, and not the sort of married woman with whom David had liaisons. That was to say—she was respectable.

Pierson's strides grew longer and more animated as they neared the mounds, he as eager as ever. What he claimed were Roman ruins were little more than lumps in the middle of a pasture. The squire who owned the field, one of Pierson's parishioners, was a patient gentleman who let Pierson dig up his land as much as he pleased, as long as the sheep didn't mind.

The sheep in question, a flock that looked remarkably the same to David year after year, nibbled grass some distance away. Only a few ever strayed to the long mounds, as lush foliage lay elsewhere.

"Furrows," David said as Pierson squatted down to examine the long heap of dirt that hadn't changed much since the last time David had been here. "Ancient ones perhaps, but hardly a villa."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Pierson returned. "I found a stone here the other day."

“My, my.” David surveyed the vast green land, which smelled of sheep and mud, not the smoke and refuse of London. “A stone. In a pasture. How extraordinary. I ought to have placed a wager with my bookmaker.”

“He has a point, Uncle,” Sophie broke in.

David tried to hide his pleasure that Sophie agreed with him. “Ah, wisdom speaks.”

Pierson creaked to his feet and surveyed them both with pity. “A stone with Latin writing on it.”

“Oh.” Sophie sounded more interested. “What did it say?”

Pierson spread his arms to make his grand pronouncement. “It said: *Left. Bottom.*”

David raised his brows. “Hardly Cicero, my friend.”

More pity from Pierson. “They are builders’ marks. The blocks were marked according to the plan so the builders would know which way the walls were put together. The inscription didn’t actually spell out the words *left* and *bottom*, but had letters indicating that.”

Sounded slightly more promising, but it was David’s policy to tease Pierson whenever he could.

“You know those could be stones from a pig’s bier or a sheep pen from medieval times. Disappointing to a classicist, I know, but possible.”

“Have you ever paid *any* attention to my lectures?” Pierson asked. “A Roman stone and handwriting is vastly different from the medieval. In the middle ages, a builder was more likely illiterate. They still made marks, but often in pictures or simple symbols.”

“I beg your pardon,” David said, giving him a bow. “I concede your expertise. You found a stone with Latin letters on it. Excellent.”

“Quite excellent,” Sophie said. “Exciting, even. I am willing to believe in the villa, even if Mr. Fleming does not.”

“Did I ever say I didn’t believe?” David said, widening his eyes. “I am merely skeptical. Pierson wants to find this villa so much he sees things

others do not.”

“It only means he is keenly observant,” Sophie said. “Where do you wish me to start, Uncle?”

“In that corner, if you’d like.” Pierson pointed to earth that had already been raked back. “Don’t tire yourself unduly, my dear.”

“Do not worry. I am quite robust.”

Pierson had taken over a deserted small byre nearby where he stored tools so he would not have to lug them back and forth from the vicarage, and had set up trays for his finds and a table where he could examine them. He unlocked its door, and Sophie dove in, choosing a trowel from the shelves.

Pierson retrieved two spades and held one out to David. “There you are. Have at it, my friend.”

David stared at the shovel. “You expect me to dig? Are you mad?”

Sophie was already on her knees, happily jabbing her trowel into the earth. “Perhaps he fears spoiling his work clothes. He seems to prefer to ruin his evening dress instead.”

“Of course,” David said. “Silk and cashmere are far better for landing on the grass. Actually, when I sought refuge here, I envisioned spending my days in the cozy sitting room with a pipe. Perhaps a brandy at my elbow.”

“That wouldn’t clear your head.” Pierson shoved the spade at him, and David closed reluctant fingers around the handle. “Good hard work is what you need. And if we find the villa, your name and Sophie’s will feature prominently in my monograph on the matter.”

“Just the sort of literature my friends peruse,” David said, straight-faced. “I’ll be famous.”

“I would be honored,” Sophie gestured with her trowel. “Can you turn over this bit for me, Mr. Fleming? Or would you rather pontificate on why you don’t wish to soil your working gloves?”

David growled, then drove the spade into the area she indicated with more emphasis than necessary.

Sophie had obviously decided David was a lily-handed dandy who couldn't lift a finger to manual labor. Embarrassing and annoying. David had played rugby at school and still rode and boxed with the best of them. He admitted he affected the lazy persona in order to make people lower their guard with him—politics had turned him into a heinous creature. But there was more to David than met the eye. He was certain of this.

“I begin to understand why your husband suggested you take a holiday from him,” he said as he rammed the spade into the soil. “You do have pointed ways of putting things.”

Sophie jerked her head up. David regretted the words instantly, and even more when Sophie gave him a fleeting look of naked pain.

Before he could utter an apology, she swiftly turned her attention to the earth and began digging hard, her silence deafening.

David gazed down at Sophie, his heart banging, realizing he'd just ruined the camaraderie he'd begun with her.

Pierson had moved off and was no help. David knew damn well he'd put his foot into it, but it was hardly his fault. Pierson really ought to send out bulletins on his family members, required reading before visits.

"My apologies, dear lady," David said in his gentlest voice. "I did not mean to give offense. My tongue gets away from me sometimes."

Sophie threw him a glance over her shoulder that was too neutral to be true. "Please dig just there." She continued to jab at the ground, doing no good David could see.

Feeling the invigorating concoction rapidly wearing off, David began to dig, her obedient servant.



SOPHIE'S BREATH CAME FAST, her hurt too sharp. She shouldn't mind—it didn't matter—everyone was saying such things. But she hadn't wanted Mr. Fleming to think the worst of her.

She didn't know why his opinion mattered so much—she barely knew the man—but perhaps she wanted her uncle's friends to take her side.

Mr. Fleming began to dig in earnest after his apology, which was abject, she had to concede. Her tongue sometimes ran away with her too.

And why, when she thought about his tongue, did she grow warm inside?

Sophie was finished with men. Once her marriage finally ended, she'd retreat here or to her father's house and live out her life in solitude, perhaps raising sheep or digging up artifacts. Or she'd move to France and join a convent—she hadn't quite decided.

Mr. Fleming's shovel halted. Leather creaked as he sank next to her, the gaiters he'd donned to protect his trousers folding around powerful calves.

"I truly do sincerely and humbly apologize." His voice was deep, full, and his warm breath touched her cold cheek. "I have no business dabbling in other people's marriages. I've come to grief that way before—you'd think I'd have learned."

Against her wishes, faint amusement cut through her misery. Mr. Fleming could drawl an insult one moment and entirely undercut its sting the next by throwing the insult back on himself.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Fleming." Sophie resumed turning over rich loam.

"I'm an unmitigated ass." David put his hand on her wrist, stilling its movement. "I will be in agony until you forgive me."

Sophie raised her head. Her hat caused him to lean out of her way, which he did in a comical fashion.

But what was in his eyes stunned her. She saw anger, intense and heartbreaking, not at Sophie, but at himself. He hated that he'd hurt her, unhappy that he'd given offense to the niece of his friend.

His eyes were that intriguing blue-gray she'd noted before, even more fascinating now that the bloodshot tinge had gone from them. They were eyes that saw much and processed knowledge quickly. A dangerous man ... and a captivating one.

Mr. Fleming was also very handsome. He didn't have the conventional



looks her female friends prized—no golden hair or Adonis profile. He was dark-haired with the red highlight she'd noticed before, his pale skin brushed with freckles.

He also had a presence she couldn't grow used to. She had the feeling Mr. Fleming would command her attention whether they were in a ballroom, on a public road, or digging in the mud. That presence sent tingles across her skin and made breathing difficult.

"I said it was nothing," she managed. "I assumed everyone knew of my ... situation."

Mr. Fleming's gaze intensified. "Why? Who is your husband?"

Sophie let out a little sigh. Ah, well, he'd find out sooner or later. "The Earl of Devonport." The name lay thickly on her tongue.

Mr. Fleming blinked once, twice. "Good Lord, you married *Lackwit Laurie*? That damnable little tick?"

Sophie's face grew unbearably hot. "Unfortunately."

"I knew him at school. Unfortunately. Hang on, that means *you're* the Countess of Devonport. The wife he's divorcing."

Sophie swallowed, trying to make her nod nonchalant. "As you see me."

Mr. Fleming peered at her in the blatant way so many gentlemen had once Laurie had destroyed her reputation, no more polite curiosity.

"He wants rid of *you*?" he demanded. "What the devil is wrong with him? Is he blind? Barking mad? Oh, wait, of course he is. He didn't gain the name *Lackwit Laurie* for nothing."

Mr. Fleming's reaction was more flattering than most, but Sophie tried not to warm to it. She could trust so very few these days.

"According to his solicitors, I am an adulteress—many times over." If she said it quickly, like a joke, it didn't gall so much—almost. "I protested my innocence, but of course, I am a liar as well."

"What does *that* matter?" Mr. Fleming said with admiring astonishment. "If you'd paraded an entire acrobat team through his house and amused

yourself with each member, he'd still be a damned fool for putting you aside. If *I* were married to such a lovely woman, I'd look the other way so hard that my head would be on backwards. What sort of poxy bastard would do this to you?" He cut off with an exasperated noise. "Forgive my language—again. I'm not used to guarding my tongue."

"Obviously," Sophie said shakily.

Mr. Fleming grabbed Sophie's trowel and stabbed the dirt repeatedly. "I will just have to speak to Lackwit Laurie."

"No."

The word came out more sharply than she meant it. Mr. Fleming stared at her—he hovered too close.

"I mean, please, do not," Sophie made herself say in a quieter tone. "My name is already in every newspaper, and I'm certain a gentleman dashing in to defend me, however kindly meant, will only make things worse. I would rather remain here at Uncle's until the divorce is finished."

"Hiding away?"

"Yes." Sophie met his gaze. "As you apparently are."

"Touché." Mr. Fleming's lips parted, as though he meant to say more, but he shook his head. "I should have taken *him* to Regent's Park," he muttered.

"Pardon?" Sophie asked, blinking at the non sequitur.

"Nothing." Mr. Fleming dropped the trowel and climbed to his feet, grabbing the spade. "Shall we give up on this furrow and try the next one?"



DAVID DECIDED to say nothing more to Sophie or Pierson about Sophie's marriage and apparently insane husband the rest of the morning, but thoughts spun in his head. And schemes. He couldn't help himself—scheming was his nature.

The day warmed slightly, but not much. The exertion of digging,

scrambling up and down mounds, and arguing with Pierson heated David's blood and burned out the rest of the alcohol. His body wanted more, but he decided to give it tea instead. Mac Mackenzie had managed to clear himself of all drink, and now imbibed fine-tasting teas he had specially blended for him. Perhaps David would take up his habits.

Easy to have grand intentions when the fit first struck. By the time he sat in Pierson's study that night, Sophie retiring soon after supper, David was happy to accept a goblet of brandy and drink of it deeply.

He regretted the large sip, however, as the sour liquid burned his mouth and choked him on the way to his belly.

"This is foul," he said to Pierson with a gasp. "You ought to let me send you better."

"It is good enough for a poor vicar of a country parish," Pierson answered, taking a modest sip. "Which I am. I like living humbly. A little humility would not go amiss for *you*, my friend."

"Not my fault I was born into the gentry and inherited my father's estates and money." David took another sip, decided it wasn't worth it, and set the brandy aside. His cigar, from the case he always carried with him, was of the finest stock, so he lit that instead.

Dr. Pierson deigned to accept a cigar from him, and soon both men were puffing in contented silence.

"Now then," David said when he couldn't contain himself any longer. "Your niece. Why didn't you tell me she was married to Lackwit Laurie Devonport?"

Pierson gave him a sidelong look. "You never asked. Nor was it your business. He's an earl, so I assumed you knew Devonport. You aristocrats stick together."

"I'm not a peer, only distantly related to one." David sat up straighter and laid his cigar in a bowl. "I did go to school with Devonport, when he was the Honorable Mr. Laurie Whitfield, and I loathed him. Most of my circle did.

You should have seen the things Hart Mackenzie did to him, or caused to have done to him. Hart ruled a band of reprobates who'd do anything he commanded. I was one them, naturally."

"Yes, I remember." Pierson gave him a disapproving frown. "I never liked Devonport, and I did voice objection to the match. But Sophie wanted the marriage, as did her mother and father, and so I kept my peace. I'm not certain Sophie was ever truly in love with the man, but she was young and excited, and in love with the hullabaloo that surrounds weddings. So many get caught up in the wedding plans and the gowns and flowers and all the nonsense that they forget what *marriage* means. That the vows are just that—vows. Promises that you'll be true to the other person, their partner in all ways, no betrayals—"

"Yes, yes," David said hastily. Pierson was apt to go on about the lofty meaning of marriage if one didn't stop him, an amusing trait in a bachelor. "What happened? Why isn't Lackwit ecstatically happy that he has a beautiful woman with a saucy tongue and an intellect nurtured by you to go to bed with every night? He objects to her lovers, does he? What reason is that to put aside such a marvelous lady?"

Pierson's eyes took on a glint of anger. "Sophie has no lovers. She is an honorable young woman. The lovers are an invention of Devonport's so he can bring a charge of criminal conversation. He's even persuaded a few of his toady friends to testify in court that they had ..." He broke off and cleared his throat. "You know ..."

"Carnal knowledge of her? Don't be delicate—plain speech is best." David lifted his cigar and took a brusque puff. "Now I am convinced that Devonport's barking mad. For what reason is he so unhappy with that beautiful young woman that he *invents* her adultery? Does she snore? Sing horribly when he's attempting to sleep? Did she try to poison him? Wouldn't blame her there. I'm sorry, but I cannot imagine what sin *she* has committed to cause a man to want to put her aside."

“You believe me that the charges are lies?” Pierson asked in surprise.

“Why wouldn’t I? You are the most truthful man I know. And you are not naive about the world, no matter how you hide yourself away in this corner of it. If you say Sophie is innocent, then she is. Besides, I know plenty of women who stray, and you are right—she is not the sort. What I cannot fathom is *why* Devonport wants rid of her. The concoction she made me drink was foul, true, but she was right. It made me feel much better, very quickly. That is no reason to turn a woman out of doors.”

“Money.” Pierson held his cigar loosely and looked sad. “That is why he is ruining Sophie’s life.”

David frowned. “Ah. I begin to see a glimmer.”

“Sophie had a large dowry, and an inheritance that went to her husband when she married. My sister and her husband were dazzled by Devonport’s title and did not make the wisest choices in the marriage settlements.”

“And Devonport went through the inheritance,” David guessed. “He is extravagant.”

“Exactly. The dowry, the money, and the property Sophie held are gone. Now Devonport has his eye on another lady, a widow who is sumptuously wealthy.”

“What woman would marry him after what he’s doing to his first wife?” David asked in amazement.

“Devonport has cultivated public sympathy for himself at Sophie’s expense. They listen to *him*, not Sophie. He is much higher born than she is, and his word carries weight, especially with those who do not know him well. Likely this widow believes she’ll soothe him from all his hurts—ladies do like to think they’ll be the nurturing angel who heals the misunderstood hero. Plus she’ll become the Countess of Devonport and a grand hostess, which must be too enticing to turn her back on.”

“There are no children,” David mused. “I’ve never read an excited birth announcement regarding the next little Devonport.”

“Another strike against Sophie. She has not produced the requisite son and heir, though they’ve been married five years. The widow whom Devonport wishes to marry already has two small children—she is obviously fertile.”

“Dear God.” David felt ill.

Society would consider Sophie lucky to have landed Devonport in marriage. Pierson’s family, no matter that Pierson had an amazing brain and much compassion, were inconsequential. Pierson’s sister, Sophie’s mother, had married a kind nobody—a gentleman with a Cambridge education but no family connections that lifted him above the ordinary. Mr. Tierney had money in a trust from his mother specifically to give Sophie a start, which was why she’d had a fine dowry with a small piece of property attached to it. But though Sophie’s father was a respectable gentleman, he had no prominent career, no connections among the ruling class, and no ambitions. So Pierson had told him.

Sophie had gone from nonentity to countess, her husband a peer of the realm and prominent in the House of Lords. Society wouldn’t forgive her for betraying this lofty man, no matter what they thought about him personally.

David had mostly ignored Lackwit Laurie since school, because he’d grown from pompous and stupid boy to pompous and stupid man, not worth bothering about. Devonport had never done anything to annoy Hart personally, and so Hart hadn’t asked David to ruin him.

But wouldn’t it be satisfying to?

“I’ll have to run up to London soon,” David said, hiding his sudden enthusiasm behind his cigar. “Business keeps marching, even when I’m rusticating. May I presume upon your hospitality and have my room again when I return?”

Pierson’s eyes narrowed. “Please stay clear of this business, Fleming. Sophie has had enough pain. I do not want her name associated with yours—that would make things worse for her. No matter how fond I am of you, you

know it's true."

David widened his eyes. "Why would you believe me rushing to London to meddle in Sophie's affairs? I've had charges of assault brought against me, and I need to find a barrister to defend me, or try to convince Griffin to drop it, which would be best all around. I do have my own troubles, you know."

"I believe it because I know you," Pierson said. "Leave it alone."

David subsided, or pretended to. "I only wish to help a damsel in distress."

"And I know your reputation with damsels. Sophie is my niece, first and foremost. I realize she is not the sort of lady on whom you usually sate your libidinous nature, or I'd never have allowed you the house, but you do like to manipulate people. For Sophie's sake, please leave it alone."

David raised his hands, the cigar trickling smoke. "I understand. I am to keep my stained paws out of it."

Pierson relaxed, but only a little. "Stay here and help me dig out the villa. It is good to have an able-bodied man to assist me."

"You know, you ought to hire people if you are serious. Let a professional have a look at the site."

"I *am* a professional," Pierson said, wounded. "I have trained in archaeology—did a dig in the Levant, I'll have you know, and one in Northumbria. Found a nice little stash of Viking gold."

"Yes, so you have related on numerous occasions. That means you know people in the business and don't have to force your friends to wallow in the dirt for you."

"But I am a selfish man, and want this find for myself. It's my villa, David. I'll not give it away."

He looked so affronted that David chuckled, feeling better. It had been a while since something made him light of heart.

David also withdrew his statement that he'd rush up to Town the next day. He did need to return to London at some point and seek a defense

against Griffin. And while in London, if he happened to look up Lackwit Laurie and beat some sense into him ...

Hmm, he could come up with a much better idea than simple violence. An idea that would destroy Devonport and make Sophie a golden and guiltless angel in the eyes of the world.

He'd need help for that sort of thing, he decided as interest burned through him. Good thing he was friends with such devious people ...

David caught Pierson glaring at him and rearranged his face into innocent lines.

The only man in the world who could stop him was the vicar now regarding him in suspicion. Pierson knew far too much about David Fleming, and David would have to be careful of that.



MR. FLEMING CLEARED HIS THROAT. "Your uncle told me."

Sophie nodded, but her face heated unbearably. "I know."

They stood under a cold but sunny sky next to the furrow they'd begun digging yesterday. Uncle had moved off with his measuring equipment, notebook, stakes, and string, leaving them relatively alone.

"Listening at keyholes, were you?" Mr. Fleming asked in the light tone with which he said everything.

"I did not have to. Your expression when you regarded me this morning was enough."

Mr. Fleming put his hands to his cheeks and moved them this way and that. "Must learn to have control over this face. But is it so bad that I know?"

Sophie kicked at a clod of earth. "The world has split into two camps—one believing I am the greatest trollop in creation and that I have gained my just deserts. The other camp pities me but secretly believes I have only myself to blame. For being a trollop, you see."



“The *entire* world?” Mr. Fleming asked. “Including natives of Tasmania? The Chinese emperor? Trappers in the Canadian forests?”

Sophie didn’t laugh. “If they knew of the situation, I am certain they would choose a side.”

She studied the soil as she turned it with her boot, head down so she wouldn’t have to look at Mr. Fleming. As it was cold this morning, she’d donned a fur cap rather than a hat, so she had no brim to keep him at a distance.

“There is another camp,” Mr. Fleming said. “Those who believe your innocence.”

“A very small camp.” Sophie dared raise her head. His gray-blue eyes were fixed directly on her—most unnerving. “Uncle. And me. Even my parents, while they are kind, aren’t certain. My husband is so very convincing.”

“You forgot me,” Mr. Fleming said in a quiet voice. “*I* believe you.”

Sophie flushed, unable to meet his assessing gaze. “Why should you? You barely know me, except through Uncle.”

“He is one reason. His opinion counts for much. The other is that I know something of your husband, Lackwit Laurie, the Dunce of Devonport. Devonport will do anything to get what he wants, with a directness that’s alarming. Likely how he convinced you to marry him in the first place. I can’t imagine anyone actually falling in *love* with him.”

“I thought I had,” Sophie said, though she was amazed at herself now. Laurie had been attentive, flattering, even fawning, and Sophie, too often a wallflower, had fallen for him.

“He does have a certain oily charm, I suppose,” Mr. Fleming mused. “And women believe him handsome. But then, a few ladies think *I’m* handsome, so there is no accounting for taste.”

Sophie looked straight at him, her inhibition fleeting. He had the gift for making her relax her guard. “Are you fishing for a compliment, Mr.

Fleming?”

His eyes widened. “Me? Good Lord, no. I am stating facts. Your unctuous husband has now charmed a rich widow into throwing in her lot with him. Hopefully someone will talk her out of it before it’s too late ...” A smile spread across his face, lighting his eyes and driving out the shadows. “Hmm.”

“What are you thinking?” Sophie asked in alarm. “You look very much like a snake just now.”

“Damn my expressions. I can’t keep anything from you. I am thinking nothing, dear lady. Wheels simply spin in my head without my permission. You will be well rid of Devonport in any case. Good Lord, his name sounds like a piece of furniture. You might as well be Lady Writing Desk, or Sophie ... let me see ... Sofa.”

Sophie sucked in a breath and dropped her gaze again, frantically wishing the villa would reveal itself at her feet and swallow her.

“Oh, devil take it.” Mr. Fleming put gentle fingers under Sophie’s chin and raised her face to his. His eyes held anguish. “They do call you the last one. Bloody bastards—bloody ingrates. I did not know, I promise you. It’s only the wheels, you know ... not in my control.”

“It is a natural association,” Sophie said faintly. “I cannot blame you for making it.”

“Yes, you can.” He slid his fingers away, leaving a chill where he’d touched her. “I always strive to be the cleverest man in the room. It is why I am a bachelor. Your uncle chooses that life, but I am alone because I’m an uncouth idiot. I loved a woman once. Only once. She crushed me like an eggshell.”

“Oh, dear.” A spark of interest slid through Sophie’s unhappiness. “Is that true? Or are you trying to make me feel better by being more heartbroken than I am?”

“No, it is perfectly true. She’d tell you herself, and she’d tell you exactly

why she threw me over. I'd have driven her mad if I'd married her, and she knows it. Her husband is my closest friend, so it makes things a bit awkward. For me, I mean—the two of them pity me but are not bothered in the slightest that they are deeply in love and happier than most people ever dream of being. To them we are all comrades, chums for life.”

“Poor Mr. Fleming. I had no idea you were a tragic hero.”

“Ugh.” He grimaced. “Never say so. I prefer to think of myself as a strong rock, solid in the stream of life, unbothered by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

Sophie couldn't help her smile. “*Tragic hero* explains things much better.”

“I am devastated, dear lady. Now, I believe we are supposed to be looking for a Roman villa. Your uncle will march back here and demand to know why we haven't yet uncovered a fabulous wall painting.”

Sophie held her trowel out to him. “Go to, Mr. Fleming.”

Mr. Fleming eyed the muddy ground with distaste. “He must wield highly magical powers, your uncle. He has forced two perfectly respectable people into grubbing about in the loam, and we still *like* him.”

Sophie's laughter bubbled up and spilled over. She hadn't laughed in true mirth in some time, and it felt fine, like being washed clean.

Mr. Fleming's absurd expression drained away until he looked at her without his mask in place. His face had lost color, making the faint freckles stand out across his cheeks.

Naked emotion filled his eyes, a self-deprecation that approached self-loathing. This was a lonely man, rejected by the woman he loved, forced to watch her love another. He'd fled here—Uncle said because he'd been arrested, of all things—needing peace. Like Sophie.

Mr. Fleming touched her cheek.

She flinched, but only because she hadn't been touched in such a way in so long a while. Not with this tender inquiry.

Mr. Fleming immediately lifted his hand away, but when Sophie held his gaze and did not move, he touched her again.

His fingers were gentle, gloves smooth, warm with the man beneath them. He brushed her cheek then drew one finger down and across her lips.

Sophie swallowed. After her husband's accusations, gentlemen had tried to corner her, believing they'd be welcome. But their awkward attempts at groping were worlds away from Mr. Fleming's touch.

He traced her lips, floating his thumb across the lower one, pressing its cushion. He followed what he did with his eyes, lashes flicking as he studied her mouth.

The cold wind pushed at her, but Sophie paid it no heed. Mr. Fleming's fingertips stroked heat deep inside her, a burning in her veins she'd never felt in her life, no matter that she'd shared a marriage bed with her husband. She'd never felt this heat, never knew the join of her legs could grow so hot and damp.

Their point of contact was the merest touch, but at the moment, the only thing in Sophie's world.

Glide, brush, caress. He moved to her lips, her cheek, lips again. He'd shaved today—his skin was smooth, plus she'd heard curses from the top of the house when he'd nicked himself. She smelled his shaving soap, the leather of his gloves, the mint-infused water he used to sweeten his breath.

So careful of his appearance today, when the first morning at her uncle's table he'd looked and smelled like something from the gutter.

Wind tugged at Mr. Fleming's clothes, as it tugged at Sophie's. Tiny cuts marred the skin beneath his chin, attesting to the fact that he was unused to shaving his own face.

He pulled his gaze from her lips and met her eyes squarely. "You," he whispered, "have exquisite beauty."

Sophie could barely breathe. She was incandescent, light as a balloon. The merest breath of wind would take her away.

Mr. Fleming lowered his hand, removing his beautiful touch. He studied her another moment, then his brows came together, his expression darkening.

“Damnation,” he snarled. “Damn everything to hell.”

He turned on his heel and marched away, sinking his polished boots into mud as he went.

Four days. David shook his head as Pierson goaded him out into the field yet again.

Four days he'd endured life with Pierson, rising at a hideously early hour in the morning to tramp with the man to dig in the pasture. Returning in the late afternoon to a hearty meal prepared by Mrs. Corcoran, lively conversation, games in the evening, then a snifter and cigar with Pierson before turning in.

A staid, organized, quiet existence. The only strong drink David consumed was a small glass of wine at supper and one goblet of brandy as he and Pierson conversed after Sophie went to bed.

Four days of gazing at Sophie across the breakfast table, carrying her tools to the dig, watching her and Pierson play draughts in the evenings and Sophie nearly always winning. Pierson played like a shark, so her victory meant something.

Days of being near Sophie and not near. He'd touched her in the cold field, the satin softness of her skin coming through his thin gloves. She'd stood very still, like a wild animal giving him leave to touch her.

Four agonizing days of keeping himself away from her, pretending to view her as the niece of his old friend, a sweet young lady forbidden to a man like David.

This would kill him.

Pierson was correct that Sophie wasn't the usual sort of woman David chased. David had liaisons with the most elite courtesans in the world, ladies who were companions to kings. Or, aristocrats' wives, bored with the endless round of balls, plays, masquerades, and musicales, their husbands off with their own mistresses. They sought David for amusement and diversion.

Sophie, with her sleek black hair and fine green eyes, her gentle manners and spirited banter, was far too pristine for the likes of David Fleming. Her husband might have decided to ruin her, but in truth, Sophie was a well-bred and virtuous young woman, the sort mothers pulled quickly out of David's path.

He had to sit near her every night, walk with her every day, and keep his hands—and his craving, and his words—to himself.

David told himself that he wanted her for the novelty of it. Perhaps because he was isolated here, and she was the only female company in view. He was lonely, and Sophie was pretty and agreeable.

But it was nothing pretty and agreeable that made David wake in the night in his tiny room, hot and hard, stifling a groan. Sophie was beautiful, like a naiad—ethereal and elusive. She had wit as well as knowledge—she'd read more books than David had even heard of. She easily matched David's barbed speeches with retorts that put him in his place. He was enchanted.

More than that—he'd wake in a sweat from erotic dreams where Sophie surrounded him, her long hair spilling across his bare chest and aroused cock. The groans that dragged from his mouth came from frustration, desire, and brutal yearning.

He'd throw off the blankets and try to revive himself by plunging hands and face in a basin of cold water. In the morning he'd descend, eyes burning and skin itching, and there she'd be across the breakfast table, chewing toast and smiling serenely at him.

He had to leave.

David decided on the fourth day that it would be his last. He'd return to London, deal with Griffin and his prosecution, humbly asking Hart for assistance if necessary. That and apologize to Eleanor for not responding to her summons. He'd now recovered sufficiently to face her.

"Shall we try here?" Sophie said when they reached their now-familiar trench that morning, gesturing with her trowel.

The earth was pockmarked with holes, as though all the ground-dwelling animals in Shropshire had dug their burrows in one place. The deepest holes had been made by David, he taking out his frustrations by driving his shovel into the soft dirt.

He swung his spade from his shoulder and pounded it into the ground where Sophie indicated. If only she didn't have such lovely hands even her thick gardening gloves couldn't hide.

"Not so hard," Pierson admonished as he passed them on the way to his trench. "Roman craftsmen built these villas with care, not for you to destroy with your carelessness. Flinders Petrie advocates slow exposure, sifting each layer and recording what is found with precision."

"Yes, Uncle," David said, so meekly that Sophie laughed at him. He loved her laugh.

Pierson ignored him and returned to his trench.

"He works so hard," Sophie said as David resumed digging, more moderately this time. "I hope he finds something, one day."

"He has a bee in his bonnet," David said. "But he's no fool. There must be *something* buried here, even if it isn't a Roman villa."

"Wouldn't it be fine to uncover it for him? Whatever it is?" Sophie knelt and started carefully troweling through the hole David had begun. "It might take some time, but time is something I have in abundance. I believe I shall grow old looking after Uncle, helping him turn up bits of the past."

David didn't answer, his breath not working well. He ceased digging and leaned on the spade. "I'm leaving for London in the morning," he announced



abruptly.

Sophie's eyes widened. She wore her white fur cap pulled down over her ears, black curls protruding from beneath it in a most fetching manner.

“Leaving?”

David nodded, ignoring the lump in his throat. “I have barristers to consult, charges of attempted murder to thwart. Well, one charge. The irony is that I'm innocent of this one.”

Sophie stared at him without blinking, then she rose to her feet, wind catching at her skirt. “When will you return?”

David hesitated. “I don't know if I will.”

“Oh.”

The swallow that moved her throat gave David some hope she cared whether she saw him again. Not that it mattered. Sophie was in an awkward situation, and David pursuing her would only make it more awkward.

He hadn't exaggerated when he said he needed to fight the murder charge. A letter from his solicitor had found him—his solicitor knew every place David took himself off to whenever he fled London. The solicitor had informed him that Griffin continued to claim David had shot at him and wanted him to stand trial for it. Only the influence of Hart and Detective Superintendent Fellows kept the police from making David await the trial in Newgate.

David had other things he wanted to pursue in London as well, but he knew he'd be unwise to tell Sophie and Dr. Pierson about them.

Sophie fixed him with an unreadable green gaze. “We will miss you.”

“Will you?”

She studied him as she had when he'd daringly touched her a few days ago, unable to stop himself. Courageous, unswerving. Beautiful.

“Of course.” Sophie shook herself and turned away, sinking to her knees on the tarp she'd spread across the damp ground. “Uncle enjoys your chats in the evening, and I enjoy winning our draughts games.”

“Draughts, chess, cards, puzzles, riddles ...”

He liked the smile she shot him. “Your own fault for not paying attention. Though I imagine a game of Pope Joan is not very exciting to a man used to the card tables at White’s.”

“My dear, the company at White’s is ghastly. Any game can be exciting if the stakes are right.”

“Matchsticks?” she asked impishly.

“I’ll have you know, I hoarded those matchsticks like gold until I had to turn them all over to you and your uncle. You two are such sharps, you could form a syndicate and fleece the multitudes.”

“Yes. Such a pity Uncle is a vicar.”

David relaxed, happy to hear her teasing. He’d miss it ...

No, this was for the best. He should leave now, before it became more difficult. If he didn’t go, he’d linger, let his solicitor and Hart take care of Griffin, hope Sophie grew so fond of him she wouldn’t mind if he enticed her to his bed.

His bed, which at the moment lay in a tiny space below the ceiling beams in her uncle’s house. David mentally cuffed himself. He was an idiot.

Sophie reached into the hole she’d been sifting through and delicately retrieved a small pebble. “This is pretty.”

David, interested in spite of himself, leaned to look. Sophie brushed the mud from her find and held it up.

What little February sunlight leaked through the bank of clouds winked on a fragment of blue stone, rendering it translucent. The edges were jagged, a piece broken long ago.

Sophie unfolded to her feet, ignoring David’s hand, which he’d instantly thrust out to help her. “What do you suppose it is?” she asked, eagerness in her voice.

David peered at it, but it remained a piece of stone to him. “Who knows? Broken vase? Glass from a farmer’s ale bottle?”

“One this blue?” Sophie turned and waved at Pierson. “Uncle! Come and see!”

About twenty yards from them, Pierson calmly set down his measuring stick and got to his feet, dusting off his knees. He tucked his notebook under his arm and walked to them, betraying no anticipation. He’d been disappointed so many times about this villa, David supposed he’d grown stoic.

Sophie scrubbed off the stone with the handkerchief David lent her. Polishing it brought out more of the deep blue color, the piece almost glowing, but it wasn’t glass.

Pierson studied the fragment that lay on Sophie’s palm. He poked at it, then he picked it up and turned it this way and that with professional detachment.

David saw when his eyes lost their resignation and took on a gleam of excitement. And then triumph.

Dr. Lucas Pierson, the learned, unruffled man who’d taught David that there was good in most people if one looked hard enough, suddenly leapt into the air and let out a yell.

“I knew it!” Pierson landed again, his boots splattering mud. “I knew there was a villa here! Take *that*, British Museum. And *that*, Antiquarian Society.” He punched imaginary foes with a balled-up fist. “My dear niece, you are a *genius!*”

“Mr. Fleming dug the hole,” Sophie said generously. “What is it, Uncle? Part of an amphora? Or a bit of jewelry?”

“No, no, nothing so staid. This is a piece of tile.” He opened his hand. “See how it is so precisely cut on this side? It is part of a mosaic, probably from a floor. No army hut would have mosaics on the floors. This is part of a larger building, like a bathhouse, or a villa.”

David felt his heart beating faster, a smile pulling his mouth, as though he’d single-handedly discovered the remains of a Roman palace.

“You believe there’s more down there?” he asked, Pierson’s enthusiasm contagious.

“Somewhere.” Pierson spread his hands and waved them over the mounds. “A beautiful floor, walls painted in glorious colors, a heating system ...”

His voice grew more animated with each word until he leapt into the air again. He came down and ran off across the green with the lightness of a man half his age.

“I did it!” his voice trailed back to them, and then loudest of all, coupled with another jump—“*Eureka!*”

David and Sophie burst out laughing. Her eyes were alight, her nose pink with cold. She was vibrant color in a sea of gray, a glow in the endless twilight of David’s life. They stood very close, the moment of discovery and elation warming the air between them.

David swept his arms around Sophie and dragged her to him, his mouth coming down on her red parted lips.

David's mouth was hot, skilled, strong. The air was frigid, but Sophie knew only David's warmth, the bulk of his body shielding her. His fingers pressed her cheek, much as they'd done a few days ago when he'd softly touched her.

He didn't command or possess, didn't demand Sophie respond. He simply kissed her. She tasted the coffee he'd drunk this morning, felt the scrape of whiskers his razor had missed.

The space between them filled with an energy that brushed Sophie even through layers of fabric. She parted her lips and leaned into him, hungry. She hadn't realized how hungry.

David started as she rose to him, but then he took her mouth in a deeper kiss, his tongue finding hers. The hot friction made Sophie's knees buckle, but David's strength held her steady.

Her mouth was stiff, her return kiss clumsy. She was out of practice, and she'd never been kissed like *this* before.

David didn't seem to notice, or care, about her lack of expertise. He had enough of it for both of them. His kiss caressed, gave, was all about pleasure. He knew how to touch, to draw forth fire.

Sophie no longer used the formal *Mr. Fleming* in her mind. He was David, had always been for her, but Sophie hadn't been able to admit it.

His thumb pressed the corner of her mouth, opening her to him. He cradled her head, her hat sliding sideways, curls loosening from their pins.

Sophie craved the kiss, David's warmth, himself. He was another lonely being crying out, and Sophie responded with eagerness.

She closed the fraction of space between them to seek the greater warmth of his body and slid against him, David so tall. Sophie rose on tiptoes, tilting her head so she could continue the kiss.

His arm came behind her, and she felt herself bending back as David slid one hand up to cup her breast through her thick coat. A tingle of fire raced from nipple to heart, and Sophie let out a moan of need.

In the next moment, she stumbled, David's embrace gone. She clutched at her hat and righted herself with difficulty, dragging in a burning breath.

David's eyes were wild, like stormy skies. He'd lost the tweed cap he'd donned against the cold, and his hair tumbled in the wind.

"Damnation." His voice was cracked, the self-loathing blatant.

"David ..."

"No." David took a hasty step back, narrowly missing the hole he'd just dug. "Don't speak to me. Don't even *look* at me."

"David." Hurt cut through Sophie's haze of elation. "I'm not an innocent miss fresh from my debut."

"Aren't you? As near as. Bloody hell."

He darted a worried glance behind them, but a quick look told Sophie that Uncle Lucas was still dancing around, waving his arms, celebrating his Eureka.

"No need to swear at me," Sophie said, her heart pounding. "I am my own woman. I may kiss whom I please."

"The devil you may. If any other man kissed you like that, I'd kill him. I'm near to strangling myself with my own hands."

"Don't say such things." Sophie's eyes widened in alarm. "Not even in jest."

David backed another step. “Very well, I’ll horsewhip myself instead. But I’ll do it in London. Good day, Miss Tierney.”

He grabbed the cap that had fallen to the wet grass and jammed it on his head, then turned his back and walked away.

Sophie wanted very much to run after him, wrap her arms around him, demand that he stay, beg him if she must. To behave like a needy and wanton woman, pleading for his touch.

If she did so, she suspected David would throw her off and keep marching. She’d have to watch him go, he so obviously regretting the kiss.

Sophie’s loneliness, hurt, and rage at Laurie for his nastiness, for his rejection, welled up until it burst. She’d been priding herself on keeping her emotions well hidden, but David’s kiss had loosened them, and her fury poured forth like a pent-up geyser.

“Blackguard!” she shouted. “Run away. Desert your friends. I don’t care.”

David turned, his anger just as high. “I *am* a blackguard. Tell your uncle I am gone.”

“Tell him yourself.” Sophie paused. “Do you mean you are leaving for London *now*?”

“On the moment.” David resumed his swift walk, heading across the fields to the road.

“Do you intend to march all the way there?” she yelled after him.

“To the train.” He gestured ahead of him. “In the village.”

“The village is that way.” Sophie pointed in the other direction.

“Damnation.” David glared where she indicated and began to stride on that course.

“What about your things?” Sophie cupped her hands around her mouth. “Or shall I have Uncle throw them out the window?”

“He can chuck away whatever he likes.” David didn’t slow, continuing his stride toward the village, out of her life.

“Go then,” she shouted. “I hope I never see you again, you horrible man!”  
His only response was a wave.

David’s tall figure blurred into the landscape as Sophie’s eyes filled with hot tears. Her breath caught on a sob, and then she let the tears come, weeping until her body shook. There was none to see her cry but the sheep and the rabbits, and they didn’t seem to mind.



*THE SMOKE.* London was aptly named, David reflected as the train carried him past belching chimneys under a dark gray sky.

In February the town was full, the social and political season having well commenced. Men shouted at each other in the neo-Gothic Houses of Parliament, and hostesses sparred with politicians’ wives at soirees and supper balls that were as much about power as any debate in the Houses.

David at one time had reveled in the game. He’d been on his feet in Commons, shouting down his opposition during the day, seducing the opposition’s wives at night. David was a prime player, with his own circle of toadies, at the same time he was Hart Mackenzie’s right-hand man. He and Hart had torn up Town between them. Not much had happened in London without their knowledge and say-so.

Or so it had been. David knew his days of scheming with Hart as they consumed cigars and whisky in the presence of elegant and skilled ladies were past. Hart continued to harass his foes in the House of Lords as Duke of Kilmorgan but now went home to his wife and children to bask in domestic bliss.

Not that Hart’s wife wasn’t the grandest hostess in Britain. Her gatherings were designed not only to assist Hart with his machinations but also to delight and astonish. Eleanor’s parties were legendary.

David had been avoiding her gatherings lately, as he’d been avoiding



everything else in his life.

He descended at Euston Station and took a hansom south and along the Strand to the Temple. In Middle Temple, in a tiny square called Essex Court, David rang the bell of a neat house. He had an appointment and was readily admitted.

Not long later, he sat in a comfortable chair sipping excellent whisky and facing a tall Scotsman with very fair hair and penetrating gray eyes.

“Doesn’t look good for you,” Sinclair McBride announced. “Griffin is raging about you all over London. His uncle is calling to have you detained in Newgate, though we have persuaded him that you are under house arrest in Shropshire.” Sinclair’s gaze sharpened. “Yet, here you are.”

“Things to see to.” David reclined lazily, sipping Mackenzie malt Hart and Ian supplied to Sinclair, as the man was now part of the family. “People to look up.”

“Your solicitor should be here—at all meetings you have with me,” Sinclair said firmly.

“Hated to bother the old chap. I keep him busy enough as it is. So, you will defend me? Even though your practice is mostly prosecution?”

“I take defenses that are in a good cause.” Sinclair looked David up and down, clearly not considering him a good cause.

David spread his arms. “I am completely innocent. Griffin fired at *me*. I was willing to ignore the entire incident, but he is a fathead.”

Sinclair sank back into his chair, taking up his glass of whisky. The strain and grief of his former life had entirely gone from the man, David was pleased to see. Sinclair’s home was now quite happy and filled by his delightful wife and four tumbling children—hellions, every one of them, including the wife, lucky man. David was quite fond of the swiftly growing Andrew, a fearless boy who reminded David of himself at a young and adventurous age.

Sinclair’s domestic happiness had made him an even more talented

barrister—he had declined a judgeship offered to him in order to stand in the courtroom and win case after case with aplomb. The Scots Machine, other barristers called him. The criminals called him Basher McBride, for his unflinching zeal in putting away bad men. Exactly the sort of barrister David needed on his side.

“Your solicitor is interviewing witnesses,” Sinclair said. “Though a statement from you would be helpful. More than *I didn’t do it*. I need the entire story.”

“That *is* the entire story.” David swung his booted foot. “Griffin fired his weapon and missed, thank God. I never fired mine. We were all roaring drunk at the time.”

“Griffin had injuries,” Sinclair pointed out with his glass of whisky.

“From my fists, not my pistol. I had injuries as well.”

“The fight was about ...?”

David grimaced. “A woman. What else? Griffin is convinced I was bouncing upon his lady wife, but I was not. She might have cuckolded him, true, and I wouldn’t blame her. But it was not with me. He and I have been sparring for years, however—verbally, I mean, on the Commons floor. I’ve thwarted many of his stupid schemes.”

The supposed affair with his wife was only the excuse, David knew, for Griffin to release his frustrations. Griff was a touchy bastard, especially when his lack of political acumen was thrown in his face. Accusing David of attempted murder must be his way of trying to remove David from his path once and for all.

Sinclair tapped his fingertips on the glass. He made no move to write notes, but David knew Sinclair did not have to. He had an amazing brain.

“I’ll do what I can for you,” Sinclair resumed. “Eye witnesses would be useful, but I believe putting Griffin on the witness stand will be best. I have the feeling his testimony won’t hold up to my questioning.”

David chuckled. “Not under the lash of Basher McBride, it won’t. Why

do you think I told my solicitor to hire you?”

Sinclair gave him a thin smile. He was the best barrister in London but too modest to accept praise. Many a hardy criminal wilted under the stare of the Basher.

David took a sip of whisky and the two descended into companionable silence. David hadn't needed to come here to talk about his defense—his solicitor could have done that. *Had* done it, in fact.

“By the way,” David said when his glass was nearly empty. “What do you know about the Devonport divorce?”

“The Devonport case?” Sinclair asked in surprise. “That’s in the civil courts. I only go after dire villains.”

“True, but you must know something about it.”

Sinclair bent him a wary look. “You’ve been out of London a long time if you haven’t seen the newspapers. The journalists are excoriating both husband and wife.” He shook his head, a flicker of sympathy in his eyes. “It’s a bad business.”

“I only read the sporting news. Life is difficult enough without journalists constantly flogging us with the horrors of the world.”

Sinclair gave him a sharp stare, the one that penetrated a man’s skull and tore out all his secrets. “What is your interest?”

“I happen to know the wife in the case,” David said, trying to sound nonchalant. “She’s the niece of a dear friend.”

“Is she?” Sinclair’s gaze didn’t waver. “Interesting.”

“You know, you put more insinuation into three words than most men put into entire speeches. I will say about her what I do about myself—she didn’t do it.”

“Devonport is going a little far in his accusations,” Sinclair said. “He’s claimed his wife committed open adultery. Two men so far have come forward to testify that they were her lovers, but Devonport says there are many more. I might believe one or two, but knowing what I do about ladies

of society, I'd say she did not have time for more than that."

"And I say she did none of it."

David slammed down his glass, and the remaining liquid leapt over the rim. He pictured Sophie's sweet smile, her green eyes looking straight into his. No coyness or falseness about her.

He dragged in a breath. "Trust me, McBride, I know women who have no inkling what the word *fidelity* means, and I know mostly innocent women who've had a single illicit affair in their lives. The former ladies have a complete lack of guilt, the latter have too much of it. Sophie—Lady Devonport—is unlike any of them. She did *not* have affairs with these men, no matter what Devonport claims. He wants rid of her so he can marry a wealthier woman. If I actually do shoot anyone, it will be *him*."

Sinclair listened with his uncanny perception. "I see."

"So I've come to you for help."

A glint of understanding entered Sinclair's gray eyes. "And I would enjoy helping Lady Devonport—her husband is a foul man. But as I say, the case is in the civil courts. Devonport's barristers are in Lincoln's Inn."

"Aha, you know which barristers then? Do you know them personally?"

"Yes." The answer was cautious.

"Then cajole them. I want an appointment to see Devonport. I'd simply go to his secretary and ask, but Devonport hates Hart, and me by extension, and I'm certain the secretary would have a standing order to refuse me. But if Devonport's barrister suggests it ..."

He left it at that. Sinclair was canny—he'd invent something to get David inside Devonport's house.

Sinclair gave David the barest of nods. "I will see what I can do."

David knew then that his admittance was guaranteed. They did not call Sinclair the Scots Machine for nothing.



HIS SECOND MEETING of the afternoon was trickier. David didn't have an appointment for it, but he turned up and took his chances.

Hinch, his coachman, drove him to Grosvenor Square and halted outside a tall house, as he had the morning David had fled to Shropshire. This time, David was sober, bathed, shaved, and decently dressed. He gazed up at the intimidating house, but today he was eager to rush inside and sit before the one woman in all London he knew could assist him.

At one time, David had run in and out of the Mackenzie mansion as he pleased, as Hart's friend and confidante, but these days, he made sure to send in his name and wait to be announced. Hart's haughty majordomo admitted him and led him up the grand staircase to a sunny room the Duchess of Kilmorgan had commandeered as her own.

Eleanor's touches were everywhere. Haphazard stacks of photographic plates lay on every flat surface, along with open books on photography and botany, astonishingly beautiful photos of flowers, and many pictures of her two sons and husband.

The mechanical aspects of photography had progressed so that these days a person no longer had to sit motionlessly in front of a camera on a tripod, waiting in stiff agony until the shutter closed. Eleanor had the latest in photographic apparatus at her disposal, and she shoved these cameras constantly into the faces of her nearest and dearest. The results were scattered over the top of the piano—she'd caught her sons laughing, shouting, grinning, and hugging their dogs.

David lifted a framed photograph of Hart—Hart was dressed in this one, fortunately—gazing down at his youngest son, Malcolm.

The picture was amazing. Hart the formidable Scotsman in tartan kilt, the man feared throughout Parliament and the cabinet, smiled down at his son, his hard face soft, his love for the little boy apparent. Eleanor had caught him well.

“One of my best, I think.” Eleanor's voice sounded at David's elbow.

“Hart growls like a bear about me shooting everything in sight, but I can’t help myself. And my husband is so very photogenic. He does not mind, really, but he doesn’t want to be seen as vain, so he tries to deter me.”

“Dearest El.” David returned the picture to its place to squeeze her hands and kiss her cheek. “I am pleased to see you so happy.”

“Happy and distracted.” Eleanor gently withdrew her hands, a faint smile on her face. “Young Alec is at school this year as you know, and my heaven, he can find scrapes to get into. Not always his fault, though he could avoid them if he truly tried, but he is kindhearted and apt to take things in hand for another’s own good, and then it all goes wrong. Hart, of course, thinks his son should be a model of propriety and angelic sweetness. How he can have that idea, I do not know, because you recall better than most what a hellion Hart was at school. Besides, the model of propriety is never liked—we were horrible to the prissy head girl at Miss Pringle’s Academy. She still is awful, poor lady. I saw her the other day—”

“El,” David said firmly. He’d learned from Hart long ago that the only way to stop Eleanor when she began full steam was to break in forcefully. “I do need your help on a matter.”

“Well, of course. Sit down, my dear fellow, and tell me all about it. I heard you were rustivating with Dr. Pierson. How delightful. Or perhaps it is deadly dull. Which are you finding it?”

Eleanor led David to a set of couches that faced each other, low-backed, comfortable affairs upholstered in cream and yellow. No more heavy carved furniture in dark horsehair for the duke and duchess.

David sat obediently, marveling that he could study Eleanor’s wisps of red curls and very blue eyes without the pang of regret that had filled him for years. At the moment, she was simply a friend, one whose assistance he greatly needed.

He launched into his tale without preliminary and outlined his plans. Eleanor listened with flattering attentiveness, and when David finished,

laughter lit her eyes.

“Oh, that is perfect. You are the most devious man I know. How splendid.” She leaned forward with conspiratorial eagerness. “What do you wish me to do?”

Sophie sipped her tea in her uncle's study two days after David had departed. Uncle Lucas had his feet up near the snapping fire, a brandy in his hands, resting from his frantic work at the dig.

He'd barely ceased his labors to conduct church services, running in at the last minute to throw on vestments for evensong, morning prayer, and the main service on Sunday. Fortunately the parishioners were very low church and expected little more than a reading of the service, a few hymns accompanied by Mrs. Plimpton on the wheezing organ, and a gentle sermon.

Uncle peppered most of his sermons with analogies to antiquities from long-lost civilizations, but the villagers, used to his obsession, didn't mind very much. Or so Sophie heard from Mrs. Corcoran. She had not yet summoned the courage to attend church with her uncle.

"Will you tell me about Mr. Fleming?" Sophie ventured.

Uncle opened the eyes he'd closed and gave her a keen stare. Instead of asking about her curiosity, he launched straight into an explanation. "Fleming is a reprobate and a scoundrel, but a good-hearted man. I had much hope for him when I was his tutor at Cambridge. But alas, he chose the path of darkness."

Sophie warmed her hands on her teacup. "If he has such a bad reputation, why have I heard nothing about him?"



Uncle crossed his slippered feet on the ottoman and took a slurp of brandy. “Because your parents shielded you well. His name would never be mentioned to a debutante, and you’d never be allowed to a gathering he attended. On the other hand, David has done much work—behind the scenes and admittedly by being a manipulative villain—to relieve the poor, improve conditions for factory workers, and other numerous reforms he will forever deny.”

“Why should he deny them?” Sophie asked in bewilderment. “If he’s helped people.”

“Because he *likes* to be seen as a reprobate—and he is.” Uncle gave her a dark look. “He achieves his goals by means it’s best not to examine too closely.”

Sophie studied the dregs of her tea, a few leaves floating in the bottom. “He told me he’d fallen in love with a woman and that she broke his heart. That she was now his closest friend’s wife.”

Uncle nodded. “Indeed. He was head over heels for the Duchess of Kilmorgan—Lady Eleanor Ramsay at the time. She was being arduously courted by Hart Mackenzie, before he became duke. Lady Eleanor refused Mackenzie’s proposal, quite rightly, I thought. Mackenzie was not the finest of men then, and believed he could have anything he wanted without question. David, poor chap, was potty about Lady Eleanor, but willing to step aside for Mackenzie. When Eleanor threw Mackenzie over, David thought he could easily step into the man’s shoes, but he later told me he hadn’t realized Eleanor’s very deep love for Hart. Lady Eleanor did not regret her choice to jilt Mackenzie, but she was not interested in substituting another for him. She retreated to her father’s house near Aberdeen and became his assistant, housekeeper, gardener, bottle-washer, and David had to leave her be. He was in agony over it for a long while, poor chap.”

“I know the Duchess of Kilmorgan slightly,” Sophie said, trying to hide her discomposure at the tale. David had obviously loved Lady Eleanor more

intensely than his glib words had let on. “She has little to do with me, because her husband despises mine. They are on different sides of the wall that is politics.”

“And that gulf will never be breached,” Uncle said decidedly. “Which is why I chose the clergy, though that can also be fraught with political peril. Give me a country church and a simple life. The bishops can enjoy fighting in the House of Lords all they like.”

“Did David—Mr. Fleming—never marry? Or court any other?”

“No.” Uncle gave Sophie another piercing look. He might prefer the life of an unsophisticated country vicar, but he was uncommonly wise. “Fleming is a captivating young man, my dear. I know this—I have been captivated by him for a very long time. But his charm is tarnished. He and his father quarreled mightily days before his father’s death, and that haunts him. Fleming fears he caused his father’s illness—which is nonsense, of course—and mourns that he had no chance to reconcile with him before it was too late.”

“Oh, how sad,” Sophie said in genuine sympathy.

“David took it to heart, yes. But do not decide that he turned into a libertine because of it. He was one long before that, and he has always enjoyed being unconventional and shocking. Whenever the Duke of Kilmorgan wishes to defeat an opponent, he asks David to bring out the dirt on that person and hound the unfortunate man until he surrenders. Morals fly out the window. David is ruthless.”

Sophie swallowed. “I see.”

Uncle softened his voice. “I refuse to shield you from the truth, my dear. As much as I love him, David Fleming is not a respectable gentleman. I allowed him to stay under this roof with you because I know he pursues only ladies of questionable virtue, which you are not. In spite of what others are currently claiming about you, you are innocent and he knows it. He has an instinct.”

Except that David had kissed her like a storm and then raged at himself for it. Sophie's heart stung when she thought of the kiss—the imprint of which she even now felt on her lips.

He had taken her mouth in hunger that matched her own. David might believe her innocent of her husband's accusations, but he had kissed her like he would a lover.

“The Duchess of Kilmorgan has never been a lady of questionable virtue,” Sophie pointed out, her throat tight. “Yet Mr. Fleming fell in love with *her*.”

“She was the exception.” Uncle nodded. “I knew Fleming would come to grief over her, but he would not listen to me. Never does. He is a chap who needs to find things out for himself, even if it half-destroys him to do so. I keep hoping that someday ...” Uncle let out a rueful breath and shrugged.

“You hope he'll become the man you see deep inside, and make you proud,” Sophie finished. “But people won't always be what we want them to be.” She trailed off, pain filling her heart.

Uncle sent her a look of sympathy. He understood that Sophie had wanted Laurie to be the man of her dreams, but the dream had never come true. The day Sophie realized that her ideal husband and the real Laurie were worlds apart—when she'd found out about his string of mistresses, including a few of her own maids—was the day her marriage had died. She'd fallen out of love with Laurie long before he'd decided he wanted to rid himself of her.

“Fleming will discover who he is someday,” Uncle said. “Or he will not. Not everyone achieves a happy ending.”

“Including me.” Sophie sighed. “The question is, what do I do now? The divorce has already ruined me, and it is a long way from being final yet. I do have one idea, but I must have your approval.”

“Yes?” Uncle, who'd started to drift into a contemplative state, gave her his attention again. “Tell me this idea.”

“I'd like to become your assistant, if you'll have me.” Sophie spoke

rapidly, before she lost courage. “You’ve told me much about your digs and I know how to take notes and make sketches, how to measure, how to notate the finds. Between the two of us, we should be able to reveal this Roman villa, and then—who knows? Go on to excavate more sites in Britain, perhaps. Or you can return to the Middle East, as you’ve always longed to. I’m not afraid of a little dust or sunshine.”

Her uncle listened, eyes lighting. “That is true. I’d love to try my luck in Palestine. There’s the ruins at Masada ...” He gazed off into the distant past before dragging himself back to the present. “Of course, my dear, you are welcome to stay here and help with this dig. An excellent scheme, and a good way for you to gain experience. You will be my secretary—I always need someone to go over my articles and get the punctuation correct. Though I must warn you ...”

His expression turned dire, and Sophie stilled, worried.

“Mrs. Plimpton has the rheumatics, and she’s complaining about difficulty playing the organ. Says she wishes to retire. So you might be recruited to plonk out the hymns on a Sunday.”

Sophie relaxed. “Oh dear. Are you certain your parishioners will let the Whore of Babylon into their church? The walls might fall down.”

“No one believes you the Whore of Babylon, child,” Uncle said kindly. “Truth to tell, the parishioners rather like having a scandalous person in their midst. It gives the village a certain cachet.”

Sophie knew her uncle was trying to make her feel better, and she was grateful. She smiled. “Thank you, Uncle.”

“You are very welcome, Niece.”

Sophie sipped her tea and said nothing more. As her uncle’s assistant, she could leave off finery and begin to wear dowdy frocks, becoming a dried-up woman with no interest in gentlemen without delay. Playing the organ in the church loft where no one could see her would only hurry the process along.

This would be her life, then. Safely hidden from the world, buried in

excavations and typing up Uncle's notes into something coherent, perhaps earning a footnote in his monographs thanking her for her help. She no longer had to worry about what life would bring. It would be mapped out for her, unchanging.

Sophie imagined what David would say to her thoughts, pictured his wry look, heard his cynical laughter. She clutched her teacup and barely stopped her tears.



THE EARL OF DEVONPORT occupied a tall house in Portman Square, very Georgian, with columns, a fan-lighted door, and a lofty entrance hall. The earl received callers in a study on the first floor, at the top of a flight of stairs designed to inspire awe.

The house had escaped the ruthless modernization of David's generation, retaining its early nineteenth-century faux Greco-Roman simplicity. The cool white walls, busts of great men of history, and elegant furniture came as a relief from the noisy, crammed, choking city outside.

The decor was likely the result of Laurie's father's tastes. Lackwit Laurie Whitfield would hardly have the understanding, let alone the interest, to maintain such understated luxury. That is, unless Laurie had drastically changed.

No, no, David assured himself. He decidedly had not. Any man who would throw away Sophie Tierney on a whim had proved he was a complete dolt.

The Earl of Devonport rose from behind a desk when the majordomo ushered David into the study, the timing calculated to imply that David had interrupted perusal of very important letters.

"Fleming." Laurie dropped the papers and came around the desk as the majordomo withdrew. "Such a surprise. Or shall I call you Devilish David? A

long time since our silly days at Harrow, what?”

David clasped Laurie’s extended hand, noting the grip was firm. So was Laurie. He’d changed from pudgy boy in short pants to muscular man in a trim black suit, though he’d never have height or be rid of his bulbous nose—but he was striking. Lackwit had learned how to make an impression.

“Fleming is fine,” David said when their hands parted. “Or D.D., if you prefer. I could call you L. L.”

Lackwit Laurie burst into laughter, a deep, mature sound. “Ah, yes, the puerile nicknames we gave each other in school. Boys can be so cruel. You don’t have sons yourself, do you?”

David shook his head. “Lifelong bachelor, me.”

“Too bad, old man. Domestic bliss has its place.”

He waved David to a chair. David took it, letting his gaze go to the bookshelves around him, which were filled with erudite tomes. “Domestic bliss, eh? Aren’t you charging through courts to obtain a divorce?”

Laurie waved that away and resumed his seat behind the desk. “Only because the woman I chose decided to hurt me in the most scurrilous way. Fortunately, I have met another lady who will make me very happy.”

“How lucky for you.” David’s gaze rested on a book on the nearest shelf. “Erasmus Darwin. Interesting. His translation of Linnaeus changed botany as we know it, do you not think? And he was far ahead of his time in his opinions on the education of women.”

Laurie’s brow furrowed. “Never knew he was interested in women. Can’t agree with him that men are descended from monkeys. He simply met too many monkeys when he traveled around the world, I wager. Loneliness and wishful thinking, more like.” He snorted a laugh.

“Mmm.” David forbore to explain that, while related, Erasmus Darwin and Charles Darwin were two different people, the younger born several years after the elder, his grandfather, had died. “As interested as I am in natural history, my visit is of a different nature.”

“Yes, indeed. Why have you come? Does the Duke of Kilmorgan want my backing on one of his daft bills? He’ll never win us over, no matter how many Highland dances he performs. Tell him to go back to Scottish-land and eat haggis.” Another snort, Laurie fond of his own wit.

David again decided to keep silent, this time on the fact that he too was Scots and preferred beefsteak and vegetable soufflé to sheep’s innards.

“My request is of a more personal nature,” David said, draping his arm comfortably over the back of the Louis XV chair. “I have a favor to ask, man to man, one Harrow boy to another.”

“I remember you and Hart being great bullies at Harrow,” Laurie said. “To me, I mean. Well, to most not fortunate enough to be in your circle.”

“As you say, boys can be cruel.” David spread one hand. “Males are thoughtless at that age, without the learning, experience, and gentler sentiments we acquire once we become men. I can only apologize.”

Laurie gave him a nod, a smug one. He’d obviously thought David had come to grovel, to beg the condescension of a lofty earl.

The thought of this man touching Sophie made David’s blood boil, but he held himself in check. He could only accomplish what he needed by remaining cool-headed.

“What is this favor?” Laurie asked the question with the air of a man who could make one’s dreams come true or shatter them in a blow.

“Miss Tierney. Your wife.”

Laurie frowned. “You mean Lady Devonport.”

“What is in a name?” David smiled as Laurie looked befuddled at the question. “You see, my dear fellow, I am slightly acquainted with Miss Tierney. She is the niece of an old friend of mine. This friend is most distressed for her.”

“You know my wife?” Sudden rage crossed Laurie’s face. “Good Lord, have you come to offer your testimony of crim con as well?”

David pretended to look puzzled, tamping down his desire to punch

Laurie's protruding nose. That Laurie instantly believed David had tumbled Sophie increased the boiling inside him.

He kept his tone calm. "You mean have I had criminal conversation with Miss Tierney? No, no. You misunderstand me. I barely know the gel. But my friend, he was like a father to me, and I hate to see him unhappy. I am here to ask, on his behalf, for you to give up the divorce."

Laurie blinked. Not what he'd expected. Laurie settled into his chair, which he'd half risen out of, looking thoughtful. "I am sorry your friend is distressed, but I have already begun the proceeding. My wife, sadly, is an adulteress. I have two of her lovers willing to appear in court and say so."

David came out of his slouch and sat forward, changing from old acquaintance begging for a favor to the man who would take charge of the room.

"Now, old chap, you and I both know Miss Tierney is nothing of the sort," David said. "The gentlemen who are testifying to the crim con are friends of yours, paid handsomely for their efforts. Their reputations will not suffer too much, and they'll be rewarded for coming to your aid. I know all this, because I've spoken to them, and both confessed everything to me." Sinclair and Eleanor had many connections, and had helped David make appointments besides this one.

Laurie flushed, uneasiness settling upon him. "Does it matter? My marriage is at an end. If the dear laws of England would let me finish it without all this mess, I certainly would."

"Yes, declaring 'I divorce you,' three times and tossing her out of your tent would be much easier."

"Quite." Laurie clearly did not understand the reference, just as he had no idea what was inside any of the books in this wonderful library. "But I must take my wife to court, or I will not be free to remarry."

"And that is the crux of the matter, is it not?" David pinned Laurie with a gaze worthy of Basher McBride. "You wish to marry another. I understand



that. Therefore, you must legally end your current marriage. But have you not thought of annulment? There will still be legal papers to wade through, but annulment is much less scandalous. You and Miss Tierney have no children to worry about, is that correct? None to become suddenly illegitimate when the marriage is declared invalid?"

"No sons, no." Laurie scowled. "No offense to your friend, but his niece never came up to scratch in that way."

David raised his brows. The rage inside him danced about, seeking release. He had already decided how to let it out, in a way it would be most effective, but it was difficult not to simply grab Laurie and bang his face into his desk.

"Really?" David drawled. "Or is it that your little man isn't up to the task?"

Laurie's expression went dark. "Of course that is not the case. Why would you even suppose such a thing? When children don't come, it is the woman's fault. Childbearing is up to them."

David could put forth plenty of medical arguments to prove Laurie wrong, but he let the statement pass. "So, no children whose lives you will ruin. Then why not annulment?"

"An annulment is not such a simple thing," Laurie said impatiently. "To declare a marriage invalid is difficult. There are certain conditions that must be met. Trust me, I looked into it."

"Yes, I do imagine your solicitors with their heads together day and night scheming, scheming. Let me see, if I recall, the conditions are ..."

David paused as though trying to remember, but he knew damn well what they were. Sinclair had gone over the process of annulment with him meticulously, but David was more interested in what Lackwit Laurie knew.

"One is if we are too closely related," Laurie finished for him. "I studied our family trees, and Lady Devonport and I are not even remotely connected." He looked disdainful. "Her family is far inferior to mine, which I

should have noted long before she dazzled me.”

David barely refrained from spitting at him. He touched his fingers, counting off. “Very well, then. That possibility has been wiped away. Next?”

“That we have already contracted a previous marriage. I had not.” Laurie pressed his hands to his chest, a virtuous man.

“What about Miss Tierney? You could not find a marriage in her past—or at least, invent one?”

“I thought of that.” Laurie looked regretful. “But claiming she married another before me—that would have to be proved.”

“Yes, I can see it would be ticklish. You’d have to produce documentation, witnesses, perhaps the vicar who performed the service. Even if Miss Tierney had married on the Continent, a judge here would want to send for the documents there.”

“I say, why do you keep referring to her as *Miss Tierney*?” Laurie looked affronted. “She is still my wife, at least legally, for now.”

“Because if you annul the marriage, as I believe you can, she will never have been the Countess of Devonport. Therefore, her true name is Miss Tierney.”

Lackwit had to work through that. “I see.”

“Let us resume—Miss Tierney is not a close relation. Nor is she currently married to another. I would choose the next point on which a marriage can be annulled—insanity—on your part, I mean—but alas, that also would require testimony. And Miss Tierney was of marriageable age when you wedded—too many witnesses to that.” David touched his last finger, unable to hide his glee. “But I believe another reason for annulment is ...”

“What?” Laurie said irritably. “We have run through them all. Except ...” His face went red as he realized where David was leading him.

“Yes, indeed,” David said, and pronounced the word with satisfaction. “Impotence.”

“On her part, yes,” Laurie snapped. “But still, it is—”

“No, no, old chap. You mistake me,” David interrupted in a hard voice. He smiled into Laurie’s face, a cold, angry smile. “Of course I mean the impotent one is *you*.”

Lackwit Laurie stared in such bafflement that David couldn't hold in his laughter. The man's resemblance to a stuffed fish at the moment was hilarious.

Laurie coughed. "But I am not ..." He held his fist to his mouth and wheezed. "You know."

"Flaccid as a deflated balloon?" David suggested. "Limp as a drowned worm? Are you certain?" He made a show of glancing about the room. "I see no sons or daughters crawling around your house. No by-blows from your mistresses. I've investigated this point. Are you certain *you* are up to scratch, old son?"

"Of course I'm not impotent!" Laurie's voice rang out. "What the devil are you playing at?"

"You could pretend to be. To obtain the annulment."

Laurie was up from his desk, advancing on David. David made a show of taking his time to rise to meet him.

"You two-faced blackguard!" Laurie snarled. "You're her lover, aren't you? You want me to back off so you can have her. Well, I refuse." He stepped to David, putting himself nearly nose to nose with him—not difficult as Laurie's stuck out so far. "There will be no annulment. I will divorce her and cover her with so much muck, even *you* will be disgraced if you take her.

You've tipped your hand, my friend."

David's gaze was steady. "You always were a bit slow, weren't you, Devonport? An annulment will save you reams of cash. Why do you care what your wife gets up to after that? You will have no blemish on your character and can marry whom you choose."

"What the devil are you talking about? I can't make a case for *impotence*." Laurie flinched at the word. "Such a thing must be proved, and it never will be. Please, do your worst. Send a lovely courtesan or even a homely midwife to come to me and touch my prick. It will bounce forth in all its glory and your impotent theory will be dust."

"An excellent idea." David pretended to brighten. "I will make a bargain with you. If a lady can get you stiff—and she agrees to bear witness to a judge that you're flowing like a virile man—I will withdraw the idea. But, if she proves we should change your name to Limp-Prick Laurie, you will have your marriage annulled, announce to the world that Miss Tierney was falsely accused, and go your merry way. Your wealthy widow might think twice about marrying a man who can't please her in the bedchamber, but that is the risk you'll have to take."

Laurie stepped back, his smile huge and disquieting. "You have made a bad choice, Fleming. I will accept the bargain and enjoy squashing you. I'll have Devilish David in court as one copulating happily with my wife, and be damned to you—and to her."

David raised his brows. "*Devilish David* doesn't have the sting of *Lackwit Laurie*, does it? Or *Limp-Prick Laurie* as I will call you from now on." David stuck out his hand. "I believe we have an agreement. I will send my solicitor to draw it up formally if you like. Then you will ... er, you know ... be put to the test."

"I look forward to it," Laurie said in hearty tones.

"I dare say."

David and Laurie shook on it, Laurie trying not to hide a wince as David

strengthened his grip. David turned away, taking up the walking stick he'd leaned on the chair and making for the door.

"You're a bloody fool." Laurie always did have to put in the last word. "And I shall prove it."

David continued into the hall. "There is a reason we call you Lackwit, you ass," he muttered.

"What was that?"

David turned back, raising his voice. "I said, I wish you good day, old sass."

Laurie nodded stiffly. "And you."

David grinned as he went down the stairs, his steps light. He took his hat and greatcoat from the footman, slinging them on as he ducked out into the pounding rain, whistling a merry tune.



SOPHIE DECIDED that kneeling in the mud, hacking at a mound of dirt, was no bad thing. In the last few days, she and Uncle had turned up a few more loose tiles, one black, one the brilliant red of heart's blood. A floor lay somewhere under here, Uncle Lucas vowed.

As impatient as he was, Uncle would not simply plow down until he found it. Modern archaeology was not a treasure hunt, he declared, but a search for knowledge of the past. Even so, Sophie knew Uncle longed to find his villa before he grew too elderly to enjoy it.

She sat back on her heels, glad of the tarp that shielded her from the worst of the muck, and wiped her brow. More to do before teatime.

A movement across the field caught her eye, and Sophie froze, a clod of earth dropping from the trowel to her skirt.

He'd said he wasn't coming back. Had shouted it. Sophie climbed stiffly to her feet, heart pounding as the unmistakable form of David Fleming

tramped toward her. Dismaying how quickly she'd learned his walk and way of moving.

Uncle Lucas dropped his spade and rushed forward, peppering David with delighted greetings. Sophie remained where she was, as though the mud cemented her feet in place.

“Thought you'd disappeared for good, my dear fellow,” Uncle Lucas said as he and David moved toward Sophie. “Leaving me to wonder when you'd turn up again.”

“Like a bad penny.” David's self-deprecating drawl cut through the wind. “Found your villa yet?”

“More pieces of it.” Uncle Lucas tried and failed to hide his excitement. “Sophie is most clever at discovering relevant bits. She is officially my assistant now, so treat her with respect. Also compassion for putting up with me.”

“Excellent.” David rested his gaze on Sophie, his gray-blue eyes holding a heat that had nothing to do with his polite words. “I am certain she will do far better than anyone else you allow on your dig. Including me.”

Sophie warmed to the sincerity in David's words, but she suspected he was thinking, as she was, about the kiss. At least, *she* was picturing the kiss with intensity, her lips burning as though he'd just lifted his mouth away.

Then again, he was a libertine, Uncle had told her. David must kiss ladies and walk away from them all the time. He might have already forgotten their spontaneous embrace.

She realized both men were staring at her, awaiting her response. “It is very good to see you back,” she blurted. *Oh dear, like a besotted schoolgirl.* “Uncle missed you, though he does not like to say so.”

Uncle Lucas sent David a sheepish grin. “I might have let on that I enjoy having you about.”

David gave him a mock bow. “You flatter me, sir. I shall be certain to return often—you are good for my pride.”

Uncle shook his head in despair. “One day you will learn to gracefully accept a compliment from your friends. I say we adjourn for tea. We’ve done enough here today, and the weather is turning colder.”

Clouds had blotted out the sun and now a fine mist began to fall, coating grass, earth, the tarp, and the three humans foolish enough to be out in it.

David stepped to Sophie and offered his arm. “Miss Tierney? Shall I see you home?”

He had a strange insistence on calling her Miss Tierney, not that Sophie minded. She’d never quite believed herself as the Countess of Devonport, and she soon would no longer be.

She wished Uncle had cut in to escort her, but he only waited, looking pleased at David’s politeness. Sophie closed her fingers on the crook of David’s arm, her knees going shaky at the strength beneath the wool. She’d end up flat on her face if she weren’t careful.

David said little as they tramped back to the vicarage. Uncle Lucas kept up a stream of talk about the dig and his speculations, never inquiring what David had been up to in London or why he’d returned. Sophie said nothing at all, not trusting herself to speak.

Not long later, they gathered around the table in the warm dining room. Mrs. Corcoran brought out a lavish tea of sandwiches, scones, soup, and divine cakes, not seeming to mind that they’d come in early. Sophie’s curls were still damp from hurried ablutions in her room—her haste to wash off her grubbiness and rush back to David unnerved her.

He sat across from her now, as he’d done the first morning of his stay. Today his dark hair was neatly combed, the red in it imperceptible in the gloom of the afternoon. His suit looked new, fresh from the tailor, a long frock coat and loosely tied cravat which were the height of fashion.

After maddening civil conversation—dissecting the weather, the slowness of certain trains, the thick pall of London—David turned to Sophie, color brushing his cheeks.



“A bit of good news for you, Miss Tierney. Lackwit Laurie—the Earl of Devonport, that is—will no longer be pursuing a divorce. Or at least, I predict he will decide this within the next week or so.”

Sophie had plucked up a piece of sponge cake from the tray. At his words it fell from her numb fingers to the tablecloth, a puff of icing sugar bursting from it like white mist.

“Oh.” Her fingers remained in the air, unable to move. “How ...”

This should be the finest news she could wish for. No divorce meant no trial, no gentlemen standing before a judge swearing they’d been her lovers. Her reputation might continue to be smeared by the rumors, but not destroyed by the certainty. A divorced woman never recovered from the shame.

She swallowed as Uncle Lucas and David watched her keenly. A shadow outside the doorway told her Mrs. Corcoran was avidly listening.

“A divorce is a terrible thing,” she said in a choked voice. “But on the other hand, I no longer wish to be married to my husband. It would mean I’d be free.”

Free to hide in her uncle’s house or follow him across the world, wherever the fit took him. She might be unwelcome in polite society, but she’d be free nonetheless.

If Laurie no longer sought the divorce, she’d be trapped as his wife forever. She’d be his property, subject to his commands, his malice ...

David closed his fists as he registered her dismay. “No, no. My dear, Miss Tierney, forgive my idiocy. I am telling it wrong. He and his solicitors will decide to *annul* the marriage rather than go through the procedure of divorce. You’ll be free and clear of him but without the humiliation of the trials.”

“Annul?” Sophie wet her lips, the word tasting strange. “Laurie will never do that. He cannot—there are no grounds.”

David smiled like a fox who’d just outwitted a pack of the best hounds. “I believe you will soon receive a paper that says you are Miss Sophie Tierney and always have been.”

He was too serene, too prideful. Sophie narrowed her eyes as her heart began to pound. “What did you do?”

“Me?” David pressed a hand to his chest. “Why should I have anything to do with it?”

Sophie gripped the edge of the table. “You disappear to London and claim you won’t return, then you pop up again announcing that my marriage will be annulled, when neither my husband nor his solicitors have ever mentioned any such possibility. I can’t help but think this is down to you.”

“Exactly.” Uncle Lucas fixed him with a stern gaze. “Explain yourself, my boy.”

David lifted his teacup, glanced at the tea inside, then set the cup down and pulled out a silver flask. “I thought you’d be pleased.” He dolloped whisky into the teacup and tucked away the flask.

“I asked you not to interfere,” Sophie said in a hard voice. “Begged you, as I recall.”

“As did I,” Uncle Lucas put in. “Your name attached to Sophie’s will cause her even more scandal.”

“Worry not, my friends.” David sipped his doctored tea. “My name will not come up in this business at all. I *do* know how to go about these things. Please do not tell me you’d prefer a divorce, dear lady. An annulment is embarrassing, of course, but nothing that won’t blow over.”

“I will be ruined all the same.” Sophie’s cheeks went hot. “If the marriage is declared invalid, I will have been living with a man not my husband.”

Sharing his bed, she meant, but could not bring herself to say. Not that Laurie had touched her after the first few years of their marriage. When Sophie hadn’t conceived, he’d sought entertainment elsewhere.

David wore an odd smile. “I don’t believe so. You might be the object of pity, but you’ll weather it.” He had a smug gleam in his eyes, very pleased with himself.

Sophie wasn’t certain whether to laugh, scold, or throw up her hands and

flee the room. She chose to remain quiet, retrieve the fallen sponge cake, and put it out of the way on a plate.

The discussion was nonsense, in any case. David could not change the world, or Laurie, no matter what he thought. There were no grounds for annulment, and the divorce would continue. Laurie was a spoiled man and would have his own way.

The situation was impossible, even for someone as canny as David. All she could hope was that he hadn't made things worse for her.

She lifted her teacup and glared at David over it. She refused to be a namby-pamby chit in front of David about all this. She'd secured her future as Uncle's secretary, and she'd have a fine time.

His look turned puzzled at her resolve, but he shrugged and lifted a profiterole—a puff pastry bursting with cream—and took a bite, cream sliding across his lips.

“Mmm.” David closed his eyes as he swiped up the cream with his tongue. “You’ve outdone yourself, Mrs. Corcoran,” he called out the open door.

“Go on with you,” Mrs. Corcoran’s good-natured voice floated back.

Sophie couldn't move as David drew his tongue over his lips, licking the cream into his mouth. He opened his eyes to look directly at Sophie, and her blood burned.

She glanced quickly at Uncle Lucas, but he'd become absorbed in his notes on the dig while absently shoving cakes into his mouth.

David swallowed. “These truly are most excellent.”

He smiled across the table at Sophie, challenging her. He expected her to wilt at his sensuality, she realized, to fall under the table at his feet as she suspected many women did.

Blasted man. Sophie snatched a profiterole from the three-tiered tray and quickly stuffed the whole thing into her mouth.

A mistake. Cream gushed from her lips, and Sophie coughed. She

snatched up her napkin and coughed into it, her face scalding. Silly Sophie, choking on a puff pastry to show a gentleman she cared nothing for him.

David was off his chair and around to hers, pounding her on the back. Uncle looked up from his notebook in concern.

Sophie wiped cream from her mouth and tears from her eyes. "I am well." Her voice was a hoarse gasp.

David dropped into the empty chair next to her, his warmth too close. "Are you certain? Cream puffs can be deadly."

Sophie patted her mouth with the napkin. "Don't be absurd."

Uncle, seeing she was truly all right, went back to his notes with a chuckle. "Deadly cream puffs, indeed."

"Try another." David plucked one from the tray. "A small bite. They are quite delicious."

What did he wish from her? For her to make a fool of herself? Well, she was capable of that without his help.

Sophie snatched the profiterole from David but this time made herself take a delicate nibble.

The cream, thick and sweet, smeared her mouth. David's gaze flicked to it, smile gone, as Sophie licked it away.

She felt heat on her lips as though he'd licked her himself. Her whole body smoldered as his focus remained on her mouth. Sophie carefully took another bite.

David's stare held fire, intensity, fierce desire. Sophie clutched the profiterole, cream oozing to her fingers. She absently put her forefinger to her lips and sucked the fingertip clean.

David let out a ragged breath and rose abruptly to his feet. "If you will excuse me, Pierson, Miss Tierney. I need a walk."

Without waiting for their response, he strode swiftly from the room. He called more thanks to Mrs. Corcoran, then the front door slammed, and his footsteps faded down the slate path outside the house.

Uncle raised his brows but said nothing, returning to his notes. Sophie took another shaky bite of her cream puff, her confusion and the memory of what had been in his eyes blazing inside her.



“I AM QUITE ENJOYING THIS,” Eleanor said as she sorted through plates of the photos she’d shot that day.

“You do love photography.” Her husband, the lofty Duke of Kilmorgan, lounged in a nearby chair, cupping a glass of Mackenzie malt. The windows were dark, night and London fog sealing them into their warm nest.

“Not what I mean. I meant—”

“I know exactly what you meant,” Hart rumbled. He leaned back in his chair, a Mackenzie plaid kilt draping his legs and woolen socks. Eleanor liked him this way, rumped at the end of a long day, his reddish hair awry, his golden eyes warm and half closed. “You are talking about David and your promise to help him be devious. Have a care, El.”

“Nonsense, it is most entertaining being devious. Mrs. Whitaker is a brick, is she not? I imagine most gentlemen never realize how very clever she is.”

“Oh, they know.” Hart let out a chuckle. “Or discover it too late.”

“And she is subtle. Knows exactly how and when to strike—rather like you and David. She’s very kind to help, when she doesn’t even know Miss Tierney. I ought to have taken Miss Tierney under my wing long ago, but Devonport is on the other side of the fence from you. Politics is a stupid thing.”

“True.” Hart shrugged. “But it is better than tyranny.”

“Tyranny *is* politics, you know, just of a different sort.” Eleanor studied a photo of young Malcom and a cat on its hind legs, smiling at the image. “Anyway, I have decided I will make a friend of Miss Tierney and see that

she does well. David sets quite a store by her.”

She became aware of Hart’s piercing gaze. “How do you know that?” he asked in suspicion. “Did he say so?”

“No, indeed. But why else would David be churning that marvelous brain of his to set her free of her awful marriage? I have a feeling David regards Miss Tierney as much more than the pitiable niece of his mentor.”

Hart listened in growing consternation. “El—as I said, have a care.”

“I think it’s marvelous. David has been alone far too long.”

“My love, David Fleming is never alone. He is surrounded by people day and night, especially *night*. Believe me, he does not suffer by himself in a monk’s cell.”

“Don’t be maddening. I did not mean *alone* in the literal sense. I mean in his heart.” Eleanor lightly touched her chest. “He needs a wife.”

“God help us.” Hart took a long sip of whisky. “Would ordering you to cease your matchmaking tendency do any good?”

“Of course not.” Eleanor abandoned her photographic plates and went to him. Hart’s eyes softened as Eleanor curled up on his lap and rested her head on his formidable shoulder. The tension between them changed, from husband and wife disagreeing to the electric awareness that flowed from Hart to Eleanor and back again. “David is your best friend. He’s performed monumental tasks for you over the years. Do you not wish to see him happy?”

“You are boxing me into a corner.” Hart’s voice vibrated her pleasantly. “If I tell you to leave off, you’ll accuse me of not wanting David to be happy. I *do* wish him well, but that does *not* mean I condone you rushing him into matrimony with a lady he barely knows.”

“Then we must see that he learns more about her.” Eleanor ran her fingers down the placket of Hart’s open shirt. The warmth of the man beneath enticed her, but she made herself not touch him except through fabric—far too distracting. “They may not suit at all, but we must give them a chance.”

“We,” Hart repeated. “You keep saying *we*.”

“Well, of course. David trusts you.”

Hart growled. “Not if I shove him at a woman and tell him to marry her. He’ll think I’ve lost my mind.”

“He is already interested, if he is giving the problem this much thought. You must see that. But we will be careful, as you insist.”

“I see you’ve already decided.” Hart lifted Eleanor’s hand, scattering her thoughts by kissing her fingertips. “What do you want me to do?”

Eleanor blinked. “I must say, you agreed very quickly. I thought I’d have to do much more persuading.”

Hart’s relaxed manner vanished, and the dangerous man she’d fallen in love with surged to the surface. “I never said I’d not command a price.”

“Ah.” Eleanor sank into agreeable warmth. “When will I have to pay this price?”

“Not *when*. For *how long*.” Hart’s golden eyes glittered. “We are starting now.”

“*We*?” Eleanor slanted him a coy look.

Hart growled. He came off the chair, Eleanor in his arms, his strength breathtaking. Eleanor knew they would not make it to their bedchamber, but the rug before the fire was plenty soft. Plans, and photography, could wait.



SOPHIE WASN’T SPEAKING to him, David concluded. At least, not in the easy, friendly way she had before.

She was furious, and David felt it with every glance. The February chill the next day as he returned to the dig with them was nothing to her coolness.

What had he expected? David chided himself as he shoved his spade into the earth. For her to swoon into his arms?

Sophie had entreated with him not to interfere, and he’d ignored her plea.

For a good cause, David told himself. He wanted to save her from humiliation and utter ruin.

In London, his choice had been clear. Here at the vicarage, David had to face himself with honesty. Had he put plans in motion to unselfishly help Sophie or did he have visions of her melting before him in undying gratitude?

Damnation. The problem with being friends with a vicar was that his ethical ideas started rubbing off, no matter how hard David tried to avoid such things.

Yesterday, when Sophie had stuffed the profiterole into her mouth, cream exploding across her lips, his entire body had gone hard. Even more so when she'd nibbled the second bite. Droplets of cream had clung to her lips, begging David to kiss them away.

When she'd sucked the cream from her forefinger, he'd been swamped by a vision of her in a fire-lit bedchamber, delicately catching cream from the pastry on the tip of her tongue. In this vision, Sophie hadn't been wearing a stitch of clothing, a coyly draped bedsheet making her all the more enticing.

Fleeing into the cold garden had been his only choice.

David pulled up his shovel and turned to Sophie, the iciness emanating from her nettling. She knelt on hands and knees on a tarp, skirts primly hiding her ankles as she skimmed her trowel through the dirt, utterly ignoring him.

"You were angry when I left for London," he said to the hat that obscured her face. "It seems my return has made you even more so." He waited, but there was no response. "Would you like me to leave again?" His voice was a touch louder. "Or would that also irk you?"

Sophie lifted her head, her face chiseled beauty in the shade of her hat. "I have no interest in what you do one way or another, Mr. Fleming."

David rammed his spade into the ground. "So you say, but your eyes are shouting at me to go to hell."

"Truly? I had no idea my eyes were so loud."



David held up his hands, palms facing her. “I have offended you, enraged you, annoyed you, infuriated you—I know that. But I had the best of intentions, I promise.”

Sophie climbed to her feet, hand tight on the trowel. “I dare say you did, but you likely have made things worse. My husband will *never* agree to an annulment. And now that he knows the notorious David Fleming has a friendship with me, he will be all the more vicious.” She waved the trowel as she spoke, scattering dribbles of dirt.

“You could trust me to know what I am doing,” David said impatiently.

“*Why* should I? I know so very little about you. My uncle is fond of you, which, so far, is the only point in your favor.”

To hide his sudden hurt, David pressed a dramatic hand to his forehead. “Ah, lady, you grieve me. Have I not behaved like a perfect gentleman?”

“No.” Sophie folded her arms. “You’ve flirted with me, kissed me, confused me, gone behind my back to do precisely what I asked you not to, *and* enticed me with a profiterole.”

David’s laughter bubbled up along with his treacherous imagination. “Fickle woman, you have kissed *me* and plunged me into the deepest bewilderment. You are furious with me no matter which way I turn, and I believe you tried to confound *me* with a profiterole. Most alarming when you nearly choked on it.”

Sophie’s face reddened, and she pointed with her trowel. “I believe you ought to dig in another part of the field, Mr. Fleming.”

“Pierson directed me to dig *here*. And here I stay.”

“Well, he told *me* to dig here as well.”

“Then we are at an impasse.”

Sophie glared. David wanted to laugh his triumph, but at that moment, Sophie stooped, came up with a damp clod of earth, and threw it at him.

Mud thwacked his coat, brand new from his tailor, made for the messy business of archaeology. It was the best Scots tweed.

“Bloody hell, woman.” His snarl was also the best Scots, his years of Harrow, Cambridge, and flitting through the top of London society flowing away.

Another chunk of mud hit his midsection. Sophie’s fury had segued into merriment, her eyes gleaming satisfaction.

Oh, she wanted to play, did she? David tossed aside the shovel. He bent and gathered mud into his gloved hands, sending her an evil grin. He liked that Sophie’s eyes widened in trepidation, but he’d be gentle with her. Perhaps.

He took a quick step toward her ... and found himself falling, his feet penetrating a deep hole. The balls of mud fell from his hands as he windmilled for balance and found none.

David toppled slowly forward. He braced himself to land facedown, but as he hit the earth, it opened up and swallowed him whole.

David!” Sophie shrieked. She unfroze from the horror of watching David fall through the earth and dashed to the spot where he’d disappeared. “David!”

Bogs could drown a person while they thrashed in desperation. The thought of David, a man so full of life, being dragged out of sight forever streaked terror through her.

Sophie reached the edge of the square hole David had fallen through and sank to her knees, heart thudding. She spied his body, facedown at the bottom of a shallow cavern, weak sunlight barely illuminating the interior. David lay unmoving, wet earth around him, but he’d landed in a damp cave, not a bog—thank heaven.

He didn’t move, didn’t groan. Sophie hiked up her skirts, caught the edge of the hole, and dropped down to him.

She landed on stone covered with dirt and had to stoop to hands and knees under the low roof. “David,” she whispered frantically.

“Music ...”

Sophie scrambled to him, uncertain she’d heard right. “David, are you hurt?”

“Lady, thy voice is music.” David rolled himself over with difficulty, his face scratched, his words hoarse. “Is this heaven?”

“If it is, it’s cold, dark, and damp and half a mile from my uncle’s house. You *are* hurt.” Sophie cupped his cheek, brushing away earth and blood with her gloved thumb.

“Heaven,” David said with conviction. “And music. Look.”

He repositioned himself on all fours and swiped dirt from the floor.

A painted eye stared back at them. Its pupil was a rich brown, the lid pale ivory lined with black lashes and one black arched brow.

“Good heavens.” Sophie gaped then helped David brush away more grit and mud to reveal once-smooth tile. “It’s a mosaic.”

She understood in a moment why David had gone on about music. He revealed part of a lyre, being plucked by the person with the keen brown eye. More frantic rubbing revealed another figure, smaller and female, with a flute.

“Orpheus,” David said excitedly. “Master of music.”

“Not necessarily,” came a voice from above. The opening darkened as Uncle peered down at them. “Could simply be a chap playing at an entertainment, flute girls at his side.” The dry tone left Uncle Lucas and he clasped his hands in joy. “My dear fellow, you’ve found my *floor*.”

“No, indeed,” David said. “Sophie had been diligently digging at this spot while I was vagabonding. I only widened the hole. With my body.”

Sophie had to grin. “You could say he stumbled upon it.”

David’s eyes began to sparkle. “I dropped in, and there it was.”

“You *unearthed* it. Needing no shovel.”

“No, indeed,” David said. “It was a bodily blunder.”

Sophie laughed, the sound echoing strangely in the close hole. David’s smile was warm, genuine—happy.

The expression transformed his face, erasing the tired disdain, revealing David the man. Decadence fell away to make him more handsome than ever, never mind the abrasions on his cheeks.

His smile faded as he and Sophie studied each other, but his mask did not

drop back into place. Sophie lifted her hand to hover near his hurt face.

David quickly glanced at the opening, which was light again, Uncle having vanished. “He’s gone very quiet up there.”

Sophie jerked her hand away and scrambled to her feet, careful of the mosaic. When she stood up fully, her head reached just above the hole. “Uncle?”

Uncle Lucas had fallen to his knees, his hands pressed together in prayer. A tear trickled from his closed eyes.

“Are you well, Uncle?” Sophie asked softly.

David rose next to her, his body and hers close in the narrow opening. His warmth both comforted and unnerved her.

Uncle Lucas opened his eyes, his face wet, a smile beaming. “I was thanking God for his guidance, and asking forgiveness for being so excited about earthly pleasures.” Uncle climbed to his feet, brushing mud from his knees. “My dear friends, this is a wonderful, wonderful thing. Thank you for making an old man’s dream come true.”



“ONE BIT of floor is a long way from an intact Roman villa,” David told Dr. Pierson as they packed up their tools for the evening.

Pierson had decided to cover the floor again but mark it, placing stones around the edges of the hole so animals or wandering humans would not fall through the pocket of earth as David had.

“Even if I find only this mosaic, I will be happy,” Pierson said with continued good cheer. “I knew I was right.”

“Yes, you were.” David clapped him on the back. Sophie had already headed for the house, her trim form a fine sight moving down the path toward the vicarage. “I have a suggestion. Let me send word to my friend El—the Duchess of Kilmorgan. She’s an amazing photographer. If anyone can

capture this floor before it's damaged by sun, wind, water, or curious antiquities seekers, it is she."

Pierson's brows went up. "Eleanor, the woman you wished to marry?"

David waved the objection away. "That was a long time ago. We're both older and far more sensible. Besides, she's madly in love with her husband."

Pierson looked at him in his penetrating way. "What about you?"

"Me?" David attempted a grin. "I do admire Hart and consider him a great friend, but I'm not in love with him, no."

"You know I meant his wife," Pierson said without humor.

David gazed at the arches of the ruined abbey in the distance, the evening made bleaker because Sophie had reached the vicarage and gone inside. He preferred to dance around truth because truth could be so exposing, embarrassing, and gut-wrenching, but he was ready to acknowledge things had changed in his life.

"I am no longer in love with Eleanor Ramsay." He could say it with clarity, because it was true. "As I said, that foolishness was a long time ago. I am now *friends* with the Duchess of Kilmorgan. She truly is the best photographer in Britain, but no one will admit that because she's a woman. All smile about her dabbling, more fool they. If you want a good record of this find, invite her."

"What about Sophie?"

David growled in irritation. "Why are you asking me about all these ladies? What about Sophie? I imagine she will welcome the assistance. I'm obviously useless except by accident."

He touched the cheek that still smarted from landing on ancient decorative stone. His elbow, knee, and hip didn't feel sound either, and his new suit was much torn and grimy. Why he'd bothered with the damned thing, he had no idea.

Yes, he did know. He'd wanted Sophie to think him both well turned out and practical-minded. Circumstances had proved him neither.

“You are deuced obtuse sometimes, Fleming,” Pierson surprised him by saying. “I will speak plainly so you will understand. Sophie is forming a tenderness for you, whether I approve or not. It would be awkward for her if the woman you once proposed to pushed her way in to our dig.”

David listened in amazement. “What the devil are you talking about—a tenderness? Sophie wishes me at the bottom of the sea. She’d have left me in that hole, and good riddance, if I hadn’t fortuitously landed on a bit of Roman tile. Besides, Eleanor would never push her way in. In spite of the way she rattles on, she is a perceptive woman. She’ll give all credit to you and Sophie for the floor, snap her photographs, and go home. I suggested her because your books will be treasured forever if you include brilliant photographs to accompany your rather dry prose. But if you want blurred shots from, say, myself, then by all means, keep Eleanor far away.”

David was surprised at his vehemence, and at Pierson’s silence. He wished the world would find something else to talk about besides David’s youthful passions. He had let Eleanor go in his heart some time ago—he would be happy when everyone else caught up.

“I see.” Pierson watched him a while longer, reminding David without words that this man was far wiser than he liked to let on. He at last gave David a terse nod. “I suppose we can write to the duke.”

“Or I could be terribly efficient and telegraph Eleanor this evening. Knowing her, she’ll set off at once and arrive by morning.”

Pierson shook his head. “You do like to rush about where angels fear to tread.”

“Always have. But you want your floor recorded for posterity, don’t you? Best to start immediately.”

The appeal to his find clinched matters, as David knew it would. Pierson gave in with a sigh.

“Off you go. Send your wires. I’ll break the news to Sophie.”

He turned and shuffled toward the vicarage, the very picture of a worried

guardian.

He worried for no reason, David thought irritably as he turned up the collar of his coat, settled his mud-smeared hat, and took the path to the village and its train station, which housed the telegraph office. Sophie didn't give a damn about David's past, nor would she feel any awkwardness about Eleanor. Why should she?

He was correct that Sophie would be very glad to see the back of David Fleming. He knew it in his bones.



SOPHIE WAS UP EARLY the next morning, washed and dressed, her hair neat, her boots scrubbed free of yesterday's earth. She paced to the edge of the garden, pretending to take air after breakfast—so what if she timed the walk to coincide with the arrival of the Duchess of Kilmorgan?

Ever since Uncle had come in last evening announcing that David was striding to the village to telegraph the woman, Sophie hadn't been able to settle herself.

The duchess was one of the best-known hostesses in London. The ladies of the haut ton either adored Eleanor or reviled her, depending on their husbands' political stances. Laurie had commanded that the duchess be nowhere on Sophie's guest lists.

Therefore, Sophie did not know what to expect from her. She'd seen Eleanor at art openings and the like, which ladies from different factions attended, as long as they kept to their own sides of the room. The duchess was a red-haired woman who was very stylish though not a slave to fashion. She'd wafted about, unbothered by anyone's opinions, and Sophie had envied her effortless grace.

Sophie was not surprised David had fallen madly in love with Eleanor. She charmed all who came near her.



Today, this paragon would arrive at the stone vicarage in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere to photograph Uncle's mosaic. Not because she was a keen observer of archaeology or out of kindness for Uncle Lucas. She was coming because David asked her to.

David had been quite cheerful when he'd returned to the vicarage, missing tea, to Mrs. Corcoran's annoyance. He'd waved the duchess's return missive in triumph, his spirits high that she'd agreed to come.

Today. Now.

A plain black coach belonging to the stationmaster turned down the lane and headed for the vicarage and Sophie in the garden.

Sophie had expected a duchess to turn up in an elegant landau emblazoned with the ducal coat of arms, eschewing the ordinary train to travel in elegance. But David had said she'd come by rail, chugging out of London at an ungodly hour.

"No hour is ungodly," Uncle had chided him gently, and David only grinned.

The coach slowed, the beefy man who doubled as a porter at the station pulling the horses to a halt. He climbed down ponderously, but before he could open the passenger's door, a lady's gloved hand reached through the open window and yanked at the handle.

"Ah," David's voice came behind Sophie. "There you are, old thing." He strode down the path, air wafting as he passed, and gallantly reached for the descending lady. "Good of you to rush to our aid."

A trim foot in a laced-up boot landed on the iron step, followed by a narrow gray tweed skirt that matched a gray jacket buttoned to the duchess's chin. A wide but plain hat covered a pompadour of red hair, no flowers or feathers or birds that liberally sprinkled women's hats these days in sight. The duchess had dressed practically for poking about muddy fields, it seemed. Sophie wasn't certain why the fact irritated her.

As soon as the duchess's feet touched the ground, she turned back to the

carriage and tugged a case from it. “Don’t call me *old thing*, and do be useful, David. There is much more in the carriage and another cart coming from the station.”

She thrust the case into David’s hands and turned a wide smile on Sophie. “How delightful to meet you, Miss Tierney. I believe I saw you at the Royal Academy presentation last year, but of course, I was instructed to snub you, as your husband and mine are on the opposite ends of the political spectrum. Yours wants Scotland firmly under England’s thumb, and Hart wants all claymores raised until the Stone of Scone returns to Edinburgh. But that should not preclude us from being friends. We ladies have to stick together, no matter what our husbands get up to, do you not think?”

The duchess laced her arm through Sophie's as she spoke, and turned her up the path to the vicarage. Sophie pressed her lips closed against all the questions she wanted to ask and let the duchess more or less march her to the house. Behind them, David threw himself into helping the coachman unload Eleanor's things, his voice cheerful.

Uncle Lucas appeared on the doorstep. He'd dressed in his clerical collar and one of his best black coats, though his next service wouldn't be until the morrow.

"Your Grace." He bowed awkwardly. "Welcome to this humblest of abodes. I hope we can make you comfortable, but I am skeptical about that, really."

Eleanor stepped inside and took in her surroundings with obvious pleasure. "Nonsense, I prefer small and cozy over large, damp, and draughty any day. Castles such as the one I grew up in are romantic to look at but not to live in, I assure you. And do please dispense with formality. I am Eleanor. If it offends your propriety to address a lady thus, Lady Eleanor will do, though I imagine we will all be shouting at each other by the end of the week without bothering with names."

Mrs. Corcoran had left her kitchen in time to hear the last of the speech. She curtsied. "I'll take you to your chamber, Your Grace. It's a bit small but

I've warmed it well."

"Palatial compared to mine," David said as he struggled in, breathless from his load of cases. "I'm in a closet under the rafters. How you fit a bed up there, Pierson, I have no idea."

"It was here when I arrived," Uncle answered without worry. "Are these the photographic apparatus? How exciting."

Eleanor made Mrs. Corcoran happy by going off with her, her effusions of gratitude floating back to them. Uncle hovered over the cases, and David straightened up, pushing his hair from his face. He winked at Sophie, and in spite of Sophie's nervousness, she wanted to laugh.

Somehow, the duchess and all her equipment was settled, and she shared a brief luncheon with them before they trooped out to look at the mosaic. Sophie had assumed the woman would want to rest the remainder of the day and perhaps be carried to the site on a litter with a host of servants by her side. Silly, yes, but Sophie hadn't known what to expect.

What she discovered was that Eleanor was a fairly normal human being, who'd grown up penniless, in spite of being an earl's daughter, and appeared at home in the misty countryside. At luncheon she'd steered the conversation to archaeology, getting Uncle to tell her not only about the villa, but other things he'd dug up in the past. By the time the meal was finished, Uncle was besotted, and Eleanor eager to see the mosaic.

The four walked out, each carrying a case of photographic equipment. The day was gray, but a luminous glow seemed to surround the field.

"A most excellent specimen," Eleanor proclaimed as she gazed down at the tiled floor. "The artistry is remarkable, is it not? A piece from so far in the past, and yet we can touch it in the present." She let out a happy sigh. "Now then, it will be a challenge to photograph in this light. Miss Tierney, if you don't mind, I will need your help with reflectors and such. Dr. Pierson, you ought to also have an artist sketch this. Why not David? He draws like an angel."

“Do angels draw?” David asked in his lazy way. “I wouldn’t think they’d have the time, what with all the harping and having to look after sinners like me.”

“You know what I mean. If you do not have a sketch pad and pencils, procure some, please. The photos might not turn out, but a very good drawing will preserve this mosaic for all time. Like the *Description de l’Égypte* by Napoleon’s savants.”

David looked dismayed. “I’m not certain my draftsmanship is up to theirs.”

“No matter. It will be good enough. Now, may I go down? Miss Tierney, will you accompany me?” Eleanor scrambled into the hole with only Uncle’s hand to guide her.

Sophie wouldn’t dream of remaining on solid ground while the duchess dropped into the dirty cave. She began to follow, then started when a pair of strong hands caught her around the waist.

She looked up into David’s face, too close, his eyes briefly meeting hers. He lifted her, then set her gently down on the edge of the mosaic. Sophie caught Eleanor’s glance and the hint of her smile before the duchess turned away.

“Mmm.” Eleanor gazed about, careful not to step directly on the tiles. “Reflectors, definitely. We’ll have to beam light here, and here.” She pointed. “David will have to help. He *can* work hard, contrary to the indolent nature he displays.”

“I do hear you, El,” David said from above.

“It’s rather foolish of him, this decadent man-about-town he insists upon portraying, when very few work longer hours or do more than Mr. Fleming. And then he gazes at one in astonishment when praised for his accomplishments.”

“I’ll be returning to London, I think.” David’s tone was pained. “Then you can talk me over to your heart’s content while I sip brandy in my warm

and comfortable club.”

“Nonsense, I need you here to hold things.” Eleanor dusted off her hands. “I will have to ponder how to arrange my gear, but for now, I believe a cup of tea for us all will be best.”

The bulk of David’s body blocked the light as he bent over the hole. “Do you mean we lugged all this out here only to lug it back again?”

“Of course not,” Eleanor said, her blue eyes wide. “We can store it in Dr. Pierson’s shed. But the light is too bad today, and shooting into this hole will be tricky. We might as well have a nourishing cup of tea while we make plans. Help us out, will you, gentlemen?”

Sophie could only admire how Eleanor mustered the troops. Within minutes, the equipment was stored, and they strolled back to the vicarage.

Eleanor, her arm firmly through Sophie’s, slowed her steps, letting the gentlemen surge ahead. When David hesitated to wait for them, Eleanor waved him off. David’s expression turned wary, but he walked on, catching up to Uncle Lucas who was bent on the warm vicarage and tea.

“Now then, my dear,” Eleanor began. “I doubt we’ll have much time to ourselves, so you must tell me everything immediately.”

Sophie wet her lips, which the wind had dried. “Everything about what, Your Grace? I mean, Lady Eleanor.”

Eleanor gave her a patient look. “You know exactly what I mean. Your marriage, your divorce, why David is meddling in it, and what you think of him. I see the way you look at him, so it is obvious to me what is in your head, but I want to hear it from your lips. Are you in love with him?”

Sophie jerked to a halt. “In love?” she stammered. “How can I be? I barely know him.”

“The heart does not always wait for such practical things. When I first met Hart Mackenzie, I told myself he was an arrogant, high-handed wretch who thought too much of himself and needed to be kicked squarely in the backside. I was right, of course, but at the same time, I fell hopelessly in love

with him. Common sense told me to turn a cold shoulder, but my inconvenient emotions urged me to smile at him and kiss him silly at the first opportunity. Ah, my dear, I see your blush. You already have kissed David silly.”

The duchess’s very perceptive gaze made Sophie’s face go hotter.

“Not deliberately,” she managed.

“It was indeed deliberate, my dear. If you’d found David repugnant, you’d have punched him in the nose and marched away, demanding your uncle turn him out for the scoundrel he is. That means David kissed you, and you did not mind.”

“No.” Sophie had to face what was in herself. “I did not.”

Eleanor’s crooked smile warmed her. “Well then, we must retrieve you from this wretched marriage so you can kiss David with impunity.”

Sophie gave a bitter laugh. “My husband is trying to push me from it quite eagerly.”

“In a most inelegant and shameful way. Never mind. We shall see what happens.”

She looked mysterious, and Sophie’s misgivings rose. “David ... Mr. Fleming hinted there could be an annulment, but that is impossible. What do you know of it? I see by your face you know *something*.”

“I do. But I do not wish to raise your hopes. Let me simply say that Mr. Fleming knows powerful people, my husband included in that number. They will work, and we shall await the outcome.”

“Why should they?” Sophie ceased walking, facing the duchess as the wind tugged at hats and skirts. “Why should powerful men care about the bad marriage of the Earl of Devonport and his nobody wife?”

Eleanor regarded her calmly. “You are an intelligent young woman, I can see. Why do you suppose?”

Sophie did not believe her face could grow any more scalding. “You are saying David ... Mr. Fleming ... cares for me. I think you’re wrong. I think

he is trying to redeem himself—perform a good deed and be praised by his friends, or be forgiven for his past, or ... I don't know. He was very much in love with *you*." Sophie looked straight into the duchess's blue eyes. "Perhaps he is trying to gain your admiration."

"He is always attempting to gain my admiration," Eleanor said without concern. "And Hart's. That does not mean he cares nothing for you."

"He was in love with you," Sophie said, exasperated out of her politeness.

"Not at all." Eleanor's tone turned brisk. "David *liked* me very much—he still does, bless him—and he felt sorry for me. David lives very much in Hart's shadow—he usually prefers that, but it can't be easy. He took the opportunity once Hart's shadow moved to propose to me, but I knew full well we'd never suit. David knew that too once he worked through his wounded vanity. He is neither a slave to his emotions nor a fool."

Sophie listened in disquiet. Uncle Lucas had implied that David had nearly wrecked his life for this woman, and she'd observed how easily Eleanor and David had fallen in with each other upon her arrival.

Because they had been friends for so long? Were they that comfortable with each other?

Sophie envied them this, even under her flare of jealousy. How lovely to have such a friendship. If the world were a different place, she could live forever with Uncle in the vicarage, friend David appearing for long stays, the three of them growing closer as the years passed.

But the world was not comforting. It preferred Sophie to either be married or widowed, to have no bodily desires, and to not dwell under the same roof as an unmarried gentleman, even with her uncle as a chaperone. Her bubble of coziness here would come to an end soon, never to be repeated.

Eleanor turned with Sophie and began walking again, in silence this time, sweeping her gaze over the landscape.

Sophie studied her curiously. "What about you, Lady Eleanor? You mentioned your husband's shadow—you must live constantly in it, as I do in



my husband's. How do you manage?"

"Easily," Eleanor answered without rancor. "I side-step right back into the sunshine. Drives Hart spare." She smiled broadly, a woman confident in her own life and power.

Sophie had once thought she was as confident. Now she swam in a sea of confusion.

"You must be very happy," she said glumly.

Eleanor pulled her closer and patted her hand. "You must not give way, my dear. We will see that *you* are happy. I have determined this. I am so determined that Hart rolled his eyes at me and sent me away. Which means he agrees with me." Another pat as Eleanor gazed across the fields again. "What lovely country. I believe there are picturesque ruins of an abbey that I can photograph, are there not? I will have so many plates to develop I'll not come out of my darkroom for weeks." She squeezed Sophie's arm and smiled excitedly. "What a treat."



DAVID WATCHED Sophie as she held a mirror to beam a ray of sunlight onto the floor. She remained patient while Eleanor repositioned her camera a dozen times, none of the angles right, or so she claimed.

David hunkered on the other side of the mosaic with his mirror, he and Sophie trying to send the faint light onto the tiles. They'd cleared the hole and shored up its walls, but even so, it was tight quarters.

"You had to unearth the smallest Roman villa in creation," David called up to the hovering Dr. Pierson. "Instead of the lavish Golden House of Nero."

"I'm certain even bits of *that* found will be small," Pierson said without rancor. "It has been two thousand years, my friend. We cannot expect vast parlors for us to lounge in."

"I don't see why not. The Romans were fond of lounging. They ate dinner

lying down.”

“Must have been a messy business.” Eleanor bent over her camera, covering her head with a black cloth to shut out what there was of the light. “I can’t tuck into a cream cake at tea without dropping it all over my clothes.”

David’s imagination flashed to Sophie biting into the profiterole, cream sliding over her lips.

She must have thought about it at the same instant, because her eyes sought David’s, and they shared a hot look.

He flinched at how much his heart turned over at her smile. When Sophie walked away once she was free, David would hurt, and hurt excessively. He knew it, but could he climb out of this hole and leave now, to get the pain over with?

No, of course not. He’d remain and be tortured by what he could not have. It was his way.

“Ah, there we are. Now, David, for the love of all that’s holy, do not move. Oh, forgive me, Vicar.”

“Not at all, my dear,” Uncle Lucas said. He gazed eagerly into the opening, out of the light—Eleanor had already scolded him about casting shadows.

David tried to become a statue. Sophie, her arms a graceful curve as she held the mirror, did the same.

She’d make a beautiful sculpture, David thought. Like the Daphne of Bernini, or the glorious marble perfection of a Canova. It would of course be a nude statue, every curve of her delectably caught, her limbs displayed for all to see. But it would be a private thing, for the two of them ...

“*David*,” Eleanor said in exasperation. “Do pay attention.”

David snapped his mind from its treacherous path. “I beg your pardon, old friend.”

“And cease calling me *old*. No lady likes the adjective, even when she’s ninety.”

“I am devastated to upset you, my friend from the far-off days of my callow youth.”

The light from Sophie’s mirror wavered. David, who had not looked away from her for a moment, knew she was laughing.

Eleanor flung off the black cloth. “Well, I have done my best, but I see that I cannot have the pair of you down here at the same time. You are conspiring to ruin my work.”

Sophie’s mirror shook harder, and David fell in love with her a little bit more.

“Good heavens,” Pierson rumbled above, but he’d left the lip of the hole. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

All three on the mosaic rose and peered over the edge in bewilderment. David thought they must look like moles poking out of their burrow to see the wide world.

A tall man with a thick brown beard, a brown suit in nearly the same shade, gaiters, and a shapeless hat walked toward Pierson, his arm outstretched. “Well met, Dr. Pierson.”

“Indeed. Indeed.” Pierson engulfed the man with his usual enthusiastic handshake and turned him to the three faces watching them. “My friends, this is Dr. Gaspar. Howard Gaspar. I took your advice to heart, Fleming, and decided to ask a professional archaeologist to help me with the site. I wrote to him while you were away.”

“At your service.” Dr. Gaspar bowed politely to the company.

His surname was Hungarian but he dressed, sounded, and behaved like an Englishman. Probably had never set foot in Hungary. He had brown eyes, brown hair, and sun-bronzed skin that blended with his rather shabby suit. *Drab*, David thought. Extraordinarily drab. Probably worked hard at it.

David knew bloody well he’d not have disparaged the man if Gaspar hadn’t stared in a rude and intrigued way at Sophie. As Pierson assisted first Eleanor then Sophie to solid ground, Gaspar gazed at Sophie as though he’d

been clouded between the eyes.

Exactly as David must have appeared when *he'd* first seen Sophie. Damn it all.

“May I present the Duchess of Kilmorgan,” Pierson said grandly. “She’s agreed to do the photography. And my niece, Miss Tierney.”

Gaspar paid little attention to the fact that he was in the presence of a lofty duchess, because his interest was all for Sophie. David expected him to say something about envying Pierson for being surrounded by beauty, or exclaim that no great find could compare to the ladies—something smarmy and overblown.

Gaspar managed to stammer, “How do you do?” and then went silent.

Sophie took the hand he offered after he’d shaken Eleanor’s and smiled at him. It was an admiring smile, a welcoming smile.

“How very nice to meet you, Dr. Gaspar. Uncle Lucas has spoken so highly of you.”

She sounded happy to see him. David slipped as he climbed out, and ended up with mud all over his hands and knees.

Stifling curses, he made a show of comically wiping the earth away, but no one had noticed. Not Pierson, or Gaspar, or even Eleanor, blast her.

Most oblivious of all was Sophie. She continued to hold Gaspar’s hand and smile into his face, and David’s spirits went straight to hell.

Things did not improve over tea. Dr. Gaspar had recently returned from the Near East, where he'd been digging up Nineveh, and the ladies were full of eager questions.

Damn and blast that David had to admire intelligent women. Eleanor was the daughter of Britain's foremost botanist, and she'd done the photographs and plates for all his published works. Now she was reading her way through the Mackenzies's formidable library. David joked from time to time that she'd married Hart to get at his books, and Eleanor never corrected him.

Sophie's Uncle Lucas was not only a vicar but a Cambridge fellow, who, it was clear, had taught his niece many things about archaeology and ancient history. Instead of inquiring where on earth Nineveh lay—David had only the vaguest idea himself—she asked Dr. Gaspar if he'd seen Ashurbanipal's library and had the Babylonians left anything of it when they'd sacked the city?

Gaspar warmed under the ladies' interest and began to hold forth without arrogance. He told delightful anecdotes about how the local men and the donkeys had always gotten the better of him, which made the company, David excepted, laugh in merriment.

Dr. Gaspar wasn't much older than David, David decided, even if harsh climates had left lines on his skin. The beard made him look more elderly as

well, though there wasn't a gray hair in it. He must have been at university around the same time as David—it turned out that Pierson had been one of Gaspar's tutors.

David had no memory of him. Either Gaspar had been finished by the time David arrived, or he'd existed in a world of reclusive scholars while David had sown his wild oats with Hart at his side. There had been times when David had barely remembered his own name, let alone those of his fellow undergraduates.

"Are you pleased to be home?" Sophie asked Gaspar when he paused for breath. "Or do you miss the excitement of the Arab lands?"

Gaspar considered the question. "There are benefits to England. Tea." He lifted his cup. "And a comfortable, dry home with a jolly fire, good food, and fine company." He raised the cup again. "But there is much to miss about the desert. Its weather suits me better than the damp air here. You would think we'd be isolated and know nothing of the wide world, but in fact, I learn news there almost quicker than in my lodgings in Cambridgeshire. Gossip abounds, and anyone who goes into town is bombarded when he returns to the dig. We learn of events not only in Britain—we have news from so many countries."

Eleanor gave him a sage look. "I believe you are itching to be off again, Dr. Gaspar."

"Perhaps. But when Dr. Pierson wrote me about this Roman villa, I had to come. I can coordinate the excavation here before I return to the Ottoman lands."

Everyone but David smiled, pleased with him.

"In that case, I'll run up to London," David said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Now that you have a much better expert at digging in the dirt, Pierson." He gave Gaspar what he hoped was a gracious nod.

"Nonsense," Pierson answered in surprise. "I can always use another man with a shovel."

“For which you can hire a villager. I have business to attend.”

Sophie glanced at him, but said nothing. Whether she gave a damn if David came or went, he couldn't say.

On the other hand, Eleanor's glare held volumes. “Business you have other people looking into for you. Or do you mean you need to look into other people's business?”

Sophie quickly lifted her teacup, smothering her delicate cough.

“Very amusing, ol— I mean, *dear* friend,” David said. “I have much to do, as always. I've rusticated here far too long.”

“No, no, my good fellow,” Pierson said. “You came here for sanctuary, and I believe you need to remain for a time.”

True, both Fellows and Sinclair had counseled him to stay out of London as much as possible until his trial. Or, if he insisted on London, to remain home, under a voluntary house arrest.

Well, he couldn't be in a much more remote spot in England than Pierson's vicarage in Shropshire. David could walk outside whenever he wanted here, no locks or chains to keep him in, because there was nowhere to escape *to*.

“Perhaps not London,” David said after a swallow of tea. “I might return to the old family farm.”

“Oh, you are a farmer?” Gaspar asked with sudden interest. “Very like an archaeologist, is a farmer, except you dig to help living things and we dig to find dead things.”

The room found his wit outstanding.

“Not much for farming, me,” David said when they'd calmed themselves from the hilarity. “My pater left me an estate in Hertfordshire. Lovely country, though I'm apt to let the steward do as he pleases with the arable.”

Gaspar's expression didn't change. “Quite a responsibility, a large landholding. I am not surprised you don't want to leave it for long.”

Now David felt Sophie's eyes upon him, a hard stare as she sipped tea.

Could he never please her?

“I don’t mind rushing out to help Dr. Pierson with his hobby when he needs me,” David said. “But we will be a bit crowded here. I should at least make way for a new guest.”

“Not at all,” Gaspar said quickly. “I am putting up in the village. And archaeology is not a hobby, my good sir. It is a science, revealing knowledge of the past—we learn many astonishing things we never understood even from the writings of the ancients. Pieces from a faraway age tell us much about day-to-day life of the ordinary person, as well as of kings.”

He did not speak with rancor but as a learned man instructing a simpleton.

David clutched his teacup and bared his teeth in a grin. He who could hold a roomful of lords and ladies, princes and princesses, bishops and archbishops in the palm of his hand, was losing a battle against a vicar, an academic, and two beautiful women.

Before he could speak, Eleanor said, “Besides, I want to photograph the nearby abbey ruins, and you and Sophie need to show them to me.”

“An excellent idea,” Pierson said, far too earnestly. “We will all go. An outing away from the dig will do me good, and I can tell Dr. Gaspar all about it as we walk. The abbey at Weston is lovely, the cloisters amazingly well preserved—Cromwell’s men fortunately missed it when they were kicking over ancient churches.”

And so, David, instead of being able to flee to the solitude of his London flat or the green fields of Moreland Park in Hertfordshire, found himself roused from sleep at dawn the next morning by Eleanor’s brisk knock.

“Come along, David,” she said through the closed door. “We are about to set off. We’re waiting for you, so do get up. At once, please, there’s a good fellow.”





SOPHIE KNEW David had no wish to accompany them to the abbey ruins, and only Eleanor's prodding had him on the path a half hour after she woke him.

He dressed in the tweeds he'd brought back from his London sojourn, cleaned and pressed by Mrs. Corcoran, but he'd quickly ruin the suit in the damp. He looked like a dandy trying to fit into the country and failing miserably.

Dr. Gaspar, in plain brown flannel and thick-soled boots, was prepared to be grimy by the end of the day. A professional archaeologist, Sophie mused as she studied him. She would meet more of them as she followed Uncle about the world.

David trudged along, burdened with Eleanor's tripod, which he balanced over his shoulder, as well as two of her cases. Sophie carried a satchel with sandwiches Mrs. Corcoran had pressed on her, knowing Uncle often forgot to eat. She'd also brought pencil and paper—while Eleanor photographed, Sophie might do a sketch of the ruins. She didn't consider her drawing skill up to much, but she enjoyed it.

"May I carry that for you?" Dr. Gaspar, at her side, reached for the satchel.

Sophie jumped. "No, no," she said breathlessly. "You are kind, but it isn't heavy."

Dr. Gaspar looked embarrassed. "Oh. I beg your pardon. I did not mean to insult ..."

Sophie smiled at him. "Never mind. You startled me, is all. I would be grateful for your help."

Dr. Gaspar eagerly closed his fingers around the handle. The satchel was indeed light, and he overbalanced, expecting a greater weight. He danced a few steps and then righted himself, laughing a little.

Poor man. Like many of Uncle's acquaintance, Dr. Gaspar wasn't certain how to behave in company. She would have to put him at his ease.

She caught David's eye on her, the man scowling like a thunderstorm.

Upset Dr. Gaspar hadn't offered to help *him*? Or upset at Sophie for some reason? Drat the man—he confused her so.

“Weston Abbey was founded in the eleventh century,” Uncle held forth as they walked. “The Augustinians built an enormous cloister and church, which was of course sacked by Henry the Eighth when he had his little disagreement with the Pope. It was one of the wealthiest, I have heard, and the king and his men took everything, leaving it to ruin. Wonderful place for a picnic.”

The abbey, which decorated the distant views from the vicarage, grew more imposing as they approached it. The stark ribs of the fallen church on the hill never failed to move Sophie—forlorn, forgotten beauty, a once proud place now silent and deserted. The golden stone against blue sky held stark and yet warm beauty. She could imagine the monks of centuries past toiling in the fields before returning to the golden-bricked cloisters for prayer and rest.

“They had a large scriptorium, Uncle tells me,” Sophie said to Dr. Gaspar as they trundled up the hill. “Records show they copied many books over the four hundred years they were here. All lost now.”

Dr. Gaspar halted, aghast at her words. “Terrible. What a waste.”

Sophie nodded. “Sad when people value books so little. They stripped the abbey of its riches and discarded what they considered useless.”

“Men tend to be dazzled by a book's gold bindings and not the words inside,” Eleanor agreed. “If those soldiers could even read them. Most were in Latin, I imagine. Or Greek.”

“Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” David burst out.

Dr. Gaspar, Uncle, and Eleanor stared at him as though he'd lost his mind. David, flushing, quieted. “It's Shelley. *Ozymandias*. I thought it fitting.”

Sophie wanted to laugh. His look was so contrite, Dr. Gaspar's confused, that their present comedy outweighed the sad loss of the past.

“We’re almost there,” Sophie declared. “Our favorite place is just around the corner.”

They soon lowered their burdens, David making a show of rubbing his back. Sophie spread blankets they’d brought and retrieved the satchel from Dr. Gaspar, unpacking it. Mrs. Corcoran has insisted on flasks of tea and porcelain cups from which to sip it.

Eleanor had the gentlemen setting up equipment for her, trying various angles to catch the best light. Sophie, once she’d finished laying out the food and drink left them to it and wandered away to the cloisters.

She’d loved this place on her visits to Uncle as a child. He hadn’t objected to her exploring at will, asking him question after question. She’d learned so much more from Uncle Lucas about history and religion, the past and present, than from any book or lecture at her girls’ seminary.

A large part of the cloister walls remained standing, arches that lined a courtyard rising gracefully. The abbey had been built in the Romanesque style, before the Gothic mania of the later medieval times, and had more rounded arches, plainer walls, a simplicity that touched her.

Beyond the walls, green hills stretched toward a river valley that marked the Welsh border.

“Amazingly peaceful,” said a voice at her shoulder.

Sophie somehow had known he’d come, that he’d been there, admiring the beauty of the landscape with her.

“I loved it as a girl.” Sophie rested her hand on an arch. “I pretended it was my castle, put here for me and Uncle. No one else could come.”

“Then I’m intruding.” David made no move to leave, relaxing against the bricks beside him.

“Of course not. You’re a guest.”

David frowned. “Don’t sound so damned formal. A princess condescending to allow a peasant to bask in her company for a few moments.”

“At a monastery? I’d be a nun, not a princess.”

“You wouldn’t be here at all. Except as a lady bountiful bestowing largess on the men who slaved away here day after day, copying books and brewing beer.” He trailed off to a mutter. “As you do with Gaspar.”

Sophie stared at him. “I beg your pardon? I am being polite, hardly bestowing largess. You, on the other hand, are appallingly rude to him. What the devil is the matter with you?”

“Rude?” David blinked. “When have I been rude? I thought I was being disgustingly unctuous.”

“Rubbing his nose in the fact that you are a landed gentleman with a vast estate, when he can barely pay for a meal. Dr. Gaspar’s father and mother ailed for a long time, eating up any money they had, leaving him destitute when they finally passed on. Uncle had to help him find work with a professor leaving for Constantinople. Dr. Gaspar has a brilliant mind, but he’s paid only in room and board—a gentleman doesn’t work for wages, does he? The sponsors of the digs have no intention of keeping him in luxury.”

David’s expression went stiff. “I hadn’t realized that.”

“And calling archaeology a hobby. How could you?” Sophie warmed to the topic. “You know how Uncle feels about his digs. As though you are not a dilettante in your ridiculous suit ...” She waved her hands at it.

David glanced down in surprise. “What is wrong with my suit? Shall I scramble about looking for Roman villas in evening dress?”

“Of course not. Don’t be silly.”

“My usual clothes are meant for clubs and meetings with other indolent gentlemen. I thought I’d purchase things I could ruin.”

A Bond Street tailor had made his suit and made it well, Sophie recognized. Even Laurie, who spent money in great spews, would have taken good care of clothes like that.

“Whose approval do you seek?” Sophie asked, unable to halt her tongue. “Uncle’s? Or Lady Eleanor’s?”

David gave her an odd look. He began to answer, then checked himself. “Why should I seek their approval?”

Not what he’d meant to say. The question lacked conviction.

Sophie cast about for biting answers, but all she could manage was a lofty, “I am certain I have no idea.”

David turned and folded his arms as he gazed out over the fields below. After a time, his face smoothed, lines of anger vanishing.

“I could stay here forever,” he said softly.

“But we can’t.” Sophie heard the regret in her voice. “The world marches on, and we must march with it.”

“*Why* should we? The world has done its best to hound us until we retreated from it.”

“Because I must await my fate, and you, I believe, must attend a trial to clear yourself of attempted murder.”

“Ah, yes, mustn’t forget Griffin.” David stared at the distant hills without changing expression.

“You don’t seem worried.”

“Griffin has been determined to pot me one for years. Ever since I destroyed one of his proposals to increase a man’s control over all monies his wife possesses, even those left to her in carefully worded trusts for her lifetime. He wanted to get his hands on the part of his wife’s fortune he can’t touch, is all. I remember being quite blatant in my ridicule. He’s never forgiven me.”

Sophie felt herself soften. “You spoke up for the ladies, did you?”

“I always do. The laws that keep them bound to tyrannical men are ridiculous and should have been done away with long ago. You are in the delicate position you find yourself because of those stupid laws, created to make women property so they’d be easier to control.”

His face had flushed, his anger high. Sophie softened even more.

“I was also a giddy young woman who fell in love with a handsome man.

What a fool I was to do that.”

David took a minute step closer to her. “I don’t think you fell in love, not really. You were charmed, is all. Lackwit Laurie is, I suppose, good-looking and can make himself agreeable.” He gave her a wavering smile. “As I am not handsome and never agreeable, you have no need to worry about that in my case.”

Sophie’s heart beat faster. “You do yourself a wrong. I find you quite handsome.”

His gray-blue eyes flicked to her, something in them she couldn’t read. “I noticed you left off *agreeable*.”

“I did.”

“I love when you smile.” David reached for her, cupping her face. “It’s like the warmest sunshine.”

Sophie strove for another quip, but thoughts deserted her as he touched her cheek, soft glove over a strong hand.

The memory of his kiss before he’d stormed away to London hadn’t left her. It still seared on her lips, the tingle as fresh as though he’d kissed her a moment ago.

Sophie’s body felt like water, her need to flow to him strong. As much as she’d been beguiled by her husband, she’d never felt for Laurie this attraction, the desire to touch and be touched by him.

The difference between a naive girl and a wiser woman, perhaps.

Or perhaps it was simply David—his haunted eyes, the lines around his mouth that deepened with his smile. His amazing strength, apparent in every move, the athletic hardness of a body he hid under well-made suits.

The way he looked at Sophie, truly *looked* at her, as though she was a person, not a female in attractive clothes meant to impress her husband’s cronies. David listened to her when she spoke, argued with her or agreed with her, as though her opinion on a subject mattered.

Wind blew through the broken arches of the cloister, stirring Sophie’s

hair. It strengthened, taking David's cap. The tweed hat sailed down the hill and through the grass like a strange, flat bird.

"Damn and blast," David growled, and Sophie laughed.

He was off, chasing it. Sophie caught up her skirts and ran after him, David trying to pounce on the wayward headgear. The wind caught it again, snatching it from David's hands.

Sophie hurried down the hill, picking her way through the slippery grass, warmed by the sun. David missed again, but Sophie managed to stop the hat as it tumbled away by stepping on it.

She reached down and lifted the cap, gazing ruefully at her muddy boot print in the middle of the fabric. "Oh dear. I will order another one for you. Or you can wear one of Uncle's, though they are rather battered—"

David snatched the cap from her and threw it to the ground. "I don't care about the be-damned hat."

They stood on the steep side of the hill, the ruins looming above them. Easy to fall the short way to the grass touched with spring green, David's arms cushioning her.

They landed together, sprawled against the hill, David turning Sophie to him to cover her mouth in a burning kiss.

Time slowed to a trickle as David kissed Sophie, an amazing, beautiful woman. Her mouth softened to his, she kissing him in return as she brushed his hair back with shaking fingers.

Grass tickled his leg, and the wind was sharp, but David ignored all but Sophie beneath him. Her breath touched his cheek, mouth caressing, teeth gently scraping his lip.

David eased the kiss to a close and took in her green eyes shining in the gray light, her face that haunted his dreams.

He touched her mouth, red and warm. “The beauty of you,” he whispered. “It tore at me the moment I saw you.”

“That sounds frightening.” Sophie’s smile was faint. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Too late for that. Being with you hurts me, and being without you is even worse.”

The smile vanished. “I don’t like being without you, either.”

David stopped, his body going cold then hot. “Dear God, don’t give me hope. Don’t let me.”

“I can’t help it.” Sophie’s eyes were sad. “It is the truth.”

David’s breath choked him. He longed to push her back into the hill and let them seek peace in each other, no matter that her uncle and Eleanor and



the irritating Gaspar lurked above, probably looking for them by now.

He wanted Sophie with intensity, wanted to peel her sensible clothes from her and lick her body, to gaze at every astonishing inch of her, to touch her. He pictured her ripping the suit she so disliked from him, and then exploring, stroking, the two of them bringing each other to life.

A sparkle in her eyes told him she wanted it too.

David slid on top of her, and she wrapped him in eager arms. They met in another kiss, this one frenzied, their veneer of politeness falling away. They were man and woman, needing, yearning, and on David's part, loving.

Sophie was a part of him he hadn't realized wasn't there. Her simply being in the world completed him.

She sought his mouth, and David let her in, needing her heady taste, the spice that was Sophie. Her lips were softness itself, her tongue brushing against his as the kiss turned harder.

David slid his hand between them, wishing they weren't wearing so many damned clothes. He cupped her breast, moving his thumb across her nipple, which tightened even through her corset.

Sophie made a noise of desire. She slid her firm hand to the back of his neck, tugging him closer.

Her kisses, full of passion, weren't practiced. Her stupid husband hadn't taught her, David realized, had ignored her needs. Sophie would never say so, but her inexperienced caresses told David more than words. She was a woman of fire, but that fire had never been allowed to flare.

David caressed her breast, slowly, not wanting to scare her away. She looked up at him in languor, no fear at all. She wanted, she needed. She welcomed.

Their mouths met again, softly at first, then with more fervor. David nibbled her lip, his body on fire.

He rapidly considered places they could go, out of the wind and damp, to be alone, finish this. His mind fixed on nothing, wanting to be in the here and

now, with Sophie.

Her mouth tasted like the finest wine and the deepest need. When she twined her foot around his leg, the warmth of her skirts enveloping him, he thought he'd die.

Shouts sounded above them, and David heard his name. Sophie gasped, their mouths clashing as she fought to sit up.

David quickly rolled from her and to his feet, reaching for Sophie to help her stand. He brushed at her clothes covered with grass, and felt her hands on him doing the same. They started to laugh, stifling it as they frantically batted away grass and mud.

Eleanor appeared over the crest of the hill. "Ah, there you are, my dears."

Sophie bent and retrieved David's now ruined and flattened cap. "David's hat blew away," she said quickly. "We were chasing it."

Eleanor only gazed at them, knowing damn well what they'd been doing hidden away from the others.

"I agree," she said in a loud voice. "The view is especially fetching. But now it's time for luncheon."

David held out a hand to assist Sophie up the hill. She touched his fingers as she ran lightly past him, Eleanor watching them come, wisdom in her eyes.



SOPHIE WAS NEVER sure how she managed the next days. David was always near, and she could barely breathe around him.

He'd touched something in her, sparking it to life. She'd never felt anything like it before, and realized now that she'd never loved Laurie. As David had so perceptively observed, she'd been only attracted to Laurie, as he could make himself agreeable when he wished.

She understood that Laurie had flattered her and been at his most gentlemanly around her so she'd marry him. Once he'd run through her

money and it was clear she hadn't conceived his child, he'd been finished with her. Sophie might have been any woman, of any name, and it wouldn't have mattered. Laurie had no interest in her for herself.

David did. Sophie told herself to be careful, that she'd been cruelly deceived by Laurie, but this didn't feel the same.

David had no reason to woo her. She was legally still married, and she had no more dowry, no family connections, and no popularity that would help him. He had an estate, wealth, many friends, and seemed unconcerned about his bachelor state. He could have any mistress he wanted, and had apparently taken famous ones in the past.

What he saw in Sophie Tierney, a nonentity with a scandal in her life, she had no idea. But when David smiled at her, his eyes held need and warmth, caring.

*Being with you hurts me, and being without you is even worse.*

Sophie knew exactly what he meant. She held the words to her heart, and tried not to give herself away every time the two of them passed each other in the vicarage's narrow corridors.

On Sunday, they attended the village church. Uncle had convinced Sophie to play the organ, Mrs. Plimpton happy to stay at home and nurse her aching bones. The church, built in an age where even the smallest parishes sported grandiose Gothic structures, had an organ loft, so Sophie could perch there and not have to enter with the congregation.

Uncle spoke about Moses today, focusing on the story of the baby Moses being rescued from the reeds. He then compared Moses being chosen to lead the Israelites to freedom to Jesus being born to redeem sinners, one foreshadowing the other. Two helpless children had become saviors.

Uncle then went on to talk about how archaeologists and historians argued whether the pharaoh in Exodus was Ahmose the First or Ramses the Great, and perhaps if there were enough excavations, they would find out for certain. Digging up the past, Uncle concluded, was much like human beings

sifting through their own pasts to reveal their sins, confess them, and ask forgiveness.

The last had been tacked on, as though Uncle realized his congregation was nodding off over the history of Ramses. Sophie pumped the organ and plodded through the next hymn, while Uncle shook himself and returned to the rest of the service.

David glanced up from where he sat with Eleanor and Dr. Gaspar, and shot her a quick grin. Arrow to her heart.

Once they reached home, Mrs. Corcoran, after she'd removed her Sunday hat, handed David a small envelope.

"You've a telegraph message, Mr. Fleming. Village boy gave it to me as I was walking back."

David neatly slit the envelope with a pocket knife and slid out the paper inside. He read the brief missive then folded it, his eyes dark.

"I must return to London." His voice was easy but held a note that stirred Sophie's worry. "Is there a train up, Mrs. Corcoran?"

Mrs. Corcoran shook her head. "There's no train from our station 'til morning, very early. But the butcher's son is driving into Shrewsbury to be at the market tomorrow, and there's a mail train from there at four this afternoon."

"You are a walking Bradshaw, good lady," David said, impressed.

"I've lived here all my life," Mrs. Corcoran answered. "Stands to reason I know the trains. Not that there's many out our way, so I've come to know the Shrewsbury timetables as well."

"Excellent. I shall seek this butcher's son and beg him to take me in his cart."

Sophie did not like how heavy her heart grew as she listened to this exchange. She could say nothing, only swallow the lump in her throat.

Uncle Lucas gave David a surprised look. "Why the hurry to be off? Are they arresting you at last?"

Dr. Gaspar started, and even Eleanor looked concerned.

“No, indeed,” David said quickly. “It’s business that won’t wait. I’ll return as soon as I’m able.”

“Not until you’ve had luncheon, certainly.” Uncle led the way to the dining room as though brooking no argument.

Sophie tried to corner David as they went in, but he eluded her, slipping past Dr. Gaspar to escort Eleanor and seat her with aplomb.

Had the telegram to do with Sophie’s divorce? She’d asked him to leave it alone, but she didn’t believe for a moment he would. David was a whirlwind, Sophie had come to understand, and when he fixed on a problem, he’d sweep it up and pound on it until that problem surrendered in defeat.

“I believe I will accompany you, Mr. Fleming,” Eleanor announced as Mrs. Corcoran brought in the meal—a cold one, as she did no cooking on Sundays. “I have taken many photographs, and I want to develop them in my darkroom at home.”

Dr. Gaspar gazed at her in alarm. “Gracious, dear lady, you cannot ride all the way to Shrewsbury in a butcher’s cart. You are a duchess.”

Eleanor sent him a pitying smile. “Well, I am not about to tramp to Shrewsbury with my photographic plates strapped to my back. Do not worry, Dr. Gaspar, I am not delicate porcelain. And I am certain David will give me the best seat on the cart.”

“Of course.” David winked at Sophie.

Sophie ate her cold beef without answering.

Eleanor shot Sophie what she supposed was meant to be a reassuring look. Sophie did feel a little better—Eleanor had decided to travel back so that she could keep an eye on David, Sophie surmised. Developing the photographs was an excuse.

After luncheon, David disappeared to his chamber at the top of the house, descending with his small valise. Eleanor had several large cases, which David and Dr. Gaspar gallantly loaded onto the cart for her. The butcher’s

boy, a placid youth, assisted, seemingly unbothered by his detour.

David turned to Sophie once the cases were safely stowed. “*Au revoir, my lady.*” He gave her a sweeping bow, narrowly missing hitting his head on the cart’s large rear wheel.

“I will take good care of him, dear.” Eleanor caught Sophie’s hand and kissed her cheek. “He needs looking after.”

Sophie had been thinking things over since the day at the ruined abbey, and she’d come to a few conclusions. “Eleanor,” she said, drawing the lady a few steps aside. “May I ask you to help me do something?”

She told Eleanor what she had in mind in a few short sentences, and Eleanor listened in delight.

“Well, of course.” Eleanor sent her a broad smile, and then one to David, who looked suddenly suspicious. “Leave it to me. Wait for my message.”

“Thank you.”

Sophie squeezed Eleanor’s hands, who returned the squeeze. Eleanor accepted Dr. Gaspar’s assistance into the cart, David climbed up after her, and Uncle stood back and waved.

David tipped his hat to Sophie as the butcher’s boy started the cart with a jerk, and they rolled away. His look held both curiosity and misgivings, but Sophie trusted that Eleanor wouldn’t breathe a word.



DAVID SLEPT at his London flat that night, every moment agony as he alternately missed Sophie and dreamed erotic dreams of her. In the morning he took time to bathe and make himself presentable before he turned up at a horribly early hour at Essex Court in Middle Temple to meet Sinclair, Lackwit Laurie, and a barrage of solicitors.

He had not been able to pry out of Eleanor what she and Sophie had been whispering about before he’d rolled away from the vicarage. Eleanor had

only given him one of her serene gazes and spoke determinedly of other things. He was not certain whether to be worried or amused. Worried—he should most definitely be worried.

David reflected, as he reached Essex Court, that he'd grown so used to Pierson dragging him up at dawn that he entered the meeting at Sinclair's chambers relatively refreshed and wide awake.

On the other hand, Laurie, the Earl of Devonport, looked as though he'd been dragged from the warmth of sleep, poured into a suit, and dropped on Sinclair's doorstep. His eyes were bloodshot, his face flushed, his hands trembling with dissipation. David did not like to think that for most of his life, he had appeared the same.

"Fleming," Laurie said with a sneer as they all took chairs. "I am glad you've condescended to join us. We can put an end to this nonsense."

David crossed his elegantly booted feet. "Indeed. I look forward to you vanishing from Miss Tierney's life."

Laurie's sneer grew more pronounced. "So you can have her yourself, you libertine."

"You mistake me. I am acting as her friend, attempting to free her from a terrible situation. What she does after that is entirely up to her."

"Your idea of annulment has failed, damn you." Laurie clutched the arms of his chair, but his eyes gleamed in triumph. "As I am here to reveal."

Sinclair, who could be both silent and heavily present at the same time, adjusted his cuffs. Laurie's two solicitors fussed with papers, pretending to ignore their client's boorishness.

"Why are you so adamant about divorce?" David asked, as though merely curious. "Annulment will free you to re-marry without fuss. Divorce complicates matters."

"Because there are no grounds for annulment." Laurie nearly shouted the words. "As I told you before. I had no choice."

"Ah, so better that it is Sophie's fault than yours." David's voice went

hard. “I warned you, Lackwit. You ought to have taken my advice.”

“I did. I let myself be tested for impotence.” Laurie flushed, as though too delicate for such matters. “A rather humiliating ordeal, but I am happy to report that I passed with flying colors.”

“Poor man. The ladies pleased you, did they?”

“They did.” Laurie smiled, his eyes sparkling.

Sinclair cleared his throat, a dry but powerful sound. “Perhaps, your lordship, you will let me share the testimony of the ladies in question?”

Laurie’s flush deepened. “Why not? Then Fleming will leave me alone. That is, after I sue him for poking his fingers into my private business.”

“That sounds disgusting.” David sat back, resting his hands easily on the arms of his chair. “I wouldn’t put my fingers anywhere near your private business. Carry on, McBride. Let us hear the worst.”

Sinclair cleared his throat again. He was very good at it.

“I need not read the entire statement of either lady present at the examination. The gist from Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Whitaker is that at no time during the procedure did Lord Devonport show any physical response to them. They vow that he remained flaccid the entire hour.” Sinclair dropped the paper, his cheekbones tinged red. “No matter how much or how often they tried.”

Laurie gaped in astonishment. Not a pretty sight—he was developing jowls. Some men retained handsomeness for life, but Laurie wouldn’t be one of them.

Laurie gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles were white. “That is a damned lie. You’re in *his* pay—of course you’d claim that.” He glared at David then snarled at his solicitors. “Speak up. Read the statements. Do what I pay you for.”

One of the solicitors raised his head, his expression strained. “We have the same testimony, my lord.” He held up a sheaf of papers.

Laurie sprang to his feet. “But it’s a bloody falsehood. My cock stood like



a soldier at attention from the moment they started on me. More than that. I had Mrs. Lane, had her several times right there on the floor. She was most willing, squealed quite fetchingly. Then I went to my mistress and had *her* several times that night. Not only am I *not* impotent, gentlemen, I am most healthily robust.”

David rose in one smooth motion and faced the triumphant Earl of Devonport, while the solicitors looked away, painfully embarrassed. Sinclair sat like a stone, but his eyes glittered with resolve.

“I am glad you said that,” David stated to Laurie in a quiet voice. “It allows you a choice. You can either agree with this testimony as it stands and proceed with an annulment, or I and Mr. McBride can be witnesses for Sophie that you are an adulterer many times over, and she needs a divorce from *you*.”

Laurie’s chin came up. “I’ll not let you bully me into telling lies. This isn’t school anymore, Devilish David. The divorce proceedings I began will go forward. Count on that.”

“No, they won’t.” David had hoped he’d taste triumph at this moment, but only revulsion filled his mouth. “You have no more witnesses. The gentlemen you bribed to make false statements against Miss Tierney have withdrawn them. They admitted they were liars and that you paid and coerced them to claim they’d had relations with your wife. They never did, and they have signed sworn statements saying the same. Lady Devonport is spotless and innocent, and you will proclaim that to the world, Lackwit. What you have done to her, your duplicitous scheme to ruin your own wife in a loathsome fashion, is all over London, and I doubt that after this, any house will receive you.”

Laurie's mouth had dropped open once more, and his face was mottled red and white.

"You'd ruin me?" he demanded of David. "You heard this, did you not, gentlemen?" He appealed to his solicitors. "Those women are damned liars—likely in Fleming's pay. You'd take the word of courtesans over that of a gentleman?"

By the solicitors' expressions, they would.

Sinclair, at David's behest, had made certain the solicitors would take the depositions Mrs. Whitaker and her protégé, Mrs. Lane, gave as legal testimony. The ladies had played their parts well, swearing up and down that Laurie was as impotent as a castrated bullock. David would send Mrs. Lane a lavish gift for putting up with Laurie's despicable attentions, and Mrs. Whitaker one for orchestrating their part of the scheme.

"I want to be tested again," Laurie snarled. "With ladies of *my* choosing."

"Do," David said. He knew plenty of courtesans, as did Mrs. Whitaker, who would make certain whoever Laurie chose would also claim him impotent.

Laurie recoiled. "Kilmorgan is behind this, I know it. He wants to impugn my character, to ruin me."

"The Duke of Kilmorgan had nothing to do with any of this," David said.

He spoke the truth. Mrs. Whitaker, who had assisted David and Hart so much in the past, had done the favor because Eleanor asked her, not Hart. Mrs. Whitaker had much respect for El.

David looked into Laurie's eyes to read fear there. Laurie was losing ground, and he knew it.

"You've impugned your own character, ruined yourself," David said quietly. "The scandal-loving newspapers are already printing your perfidy now. I'd leave for the Continent soon, Limp-Prick. *After* you annul your marriage with Miss Tierney."

Laurie scowled at David, the petulant boy he'd once been shining through. He glanced at the solicitors and Sinclair, but those gentlemen sat silently, offering no help.

David lifted a pen from Sinclair's desk and shoved it at Laurie. "Mr. McBride has drawn up everything you need to begin proceedings for an annulment. Sign it."

"How dare you?" Laurie blustered. "You can't threaten me. This is a farce, and you a bloody scoundrel. You are Hart's arse-licking toady—what is his game? You fu—"

Laurie choked off the word as David caught the lapel of his coat, pressing the tip of the pen hard to Laurie's cheek. "How dare *you* make Miss Tierney's life a living hell? What you owe her you can never, ever repay. Now sign the bloody papers or this pen goes down your throat."

Laurie drew a breath to argue, but what he saw in David's eyes defeated him. He'd always been a coward, full of bravado and bullying, wilting whenever challenged in truth.

"Damn you." Laurie jerked himself from David's grip. "Damn you all."

He snatched the pen from David's hand and thrust it into the inkwell Sinclair held out to him.

"I'll ruin *you*, Fleming," he vowed. "I'll smear so much dirt on you, you'll never be able to stand for Parliament again."

“An empty threat,” David said, his easy drawl emerging. “I’m a bit tired of it all, as a matter of fact. I plan to return home, make a go at farming.”

Laurie glared fury at him. But he turned to the desk, and with a few strokes of the pen, started Sophie on her path to freedom.



SOPHIE HAD NEVER BEEN to Hertfordshire, in spite of the county lying so near London. She knew of Hatfield, where Good Queen Bess had grown up, but she’d never traveled to look at that queen’s historic house. Being the countess hadn’t allowed her much time for herself.

David Fleming’s estate lay in the north of the county, near its border with Bedfordshire. The train took Sophie and Uncle Lucas to the village of Clopton—from there the stationmaster directed them two miles north to the house called Moreland Park.

As it was a fine day, and they had brought only one valise with their combined belongings, Uncle Lucas suggested they walk.

None at the station had questioned their intent to visit Moreland Park. The gardens were open for viewing, provided one paid a shilling to the gatekeeper, and on a certain day each month, the house could be toured as well.

The home itself hailed from the eighteenth century, built in the French style, kept well by the current landlord, if he rarely visited it. Mr. Fleming’s father had purchased it about forty years ago when the line of the family who’d originally owned it died out. The Flemings, senior and junior, had spent much to restore and modernize the estate.

So had said the stationmaster, who regarded the house and grounds with much pride. The master wasn’t a bad sort, he said, even if he preferred Town living to country.

“Glorious.” Uncle Lucas gazed about in admiration as they trudged

through a side gate from the lane to a vast front garden. “I had no idea David lived in such splendor.”

A park with straight walks through greenery spread before them, spring bulb flowers emerging in symmetrical beds. Daffodils, tulips, and irises brushed bright yellow, orange, red, and purple through the green. The walks were pressed clay, stripes of burnt orange leading through the flowering splendor.

The house, in the style of a French chateau, was long and low, with three stories in its center wing, the top floor studded with dormer windows in a mansard roof. Two single-story wings flanked the main one, and a shallow flight of steps rose to a front terrace and a double-door entry.

Though the house was formal, Sophie found it inviting. Its soft golden stone shone in the afternoon sunshine, and French windows lined the ground floor. The entire scene suggested ladies and gentlemen moving casually about, strolling onto the terrace to enjoy a view of the garden, or back inside to warmth and a cup of hot tea.

“Have you never visited?” Sophie asked as she and Uncle Lucas made their leisurely way through the garden.

“Never had call to. I’m so pleased he’s invited us now.”

Sophie halted. Uncle walked onward for several yards before he realized she’d stopped, and glanced back in surprise.

“I did not realize you thought Mr. Fleming had invited us,” Sophie said awkwardly. “He did not.”

“No?” Uncle Lucas gazed across the garden as though expecting David to pop up from behind a box hedge and explain. “Then why have we come?”

Sophie’s face went hot. “Lady Eleanor arranged it. I asked her to.”

Uncle frowned in perplexity. “I am not certain I understand. Why not simply ask David to show you his house? It is open every third Thursday to the world, anyway.”

“Because ...” Sophie was no longer certain, and she fumbled for an

explanation. “He might have said no, and I wanted ... I wanted to see where he comes from. Learn more about him.”

Uncle studied her, understanding in his eyes. “My dear, the man you see with us in Shropshire *is* Mr. Fleming. He does not change when he moves from place to place. I admit that some people do, but David has never been duplicitous. At least, not to his friends.”

Sophie drew a breath, enjoying the clean air scented with flowers. “I am pleased to hear it, but ... I suppose I wish to understand him. He is a puzzling man.”

“True, but we did not have to change trains three times and ride halfway across England so you can understand him. But, as we are here, we might as well make the best of it. Come along.” He lifted the valise, which he had rested on the path while he spoke, and trudged toward the front door.

Sophie fell into step with him and studied the house as they approached it. “It is not where I imagined he’d live.”

“His father purchased the estate.” Uncle Lucas spoke breathily as they walked. “He was even more decadent than David—David learned his feigned lazy manner from him. David’s father bought it for David’s mother, but she died when David was quite young. His father then began to live a most extravagant and lavish lifestyle, collecting expensive artworks and hosting gatherings that became famous, if not infamous. Some said, uncharitably, that he celebrated his wife’s death, but from what David has told me, the man was grieving. Trying to run away from his pain. He died falling from a racehorse in a steeplechase, leaving David alone as a very young man and quite rich.”

Sophie’s steps slowed as she listened. David must have grown up watching his father cover his deep feelings with self-indulgence and dissipation. This explained some of David’s sardonic manner, the pain that lingered in his eyes. His father must not have known what to do with a small boy except teach him to be as extravagant as he was.

Uncle Lucas had already mounted the steps to the front door, and Sophie

hurried to catch up.

“Perhaps we should not,” she said quickly. “We are intruding. I am satisfying my own curiosity, is all.”

“That is true.” Uncle sounded cheerful. “But I am curious myself, and I do not wish to trudge the two miles back to the village. The house is here, David has told me it has a caretaker, we are his friends, and they at least might let us sit down for a few minutes.”

Sophie could not argue with his logic. The spring day had turned warm and a rest would be welcome.

The door opened when Uncle rang the bell, revealing a tall footman who looked down his haughty nose at the dusty travelers.

“Good afternoon,” Uncle said brightly. “I am Dr. Pierson, and this is my niece. We are great friends of Mr. Fleming.” Uncle beamed at the footman who, to Sophie’s surprise, softened.

“Ah, yes. Her Grace of Kilmorgan sent word. Please enter, sir. Madam.”

Sophie prepared to follow her uncle inside when hoofbeats sounded behind them.

Up the side path, well out of the way of the more formal garden, galloped a horse and rider. The horse halted, and the rider, dressed in a sleek black suit complete with top hat, slid from the saddle, tossing reins to a groom who’d materialized to meet them.

The rider strode toward the house, head down, paying no attention to the visitors. He hopped over the railing onto the terrace without bothering with stairs, still not noticing his guests until he found them blocking the front door.

David stumbled to a halt, his gray-blue eyes widening, his chest lifting with a startled breath.

Sophie wanted to dissolve into mist and disappear. She’d been so very certain he wouldn’t be here—Eleanor had assured her David rarely came home.

In the next heartbeat, David left behind shock and obvious dismay to

become a congenial host. He removed his hat and rubbed the dust from his hair, giving them a warm smile.

“My dear friends, had I known, I’d have sent a coach to the station and extended a carpet when you arrived. I can’t promise a buried Roman villa for you, Pierson, but I hope what little I have will delight.”

David waved them into the house, out of the spring sunshine. His welcome included Sophie, but he didn’t look at her.

The interior of the house was even grander than Sophie expected. The entrance hall rose two floors, its high ceiling painted with clouds and frolicking cherubs. Paintings hung on the paneled walls, many depicting the house and grounds, while others were portraits. Sophie at once found a painting of David along with that of an older man who, by the resemblance, must be his father. A woman with soft gray eyes peered from a painting next to his.

A few of the older pictures depicted men and women in Scottish dress, and on one wall hung a family tree, wonderfully curlicued and embellished, with small names written all over it.

Uncle Lucas, his valise taken by the footman, went at once to this. “Your ancestry?” he asked David.

David strolled to him, the world-weary man returning. “My pater was *very* proud of the fact that we are distantly related to the Dukes of Kilmorgan, ever since Angus Roland Mackenzie married Donnag Fleming, my great-great-something aunt. I have no real Mackenzie blood, only Mackenzie in-laws, as it were.” He waved at paintings higher up the walls, difficult to see in the shadows. “The rest of the lot hanging here are the D’urbeyns, who owned the property before the last scion lost his fortune at cards and died penniless. My father snapped up this property for a song after the Crown, who’d taken it back, didn’t know what to do with it. He ever loved a bargain.”

Sophie studied the names on the family tree, one branch leading from



Malcolm Mackenzie, who fought in the '45, and his son Angus, down through the ages to Hart Mackenzie, the current Duke of Kilmorgan, Eleanor's husband. Names beneath Hart and his brothers had been written in—their wives and many children.

The other branch led from the brother of Donnag Fleming, unfolding down to David Fleming father, and David Fleming son.

“Fascinating,” Uncle Lucas said in true interest. “Every name has a story behind it, I wager.”

David looked pained. “They do, but nothing I am prepared to tell you now in the middle of the hallway after a long and dusty journey. If you are truly intrigued, I'll pair you up with Ian Mackenzie, who is an expert on the family history. He can relate the stories in great detail.”

“That would be splendid.” Uncle Lucas meant it, Sophie knew, and would likely hound David until he set the appointment.

“Now then, it is a poor host who keeps his guests in the draughty hall. Thomas will be scurrying about upstairs, harrying the rest of the staff to prepare rooms for you. You will of course stay, unless you plan to rush for the last train out?”

David sent them a look of mild inquiry, as though he didn't care one way or the other, but Sophie saw the uneasiness in his eyes.

“We will indeed stay, my dear fellow,” Uncle Lucas said. “We had hoped for a billet here, though we were prepared to bed down in the village if need be. I believe Lady Eleanor telegraphed to your servants, so they will be more prepared than you fear.”

“Eleanor?” David flashed a frown at Sophie. “I see.”

He clearly did not, but before Sophie could stammer an explanation, Uncle continued in his exuberant way.

“I know you must think us rude, but I had a hankering to see your house and the gardens I've heard so much about. They are written up in newspapers, you know. Since you flit about so much, I thought we'd simply

come on our own without bothering you.”

Sophie stared as her uncle lied for her. He did it well, smiling gently, the vicar’s collar on his throat giving his words credence.

“You had but to ask, my friend,” David said. “I am glad you have come—it will keep supper from being a deadly dull and silent meal. When I’m home, I mostly eat with my valet, Fortescue, and read the newspaper, but I left the man in London. Thank heavens—he is forthright with his many opinions.”

David spoke glibly, but Sophie sensed his tension. He did not want them there, had barely stopped himself from leaping back onto his horse and riding away when he found them on his doorstep.

“It was me,” she blurted. Both men turned to her in astonishment, and Sophie’s face scalded. “I wanted to see your house, Mr. Fleming. I was curious. Uncle traveled with me for propriety’s sake.”

David gazed at her for one endless moment, stillness shielding any emotion in his eyes, then his sardonic expression returned. “Ah, it is the *building* that holds the Pierson family interest, not the man who owns it. Well then, I’ll leave you to have supper with my house, while I take something in my chambers. You’ll never know I am here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Uncle Lucas said. “Of course we are delighted you are home. We didn’t expect you, nor you us, but we are all good enough friends that none of it matters. Now, let us each refresh ourselves and meet again for supper—by then we will have all recovered our tempers.”

David and Sophie stared at him. Uncle liked to be the most self-effacing gentleman possible, but when he decided to take charge, he could be a force of authority.

“Yes, Uncle,” Sophie said meekly.

“Yes, Uncle,” David echoed. He shot Sophie a glance, and winked.



PIERSON ALLOWED them only congenial topics at supper that night, both to David's relief and frustration. The history of the house and its interesting inhabitants, the joy of the unusually warm weather, the design of the gardens—by none other than Capability Brown, of course—why the house had been built in the French style, and what sort of crops grew in David's fields.

Nothing about their impromptu visit, what David had been up to in London, Sophie's divorce, or David's triumph regarding her annulment.

Once conversation surrounding David's house had been exhausted, Pierson went on at length about the dig and his Roman villa. Dr. Gaspar had proved so competent that Pierson had been comfortable leaving the excavation in the man's hands for a few days. Though, he added with amusement, a villa of Roman Britain was a bit too modern for Gaspar's tastes.

Sophie also looked pleased with Dr. Gaspar's expertise, to David's irritation. He needed to speak with her.

"A stroll?" he suggested after the meal had finished. Light lingered in the sky even if a brisk breeze had sprung up.

Pierson brightened, then caught on that David meant a walk with Sophie alone. "A bit chilly for me," he said quickly. "I'd love a rummage through your library."

The efficient Thomas, in charge of the sparsely staffed house, led him off, Pierson chattering excitedly all the way. This left David to escort Sophie, once they'd fetched wraps, out to the terrace. David glanced at the lighted windows of the library, which showed Dr. Pierson avidly looking over books packed onto a tall shelf.

"I never knew he could dissemble so well," he remarked. "I suppose that's a good trait in a vicar."

"Yes, Uncle is full of surprises." Sophie's words were light but stiff.

David could think of nothing to reply so he led her unhurriedly down the steps to the main garden, where lingering twilight touched pale flowers.

“Beautiful in the summer,” David said as they walked side-by-side, not touching. “Fountains play, birds sing, the trees are green. Absolute paradise. Or so I remember as a child.”

“Do you not come here for summers now?” Sophie’s face softened. “It is incredibly lovely. You are lucky.”

“No, I’m usually flitting about Britain or the Continent, doing errands for Hart. All part of the game.”

He heard weariness in his voice that he never meant to put there. Only a few years ago, he’d thrived on the game, chasing down men reluctant to help Hart with his schemes, campaigning for his own seat in Commons. What had changed?

“Well, one day you must come for the summer and enjoy it,” Sophie said.

David halted. “Are you feeling quite well, Miss Tierney?”

Sophie turned from admiring the view. “Ever so robust. Why?”

“You aren’t teasing me, twitting me, or telling me I’m an ungrateful wretch for throwing everything my father built to the wind.”

Her faint smile made his heart turn over. “I don’t need to. You’ve just done it yourself.”

“And I’d say you are right.”

Sophie stood very still, the night breeze stirring the curls on her forehead, peeping from under her fetching fur hat. “Is that why you rushed away to London? Something to do with your estate? And why you returned today?”

“Pardon?” David made himself cease watching the way Sophie’s lips moved, which only enticed him to kiss them. “No, indeed. I went to London to see about your annulment.”

All color left her cheeks. “You mean my divorce. Which I asked you to leave alone.”

David faced her squarely. “I know you asked me, but of course I could not. And you will have an annulment. The solicitors have all the papers now and it only awaits the verdict of a judge.”

Sophie's breath left her, her lacings suddenly far too tight. She turned swiftly as she coughed, seeking air.

David was beside her in an instant. "My dearest Sophie, forgive this wretch for springing the news on you so callously. But it is the truth. We can rejoice."

Spots swam before Sophie's eyes, but she found her voice. "You are wrong. My husband will never let me go that easily."

"Oh, but he will. With the Scots Machine and Hart Mackenzie on your side, the proceedings will take mere weeks, not the months it does for lesser mortals."

"You don't know Laurie," Sophie said, shaking her head. "He does as he pleases, and he wants to humiliate me. I did not fill his nursery like the dutiful wife I was supposed to be. He is punishing me for that."

Somehow David's hand was on her arm, holding her up. "If I may say so, Lackwit underestimates me and Hart, not to mention Sinclair McBride. The marriage will be annulled, you may trust me on that. I'll spare you the sordid details—believe me, they are sordid—but Lackwit will keep his mouth shut to protect himself."

Sophie slid from his touch and began to walk, wandering down the darkening path toward the woods. She had no idea where she was going, but

movement was better than standing still. At least she could breathe again.

David's warm body beside her cut the chill. Sophie knew she should make for the house, find Uncle and a fire, but her feet would not obey.

"I thought I'd make you happy," David was saying. "I might have known I had no power to do that."

Sophie slowed to a stop at the edge of the garden, where a line of trees divided the formal park and gardens from the fields beyond. Those fields were the real world, where farmers toiled and animals built burrows. Inside the garden was gentleness, sanctuary.

But not for David. When he'd sought peace, he'd traveled to Uncle's remote vicarage, in spite of the inconvenient trains, rather than come here. Why?

"I am grateful, in spite of what I seem," Sophie managed to say. "You are stirring powerful people to help me, for no gain to yourself. I don't know why you should help, except that you are a kind man, no matter how you protest to the contrary. But I'm so afraid, David. So afraid to hope."

David watched her in silence, his eyes a glimmer in the shadows. He went so still that Sophie touched his shoulder.

He started, then caught her hand. "I am afraid to hope too," he said softly. "Do you know? You've just addressed me as *David*."

Sophie began to shake. "I beg your pardon. I am agitated ..."

David put his finger to her lips. "I prefer it. Not Mr. Fleming. *David*. As though we are intimate." He came closer. "Sophie."

The darkness embraced them, and shadows hid them from the house. They were alone here, more than they had been on the hill by the abbey. Sophie's heart beat just as swiftly as it had then, his nearness sending her reason to the wind.

She rose on tiptoe and sought his mouth in a kiss.

She'd meant it to be a light touch, a reassurance that he was real, and with her. But as soon as their lips met, David's arms came hard around her and he

dragged her close.

His heat enveloped her as his lips parted hers, his strength turning the kiss deep. As he swept his tongue into her mouth, hot need gripped her and would not let go.

She pulled him against her, wanting this kiss. She'd dreamed so often of being in this man's bed—imagined David's slow smile as he shed his clothes, firelight touching his strong body, his sure hands on her skin.

Her heart pounded, and she felt his hammering as hard. His hands were firm on her back, fingers splayed. The breeze turned cold, but David kept her warm.

Dizzily she broke the kiss but kept her hands on his shoulders. "I'm not ..." She shook her head, eyes stinging. "I'm not a free woman."

David gave her a feral smile. "If the marriage is proved invalid, that means you already are free. You never were married."

But then she'd be ruined, having shared a bed with a man who wasn't her husband. If she followed David's logic, however, being already ruined meant she had nothing to lose by becoming his lover.

She laughed shakily. "You are trying to make me as bad as yourself."

David touched her cheek. "No one, least of all your sweet self, could ever be as bad as I am."

"You wish to be irredeemable." Sophie gave him a tremulous smile. "Why?"

"I don't. But it's easier if I accept it. I am a bad, bad man and there is no help for me."

"You're wrong." Sophie laid her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes as he sheltered her in his arms. "You're a good man masquerading as a reprobate. Uncle would never be so fond of you otherwise."

"He's nostalgic for the youth I was when we first met." David's embrace tightened, and she felt his lips on her hair. "But to hear you believe in me makes me half-hope the devil within will flee. I will become a puddle of

straight-laced virtue, if that will make you happy.”

“I think that would be frightening.”

His laughter vibrated her in a fine way. “I agree with you.”

“Can virtue be a puddle anyway?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never been virtuous, so I couldn’t say.” David’s voice dropped to a softness she hadn’t heard in him before. “But I can promise you, I would never, ever hurt you. I’d never be such a fool.”

Sophie wrapped the words around her. She wanted so much to be treasured by him, the way she’d once believed men treasured their wives. Her own parents were happy, and she’d naively thought all marriage like theirs. She’d believed magic would happen when she married Laurie, transforming him into the perfect husband.

She hardly believed now she’d been so innocent. A man like David Fleming would never have been let near her when she was a debutante, yet he was proving to have far more worth than the too-charming bachelor earl who’d been the correct man to marry.

“We should go inside.” David’s voice remained low but took on an edge. “Lest I do something even more devilish.”

Sophie shivered agreeably. “Perhaps I wish you to be devilish.”

David kissed the bridge of her nose. “Do not tempt me.”

“I wish ...” She leaned into him, running her hand down his coat. The warm man beneath stirred, the rumble in his throat like a caress.

“I know what you wish. I wish it too.” David cupped her cheek, turning her face up to his. “I want you, Sophie. Want you with an intensity that’s killing me.”

His next kiss told her he’d been containing himself until now. He dragged her up to him, his mouth searing as he opened hers. Sophie’s head went back, David holding her upright as her knees weakened.

She felt his hand on her backside then her thigh, teasing her legs apart. He stepped between them, his hardness apparent through her skirts.



Here under the trees no one would see them. He could lift her, hold her against the bole of the large elm behind her, satisfy the ache that never let her rest.

“Please,” she heard herself whisper.

David answered with another kiss, grip tightening. He wanted it as much as she did—his mouth, touch, and body told her this as loudly as if he’d shouted it.

The virtuous man he claimed he wanted to be would have pushed Sophie from him in shock, perhaps lecture her on propriety as he dragged her to the house. A bad man like David only kissed her harder, a groan in his throat.

“Dear God.” David wrested his mouth from hers and stepped back, hands on her shoulders, fingers biting down. “Sophie, what the devil are we doing?”

“Being consumed with need?” Sophie tried to speak glibly, but she trembled so she could barely form words.

“Obviously. But if we do not walk sedately to the house, I will be carrying you back with our clothes in shreds, and your uncle will take a bullwhip to me. Never mind that he’s a kind man—he has the wrath of God on his side.”

Sophie shook her head, her hair tumbling. “He would never ...”

“Perhaps not literally, but he would cast me out. I want ...” David dragged in a breath. “I want everything to be right.”

“The world isn’t right,” Sophie said sadly.

“I know. But I want to stand with you and face it. Not with us looking debauched and depraved.”

Sophie let out a little sigh. “I am finding virtue not worth the trouble.”

“I agree. But ...” David’s eyes held sadness and resignation. “I refuse to save you only to ruin you. It cuts at me to wait, but I will.”

It cut at Sophie as well. She was already ruined—did he not realize that? In the eyes of the world, it no longer mattered what Sophie did. Because of Laurie, she’d been painted as a whore, and that was the end of it.

David gently straightened her hat then put his arm around her and led her to the gardens, silence enveloping them.

Only the breeze spoke, the rushing sound in the branches like water, but it couldn't soothe Sophie's fire or troubled spirit.



FOR THE FIRST time in his life, David enjoyed a sojourn in his own house. He'd spent most of his adult life avoiding it, the memories too thick.

After his mother's death, his father, in grief and pain, had filled the house with mistresses and rakes. He'd hosted lavish entertainments that ran between puzzling to frightening to a small boy, from drunken routs to outright orgiastic gatherings.

David had found relief with school and friends, but he'd grown up surrounded by decadence and easily fell into that way of life himself.

Now, viewing his home through Sophie's eyes, he discovered the beauty in it. Though his father had been broken inside, he'd had unusually good taste in art and architecture.

Keeping himself away from Sophie was more difficult. David wanted to seize her and kiss her at every turn, slide her against the wall and drink his fill. He wanted to rid her of her clothes, slowly, a button at a time, and touch the body the falling fabric revealed.

Never in his life had he been so close to a woman he'd wanted, and yet neither of them removed a stitch. Madness.

The presence of Dr. Pierson helped. Pierson knew full well how David felt about Sophie, and yet he chatted cheerfully about inane things like what sort of farming David did here and the history of the village church.

David took Sophie and Dr. Pierson over the house, from the attics to the gallery of famous paintings, to the ballroom and parlors made to host kings.

"It's like you," Sophie said on the last day of their visit. She and David

lingered on the terrace, in full view of Dr. Pierson in the library—that is, they would be if Pierson bothered to look up from his books and maps. “The house, I mean.”

“In what way?” David glanced at the walls behind him, the mansard roof high above. “Pray tell. I do like a good metaphor.”

Sophie gave him the smile he’d grown to love. She’d softened since her first night here, when she’d been brittle, fearing to believe the troubles in her life could ever be over.

But they would be. David would see to it.

“Outwardly hedonistic,” Sophie said. “Bathing the senses in sumptuous luxury, promising delights. But solid beneath, comforting. Steady. Peaceful.”

“Steady and comforting.” David huffed a laugh. “What every gentleman wants as his epitaph.”

She gave him a look. “I know you are not offended, so do not pretend to be so.”

“Nothing you do offends me, Sophie, love.”

Their hands rested near each other’s on the railing, hers slender in dark brown gloves, his hard in black leather. Their arms were nearly touching but not quite.

This waiting was horrible. And there was nothing to say that when Sophie found herself free she’d turn to David.

All he could do was see what would come. When foolish and young, he’d thrown himself at a woman, and he’d fallen on his face.

He refused to do that again.

Sophie said nothing more, but what he saw in her eyes told him the waiting was difficult for her too. He moved an inch closer, still not touching her, but sharing her warmth. They stood so, in silence, drinking in the night and each other, before Pierson emerged to rattle on about ancient methods used in these parts to till the earth.

The next morning, the Fleming coach pulled to the front steps to take

Sophie and Dr. Pierson to the village station. David handed Sophie in.

“I thought you were coming with us,” Pierson said in bewilderment as David stepped back once the vicar had settled himself. Sophie remained quiet—she, being more observant, had probably noted the footman loaded only the valise she and her uncle had brought with them. No bags for David.

“Things to do,” David said. “Worry not, dear sir, I will turn up soon in Shropshire, clad in ragged tweed, ready to break my back for you once more. I have business to take care of. Trial to face and so forth.”

Sophie sent him a worried look. “Mr. Griffin is still pursuing the suit?”

David had deliberately not spoken of his impending trial or Sophie’s marriage since their first night. It had been pleasant to talk about houses and gardening, archaeology and local history. Who’d have known such topics could be so entertaining?

“He is, confound him.” David kept his voice light. “Do not worry, my friends. Basher McBride will shred the prosecution and have Griffin on his knees abjectly begging my pardon.”

Pierson nodded, believing him. Sophie looked more trepidatious, but David shut the coach’s door, deliberately not touching the hand she lay on the windowsill.

Sinclair’s last message had indicated that Griffin was out for blood. David had angered so many people in his life that he might well have to face the music now—Griffin had many supporters. David had confidence that Sinclair would win the day, but they might have to concede much to Griffin before the man backed off.

But facing a trial that might end in David breaking rocks at Dartmoor did not gouge him as much as saying good-bye to Sophie that day. He folded his arms over his chest to contain his emptiness, watching dust rise as his coach carried her down the drive and perhaps out of his life.



SOPHIE WENT through the next weeks with difficulty. Dr. Gaspar had continued with the dig, unearthing a stash of pottery that excited him and Uncle greatly. No gold or treasure could have made Uncle Lucas happier than these everyday cooking pots.

David remained absent. Sophie made herself cease scanning the road hopefully or rushing to the door of the vicarage when any cart rumbled by.

Eleanor did not return either, though she sent the developed photographs to Uncle Lucas and promised to take more when the London Season let her escape.

Sophie tried to shut out the world and concentrate on helping her uncle, but it was difficult. She found herself, during the tedious process of brushing dirt from the mosaic or the potsherds, thinking of nothing but David, how safe she'd felt in his arms, how decadent under his kiss.

His voice, his deep laughter, the scent of smoky wool and brandy, the gleam in his eyes before he launched into one of his satirical speeches.

He'd burned his way into her heart, and Sophie knew he'd not leave it soon.

Within a week, Sophie decided to tell Dr. Gaspar about her circumstances. He deserved the truth, and she preferred to tell him her story before he learned it from the newspapers or whispers in the village.

She explained to him over breakfast, with Uncle Lucas's approval. Dr. Gaspar listened with confusion in his brown eyes, and then sympathy. She included the fact that David claimed the marriage would end in annulment instead of divorce, but both events were a scandal, though the annulment was the lesser of the two evils.

Dr. Gaspar said little, to Sophie's relief. That is, until later, when she bent over pieces of pottery in Uncle Lucas's shed, trying to decide if any matched. The faint odor of cow lingered in the old byre, but it was faint enough to be a comforting, not off-putting, scent.

Dr. Gaspar filled the doorway, cutting off what little light had filtered

inside. “Miss Tierney.” He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable in the confined space. “I mean—I think—Lady Devonport?”

“Miss Tierney will do well,” Sophie said, sliding from the stool to her feet. “I suppose I had better become used to it. Is Uncle asking for me?”

She made for the door, wondering what task Uncle Lucas wished her to perform now, but Dr. Gaspar remained awkwardly in her way.

“I am grateful to you for taking me into your confidence, Miss Tierney.” He cleared his throat again, agony in his eyes.

Sophie shrugged as though none of it—her life, her reputation, her future—truly mattered. “Not at all. I knew you would hear the gossip before long.”

“It must be difficult for you.”

She gave him a wan smile. “A bit. But I hope it will be finished soon.”

“When it is ...” Dr. Gaspar removed his hat, wiped his forehead, and set the hat back on his head. He glanced at the pottery pieces, coughed, rubbed his hands together, and took off his hat again. “When it is, Miss Tierney, I hope that you will do me the honor of becoming my wife.”

Sophie stilled in astonishment, uncertain she'd heard aright. But no, Dr. Gaspar had just asked her to marry him and now waited in anxious anticipation for her answer.

"I beg your ..." Sophie clutched the edge of the table. "Your *wife*?"

Gaspar nodded, seeming to gather courage from his blurted proposal.

"I know it is a surprise. But it distresses me to think of you ruined and pushed aside. You are a lovely woman, if you forgive my forwardness, and intelligent too—I haven't met many ladies who know the difference between Ancient Babylon and Hellenistic Greece." He gave a breathy laugh. "You would be handy when I return to the Near East—a man with a helpmeet who knows how to sort pottery would be ..." He waved at the scattered pieces of clay. "Heavenly, I think."

Sophie felt the world spin beneath her, the walls of the shed wavering. "I don't ... I ..."

"I know I have sprung this upon you." Dr. Gaspar's lips quivered behind his thick beard. "But please contemplate my offer. You've declared you will be your uncle's assistant, but I would hate to see you wasted as a spinster. You would regain respectability as a married woman—and a mother."

He averted his gaze and blushed painfully as he spoke the last word.

Sophie opened her mouth to point out that he'd need to overcome his

bashfulness if he wanted her to bear his children, but she shut it again.

She could say such things to David, and he'd laugh. Tease her, yes, but he wouldn't faint in mortification. Dr. Gaspar might.

"You are very kind." Sophie made her voice firm. "But I have not decided what I will do."

"Of course, of course. You must wait for the courts." Dr. Gaspar paused, still anxious. "When the legal issues are behind you, you will give me your answer?"

Sophie hated to hurt people's feelings. Any idea that someone smarted inside because of her made her unhappy, but she understood that if she did not tell Dr. Gaspar the truth, he might persist for the next forty years. The archaeology world was small, and their paths would often cross.

"Forgive me," she said, standing as straight as she could. "But my answer must be no. As I say, you are kind ..."

Dr. Gaspar's crestfallen look was difficult to bear. He removed his hat and turned it in his hands. "I see." He chewed his upper lip. "You can give me no hope?"

Sophie shook her head. "I am sorry, but no. I pray you can forgive me, and we can continue to be friends."

"Yes, yes." He put on his hat again, pulling it down to his ears. "Beg pardon for disturbing you."

Dr. Gaspar turned to leave. Sophie was about to let out a breath of relief when he turned back. "When you are unmarried once more—though the words sound strange—I will speak to you again. I daresay you will change your mind when you find yourself alone."

He tipped his hat, though he had to scrape it from his head to do it, and finally slunk out.

Sophie sank to her chair with a thump. She supposed Dr. Gaspar thought himself charitable, but he assumed that when Sophie found herself without a husband, she'd leap at his offer—any husband would be better than none.



Blast the man.

She wished David were here so she could tell him about the bizarre encounter. He *would* laugh, she was certain of it. He'd also understand why she'd turned Gaspar down. Though a woman in her situation might be tempted to marry a man who'd whisk her away from the condemning gaze of society, David would realize why she'd said no.

Not that David, for all his kisses and declarations, had offered her marriage. He'd blatantly suggested he wanted an affair with her, wanted her in his bed, but he'd never said a word about matrimony.

The potsherds blurred before her as tears filled Sophie's eyes and spilled to her cheeks.



DR. GASPAR'S PROPOSAL, and Sophie's refusal, made the next day or so decidedly awkward. Dr. Gaspar never said a word, but his gazes from his rather sad brown eyes conveyed much. Uncle, who knew nothing of the matter, spoke robustly about the dig and never noticed Sophie's silence or Dr. Gaspar's nervousness.

A letter from the Duchess of Kilmorgan, which reached Sophie a few mornings later, came as a welcome relief.

*I would be grateful if you would be my guest in London, Eleanor wrote. The Season is reaching its height, and I've been abandoned by my sisters-in-law. Isabella has a large social calendar of her own with the art crowd, Ainsley has retreated to Berkshire with her husband for the horse season, and Beth lives a quiet life with Ian. My nephew Daniel's wife often helps me, but Violet and Danny are tinkering like mad with a motorcar, determined to win the latest time trial, whatever those are.*

*If you could see your way to aiding me in my desperation, I would be unceasingly obliged to you. I will also be able to finish my duties quicker so I*

*can take more photographs for your uncle, and no, I am not above a little bribery to bring you to my side. Also it would do you no harm to be seen outside your marriage and under my protection. I speak bluntly because nothing will move forward if I am too delicate to point out your precarious position, which I am not.*

*Most of all, I would enjoy spending time in your company. I find you refreshing, and my home rather over-run with gentlemen. They are fine fellows to be sure, but a female voice in the clamor is always welcome.*

*Do say you'll come. I will send my maid, who brooks no nonsense, to escort you, so that you will be saved the horrors of traveling in a train car by yourself. I have also sent the fare for a first class ticket enclosed in this letter, since I am demanding your presence.*

*Yours in haste,*

*Eleanor Kilmorgan*



SOPHIE'S RIDE to London in the cushioned luxury of the first-class carriage, Eleanor's prim maid to look after the luggage, proved to be soothing. The maid sat upright in the opposite seat, darning socks, for the entire journey. Eleanor's sons ran through them quickly, it seemed.

Sophie's own lady's maid had given notice the moment Laurie's solicitor had informed Sophie of the divorce proceedings, and after so many months she found it disconcerting but comforting to have someone procure all tickets, snap orders for the luggage to be carried, and see that Sophie was taken care of all the way to Eleanor's front door.

They approached London from the north, Regent's Park green with spring. The park at Grosvenor Square was also tinged green, studded with nannies and children enjoying a spate of fine weather.

The Grosvenor Square home of the Duke of Kilmorgan was far grander

than any London house Sophie had ever visited, including her husband's. The Earl of Devonport's townhouse paled against the double mansion with tall windows whose black fan-lighted door opened to a vast hall.

The lady of the house appeared on the landing of a lavish staircase in pursuit of two boys with red hair, both of whom hurtled toward Sophie with blood-curdling yells.

"Do catch him!" Eleanor shouted as the smaller of the pair shot toward the open front door, evading the footmen and the lady's maid who lunged to stop him.

Sophie stretched out her arms and caught up the child before he could race out into the street. He was heavy and squirming, but her heart warmed as she held him close and looked him in the face. "Good evening, little man. Where are you rushing off to? I've only just arrived."

The boy ceased struggling and stared at Sophie. He had blue eyes like his mother, his hair dark red, his face freckled.

"I'm Malcolm," he announced in a voice that carried to the lofty ceiling. "Are you mum's friend come to stay? Do you play draughts? Or poker? Cousin Danny taught me."

"I am a mean one for draughts," Sophie promised. The door had been closed behind her so she set the lad on his feet.

The slightly older boy waited politely in front of Sophie. "I am Alec Mackenzie," he said, holding out his hand. "How do you do?"

Malcolm snorted. "Prissy-prissy."

"There's nothing wrong with good manners, Mal," Eleanor said as she came off the stairs.

Sophie shook Alec's hand solemnly, then said to Malcolm, "And of course I know how to play poker. My uncle taught me."

"See?" Malcolm yelled at Alec. He took a swing at his brother then bolted toward the back of the house.

Alec's formality dropped in an instant and he raced after Malcolm with a

scream of a Highland warrior ready for battle. Two footmen, who must be charged with keeping the boys alive, hurried after them.

“You see why I find photographing ancient tiles in dark holes so refreshing,” Eleanor said to Sophie. “Alec is home from school for a short holiday, and there has been no silence in the house since.” In spite of her words, the look she turned to the vanishing boys held so much love that Sophie’s heart squeezed.

“They are lovely children.”

“They are little hellions,” Eleanor said. “Like their father and uncles. But yes, quite lovely.” She patted Sophie’s arm and smiled. “How wonderful that you’ve come. We will have a fine time, I know it.”



ELEANOR KEPT SOPHIE in such a whirl over the following weeks that she scarcely distinguished one day from the next. They planned soirees, musicales, and garden parties—bringing the garden parties indoors if the weather did not cooperate.

When not hosting her own gatherings, Eleanor took Sophie with her to balls and suppers, the theatre, and the opera. During daylight hours they visited museums and libraries and met other ladies for tea.

Sophie was trepidatious about these outings at first, but Eleanor’s friends—who must have been hand-picked to make Sophie comfortable—welcomed her into their circle. Among these were Eleanor’s sisters-in-law, Isabella, Ainsley, and Beth, and Hart’s niece Violet, none of whom seemed to be as busy as Eleanor’s letter had suggested. Sophie especially liked Violet, an intelligent young woman, very much in love with her husband, with a knack for mechanical devices.

All these ladies had been touched by scandal or the dark side of life, Sophie learned—Beth had grown up in a workhouse; Isabella had eloped

with Mac Mackenzie on the night of her come-out; Ainsley had been seduced at a very young age; and Violet had been a faux stage medium to make a living, though she claimed that her mother appeared to have a true gift for clairvoyance.

The McBride wives—sisters-in-law of Ainsley—who rounded out the group had similar stories, and Louisa, Isabella's sister, had fallen so low as to marry a policeman. This last was told to Sophie with merriment—Detective Superintendent Fellows was no mere policeman.

None of these ladies found the impending breakup of Sophie's marriage scandalous at all. They surrounded her on outings, befriending her in truth, and kept more unforgiving members of society away from her. With the Duchess of Kilmorgan and the ladies Mackenzie at Sophie's side, no one dared to shun her.

Eleanor had said she'd protect Sophie, and protect her she did.

The one person Sophie never saw on these rounds was David.

"He's still in Hertfordshire," Eleanor told Sophie when Sophie finally summoned the courage to inquire about him. "He is not supposed to come to London, according to Fellows—not that it stops him. But he's being careful. I'm very glad to see it. David is finally taking his position as landed gentleman seriously. He has been a loyal friend to Hart all these years, but good heavens, David needs his own life."

Sophie remembered the cozy evenings she'd spent in David's home, the camaraderie from the vicarage almost renewed. Not quite—there had been a strain since the night he'd kissed her so passionately at the edge of the garden. Even so, Sophie thought longingly of those evenings around the fire, talking of anything and everything.

David accepted Sophie for who she was, a rare gift, she was coming to understand. She missed him.

Interestingly, ladies of the London ton had heard about Uncle Lucas's find of the Roman villa in Shropshire. Stories about it had been printed in

several newspapers, including the *Illustrated London News*.

At a garden fete at a house in Mount Street one afternoon, Sophie heard both her uncle's name and David's in conversation. Pretending indifference, she wandered toward the ladies speaking about them, as though only admiring the hostess's lovely spring flowers.

"Griff is frightfully doleful," one woman in a dull lavender gown said. "He is unhappy about appearing in court, but that awful Mr. Fleming *did* try to kill him."

"I heard Mr. Fleming denies it with every breath," another lady said brightly.

"He would," the first woman said. "But my Griff says Mr. Fleming *shot* at him and then punched him in the face when the shot missed. Horrible. Mr. Fleming was arrested but then allowed to retreat to the country."

Sophie surmised that the first woman was *Mrs. Griffin*, and Griff, the man who'd accused David of attempted murder.

"I heard Mr. Fleming helped Dr. Pierson reveal the Roman villa in Shropshire," another lady said. "It was in the newspapers."

"So unfair," *Mrs. Griffin* said. "The *Illustrated London News*, no less. They barely sniffed when Griff found that Saxon gold in Suffolk. He offered to fund a full excavation, but no one would take it. Griff sits in his chamber, running his hands through the coins he turned up, quite morose. This trial will upset him too much. Mr. Fleming should admit guilt and go quietly to prison."

Sophie thought David should do nothing of the sort, but the exchange gave her an idea.

She continued across the garden as though seeking the shade of the house, but once inside, she excused herself to the hostess, returned to Eleanor's home, and asked the duke's butler to dispatch several urgent telegraph messages for her.



“TELEGRAM FOR YOU, SIR.”

Fortescue, tall with his graying hair brushed to cover the thin spot on top of his head, bent down with a salver in his hand, an envelope squarely in its center. He enjoyed playing the perfect servant, complete with white gloves and upper-crust accent.

David lounged deep in a chair with his nose in a book about farming a vegetable called a swede. It was unbelievably technical. He’d always thought one dug a hole, dropped in a seed, and walked away, to pluck up the fully grown vegetable in the fall. But things such as the soil’s content and consistency, average rainfall in the county, and field drainage apparently were all very important if a man wanted a fine crop of rutabagas.

At Fortescue’s words, David happily shoved the book onto a table without bothering to mark his place.

“Miss Tierney has sent for me, declaring her undying love,” he said in hope.

Fortescue looked down his nose. “I believe the message came from London, sir. From your solicitor.”

“My solicitor?” David’s light mood evaporated. “Not McBride, my barrister?”

“No, sir. I imagine Mr. Basher McBride is too busy to send his own telegrams.”

“Cheek. But you are no doubt right. Then it is either to do with my trial or some other tediousness.” David eyed the envelope on the tray with distaste. “Read it to me, Forty. My eyes are glazed by my intense study of soil composition.”

Without a word, Fortescue set down the salver, slit the envelope with a silver knife he kept about his person, slid out the missive, unfolded it, and cleared his throat.

“I am pleased to report that Mr. Griffin has withdrawn all charges of assault and attempted murder,” Fortescue read in a monotone. “The Crown has dropped the prosecution, citing lack of evidence.”



What?" David came to his feet, his mouth hanging open.

"All restrictions on your movements have been lifted," Fortescue finished. "Congratulations, sir." He didn't change expression, but David had known the man long enough to see the relief in his eyes.

David snatched the paper from Forty's hand. He read the message through—the words indeed said he no longer had to worry about Griffin and his accusations.

"How?" He demanded of the page, then he raised his head. "No—I don't care how. This changes everything. Pack my bags, Fortescue. We are racing to London tonight."

"London?" Fortescue's brows climbed the faintest bit, his version of excitement. "I've only just come from there."

"Well, we are going back. The swedes will have to wait."

"It is too early to plant them in any case," Fortescue said.

"Is it?"

Fortescue neatly folded the telegram David had dropped on the book and slid it back into the envelope. "Yes, sir. They prefer soil that is above forty degrees Fahrenheit, and my almanac says we will have several more frosts before the weather warms."

David dragged his thoughts back from Sophie's beautiful smile and

focused on Fortescue's bland countenance. "How the devil do you know that?"

"I have had a lifetime to read as many books as possible, sir. When I understood that your interest had shifted, at long last, to what is growing in your own fields, I refreshed my knowledge of crops that thrive in this part of England. In case you had questions about them."

David laughed. "Forty, you are the most impertinent, presumptuous manservant I've ever had the misfortune to be saddled with."

"So you have said many times, sir. But as I am the *only* manservant you have ever been saddled with, the comparison can hardly exist."

"It is my way of saying I love you, Fortescue. Now, let us have those damned bags packed. I have a lady to woo. She'll turn me down flat, I'm certain, and soon I'll be back, trying to soothe my broken heart with research on fertilizer and crop rotation."

"She might say yes, you know," Fortescue said as David charged from the library to the stairs. "Then you can read to her all about tilling the fields. She will never regret her choice."

"Ha. She already thinks me the greatest fool in Christendom. Besides, she's still married at present, not to mention far more interested in Roman ruins than a ruined Englishman."

"Very poetic, sir."

"I thought so." David caught his breath at the top of the stairs. "A few small bags are all I need. Come and watch a lady trample me into the dust." He beamed at his long-suffering valet. "I cannot wait to see her."



SOPHIE STOOD on a stool in her bedchamber while Eleanor's dressmaker pinned a skirt in place, making tiny marks on it with chalk.

Eleanor had insisted Sophie have new dresses made, nothing drab or

nondescript, she said severely—Sophie had nothing to be ashamed of. Thus, within a short time, Sophie found herself attired in deep blue silk evening gowns, bottle-green walking dresses, and dusky pink tea gowns.

Why Eleanor thought Sophie needed yet another ballgown, she wasn't certain, but Eleanor had rattled off a long explanation that Isabella had insisted it be done for the grand ball at the Grosvenor Square house and Sophie could not be seen in something she'd worn before. The Queen and the south of France had come into the speech somehow, and before Sophie could do more than blink, the dressmaker had arrived. Now Sophie stood in her underthings while swaths of silk enfolded her body.

Eleanor swept in, her blue eyes alight, her smile wide. "Mr. McBride is here. Dear Sinclair. He is so happy now that he has Bertie and more little ones. His eyes are softer, though not, I gather, when he is in court with a criminal squirming on the dock before him. He wants to see you—it must be to do with your marital state. I told him you'd be down at once."

The dressmaker, no doubt used to Eleanor's abrupt ways, began to calmly unpin the skirt. Eleanor assisted, apologizing profusely to the dressmaker and promising that Sophie would be back to continue the fitting forthwith.

Sophie restored her everyday skirt and shirtwaist, but her fingers shook so that Eleanor and the dressmaker had to help with her buttons. Eleanor hooked her arm through Sophie's and led her out, patting her hand as they descended the stairs. Sophie had thought to explain she could face Mr. McBride alone, but then decided against it. A friend at her side was just what she needed.

She was glad she hadn't insisted Eleanor leave her when they entered the front parlor. Mr. McBride, a handsome blond Scotsman, came to his feet at their entrance, but he wasn't alone. Next to him, already standing, was David.

Sophie's breath left her. David's gaze was all for her, his blue-gray eyes filled with his biting wit and a strange apprehension.

Eleanor stopped, as surprised as Sophie. "David, what are you doing here? The majordomo didn't announce you. Did you slide in under the

moldings?”

David gave her a bow. “I bade your good man not to say a word. I was afraid neither of you would darken the door if you knew I lurked. I had rushed to London to visit McBride about my own situation, and he declared himself on his way to visit you. Naturally, I invited myself along. He has news.”

Sinclair shot him a look. “They likely discerned that from my presence alone.”

“Tell her.” David folded his arms and stepped back, rocking restlessly on his feet.

Sinclair opened a case that lay on the table next to him and withdrew a long document, folded lengthwise. “I am pleased to inform you that Lord Devonport has been granted an annulment to his marriage to Miss Sophie Tierney. The marriage is declared invalid and nonexistent, and both parties are at liberty to marry another if they so choose.”

Sophie’s jaw loosened, and the next thing she knew, she was in a chair, Eleanor and David on either side of her. David shoved a glass under her nose, and Sophie inhaled the sharp bite of whisky.

“Drink it,” David advised. “Trust me. Down it in one go.”

David had to steady the glass for her, but Sophie obeyed. Whisky filled her mouth, and she forced herself to swallow. Liquid burned fire down her throat but it settled her roiling stomach and let her draw a breath, her vision clearing.

Sinclair gazed upon her in sympathy. “Forgive me for springing it on you so abruptly, Miss Tierney. Barristers can be sharp, so my wife likes to tell me.” His expression softened a long way when he said *my wife*.

“Not at all.” Sophie tried to speak briskly, but her voice was breathy and wrong. “I needed to know. But ... are you certain? Laurie—or rather, his solicitors—told me he could not annul the marriage, and that divorce was the only way he could be rid of me.”

David's hand tightened on hers before she realized he'd been holding it. Warm, anchoring David.

"I'd never have brought this to you if I weren't certain." Sinclair held up the papers and then laid them carefully on a table. "The marriage has been annulled on the grounds of physical incapacity."

Sophie blinked. "Physical ..." Bile touched her throat, and she longed for another gulp of the whisky. "You mean my inability to carry a child."

"By no means—"

David cut off Sinclair's gentle answer. "Not on your part, love. On Lackwit Laurie's. The evidence finds your husband incapable of siring an heir, a spare, a daughter, or anything else. Of completing the act at all. His soldier is always at ease, and by about ... oh, now ... several unscrupulous journalists will be announcing this fact to the world, using very circumspect wording and no names so they can't be charged with libel."

Sophie's mouth hung open again. She shut it with a snap. "You did this," she said rapidly to David. "*You* did all this."

"I did." David raised her hand to his lips, then he released her. "I am a monster. You may hate me for the rest of your life for making a complete fool of your husband and a mockery of your marriage. But I would do it again." His voice turned hard. "What matters is that you are free of him—free to choose your life, without a shadow of disgrace."

"Annulment is still a scandal," Sophie said, voice weak.

"Usually, yes," Eleanor's brisk tones broke in. "But with your husband declared impotent, it means that, in the eyes of the world, you are untouched, unsullied. Perhaps unwise in your choice to marry him in the first place, but everyone knows about Lackwit Laurie. He's a charmer with nothing behind the charm. You will be quite forgiven, and also unstained."

"But he isn't ..." Sophie swallowed and turned a dazed face to Sinclair. "Laurie isn't ..."

Sinclair held up his hand. "Say nothing. Never, ever say anything about it

again, Miss Tierney, especially not to a man of law. Accept the verdict and carry on.”

“Best way,” Eleanor agreed.

Sophie swung to her, suspicions sharpening. “*You* knew, didn’t you? You knew what David was up to.”

“Well, of course.” Eleanor looked serene. “He asked for my help. I thought it a delicious scheme and naturally agreed. I will not explain all the underhandedness, but you did not deserve to be married to that awful man, and as David says, I would do it again. Though *I* am not as contrite as he appears to be at the moment. Ladies can be much more ruthless than gentlemen, I always say.”

They had all known. Sophie’s gaze went from one to the other—Sinclair with compassion but warning caution, Eleanor gleeful, David grim. David had known the entire situation would disconcert her, but he had no regret over his part.

Somehow Mr. Fleming had convinced a barrister, a slew of solicitors, and a judge of the courts that the Earl of Devonport was incapable of performing in bed. How David had proved such a thing, Sophie could not fathom, nor was she certain she wanted to.

He was duplicitous and determined—that much she understood. Somehow David had threatened Laurie enough that Laurie had agreed to the annulment and set Sophie free.

Sophie rose, her limbs stiff. David caught her arm, ready to assist, but she slid away from him, finding strength once more.

“I thank you, sir,” she said, surprised her voice was steady. “You have done me a great service.”

David’s eyes flickered with pain. “It was my most profound pleasure.” His throat moved in a swallow. “You deserve to be happy, Sophie. To have that chance.”

Sophie made herself nod. “But just now I need ... I must ...”

She had no more words. Her dry eyes burned as she turned abruptly from David, waved off Eleanor's solicitous movement, and fled the room.



“I HAD the feeling she wouldn't fling herself into my arms and cover me with kisses,” David said despondently.

“Give her a moment.” Eleanor accepted the whisky Sinclair handed her before he dispensed one to David. “This is a shock for her, however welcome.”

David sank into a chair, unaccountably weary, and downed his whisky, as he'd advised Sophie to, in one dose.

Sinclair gave him a stern look. “If she discovers that courtesans were happy to do you a favor, Fleming, it might not appease her.”

“I'll keep mum,” Eleanor said. “Promise.”

“No.” David sighed from the depths of his boots. “I will tell her all. Eventually. She deserves to know every horrible lie and my hand in them.”

“I see.” Sinclair resumed his seat. “You wish to make certain she hates you thoroughly.”

“So you can wallow in your broken heart and drive your friends distracted,” Eleanor put in. “You do not always have to be a martyr, David. From the number of times Sophie has asked me about you since her arrival—then pretends to forget asking and inquires again—I would say the lady is smitten.”

“My optimistic El.” David heaved himself from the chair to refill his glass. He lifted it to drink, thought about the rivers of whisky that had run through his body in his life, and clicked the glass to the sideboard. “I might have saved her from dire scandal but I did it by no honorable means, and she knows it. Can she be comfortable with such a man as me? I will depart, and she will become the toast of London and marry some lucky gentleman within

the year. She will have many children and grow old and happy.”

Which she deserved. So why did David feel hollow inside?

“No, you don’t.” Eleanor was on her feet, facing him. “You will not run away, my friend. I helped you not only for *her* sake, but for yours. The devil I will let you retreat to the country like a wounded bear, becoming a hermit for unrequited love. Absolute nonsense. There is no reason for either of you to pine away alone. You will remain in London, and you will attend my supper ball, if I have to have Fortescue tie you up and drag you to it. He would, if I asked him.”

“I know,” David said gloomily.

“It might help you to know exactly *why* you are no longer facing charges from Mr. Griffin,” Eleanor said, her eyes flashing.

She had no idea how frightening she was when she did that. Explained why Hart was a quiet man these days.

“Would it?” David asked. “I can’t imagine what it has to do with Sophie’s life.”

“Please explain, Sinclair, there’s a good fellow.” Eleanor turned in a swirl of skirts and plopped into a chair to enjoy the waters she’d just stirred. Eleanor was a master at that.

Sinclair steepled his fingers. “I was prepared to explain when you arrived today, but understandably you were more interested in my visit to Miss Tierney, and prevented me. I will tell you that Mr. Oliver Griffin is now the principal funder and director of Miss Tierney’s uncle’s excavations of his Roman villa in Shropshire.”

David stared at him. “What the devil? Why on earth is Griffin—?”

“Dr. Pierson will need money, a mountain of it, if he’s to do this thoroughly,” Sinclair interrupted. “I imagine Pierson hoped his old university would sponsor him, but a small villa of the Roman British period, even with an intact mosaic floor, has not drawn much attention. Mr. Griffin, as director of the excavations, will oversee the project, find donors, and possibly interest



a museum or his Oxford college. *His* uncle, a vastly wealthy man, has already promised some funding. Mr. Griffin will no doubt take all credit for this project, though I did tell him that Dr. Pierson must be named as its primary discoverer. Mr. Griffin complied, and agreed to drop all charges against you for this carrot I extended him.”

David groped at the back of a chair and moved himself to sit in it before his legs gave way.

“*You* offered it. How the devil did you know he’d want Pierson’s dig? *Why* would he?”

“Miss Tierney told me.” Sinclair spoke calmly but his gray eyes betrayed vast amusement. Confounding David apparently entertained him.

“Miss Tierney—Sophie—told you ...”

“Do not speak as though she hasn’t a brain in her head,” Eleanor broke in. “She gathered the intelligence that Griffin is terribly interested in archaeology and greatly disappointed when no one wanted the Saxon antiquities he found in a burial mound in Suffolk. I suspect he is more interested in being lauded and celebrated than doing the actual work, but no matter. Sophie made inquiries, discovered that Griffin has found other burials and been rebuffed as a dilettante several times. She asked Dr. Pierson if he’d consider letting Griffin step into his dig—if he brought piles of cash with him, of course—and Dr. Pierson was delighted. Sophie then asked Sinclair to contact Griffin and offer this exchange.”

Sinclair nodded, infuriatingly calm. “Mr. Griffin proved to be more interested in heading a dig than prosecuting a man for pummeling him.”

David’s lips were numb. “You knew this,” he said to Eleanor. “I was festering in the country reading up on *root vegetables*, and you could not tell me my sentence would be lifted?”

Eleanor did not look the least bit contrite. “Sinclair and I decided it would be best if you knew nothing until he could present it to you as a *fait accompli*. If Griffin refused us at the last, you’d have been devastated and perhaps taken

a foolish step—left the country or shot Griffin in truth, or some such.”

“You know I’m not a violent man,” David said, affronted. “Unless I’m powerfully drunk, which I haven’t been in a long time. Not since—”

Not since he’d raised his head at Pierson’s breakfast table and seen Sophie’s extraordinary green eyes studying him in curiosity.

“Sophie.” The very name soothed his senses. She’d found a way to ease his troubles even when she’d been uncertain hers would ever vanish.

David sprang up, his energy returning. “I must go to her.”

He rushed for the door, but found Eleanor in front of him.

“Not yet.” Eleanor put a firm hand on his arm. “Give her time to let her changed situation sink in. She cannot go from being a married woman, however unhappily, to a single one in a heartbeat without some disturbance. She needs to find her equilibrium. Let her alone until my supper ball, which is three nights from now. I expect you to turn up, as I said, dressed in your finest.”

David gazed down at the woman who’d once broken his heart. Broke it, stomped on it, and then offered her hand and asked to be friends. A formidable woman, and a good one. Hart Mackenzie was a lucky man, but Eleanor belonged with him. She never had with David. Good thing she’d been so sensible all those years ago.

“God bless you, El.” The last dregs of David’s lethargy burned away. He took Eleanor’s hands and kissed her cheek. “You are too damned good to me. I will do as you command.” He grinned. “You are also terrifying. Small wonder Hart looks pale.” He kissed her cheek a second time and darted around her, avoiding her half-hearted swing. “Adieu, my friends.” He turned at the door and made a flourishing bow to her and Sinclair, the tall, quiet barrister who’d stood by him through it all. “And thank you. I am a most favored man.”

With that, he left them, his head full of plans, his heart light.

Sophie had never worn such a gown before. Made of rippling pink and green silk, it swept from a tight bodice to a flowing skirt, gathered in back with a knot of cloth roses. The bodice was cut a bit lower than she was used to, and very snug in the waist, its sleeves whispers of gauzy silk. Her washed and brushed hair was piled on her head in wonderful curls, a few of which cascaded to her shoulders. A simple necklet of pearls completed the costume. Isabella, to whom the Mackenzie ladies turned for all things fashion, had said the necklet was enough.

Sophie agreed. Already news of her annulment had spread through Town, and people stared as she moved about the ballroom. Always best to look elegant when one was the subject of all attention.

Too many tonight asked her, “What will you do now?”

Sophie had no idea. Simply breathing was enough.

She privately concluded she’d return to her uncle’s in Shropshire, not to hide, but to do something a bit more interesting than the same round of gatherings with the same people night after night.

As for the man responsible for her annulment...

She had not seen him. David had remained absent since the day Sinclair brought her the papers, and Eleanor had stated bluntly that she’d told him to leave Sophie be.

Wise, Sophie thought as she drifted through the crowd, a gracious smile on her stiff lips. The stares and sometimes blatant pointing unnerved her, but she kept her head high.

She suspected she would have made a grand fool of herself if David had returned to the house in the intervening days. She'd have flung her arms around him and covered him with kisses then backed away and shouted at him. And then rushed at him for more kissing.

She wanted more than that—if David had turned up, she might have torn his clothes from his body. She wanted to touch him, to kiss his skin...

Better to shout at him. He'd saved her and made her an object of fascination, pity, and amusement at the same time. She'd heard the whispers of *Limp-Prick Laurie* during her outings with Eleanor in the last few days, seen the sympathetic glances from the same whisperers. Laurie, it was rumored, had taken a sudden journey to the Continent. The widow he'd wished to marry rather abruptly turned her attentions to another.

The ballroom Sophie moved through—quickly enough that none could engage her in conversation—was full. Eleanor had invited most of the polite world tonight, presenting Sophie to them as Miss Tierney.

The Mackenzie brothers, tall Scotsmen in formal kilts, mingled with the guests. Hart busied himself being the important man he was—*making everyone dance to his tunes*, Eleanor had murmured to her while gazing at him in open affection.

Cameron, the tallest of them, spoke animatedly about horses to a fascinated group. Ainsley stood near him, adding to the conversation, her love for her husband obvious.

Mac Mackenzie laughed loudly with his cronies, his charm in evidence. He drank lemonade, as did Isabella at his side. They were a vibrant and lovely pair, warming all around them.

Daniel Mackenzie, young and exuberant, led his wife about with apparent pride. Violet was a beautiful woman, with whom Sophie had already become

friends. Their baby daughter, Fleur, was tiny and sweet.

Sophie had only briefly met Ian Mackenzie, the brother those outside the family regarded as mad. Ian didn't look mad to Sophie as he walked through the crowd with Beth at his side, both of them calm and quiet. True, Ian did not engage in lively conversation like his brothers, but he did speak to people, usually after listening to them a time before breaking in with an apt observation.

Three of the McBride brothers had come as well—the fourth, Stephen, was with his regiment and his wife in Africa. Patrick and Rona, the patriarch and matriarch of the family, older than the others, were having a fine time. They'd raised the younger McBrides, Ainsley had told her. Sinclair had brought his wife, a merry-faced lady called Bertie. Sophie knew she'd started life in an East End gutter, but she was as stylish and gracious as any lady here, even if she winked at Sophie behind their backs.

Elliot McBride was quieter, but devastatingly handsome. More than one woman looked his way, but his wife, Juliana, at his side, was the only lady that held his gaze.

Sophie tried to calm her agitation by watching the Mackenzies and their friends, keeping herself to herself as much as she could without snubbing Eleanor's guests.

Until, that is, a knot of people at the end of the room parted, and she saw David standing near a long window that led to the garden.

The window was closed against the night's chill, its panes reflecting the chandeliers and the broad-shouldered man in black frock coat and Scottish kilt. He looked straight at Sophie.

Sophie's heart pounded as she drank in his hard body, the way the kilt hugged his hips. She'd never seen David in Scottish dress before, and she decided it much suited him.

A couple making their way to the dance floor nearly ran into her, and Sophie skittered aside with an apology. She realized she could no longer be a

stone, and forced her satin-slippered feet toward the window. The distance was only a dozen yards in truth, but it felt like miles.

David watched her come, making no attempt to go to her. She had no idea how he would receive her—was he angry at her for not sending word to him? Or indifferent about their time apart?

“Good evening,” she managed when she halted an arm’s length from him. So she might say to any acquaintance.

“Good evening.” David ran his blue-gray gaze up and down her, making her blood burn. “Lovely gown.”

“Isabella chose it. You look ...” Sophie faltered, biting off her true words. *Delectable, beguiling, desirable.*

David spread his arms, a hint of his wicked smile returning. “Hart insists on a show of force from his Scottish cousins. Great-great aunt Donnag might have married a Duke of Kilmorgan, but her brother, my direct ancestor, married an Englishwoman. Hart barely forgives me for that, but if I bring out the kilt once in a while, he lets me be.”

Sophie hid a nervous smile. “He is fond of you.”

David glanced at the large Mackenzie who was holding his audience in thrall. “Perhaps. I’ve been loyal to him, if nothing else.”

“They are all very fond of you.” Sophie’s speech was stilted, her words polite, as though she spoke to a man she barely knew. “I’ve been living in this house for a while now, and your name comes up often.”

David’s eyes flickered. “That is alarming.”

“Not at all. The ladies speak of you highly. The gentlemen too.”

“Even more alarming. I wonder what they want me to do for them?”

Sophie’s amusement bubbled up, dissolving some of the tension inside her. “Must you always mock yourself?”

“Mocking myself makes others’ mockery easier to bear.”

She softened. “You are a fine man, David Fleming.”

His restlessness quieted as he studied her face. The room behind Sophie

seemed to fade, the music and chatter muted.

“My life will be worth living if you truly believe that,” he said. “Damnation, Sophie, I wanted to come to you, to see you, to make certain you were well ...”

“Eleanor told me she kept you away.” Sophie slid closer to him, unable to stop herself. “I wanted to see you too. To thank you ...”

“No.” David held up his hands, his voice taking on a savage note. “I do not want your thanks or gratitude. It’s not what I want from you.” He closed his eyes briefly then gave himself a shake. “I am supposed to be thanking *you* for deflecting Griffin. How the devil you managed it, I don’t know, but I liked learning that you are as devious as I am.”

Sophie shrugged, the gauze of her sleeves rubbing her shoulders. “I overheard an interesting bit of conversation that made me ask questions, is all. I was glad to find the one thing Mr. Griffin wanted more in life than taking vengeance on you.”

“Exactly.” David’s snake-like grin returned. “How do you suppose I work the magic I do? If I could take you under my wing and teach you—ah, what havoc we could wreak!”

Sophie couldn’t stop her laugh. “We’d be feared the length and breadth of England.”

“Scotland too. It would be delightful.” David’s amusement faded. “Except it’s hell to pretend you only a friend when you are standing so close to me, in that dress.”

“Where should I stand? And in what frock?” She left off teasing. “I am proud to call you friend, David.”

“You were not when you first saw me, a wreck of a man. I thank you for dragging me from that, if nothing else.”

Her hands were in his before she realized she’d reached for them.

“I was as much of a wreck,” she said. “Hiding from the world.”

“Hiding with you was the best time of my life,” David said fervently.

“Far, far better than being in the world without you.”

Sophie squeezed his hands. “I agree.”

Music swelled behind them, reminding Sophie that they stood in Eleanor’s ballroom, and that she was there to be reintroduced to society. She half-turned, ready to suggest they join the throng, when David pulled her back.

“Come with me,” he said in a low voice.

Sophie felt no qualm about abandoning the ball to follow David. He led her around a screen that concealed a door to a narrow corridor—a passage for servants. David took her through this then up two flights of deserted backstairs before he opened another door into an upper hall.

Sophie’s bedchamber lay nearby, but David towed her to a part of the house she hadn’t visited and to a well-furnished bedchamber. The bedroom did not have the sumptuousness of the chamber Sophie occupied, but it was cozy, with a four-poster bed and well-cushioned chairs, a deep rug, and a crackling fire.

“Whose room is this?” Sophie asked in surprise. “And should we be invading it?”

“It is mine, dear lady. Set aside for me long ago, when Hart and I spent many nights in this house planning to take over the world.” David gazed about in nostalgia. “Fortunately for the world, we did not succeed.”

“They keep the fire lit for you?” Sophie wandered toward it, nervous. “Very considerate, since you are not staying here.”

“I tipped the wink to the majordomo that I might spend the night. He is used to me getting roaring drunk at Hart’s gatherings and having to be carried to bed.”

Sophie made a show of looking him up and down. “You seem relatively sober.”

“I am. Stone-cold. I certainly didn’t want to come to you fluid with whisky. I’ve already done that, and seen you despise me.”



Sophie flushed. "I was very rude." She remembered David looking up at her at her uncle's table with his changeable eyes, and her heart constricting. She'd blurted out her tart observations to hide her confusion.

"You were astute," David said. "I was a drunken sot. Could have saved myself much trouble that night if I hadn't been. But then, I might not have met you."

He joined her as she drew near the fire, taking her hands and pulling her close, his warmth competing with that of the flames.

David's smiles were gone, the lines on his face deepening as he gazed down at her. Firelight touched his dark hair and softened his hard-edged eyes.

Sophie rose on tiptoes to kiss the side of his mouth.

David made a raw noise in his throat. He released her hands to cup her face, drawing her up to him for a fierce kiss. His mouth moved on hers, hot, needing, and Sophie kissed him back with as much hunger.

David pulled away, eyes haunted. "Staying away from you has been hell, but I can't make myself keep from you any longer. If you want to run from me ..." He stepped back, the movement rigid. "I won't impede you. The door is unlocked, the way open. Go, and save your virtue from the likes of David Fleming."

Sophie studied him for a long time. David breathed hard, chest rising sharply, a pain in his eyes she felt in her own heart.

She moved from him and crossed the room. She heard David's sigh of resignation, almost a groan, before she quietly turned the key in the lock.

"Sophie." He gazed at her in such anguish it stabbed at her, but the hope behind his pain was even more anguished.

Sophie went to him. She closed her hands around the lapels of his coat, pulled him down to her, and kissed him hard on the mouth.

David's world changed. Sophie Tierney was in his arms, the scent of her light perfume filling him. Her gown bared her arms and back, her skin smooth under his callused hands.

Her mouth was a place of heat, like light brushing into him and freeing his dark heart. He pulled her closer, his body hard with wanting, drinking in the delight of her.

Her expression as she'd turned from the door had shattered him. She'd locked them in, coming to him willingly, to give him the gift of herself.

Thank all that was holy David had persuaded the majordomo have a fire laid. It warmed them now as they sought each other, the flickering light turning Sophie's dark hair to glistening silk.

David skimmed his hands down her back, finding the hooks that kept her bodice in place. He eased them apart as he continued the kiss, expecting at any moment she'd pull away from him and flee. Well, he'd left the way to the door clear.

Sophie broke the kiss but she made no move to run. She pushed his coat down his arms with impatience, at the same time her bodice fell in a wash of crumpled silk.

David's heart sped as he let his coat drop to the floor. Beneath the bodice was Sophie's corset, a small one to fit under the breath of a bodice.

He loosened the corset with skilled fingers, pulling out the laces with ease. Under that was her combinations, her breasts unfettered beneath.

Sophie unbuttoned David's waistcoat as he unfastened her skirt. The gown was beautiful—he recognized a masterful touch in its making—but Sophie underneath was even more beautiful.

The warmth of her sparked fire as he shoved the exquisite skirts and petticoats away, lifting Sophie from them when they pooled at her feet. She yanked at the buttons of his shirt, David laughing at her fervor as he closed his arms around her.

She was as soft and pliant as he'd imagined, nothing between them now but her combinations and stockings. David's shirt opened under her urgent fingers, and he couldn't stop a groan as her touch landed on his bare skin.

"My love." He kissed her neck, then traced its curve with his tongue. "Sophie, I have wanted you for so long."

"Highly improper," she murmured.

"I think you know me well enough to realize I don't give a damn."

Her look was impish. "I meant it is highly improper how much I've been wanting *you*. In my uncle's vicarage, no less. I wanted to kiss you and touch you ..."

"Stop." David's need flared high. "You're going to kill me."

"I'd never hurt you." Sophie's voice went soft. "But I think we both needed some relief."

"I love that you are wicked." David tugged her closer. "Never as wicked as me, but I can teach you if you'd like."

Sophie touched his face. "I *would* like that."

"Hell."

All teasing fell away. David swept Sophie into his arms and carried her to the bed. He made short work of her undergarments, Sophie laughing as she helped him.

One thing he liked about a kilt—he could unbelt it and unwind it quickly,

no stumbling over clumsy trousers. The swaths of plaid came open, loosening and falling away.

He spread the plaid on the bed, surrounding Sophie with his Scottish ancestry, and slid off the drawers he wore beneath—no traditional bareness for David.

He took a moment to study her—full breasts, waist nipped in a little from corsets, lush hips, lovely legs that had always been hidden by skirts. He'd glimpsed those legs from time to time as they'd scrambled around Dr. Pierson's excavation, brief flashes of calf, and once a very enticing hint of thigh when he'd helped her out of the hole where the mosaic lay. Enough to make him hot and breathless and deprive him of sleep for days.

Now she was here, in his bed. David hadn't used this room in years—it was fitting he re-enter this house and chamber as a new man with Sophie.

He was on the bed beside her in the next moment, her body silken under his touch. His shirt still hung from his arms, but he couldn't be bothered to shrug it off.

"Your uncle ruined my hands," David said, spreading one across her belly. In spite of his gloves, his skin had become rough, palms hardened from the work. "Making me dig like a garden laborer."

Sophie caught his hand and kissed it. "I think it's perfect."

"The kindness of you." David brushed her lips with his fingertips.

"You make me want to be kind."

"Hmm, I am not certain that's a compliment. You make *me* want to be very, very bad."

Her smile undid him. "I think I shouldn't mind."

Sophie's answer, coupled with the heat in her eyes, sent David's thoughts to wicked places. He cupped her breast, loving its weight against his palm, then ran his hand down to the join of her legs.

She was ready for him, liquid heat. David slid over her, kissing her as he positioned himself.

She welcomed him in. David closed his eyes, becoming complete for the first time in his life as he slid inside her. Sophie surrounded him, held him, and David knew the fire of pleasure and love.



SOPHIE WANTED to cry out as David thrust deep inside her. This was new, an awareness, a longing, a *need* she'd never experienced.

This was not her first time with a man, yet she felt raw, eager, passionate. David slid into her, hard, but there was no hurting—her body wanted him. This was her David, the man as gentle as he was sinful. He touched her, kissed her, and smiled at her, before he closed his eyes and groaned.

Sophie's answering groan mingled with his. He took such care of her, though he didn't hold back, his thrusts powerful. She knew she was truly *with* him as he loved her, and was in a place he wanted to be. David brushed her hair back with a hard hand, kissed her lips, stroked her skin, looked into her eyes without worry.

“My beautiful lady.” His words were filled with quiet desire. “If I'd known how this would feel, I never could have stayed away from you.”

Sophie wanted to answer with witty words, to tell him what he meant to her. She could only touch him, whisper his name.

David didn't seem to mind. He sped his thrusts, each one fire. Sophie clutched at him, the shirt that enticingly bared his shoulders coming off in her frenzy. The folds landed on the plaid, the fine lawn and wool cradling them both.

David's skin was smooth over hard muscle. She felt his heart swiftly beating, his breath on her skin, his kisses. Most of all she felt *him* inside her, opening her, spreading her, remaking her.

Wildness swept her body, and she heard her voice ringing through the firelight. Wordless cries sprang from her throat, a dark, hot ferocity closing

her in a crushing grip.

David awakened her, freed her. She met him thrust for thrust, his voice rumbling as he groaned her name, the sound like velvet.

*I love you!* Sophie shouted silently. She might have said it out loud—she wasn't certain.

The wildness took her far away on a whirlwind of sensation, then receded, very, very slowly.

After a long time, the world stopped spinning, and she realized she lay on a soft bed, safe in David's arms. He kissed her lips, her face, nipping, whispering, loving.

"My Sophie." He licked the shell of her ear. "My love. My lady."

Sophie could only cup his face, kiss his mouth, and love him.



SOPHIE WOKE TO DAWN LIGHT. It trickled through the window to halo David next to her in a tangle of sheets and plaid. He must have covered them in the night while Sophie lay insensible from the third time he'd taken her.

Laurie had never brought her to life as David had, never lifted her to the place of unrestrained frenzy. She blushed to think of the things she'd said and done with David in the night.

His cock rested heavily against her thigh, hard with arousal. He must be having a nice dream.

As though he felt her gaze, David opened his eyes. He smiled, relief on his face. "Love. There you are."

"I'd hardly run through the house in my altogether." Sophie skimmed her fingers along his arm, enjoying the strength of him. "And anyway, I was asleep."

David regarded her quietly with his gray-blue eyes. "I feared this would prove to be a dream."

“On the contrary, I think your dreams were quite randy.” Sophie let her hand drift to his hardness, and David’s smile turned sinful.

“Oh, they were. Would you like me to tell you about them?”

“Will you think me very wicked if I say yes?”

“I will think you wonderful.”

“Then yes.” Sophie squeezed, and David let out a groan.

“I believe I will show you instead.” David growled as he rolled her down into the bed, parting her legs and sliding into her once more.

Sophie laughed and happily succumbed.



WHEN SHE WOKE the next time, more hours had passed, and David was gone.

Sophie sat up quickly. She flushed with embarrassment when she saw that a dressing gown had been left for her, along with one of her own shirtwaists and skirt, stockings and sensible shoes, easy things to put on herself. Eleanor must have brought them.

The plaid still lay across the bed, and Sophie spent a moment hugging it to herself, reveling in the sensation of the wool on her skin, the warmth it held of David.

Once she persuaded herself to leave the bed, she dressed hastily, hoping David would return and offer to button her, escort her downstairs, or even simply say good morning. He never appeared.

Sophie’s hair was a mess, but she managed to untangle it with a hairbrush that had magically appeared, and pull it into a simple plait. Eleanor had thoughtfully supplied a ribbon and some pins so Sophie could at least wind the braid into a knot and secure it in place.

She wondered if Eleanor sometimes had to dress herself quickly after a night of debauchery, and so knew exactly what Sophie would need. The way the duke and duchess regarded each other when they thought no one watched

told her this was the case.

Eleanor sent Sophie a broad smile when she entered the breakfast room. Hart was there, engrossed in a newspaper. His two sons ate with robust appetites and only a modicum of arguing—they were far too busy shoveling in food for brotherly conversation.

Hart gave Sophie a welcoming nod, as he did every morning, then returned to his paper. The boys shouted their greetings, and young Alec rose to hold a chair for her.

Ian and Beth Mackenzie had spent the night, and were at the breakfast table, Ian reading alongside Hart. Beth's greeting shared Eleanor's knowing smile, to Sophie's discomfiture. Ian continued reading without glancing up, but Sophie knew he was in no way trying to be rude.

Of David, there was no sign.

"Mr. Fleming raced away to Shropshire this morning," Eleanor said, placidly buttering her bread. "Your uncle sent him a telegram."

"Oh." Sophie accepted the coffee a footman poured her, and young Malcolm brought her toast. "Thank you," she said to them both.

"Dr. Pierson sent you a telegram as well." Eleanor pulled a small envelope from her pocket. "Well, it was the same telegram, as your uncle no doubt wanted to save the expense of sending two identical ones. He seems to believe he'd find the two of you in one place."

Sophie's face went hot, and Eleanor's eyes glinted with good humor as she handed over the paper.

Sophie opened it and scanned its contents. Uncle Lucas had indeed been economical: *Amazing developments. You must come. L.P.*

Her agitation grew—Uncle did not dispense telegraph messages without cause. "I must go, then," she said, half rising.

"After breakfast," Eleanor advised. "David has already gone to calm him. There's a train at ten."

"David—I mean, Mr. Fleming—could not wait until ten?" Sophie



resumed her seat and carefully spread butter across her toast, moving the knife to all corners.

“Hadn’t you better call him David now?” Eleanor asked with her unnerving candor. “He decided to go ahead of you, and I agreed with him. Do not be alarmed. All will be well.”

Beth, next to Eleanor, nodded agreement.

Hart was obviously listening to the conversation—his eyes had become fixed on the page—and now he lowered the newspaper and pinned Sophie with his golden gaze. “David is my closest friend. He needs happiness, no matter how much he pretends to deny it.” His expression softened. “I am grateful to you for giving it to him.”

Sophie set down her toast, untasted. “I’ve done nothing.”

“Don’t rush them, Hart.” Eleanor put her elbows on the table and raised a cup to her lips. “And you call *me* an impatient matchmaker.”

“Because you are.” Hart sent her a look that heated the air. “A confounded interfering busybody.”

Eleanor put out her tongue at him. “But a successful one.”

Hart gave her another scorching glance, then a pointed one at Sophie before returning to his newspaper. The lads were quiet, watching the adults with interest.

Ian laid down his paper with a quiet rustle and met Sophie’s gaze without a flicker.

“You are good for him,” he said. “There is also a train at half past eight.”

Ian studied her for a moment longer, then gave a nod, as though he’d finished, and went back to his paper.

Beth watched her husband with love in her eyes. “I can help you pack your things,” she offered to Sophie.

Sophie gulped coffee and clattered the cup to its saucer. She had no appetite, and her feet urged her to run, run, run, all the way to Shropshire, where David waited.

She rose, her chair banging. “No need for packing. I have things at Uncle’s. Thank you, Eleanor, for your kind invitation. Could you have a hansom summoned for me?”

All but Ian looked up at her, every face interested.

“Hart’s coach should be at the front door momentarily,” Eleanor said. “I’d anticipated you’d want to go at once, and hansom can be unsavory. You’d best be off, my dear. Do greet your uncle for me.”

David wandered the abbey ruins, one eye on the path to the vicarage below. The field with the Roman villa lay in the distance, tiny figures moving about the earth there.

He had to admit that Dr. Gaspar had done remarkable work. He and Pierson had uncovered more of the mosaic and then discovered a wall with an intact painting—a trompe l’oeil of a window into a garden.

This had been the “amazing development” that had made Dr. Pierson send an excited message summoning David and Sophie, the two of them at the same time. As though they belonged together.

David had departed at once, for reasons of his own, leaving Sophie to sleep.

Now he wondered if she’d bother coming. Why should she desert Eleanor’s very comfortable house for the mist and rain of Pierson’s fields? She could view Pierson’s discoveries at any time. David would end up climbing back onto a train, chugging to London, and having his tete-a-tete with her in the Grosvenor Square house with the very nosy Mackenzies looking on.

At least Griffin wasn’t at the dig. As David suspected, the overly pampered man would stay home until Pierson and Dr. Gaspar unearthed the entire villa and then swan in and claim the credit. Ah well. Griffin’s funding

would let Pierson excavate to his heart's content and provide a salary to the penniless Gaspar. Best of all, Griff would leave David alone. All thanks to Sophie.

Dr. Pierson appeared far below along the path to the villa, walking briskly. After a moment, a woman rushed to catch up to him with a flurry of skirts, a large hat shielding her from the mists. She fell into step with Pierson—he was taking her to see the mural.

David stilled, his blood flashing cold, then hot.

True, a wall painting from ancient times was rare and important. But to David, at this moment, it didn't matter at all.

He leaned on a ruined stone wall and watched them. He could rush down and across the mile of field and join them, but David feared if he did so, the spell that had woven around him and Sophie would break.

She'd evaporate, never having existed, or worse, she'd look at him with neutral welcome and be far more interested in seeing her uncle's wall than David. Or she'd be ashamed of how beautiful and uninhibited she'd been in his bed.

The memory flared of her rising to his touch, her hot kisses on his flesh—and David's body responded. Most inconvenient while he stood on a cold hilltop, the bones of an ancient scriptorium for company.

Sophie's steps were animated on the path below, her excitement about Pierson's find evident. They disappeared behind trees for a long moment, then emerged even farther away, Gaspar coming to greet them.

David burned as Gaspar took Sophie's hand. He balled his hands on the stone wall, ready to dash down and rip Gaspar away from her, but he stopped himself. He'd look like a fool, and Sophie would disdain him.

She was here. That was all that mattered.

Sophie spoke with the archaeologists for a long time, vanishing toward the villa with Pierson and emerging ten minutes later. Dr. Gaspar hovered next to her, but Sophie turned from him and embraced her uncle.

Congratulating Pierson, happy for him.

They stepped apart, Sophie tilting her head to look up at Pierson, her body conveying inquiry. Dr. Pierson glanced about as though searching for something, then he turned and pointed at the abbey on the hill.

David froze. Sophie couldn't possibly see him hiding up here, but he felt her gaze as she peered at the ruins.

She settled her hat, waved at the gentlemen, and began her ascent toward the abbey.

David's body went ice cold. Dratted wind.

He rushed about, kicking aside pebbles and dusting off the top of the wall on which he'd leaned, as though tidying his house for a visitor. Ridiculous. He made himself cease and leaned on a stone pillar, as though he'd come here to do nothing more than a little birdwatching.

Even so, his heart raced as she walked up the hill, taking her time. It was a steep climb, after all, but David could wait no longer.

He gave up his pose and jogged down to meet her, escorting her the last yards. When they reached level ground at the top of the hill, Sophie did not remove her hand from the crook of his arm, her gloved fingers warm.

"The wall they've found is lovely," she said with enthusiasm. "Colors quite beautiful."

"Indeed worthy of the command that dragged me from London at an ungodly hour," David said, pleased he could speak with his usual sarcasm. "Oh, forgot. No hour is ungodly. Just dark, cold, and disagreeable."

Sophie smiled at his feeble wit. "You did not have to rush off, you know. We could have traveled together."

"I wanted to ask your uncle a few questions. And if I'd been alone with you in a train carriage ..." David glanced down and found her green eyes on him—the eyes that had filled with passion last night in the firelight.

He thought of the many things they could have done in a train carriage, in spite of the cramped space. It involved Sophie's legs around him as she faced

him on his lap, or she on her knees on the seat ...

David gulped a lungful of cold wind and forced the images away. He'd never be able to speak, let alone stand up, if he continued with his fantasies.

"What did you wish to ask Uncle Lucas about?" Sophie's look was innocent—she couldn't read his mind, thank heaven.

"Oh ... one or two things. One was whether he'd decided to stay in Shropshire and bury himself in his Roman villa or rush to foreign parts."

"What did he answer?"

David shrugged, pretending nonchalance. "He says he is not certain. The villa is proving more complex than he realized. So he is remaining here for now. Which suits me."

"Are you going to stay and help him?"

Her question was so hopeful that David wanted to kiss her. "Possibly. It would do me good, rusticating in the country and letting Town life go hang. Though I do want to make improvements to my own house—I can be a social recluse there instead. And ... well, Gaspar rubs me the wrong way. I'm not sure how long I can stick him."

"He's a bit shy, is all." Sophie flashed a sudden smile. "He asked me to marry him."

David went still, his heart beating thickly as pain shot through his body. Gaspar was exactly the sort of man Sophie should marry—respectable, learned, unworldly. She would rush to him, leaving David in her dust.

He drew a hoarse breath. "Did he?"

She nodded, serene. "He knew about my predicament with Laurie, and he offered to save me from ruin. I turned him down, of course. But it was kind of him."

"Kind?" David's lips were so stiff, the word barely formed, but the rest of his body flooded with relief. She'd said no. "It wasn't kindness, my dear. He wanted you." He gazed down at the path to the ruins, a growl in his throat. "Probably still does."

Sophie looked perplexed. “Dr. Gaspar? He never said such a thing. Nor would he.”

“Any man looking at you wants you. In his bed.” David scowled. “Trust me.”

How could they not? With her wide smile that made him hot all over, those beautiful green eyes that assessed him with intelligence she didn’t bother to hide—how could any man resist her?

“I very much doubt that,” she said with a faint laugh.

“I assure you, my dear, it is true.”

Sophie slanted David a glance that immediately made him hard. “You mean that whenever I walk into a gathering—a soiree perhaps, or a discussion on the latest improving novel—every gentleman there looks at me and thinks of bed? That is absolute nonsense, unless his thoughts are only on sleep.”

David didn’t laugh. “I know what goes on in the heads of the male sex, and they would think this.” He reached to touch her cheek. “How could they help it?”

Sophie dimpled under his fingertips. “All of them? Even Mr. Gladstone?”

David drew a breath to answer, then dropped his hand. “Perhaps not. He is a bit prim. Or, he *would* think it, but never let on.”

Amusement sparkled in her eyes. “You are absurd, as is this conversation.”

“No, I am a man in love.” David let the naked truth come. “When I think of life without you, Sophie, I feel ... empty.”

Sophie’s laughter vanished, pain behind her eyes. “But you have so much,” she said softly. “So many who love you—Uncle Lucas, Eleanor, Hart and his family. Dear friends who will do anything for you.”

“I know. Ungrateful wretch that I am.” David removed his hat and dropped it to the ground, not caring that it rolled immediately to a corner of the wall and into a puddle. “But without *you*, Sophie ...” He shook his head,

wind ruffling his hair. “My life was different before I knew you. I didn’t realize it was empty, even when vast caverns opened before me. I filled the holes with debauchery and bad people and pretended all was well.” He gazed at her limply. “But now I know you are in the world, it has become a better place. At least the parts with you in them.”

Sophie’s voice went soft. “You always flatter me.”

“No, I don’t.” David touched her cheek, drawing fire from her smooth skin. “It isn’t flattery, Sophie. I want you to stay with me forever, but I have no business wanting that. I’m a wreck of a man, and you were already bound to an evil idiot.” He made himself lift his touch away, to not clutch at her, fall on his knees, and beg her to stay. He’d weep and grovel—anything if she would never go. “I found a way to annul your marriage so you’d be free. And you are. As you were meant to be.”

“I am free because of you,” Sophie gazed at him with too much gratitude. “I can return to my family and live my life without shame, because of you. Or follow Uncle through the wilderness digging up bits of it if I like.”

David gave her a half laugh. “When Pierson drags you out of bed at four in the morning to sift earth under the broiling sun, I imagine you’ll curse me.”

“Or the mud of England. You said he has not yet fixed on the Near East.”

“Don’t give me hope.” David glanced away from her, resting his gaze on the stones that had sheltered men of God so long ago, when they thought their enclosed world would last forever. “Or maybe I do want hope. Saying good-bye to you ... It is nothing I can do, so I won’t.”

“David ...”

“And don’t say you’ll stay with me out of pity. I couldn’t bear—” He broke off, swallowing. “No, I am a liar. I could bear your pity without much struggle at all. Because you’d be with me.”

Sophie gave him a bleak look that seared his heart. “I never meant to hurt you.”



“I don’t imagine you did. You don’t have it in you.”

David glanced away again, drawing strength from the soaring ruins, then turned swiftly to her and seized her hand.

“My dear, I will tell you directly instead of dancing around it: I want you. In my life, by my side, in all ways. I’m what you always call me—a blackguard—for wanting it. Lackwit Laurie made your life hell. Why should you bind yourself to another man after that?” David forced his self-deprecating smile. “But if you do not want to entangle yourself legally, which I can understand, we could always live in delicious sin. Do as we please, go where we please. You’d always be free to leave me at any time, no questions, no recriminations.”

Sophie gazed at him in astonishment. “Could you hold yourself to that—no questions or recriminations?”

“Oh, yes.” David nodded fervently. Sophie could do whatever she liked with him, whether wife or mistress. “Though *you* might have a good many of both.”

A smile pulled at her lips. “You’d ruin me in truth.”

“Not ruined. Celebrated. We wouldn’t live among stuffy Englishmen who condemn anything enjoyable while guiltily committing the same sins in secret. We’d travel the world, be welcomed by princes and kings—they have terrible manners but excellent wine.”

Sophie laughed, her green eyes so beautiful. “You are ridiculous.”

“I am. I can’t help myself. I always will be.” David drew another breath. “But I want to be ridiculous with you at my side. As my mistress, as my wife—which one will make no difference to *me*.” He caught her other hand and pulled her closer. “I want to share my life with you, Sophie Tierney. On whatever terms you wish.”

Sophie flushed, her uncertainty breaking his heart. “The carefree bachelor will throw away *his* freedom?”

“It isn’t freedom, dear lady. It is loneliness. I watched the young Hart

Mackenzie pretend to be wild and free—his original plan for life was to marry a woman, set her up in a house, and leave her there while he did what he pleased. Then he met Eleanor, and she changed everything. I learned from Hart and El what it means to share a life, and that is what I want. To share my life, as wretched as it is, with you.”

Sophie’s lips had parted, and now they trembled, but she remained silent. Trying to decide how to turn him down gently? It couldn’t be done.

David’s words became edged with despair. “I’ll understand if you’d prefer to run far way, to dig up the world with Pierson and forget about the hell your life has been. I will not blame you.” He made himself release her hands, to take a step back from her, to let her go. “I will only miss you. And love you.”

When Sophie said nothing, David’s pain gripped him. He pressed his hands together to try to summon the serenity of this place, but it eluded him. Perhaps he could be like the monks, withdrawing from the world to do nothing but tend his garden and carefully inscribe words in books.

Sophie was so beautiful in the sunlight, the green of her hat’s ribbon bringing out her eyes. He wanted to look upon her every day, drink her in, to let her save his life by simply being in her presence.

But he wouldn’t trap her. Her ass of a husband had done so, and David would never crush her like that.

“I’ll go,” he forced himself to say. “Don’t worry, my love. I won’t follow you about like a lovesick swain writing you terrible poetry or showering you with bouquets of meaningful flowers. My friends would sit on my head and stop me even if I tried.”

A sob escaped Sophie’s throat. She stepped to him and caught the lapels of his coat.

“Idiot.” Her voice was choked. “I don’t want you to go, or to send me terrible poetry or bushels of flowers. I want *you*. I love *you*, my dear, dear David.”

And she kissed him.

David started as Sophie's lips warmed him and her tears dropped, burning, to his skin. In the next instant, he dragged her into his arms, a flood of release washing his heart.

He kissed her as amazement and hope, love and happiness poured through him and made him want to weep.

David broke the kiss and took her face between his hands—her lovely, lovely face whose mouth had just spoken those beautiful words.

“Love?” he demanded. “Actual love? Damnation, Sophie, don't tease me. Not about this.”

Her eyes held honesty. “I wouldn't, I promise. I love you, David. I want to share my life with *you*. Whether we follow Uncle or live in your house in Hertfordshire or dwell in a hovel in the wilderness, makes no difference. I don't want to lose you. In all this madness, you were the one thing I could turn to, the one person who kept me steady.”

More astonishment. David held on to her as though saving himself from drowning. “Truly? I must tell my friends. I've never been the steady one.”

“Yes, you have.” Sophie laughed, her body quivering delightfully. “You've always been there for everyone. It sometimes angers me that your friends don't appreciate you more. You play the cynical, world-weary gentleman, but behind it, you truly care for people. For Hart and Eleanor—you are glad for them, genuinely so. You are terribly fond of Uncle Lucas, or you'd never have sought his company and helped find his villa. You, my friend, are a compassionate and giving man, whether you like it or not.”

David gave her a look of mock dismay, but he knew she spoke the truth. He'd been happy to help El and Hart find each other, glad to indulge Pierson, and more than pleased to disentangle Sophie from her bad marriage. He'd always striven to be useful to those he loved.

“A sentimental fool, you mean. Hell, and I thought I concealed that so well.”

“Silly man. You have a large heart, which you choose to hide for some daft reason. But I see it.” Sophie touched his chest, and her voice went quiet. “I love you for it.”

David slid his arms around her. “I hope you love more than just my heart. Or is that too much to ask?”

Sophie’s teasing look, with a touch of wickedness, shot fire through him. “I do think there are other parts of you that I would also like to live with.”

“Oh?” David’s heart hammered. “Do tell.”

“I’d rather show you instead.”

David touched his forehead against hers. “Wicked lass.” He kissed her, leisurely but tasting her fire. “*Beautiful* lass. Do you know how beautiful?” He brushed his lips over her cheek then behind her ear, following with a nibble of her delectable earlobe. “I love you so. Every inch of you. I believe I will kiss them all now.”

“We are standing on a hill.”

“Yes, well.” David’s mouth moved to her temple, the bridge of her nose. “We will have to remedy that.”

“With my uncle’s vicarage as our only retreat.”

David started to laugh. “God bless your uncle. *He* is why I flew here so early this morning. I came to ask for his blessing. I confessed all—my love for you and the fact that I wanted to marry you, more than anything else in this life.”

Sophie gave him a puzzled but happy look. “Shouldn’t it be my father you ask for my hand?”

“I’ve never met your father. Besides, your uncle has been like a father to me—my own was too busy being decadent and frivolous to raise a son. Do you know what Pierson said when I asked him?”

Sophie sent him a beautiful smile. “Pray, tell me.”

“He blinked and said, ‘Of course you love Sophie. Do you mean you haven’t asked her yet? Do get on with it, my boy.’ And he marched off to his

villa.”

Sophie burst out laughing. “He is the dearest man in the world.”

“He is, but never tell him I said so.” David closed his arms around her, Sophie’s warmth cutting the cool wind. “Is this your answer, Sophie? You will marry me?”

“Yes.” Sophie looked straight at him, and he saw her heart in her eyes—her loving, true, honest heart. “I will marry you, Mr. Fleming.”

“Thank God for that,” David breathed out, and he kissed her.

And kissed her. The spring wind tried to push them from the hill, but the old ruined wall, which had stood for centuries through strife and English weather, held them steady. David pulled Sophie against him, the curve of her body fitting his, her firm hands on his back keeping him from falling.

He tasted her goodness, her fire, her laughter. He loved this woman with all his strength, and she’d just said she loved him back. The world was an incredible place.

From far away came an excited cry in Pierson’s unmistakable shout. “*Eureka!*”

David and Sophie broke apart, eyes wide, then they dissolved into laughter.

They caught each other’s hands and ran down the hill toward the vicar who was dancing up and down in the joy of another find.

Their laughter drifted back to the old abbey, the wind carrying it to sigh around its benevolent stones.

## EPILOGUE

Sophie's ceremony for her second wedding was worlds away from her first. Absent was the tension, the fear as she was dressed by her attendants—worry she'd be too awkward under the stares of the highest in society, and most especially, Laurie's rigid aunts, sneering uncles, and derisive cousins. Fear she'd trip on her gown, stammer as she repeated the vows, or do something else that disgraced her in the eyes of the aristocrats who'd come to watch the Earl of Devonport take a bride.

Today, she was surrounded by laughter and light. She and David had decided together to marry at his home in Hertfordshire, Moreland Park's garden in June bursting with flowers. They'd collaborated on the guest lists, inviting only their close family and dearest friends. For Sophie's first wedding, Laurie and his aunt had dictated that it would be held in St. George's, Hanover Square, and decided upon the guests without consulting her.

Sophie's ladies for her second wedding were her oldest girlhood friends as well as the Mackenzie wives. Eleanor chattered away while she took photographs, and Isabella had lent her expertise in designing the gown, which hung from Sophie in elegant swaths of ivory silk.

Beth and Violet helped with the flowers—pink roses in a cascading bouquet for Sophie, buds and baby's breath for the ladies—and Ainsley had

been in charge of the cake.

The Mackenzie children played their parts—Lord Alec, the duke’s heir, proud in his role of ring bearer. If his brother, Mal, let him appear without being muddy, bloody, and his suit torn, all would be well. The younger Mackenzie girls would scatter flower petals for Sophie while the older girls and the lads made sure the guests were looked after.

“You are beautiful,” Eleanor declared as she clicked her camera, this a small affair that held the newfangled celluloid film. “David will swoon when he sees you. I cannot wait.”

The ladies laughed hard at the idea of the suave David doing anything so inelegant as swooning, but Sophie barely smiled. She longed to be near him, to take his hand and be his wife, and she chafed for the ceremony to begin.

Isabella peered at her knowingly. “No wilting bride here. I believe she’ll be glad when we clear off and let her be alone with the dashing Mr. Fleming.”

Sophie’s face heated, and the ladies went off in another peal of laughter.

During the wedding preparations, she and David had vowed they’d wait to touch each other again until after the marriage ceremony. They’d begin their wedding trip tomorrow with a visit to Uncle Lucas in Shropshire, and then a sojourn to the Continent to look at ruins in Rome and Pompei. They’d also planned plenty of time in lavish hotels along the way, where they could explore each other to their heart’s content as man and wife. No reason to rush.

That lofty sentiment had lasted until Sophie encountered David in the corridor late last night, she returning from seeing that her guests were comfortable.

They’d met in the shadows, and David had blown out the candle Sophie had carried. His bedchamber had been nearby, and after a time of hot kisses in the corridor, she’d willingly let him lead her inside.

Fortescue had betrayed no surprise when he entered in the morning to

find Sophie curled up against David, only inquired what she'd like to have brought for breakfast. David had snarled at him, but then ordered a large breakfast for himself, as long as Forty was offering.

Tonight, Sophie would share David's bed as his wife.

When she'd realized at her first wedding that her husband's bed awaited, she'd trembled and felt sick. Today, she longed to race through the proceedings so she could take David into her arms and lose herself in him.

*I love him.* That was the difference, she realized. She loved David deeply, with all her being. When he'd suggested living in sin instead of the respectability of marriage, Sophie had been ready to agree in a heartbeat.

This wedding ceremony would allow the solicitors and the church to mark the union down as legal and acceptable. The love and togetherness after that was for David and Sophie alone.

When Isabella's daughter Aimee announced it was time, Sophie nearly ran from the room. The Mackenzie ladies followed her with much merriment.

As the weather held fair, they'd marry in the garden. Sophie walked out to sunshine, a cool breeze, and a riot of roses, geraniums, snapdragons, zinnias, and others in myriad colors.

The guests were mostly in their places, though many still milled about, friends talking, joking, laughing—no stiff concern or formality. Elliot McBride chased his son and youngest daughter across the green, both children somehow outrunning his long legs, their screams of mirth cutting the air. His older daughter raced after them, black curls dancing, she laughing as she helped Elliot catch her brother and sister.

Daniel lifted his own daughter when she tried to join the hunt, planting her on his shoulders as he and Violet took their seats.

Sophie saw most of this in a blur, her focus all for the man who waited next to the vicar under the flower-strewn arbor.

Uncle Lucas had persuaded the local vicar to let him perform the actual ceremony. The vicar, happy to put up his feet and sip sherry instead, nodded



contentedly in the sunshine in the first row, while Uncle Lucas stood proudly in his vestments, ready to marry Sophie to David.

Hart Mackenzie, his expression a mixture of relief and gladness, stood beside David as his groomsman. Eleanor had told Sophie in private that Hart was very pleased with this marriage. Not only was he happy for his friend, but Hart could cease feeling contrite that he'd found happiness in marriage while David had wandered alone.

"Hart loves David," Eleanor had confided. "Only never tell him I said so. He'd deny it with every breath. David, too. When anyone mentions how close the pair of them are, they both contrive to look surprised."

The two now stood rather stiffly together, it amused Sophie to see. The best of friends, each holding up the other through pain, heartache, and loss. Well, she'd let their love for each other be her and El's secret.

David was the only person in the crowd at the moment who was clear and sharp to Sophie. His smile touched her, that pleased smile with a hint of self-deprecation that meant he was so very happy inside.

Her father, who'd been introduced to the pleasure of Mackenzie malt last night, was a bit red about the eyes this morning, but led Sophie down the aisle for the second time in her life. At Laurie's wedding, her father had been worried, hugging her and reluctant to let her go. This time, he was smiling, having found friends in David, Hart, and the other Mackenzies. When Sophie had peeped into the dining room last evening after the ladies had left it, she'd seen her father deep in conversation with Hart and David, laughing at Mac's drawling interjections, and listening with interest at anything Ian had to add.

Ian Mackenzie stood in the second row. He slanted Sophie a glance as she passed and gave her a nod, as though thanking her. Sophie smiled back at him, and was rewarded with a sudden and pleased grin.

David's expression softened as she stepped next to him. "How beautiful you are," he whispered. He leaned closer. "I want to eat you up."

Sophie blushed hard, and Hart nudged David. "Contain yourself,

Fleming. We have a long ceremony to get through.”

David sent him an innocent look, and Sophie laughed. Uncle Lucas, not as naive as he sometimes appeared, narrowed his eyes.

“Be seemly, Fleming,” Pierson said. “I know fisticuffs, if you recall.”

David touched the side of his face. “I remember.”

“You were eighteen,” Hart rumbled.

“Yes. It was a blow that lasted me ages.” David winked at Sophie. “I well deserved it.”

“I allowed you to defend yourself,” Uncle Lucas said in a pained voice. “You simply didn’t pay attention to your lessons. Now then, *We are gathered together here in the sight of God, to join together this man and this woman ....*”

His voice rose, and the crowd quieted, the children ceased their shrieking and running, friends converging to watch David and Sophie marry.

Sophie studied David as her uncle’s soothing voice went on. She recalled how David had lifted his head at the breakfast table the morning she’d met him, his eyes red-rimmed and bleary, his hair a mess, face unshaven. And yet, she’d felt the heat of him, the spark that woke her from her stupor. She’d looked into his eyes and lost a part of herself.

A part he’d never hurt. Sophie understood as he gazed at her now that she too held a part of him. They’d shared themselves, not only bodies but hearts, souls, secrets.

A true marriage, she thought as she squeezed his arm, strength enclosed by soft cashmere. A joining of thoughts and respect, love and wanting.

A forever bond, and one just for them.

David leaned to her again. “I love you.”

The whispered words warmed her to her toes. Sophie’s heart swelled, the freedom he’d given her to love and trust sweeping aside the last dust of her sorrows.

“I love *you*,” she said into his ear, against the rise and fall of Uncle

Lucas's voice. "My dearest darling, thank you."

"It was my pleasure." David grinned at her. "How else could I repay the woman who saved my life?"

Sophie broke all precedence for wedding ceremonies by rising on her tiptoes and kissing David on the lips.

The crowd behind them cheered. Applause, laughter, whoops, and shouts made Uncle Lucas look up from his open book. Hart laughed, the rumble deep and vibrating.

David slid his arms around Sophie and let the kiss deepen, never mind the escalating noise around them.

"Bless you," he whispered as they drew apart once more. His fingers were warm as he brushed her hair back from her face. "You are the best woman in the world."

"I knew that," Uncle Lucas broke in. "Took you long enough to realize, Fleming." He loudly cleared his throat and raised his voice. "Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?"

David's shout—"I will!"—rang through the summer air, mingling with the laughter.

Sophie took his hands and said, "I will," just as readily, something loosening in her heart as she joined with him in true and lasting love.

### **Author's Note**

THE MACKENZIE CLAN returns in [\*A Mackenzie Yuletide\*](#). Ian determines to find Beth the best Christmas gift of all time, with help from his daughters and son. Return to Scotland for another Mackenzie adventure!

([\*A Mackenzie Yuletide\*](#) is available as a standalone e-book, or in e-book and print in the anthology [\*A Mackenzie Clan Christmas\*](#).)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author Jennifer Ashley has written more than 100 published novels and novellas in romance, urban fantasy, mystery, and historical fiction under the names Jennifer Ashley, Allyson James, and Ashley Gardner. Jennifer's books have been translated into more than a dozen languages and have earned starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist*. When she isn't writing, Jennifer enjoys playing music (guitar, piano, flute), reading, hiking, and building dollhouse miniatures.

More about Jennifer's books can be found at

<http://www.jenniferashley.com>

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# **THE RIGID DUKE**

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**DARCY BURKE**

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SEPTEMBER 1802

“**M**arina has made a great deal of progress this summer.” Mrs. Juno Langton smiled brightly at her employer, Lady Wetherby. “I daresay she could attempt a short stint in York this fall.”

With a wide, furrowed brow and pursed lips, Lady Wetherby didn’t appear convinced. But why should she? Her daughter, Marina, was a social disaster. *Was*. Juno’s job was to fix that, and she *had* made some progress. However, perhaps describing it as “a great deal” was a slight exaggeration.

“In what specific ways has she improved?” the countess asked from the opposite chair in her private sitting room, where they met weekly to discuss Marina.

“Her dancing.” Because they practiced over an hour every day. “Her ease at conversation.” Also because they practiced over an hour every day. And Juno wasn’t shortsighted about it—she knew Marina’s comfort had increased with *her*, but would take some finessing once they got to London. Or York, which would be an excellent rehearsal for London.

“What about smiling?” Lady Wetherby asked. “I haven’t seen her smile any more than she did before. Which was hardly at all.” She gave her head a tiny shake.

“That is also improving.” Again, Juno had found success with Marina, but couldn’t be certain her charge would smile with other people. At least not



at first. That was the problem. Until Marina got to know someone, she was completely uncomfortable in their presence. She didn't make eye contact, she fidgeted, and she barely said a word. Juno could well imagine how it was that no gentleman danced with her a second time—not at a single ball but during the *entire* Season.

“I'm not seeing it, but then I think Marina takes pleasure in behaving in an especially surly manner with me.” Lady Wetherby's lips pursed even more. Juno wondered if they might shrivel up and disappear.

“I don't believe that's true, my lady,” Juno said with a reassuring smile. “I think, with respect, that Marina wants to please you and knows she hasn't.”

Lady Wetherby's nostrils flared. “Are you saying it's my fault she's cold and awkward?”

“Not at all.” Though she wasn't terribly wrong... “Perhaps if you gave her more encouragement, you might be rewarded with her demonstrating the progress she's made.” Juno offered her widest smile, which typically thawed even the most frigid people. Not that Lady Wetherby was frigid. Well, perhaps she was when it came to her eldest child. Juno had seen the countess with her younger children, and she seemed far more relaxed.

“I'll do that,” Lady Wetherby said before exhaling a rather beleaguered sigh. “I'm sure you're right that she is making progress. That is the reason we hired you after departing London early.”

Juno had finished her prior contract of employment sooner than she'd planned when her former charge had snared an earl. The family had been overjoyed with Juno's tutelage, and Juno had been thrilled to take some time for herself, adjourning to Bath, where she'd spent a lovely fortnight in the strong arms of a charming captain. It might have been longer except she'd received the offer from the Wetherbys to attend their daughter, who was in dire need of refinement after a disastrous first Season. Unable to resist the challenge—or the pay—Juno had left her captain and traveled north to

Yorkshire.

“I do fear she is destined for spinsterhood,” Lady Wetherby said with a frown, drawing Juno back to the present.

“I am confident we can avoid that. The right husband is out there for Marina. We just have to find him. I do think a short stint to York may be just the thing.” Juno wanted Marina to be able to practice her newfound skills in social settings outside the bustle and pressure of the Season.

“I agree,” Lady Wetherby said, clasping her hands in her lap. “Not about York, but that the right husband is out there. To that end, we’ve been invited to a house party next month. The Duke of Warrington will be in attendance. He is rumored to detest the Marriage Mart, but is also in need of a wife. It’s the perfect opportunity to secure a match between him and Marina.” Her blue eyes positively glowed with anticipation and confidence. As if the betrothal between Marina and the duke were a *fait accompli*.

Juno was only vaguely aware of the duke. He did not seem to be a social sort, which made it easy to believe that he didn’t care for the Marriage Mart. Matching someone like him with someone like Marina would be... challenging.

Juno absolutely loved a challenge. That was how she’d embarked on this career of helping young ladies bring their natural confidence and charm to the fore following the death of her husband. Dashing Bernard Langton had swept a naïve young Juno into a mad love affair and marriage, shocking her parents and prompting them to disassociate from their only daughter.

After less than a year, Bernard had died, leaving Juno without family or funds. She’d leapt at the chance to be companion to an elderly lady. When she’d helped that lady’s granddaughter secure an upwardly mobile marriage, Juno’s career as a companion, or more accurately “refinement tutor,” had been born.

“Shall I summon Marina to join us?” Juno suggested, hoping her charge would be up to the task of gaining her mother’s approval. That was,

unfortunately, no small feat.

“I asked Dale to send her in after a while.” Lady Wetherby directed her gaze to the doorway, which was behind Juno. “Here she is.”

Juno turned her head to see Marina walk cautiously into the sitting room. Dressed in a simple pale blue day gown, Marina fidgeted with her fingers as she approached, her blue eyes downcast.

“Look up, dear,” Lady Wetherby said with a bit of snap to her tone.

“Come and join us, Marina.” Juno stood and moved to a settee so Marina could sit beside her.

Marina’s gaze lifted to briefly meet Juno’s before she moved to the settee. Once seated, she plucked at the skirt of her gown.

“Do stop that.” Lady Wetherby frowned at her daughter.

Juno edged closer to Marina, hoping her presence would be a comforting influence. “We have exciting news to share.”

Marina glanced toward her as her fingers stilled. Straightening, she sat as Juno had taught her—shoulders back, spine stiff, chin up, slight smile in place. Pride shot through Juno, as well as glee that Marina had found the courage to do what she must in her mother’s presence.

Lady Wetherby’s features flashed with surprise and perhaps a dash of approval. “We are to attend a house party next month. The Duke of Warrington will be in attendance, and he is in search of a wife. My darling, you could snag a duke without having to suffer another Season.”

Juno felt a burst of tenderness at the warmth in the countess’s tone. She might be frustrated by her daughter—and certainly didn’t understand her—but she wanted the best for her, including the chance to avoid a Season, which she knew Marina had loathed.

Instead of responding with relief at this prospect, Marina crumpled, her face falling into a deep scowl. “Must I, Mother?”

“I’m afraid so.” The countess had stiffened, her face freezing in disappointment. “I do hope you can summon the appropriate enthusiasm.”

Turning toward her charge, Juno gently touched the young woman's arm. "Just think, you'll have a chance to practice everything we've worked on. A house party is the perfect place to gain confidence and hone your skills."

"I barely have any of either," Marina said quietly, shooting a perturbed look toward her mother. "But I suppose I have no choice."

"That is correct," Lady Wetherby said firmly. "We leave in a fortnight." Her expression gentled once more. "The duke doesn't care for the Marriage Mart either. Perhaps the two of you will find an accord. I think this could be just the match you've been waiting for."

"I haven't been waiting for any match," Marina muttered. "May I go now?"

"Yes." The countess looked rather despondent as her daughter stood and shuffled from the room.

Juno tensed as she readjusted herself on the settee to face her employer. "She'll be ready for the house party. She just needs to acclimate herself. We've plenty of time to prepare."

"I hope you're right, considering what I'm paying you. In fact, if you can ensure this betrothal occurs, I'll increase your pay twenty percent." Lady Wetherby stood. "Do not let us down, Mrs. Langton."

The countess swept from the room, and Juno narrowed her eyes in contemplation. A fortnight to not only ensure Marina was ready for a house party, but that she could snare a duke. It would be Juno's most daunting challenge yet.

She leapt to her feet, eager to get started.



ALEXANDER BRETT, Duke of Warrington, stalked into the drawing room at precisely a quarter of an hour before six. His mother, seated serenely on the dark red settee, came from the dower house most evenings to dine with him.

She surveyed him as he went to pour a glass of her favorite madeira and a brandy for himself. “How was your day?”

After handing her the wine, he sat in the chair near her settee. Same drinks, same seating arrangement, same question to begin their conversation. He liked same.

“Productive.”

“As always,” she murmured. “I don’t suppose anything exciting happened?”

“The post was greater than usual.” He sipped his brandy.

“Anything of interest?”

“Not to me, though you would probably find the invitation to a house party notable.”

His mother, in her early fifties with still-dark hair, save a few strands of gray at her temples, sat a bit taller. “What house party? When?” Her sable eyes sparked with enthusiasm.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not going.”

She pursed her lips at him before relaxing. He could see she was choosing her words, lining up her soldiers for the coming battle. “But you should. I realize you don’t care for social situations; however, this is a small gathering, not at all like the events of the Season.”

Dare, the name he’d been called his entire life, which was a shortened version of the courtesy title he’d held—Marquess of Daresbury—before his father’s death three years earlier, narrowed his eyes at his mother. “You’re behind this invitation.”

“What makes you think that?” She tried to sound innocent, but her gaze darted to the side and her voice rose. When he said nothing, she looked back to him and exhaled. “Fine. Yes.”

“Am I to understand you convinced Lady Cosford to host a house party so that I might attend?”

“Of course not. I merely made a few well-placed comments to friends in

recent months.”

“What sort of comments?”

“That you are in search of a wife.” She gave him an exasperated look. “Well, you *are*.” Frowning at him, she took an irritated sip of madeira.

“And that somehow led to an invitation to a house party that I have no desire to attend.” He made a sound low in his throat before taking another drink of brandy.

“Don’t growl. It’s so off-putting.”

“I don’t growl.”

His mother arched a thick, dark brow, then shook her head, apparently deciding that was a battle she didn’t care to wage. “You should accept the invitation. You do need a wife, and I should think finding one at a small house party in Warwickshire would be far more appealing than attempting the Marriage Mart in London come spring.”

Dare shuddered. He couldn’t think of anything he’d rather do less. His mother was, unfortunately, correct. He did need a wife. Furthermore, he’d been lamenting how he might find one given that he hated, as his mother had put it, social situations.

What if there wasn’t anyone at the house party he would consider marrying? He scrutinized his mother and gave her the credit she was due. “What is the young lady’s name?”

She looked at him in surprise, as if he couldn’t guess she was scheming a particular match. Faint pink brightened her cheeks, but the color was fleeting. “Lady Marina Fellowes, eldest daughter of the Earl of Wetherby. I’m sure you know him.”

They worked together in the House of Lords. Wetherby didn’t care for idle chatter and always got right to the heart of things. Dare hadn’t even realized he had a daughter. Or a family, for that matter. Perhaps his daughter wouldn’t be the typical prattle basket that most young ladies were.

“What’s she like?” he asked cautiously.

The vigor with which his mother answered almost made him sorry he'd expressed even the slightest interest. "Very pretty and quite accomplished at needlework."

"That tells me nothing. Is she a featherbrain or not?"

"I doubt it."

That was not a promising answer. Perhaps his mother didn't know her. "Has she even had a Season?"

"Yes, just this past one." His mother's features brightened. "You should like this bit. She returned to the country early. I'm not sure London—rather, the social whirl—is to her liking."

"You should have started with that," Dare muttered. If Lady Marina was cut from the same cloth as her father—and why wouldn't she be?—this house party actually had potential. "I'll go to the party to meet Lady Marina."

"To see if you will suit?"

Dare glowered at his mother's obvious glee. "Yes."

She laughed. "You always try so hard to be brusque, even when presented with an opportunity that could help you achieve your aims without suffering that which you find utterly bothersome."

Loathsome was a better word. Shopping for a wife made him itch.

Some of his mother's enthusiasm dimmed. "Should I come with you? I think I sh—"

"No." He didn't let her finish. If she accompanied him, he'd go mad under her attempts to see him betrothed.

She glared at him, but only for a moment. "So dour," she murmured. "Can you at least try to be charming? Perhaps smile a little?"

Smiling was for insincere people. When Dare smiled, he meant it. "Why pretend to be someone I'm not? My future wife should know precisely whom she's marrying."

His mother exhaled. "That's what I'm afraid of." She paused, rallying her troops once more before she entered the breach. "If you can't be charming,

you'll need to be...something. You can't expect to win Lady Marina's hand if you don't engage her somehow."

"I suppose I'll have to dance with her." He detested dancing.

"You could promenade. I'm sure there will be plenty of activities. Perhaps you can go for a ride together."

"That would be acceptable." He would appreciate a wife who enjoyed riding. He imagined her touring the estate with him, speaking to the tenants, and offering assistance and support.

"I'm relieved to hear it."

He shrugged. "Although, being a duke is likely enough to win the chit's—or anyone else's—hand."

His mother stared at him, then took a long drink of madeira, nearly draining the glass. "If that's what you think, you deserve a wife who only wants you for your title."

It seemed the battle this evening would go to his mother.

"I am more than my title," he said quietly, and not without a hint of irritation.

"Of course you are, and I hope you realize it. I also hope you find the woman who breaks through that rigid outer shell you wield so relentlessly. She won't see your title at all, and she'll warm to you, in spite of your efforts to keep her away."

Dare blinked. "I won't do that."

"That's all you do, my darling," she said with a loving glow that slightly melted his hardened exterior. He did keep up a wall, and he liked it. Inside his fortress, things were orderly and expected. He hated mess and emotion and anything surprising. The woman for him would understand that and leave him be.

Perhaps his mother was right—he would hold his duchess apart. Was that so bad? "You are far too sentimental, Mother."

The butler entered and announced that dinner was served. Dare finished



his brandy, and his mother did the same with her madeira. After depositing their empty glasses on a table for the butler to sweep away, Dare helped the dowager to her feet and offered his arm.

She placed her hand on his sleeve, and they walked into the dining room as they did every night. Peace settled over him. *Same.*

“I love you, my boy,” she whispered just before taking her chair.

*That* was different. Dare was surprised that he didn't mind.

Juno blinked against the bright October sunlight as she departed the coach and lifted her face to the sky. When she turned her head, the façade of Blickton, a pale stone Palladian house constructed in the last century, greeted her with sparkling windows and a wide open door.

A pair of liveried footmen bustled forth, one to direct their luggage and another to escort them to the house where a third footman stood just inside the door and welcomed them to Blickton. While Juno and Lady Wetherby took in the grand entrance hall, Marina looked at the floor. Perhaps she found the marble particularly compelling.

The butler led them to where everyone was gathered in the drawing room. On the way, they passed a large, inviting library, its shelves overflowing with books. Marina stopped and lingered in the doorway, her gaze hungry as she looked eagerly inside.

“You are not spending time in the library,” Lady Wetherby said firmly. “I forbid it. If I so much as see you with a book, I’ll gather up all the ones you’ve hoarded at home and send them to a school.”

Marina sent her a mutinous scowl, and Juno could practically hear her mind screaming in objection. Not that Marina would ever voice it aloud.

As they continued to the drawing room, Juno fell back with Marina, walking closely beside her. “We’ll find a way to explore the library. Leave it

to me,” she promised, sending her charge an encouraging smile.

“Thank you,” Marina murmured, her gaze meeting Juno’s for a brief but gratitude-filled moment.

“Our final guests have arrived!” Lady Cosford exclaimed as they entered the drawing room. “Welcome, Lady Wetherby, Lady Marina, and Mrs. Langton.”

Their hostess lowered her voice to address them personally. “I’m so pleased you could come.” She turned and beckoned to a dark-haired gentleman with warm hazel eyes. “Cosford, darling, come greet Lady Wetherby and her daughter. And Lady Marina’s companion.” Lady Cosford directed a smile toward Juno, and she was instantly struck by the unmistakable sensation that she’d met a kindred spirit. Someone with a positive outlook and a strong, determined nature. Juno hoped she was right.

After exchanging pleasantries, their host moved on while Lady Cosford remained. She chatted with Lady Wetherby about their trip, and Juno took the opportunity to scout the landscape.

Scanning the room, Juno immediately located the Duke of Warrington. At least, she was fairly certain that was him. When she’d learned of his attendance and, more importantly, of her employer’s desire that her daughter become his duchess, Juno had done what she could to recall his likeness and learn all she could about him.

He was not an exceptionally tall man, but he was muscular and fit, with a very attractive face. Rather, it would be if he weren’t scowling. He was in possession of two of the weightiest brows Juno had ever seen. Thick and dark, they commanded his expression, riding low and to the center as he surveyed the assembly. His eyes were also dark, as was his thick thatch of hair. All of him exuded a darkness and sobriety that instantly put Juno on guard. *This* was the man who was supposed to marry her charge?

“Come, let me introduce you to the duke,” Lady Cosford said.

She had either noticed Juno’s interest in him or was aware of Lady

Wetherby's hope for a match. Juno would find out which.

"Thank you," Lady Wetherby responded, and they made their way to the corner, where a rain cloud seemed to be parked over the duke's head.

On the way, Juno whispered into Marina's ear, "Make eye contact with the duke and smile. I know it's difficult since you don't know him, but just remember that he doesn't like social engagements either." She'd focused a great deal on the latter in order to alleviate some of Marina's anxiety.

Lady Cosford came to a halt and smiled into the abyss that was the Duke of Warrington. "Duke, allow me to introduce Lady Wetherby and her daughter, Lady Marina." She pivoted toward Juno. "And this is Lady Marina's companion, Mrs. Langton."

The duke barely looked at Juno, which was fine by her, especially since his attention was entirely on Marina. But his features didn't soften even the barest degree.

Marina dropped into a lovely curtsy, her eyes on the floor as usual. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Duke."

The duke said nothing in response. He flicked a glance toward Lady Wetherby, who also curtsied. Then he did the same to Juno. Executing a flawless curtsy, Juno gave him her most disarming smile. "How wonderful to meet you, Your Grace. We've so been looking forward to it, haven't we, Marina?" She edged closer to her charge, hoping her presence would give the young woman some much-needed courage.

"Yes." Marina lifted her gaze, but not all the way to his face.

Lady Wetherby frowned slightly at her daughter, and Juno could hear the woman criticizing her later. Leaning close to Marina, Juno whispered more advice. "Mention the weather or our trip. Perhaps ask about his journey?"

Her fingers fidgeting together, Marina stared at the duke's neck. "It's a very fine day."

He stared at her, the creases in his brow, which Juno would wager were ever present, deepening. "I suppose."

How on earth were these two going to make a match? Juno felt an unfamiliar sensation—a thick knot of agitation in her chest.

“It’s lovely for October,” Lady Cosford said, as if the conversation between the duke and Marina weren’t the most awkward thing to have ever occurred. “I’m so pleased as I’ve planned a picnic for tomorrow. Just down by the lake. It will be splendid!”

Juno very much appreciated the woman’s enthusiasm and clear understanding of the situation—these two people needed help. “Oh yes, that will be most delightful,” she agreed. “What else do you have planned?”

“I’m sure we’ll find out later,” the duke cut in, giving Juno a look of savage irritation.

Biting her tongue, Juno redoubled her efforts to win the man over—not for her, for Marina. “Certainly. And I look forward to it.”

“Excuse me.” The duke took a step to the side and walked around them, making sure not to come too close to Juno. He went to where a footman was dispensing beverages.

“He’s quite surly,” Marina noted, surprising Juno.

“That’s a bit rich coming from you,” Lady Wetherby responded, thankfully with humor and not malice.

“Might I have a drink, Mother?” Marina asked, glancing toward a different footman with a tray.

“I could do with some wine or whatever is available.” Lady Wetherby linked her arm through her daughter’s and they departed, leaving Juno with their hostess.

Juno decided not to mince words. “I take it you are aware of Lady Wetherby’s plan for her daughter to become betrothed to the duke?”

“Yes, I had suspected as much and thought I would do what I could to ensure the match.” Lady Cosford’s sherry-colored gaze moved first to the duke and then to Marina. “They are well suited, don’t you think?”

“I, ah, perhaps.” Juno should just have agreed, but she couldn’t see her

sweet charge with someone like the duke. Not that others viewed Marina as “sweet.” She appeared aloof and distracted, even sullen. Juno had thought so too when they’d first met, but after a few days, she’d come to know the true Marina. She was inquisitive and intellectual. She just didn’t like being around people.

Juno ought not judge the duke too harshly. Perhaps he was the same, and in time, they’d all see that it was indeed an excellent match. Thankfully, they had nearly a week to make that determination.

“I propose we join forces,” Lady Cosford said quietly, tipping her head toward Juno’s. “The duke has come to find a wife, and Lady Marina is the only unmarried young lady.”

“Lady Cosford, did you construct the guest list so that His Grace and Lady Marina are the only ones who *can* make a match?” Juno again saw her potential alignment with Lady Cosford as not only friends but coconspirators.

Lady Cosford let out a gentle laugh. “I may have.” She winked at Juno, the fine lines around her eye crinkling. Juno estimated the woman’s age to be in her mid to late thirties based on the age of her children, but thought she seemed younger. Perhaps that was due to her buoyant disposition.

“Well, if the duke is here to find a wife, he may want to improve his demeanor,” Juno said wryly.

“I understand that is your area of expertise.” Lady Cosford looked toward the duke, who was still glowering at everything and everyone. “Perhaps you can coax out the duke’s...warmer side.”

“If he has one. He’s awfully stiff.” Juno’s mind began to work. She was suddenly invigorated to try to find the duke’s gentler nature. And if he didn’t have one, well, it was better she discover that now and prevent Marina from making a mistake. “I have an idea that will encourage engagement.” She leaned close to Lady Cosford and laid out her plan.

“Marvelous. Let’s commence immediately.” She started to turn, then paused. “I think you must call me Cecilia. I do believe we’re going to be

great friends.”

Juno could never have too many of those. “Then you must call me Juno. I look forward to our alliance.” She wriggled her brows before adopting a more serious tone. “I need to maneuver myself next to the rigid duke.”

“Oh, that name might stick,” Cecilia said with a sly smile. “Follow me.”

Hopefully, Marina would do her part when it came her turn, because Juno wasn’t sure she could position herself next to both people who needed her guidance. Goodness, this was going to be a busy and probably taxing house party. She was quite looking forward to the extra payment she would earn for ensuring this match. She’d be able to take a nice long break between positions, which meant enjoying the holidays in Bath and potentially finding a nice gentleman to keep her warm for the winter. Yes, it would all be worth it.

But first, she had to achieve the impossible.



DARE WANTED to crawl out of his skin. There were too many bloody people crammed into this drawing room, spacious as it might be. The extensive parkland visible from the wide windows beckoned him outside, where he could escape conversation. And that especially annoying companion whose overwrought charm made him want to leave the house party altogether.

But no. He’d come a great distance to find a wife. At least his potential bride wasn’t irritating. She was quiet and seemed as uncomfortable as he felt. This could very well be the perfect match.

He sipped his sherry, thinking it was time to excuse himself from the gathering, when Lady Cosford moved to the center of the room with her husband. Cosford tapped his glass to gain everyone’s attention.

A lovely floral scent tinged with orange swirled around him. Turning his head, he realized the vexing companion had moved to stand at his side. She

smiled up at him, revealing even, white teeth. Her eyes, green like sage, sparkled as if seeing him were the most wonderful thing that had happened to her all day. Did she look at everyone like that? It was more than disarming. It was thoroughly disconcerting.

“Welcome, everyone,” Lord Cosford intoned before glancing at his wife, who stood at his side. “Lady Cosford has a charming activity for us to begin the festivities.”

She gave her husband a bright smile. Watching them together made Dare want to roll his eyes. He glanced toward the companion—what was her name?—to find her watching him with interest. He wished she’d go somewhere else.

“Thank you,” Lady Cosford said to her husband before addressing the room. “I thought it would be amusing to begin with introductions. We’ll go around the room and introduce ourselves, then share something interesting. For example, I would say I’m Lady Cosford and that I enjoy lemon rosemary ices. Let us form a circle around the room—quickly if we can, please.”

She bustled toward the doorway with her husband, effectively blocking an escape unless Dare wanted to throw himself through one of the windows. The idea held astonishing appeal. He didn’t want to stand in a circle, nor did he want to share a bloody thing.

“Let’s just move over here,” the companion said cheerily, effectively steering him into the infernal circle without even touching him. How did she do that?

“Lovely,” Lady Cosford said, again with another grating smile. “I’ve already demonstrated how we will go on, but I’ll offer another tidbit about myself to spark your enthusiasm.” She laughed, and Dare wished he was anywhere else, even a London ballroom. “I like to walk in the rain. Not a downpour, mind you, but a fine mist is quite lovely, especially in the autumn.” She looked over at her husband, and they seemed to share a... connection. A speechless moment in which something passed between them.



Shockingly, Dare didn't want to roll his eyes. He felt a slight but distinct envy.

Shaking the sensation away, he turned his mind to other matters, namely the renovations occurring at his house in London. He would travel there after this to assess the progress. He was so successful in his distraction that he failed to realize it was his turn.

The woman beside him—the companion of his potential betrothed—nudged him gently with her elbow. “Your turn,” she whispered.

Her touch shocked him. No one touched him. Ever. Except when his mother occasionally insisted on hugging him. And his lovers, whenever he decided to take one.

“You're growling,” she murmured, drawing him to look at her.

Was he? Frowning, he looked at the expectant circle of people and wondered what in the devil he was doing there. “You all know who I am.” He hadn't given any thought to what he might say, nor had he listened to anyone else. So he said the first thing that came to his mind. “I loathe house parties.”

The reactions were actually rather entertaining. Two ladies clapped their hands over their mouths, and several gentlemen smirked, while at least one nodded in agreement.

The woman beside him sucked in a breath. Now it was her turn.

“I am Mrs. Langton.” She spoke with a warmth and charm that made even Dare want to turn toward her. So he did. “I like to play chess, but I am quite terrible at it.” She shot a provoking look at Dare and added, “Also, I *love* house parties. Such a wonderful opportunity to meet new people and have a splendid time.”

All Dare could think was that he also enjoyed chess. However, he was an accomplished player, so he couldn't challenge Mrs. Langton—he found himself wondering what her given name was—to a game.

Wait, he wanted to play chess with her and learn her name?

Only because she was beginning to interest him. He was a disagreeable

person, and she didn't seem vexed by him in the slightest. She was either very good at hiding her emotions, or she was the most pleasant person in England. Perhaps she was both. Whatever she was, he found her intriguing, and *that* was irritating.

The person next to her continued, and Dare forced himself to look away from Mrs. Langton. She was stunningly attractive, he realized. Petite with a rather intricate hairstyle, and she wore the very latest fashion. He only knew that because his mother enjoyed poring over plates and sharing her favorite styles with him when he visited her at the dower house. Because of this, he could see that Mrs. Langton was quite well turned out for a young lady's companion. Perhaps there was more to her than met the eye.

Detecting the mischief lurking in her cheerful expression, he could believe that rather easily.

He spent the remainder of the interminable exercise contemplating the woman beside him. How had she come to be Lady Marina's companion? Was she from a wealthy family? That would explain her clothing. Was she truly a missus, as in a widow, or had she adopted the title as part of her employment?

By the time Lord Cosford, who was thankfully the last person in the circle, spoke, Dare was thoroughly annoyed with himself for spending so much time thinking of Mrs. Langton. He would deal with her as she pertained to the woman he was considering as his wife. Speaking of...he'd entirely missed whatever she'd said.

"That was most informative," Lady Cosford said. "Now, we shall have a respite before dinner is served at half six. Following dinner this evening, we'll have dancing and games. Tomorrow we'll picnic by the lake. It will be such fun!" She was nearly as ebullient as Mrs. Langton.

Dare glanced toward the latter woman to find her again studying him. Just as her touch had discomfited him, he felt off-balance under her regard.

"I play chess," he blurted.

“Do you? Perhaps you can help me improve my game.”

He would say she was flirting, but a young lady’s companion wouldn’t do that. Which meant she was simply earnest in her desire to improve her chess. Didn’t it?

Oh, he didn’t like this sort of nonsense one bit. It was past time to beat a hasty retreat and do whatever possible to avoid Mrs. Langton for the duration of the house party. He didn’t feel particularly optimistic since she’d be fixed to Lady Marina’s side. Although, she wasn’t at present...

“I do hope we’ll see you here before dinner. May I suggest you escort Lady Marina into the dining room?”

What a brazen woman. But he supposed that was her job—to push her charge at him. He couldn’t decide if a companion was worse than a managing mother. Since Lady Marina had both, he could count himself unfortunate.

“I would be honored,” he said, his muscles screaming to spring for the doorway, which Lord and Lady Cosford had thankfully removed themselves from. Others were leaving, which meant he could too.

Without further comment, he strode away from her and left the drawing room, taking deep breaths as if the air were somehow clearer and his lungs less compressed now that he was away from everyone. Several footmen stood ready to show guests to their rooms because everyone had come directly to the drawing room upon arrival.

Dare eagerly found someone to lead him to his chamber, a sprawling suite in the northwest corner of the first floor overlooking the parkland as well as some of the front drive. It was a pleasing view and blissfully devoid of anyone save himself and the footman, who was even now departing.

His solitude was short-lived, for his valet, Chadwick, came from the adjoining dressing chamber. “Would you care to rest before dinner, or will you be taking a walk on the estate?”

Dare shot his valet, who’d been with him a decade, a grateful look. “Most definitely a walk. It was too long in a coach today and then cooped up inside

with an excess of people.”

“I have your clothing laid out in the dressing chamber already.”  
Chadwick inclined his balding blond head.

“You are most efficient,” Dare said.

“I aim to be, Your Grace.” He turned on his heel and went back into the dressing chamber.

Eager to get outside, Dare followed him. He could hardly wait to clear his mind of all the nonsense from today and brace himself for that which was to come.

“They make a lovely couple,” Cecilia noted as she and Juno watched Marina dance with the duke. “Their hair color, like their personalities, is a perfect match.”

Juno still wasn’t convinced their personalities were suited. Yes, they were both somewhat quiet, but Marina didn’t possess the duke’s...rigidity. Or contrariness. She would never declare that she hated something out loud, let alone in front of two dozen or so other people. And she would certainly never insult her hostess.

“Did it bother you when His Grace said he hated house parties?” Juno asked.

Cecilia waved her hand, laughing. “Goodness, no. His reputation as a disagreeable gentleman is well known. Honestly, I find his candor refreshing amongst our class.”

That was one way to look at him. Juno had to agree he and Marina made a nice couple, at least visually. Perhaps it was their serious, concentrated expressions. They could actually be bookends, she decided.

“I do appreciate your clever seating arrangement at dinner.” Juno was pleased that she and the duke had flanked Marina. That allowed Juno to support and advise her charge—which she’d done in the barest of whispers—while Marina and the duke could get to know each other. However, as Cecilia

had noted, they were both quiet people. Juno feared they wouldn't converse enough to determine if they would suit. But perhaps that wouldn't be necessary. It was possible the duke had already decided whether he would propose.

Juno hoped that wasn't the case. She preferred they took some time, a few days at least, to get to know one another, to be sure of the match. Lady Wetherby didn't care about that—she just wanted a proposal. Thankfully, she'd been seated away from them at dinner, which had put Marina more at ease. She'd even smiled at the duke. Once.

“I am more than happy to help.” Cecilia turned toward her, lowering her voice. “In fact, I've arranged for her and Rigid”—her lip twitched, and Juno nearly laughed—“to share a picnic blanket tomorrow—along with you and Lady Wetherby, of course. Mr. and Mrs. Teasmore will join you. The blankets are large enough for six, with a footman assigned to each.”

“That sounds lovely. I will endeavor to ensure Rigid and Marina walk to the picnic location together.”

Cecilia gave her a fervent nod. “And I shall do my best to assist.”

A gasp, along with a chorus of voices, sounded from where the furniture had been cleared for dancing on the other side of the room. The music, provided by Cecilia's oldest daughter, who was fifteen, on the pianoforte, stopped.

Juno and Cecilia whipped their attention toward the commotion. A puddle of pale yellow silk surrounded Marina where she sat on the floor. Lady Wetherby was already rushing to her, while the duke helped Marina to her feet.

“Did you see what happened?” Cecilia asked.

“I didn't.” Juno had been too focused on their conversation.

“Oh, look,” Cecilia breathed, staring at the duke as he gently helped Marina find her footing. Then he offered his arm and escorted her to a chair. He bent his head and spoke to her before moving toward the refreshment

table.

“Lovely,” Juno murmured. Perhaps this match would work after all.

The duke returned with a glass of ratafia, which he handed to Marina. She accepted the drink, then darted a look toward Juno. Her eyes were wider than normal, and her forehead creased. Juno had seen that expression before. Marina needed help.

“Pardon me,” Juno said before going to join her charge.

Lady Wetherby took a chair next to Marina’s. The duke stood nearby. Cecilia’s daughter began playing and the dancing resumed, minus Marina and the duke, of course.

“What on earth happened?” Lady Wetherby asked Marina.

“It was my fault,” the duke said gruffly.

Marina briefly lifted her gaze to his. Juno knew in that moment that the duke had lied, that he’d covered for Marina. Perhaps he wasn’t so unlikable.

“I’m sure it wasn’t,” Lady Wetherby said with a smile. She turned her attention to her daughter. “All right, then, Marina? Ready to rejoin the dance?”

“I hurt my ankle, Mother,” Marina said quietly. Again, she sent a pleading look toward Juno.

The duke bowed toward Marina. “I’ll let you recuperate.”

Juno noted Lady Wetherby’s slight frown as she watched him leave. “What a lovely evening it’s been,” she said brightly. While it may not have ended the way the countess wanted, dinner had been a success, as had been the duke’s concern following the dancing mishap. Juno bent her head to say, “It seems great progress was made, my lady.”

Lady Wetherby pursed her lips. “We shall see.”

“I would like to retire,” Marina said, rising slowly to her feet.

Juno provided assistance, for Marina did seem a tad wobbly. “I’ll take you upstairs.”

“I’m going to remain here.” Lady Wetherby looked up at Marina. “I hope

your ankle is better by morning.”

“I’m sure it will be.” Marina took Juno’s arm, and they started toward the door.

Juno directed a sympathetic look toward Cecilia, silently indicating all was well. Cecilia responded with a slight nod. Tomorrow at the picnic, they’d do what they could to encourage the burgeoning connection between Marina and the duke.

As they left the drawing room, Marina moved slowly, and Juno was genuinely concerned about her ankle. “Are you terribly hurt?”

Marina straightened and took her hand from Juno’s arm. “No. I just wanted to leave.” She gave Juno a sheepish look.

“I understand you find these sorts of gatherings difficult, and after you wed, you may be able to avoid them entirely. In fact, if you wed the duke, I suspect that will be what you both prefer.”

“It isn’t just that,” Marina said. “I completely forgot the steps of the dance and collided with the duke. It wasn’t his fault at all.” Red flagged her cheeks, and Juno patted her shoulder.

“Don’t be embarrassed. That sort of thing happens to everyone at some point or another.”

“I can’t imagine it ever happens to you.” Marina allowed one of her rare smiles. “You’re so perfect.”

Juno laughed. “Hardly. I met Mr. Langton at an assembly, and I spilled punch on him.”

Marina actually giggled. “You have to be making that up.”

“I swear I am not.” Juno noted they were near the library. “Come, let’s get you a book or four since your mother’s not around.” She glanced back toward the drawing room, but knew the countess would stay as long as the wine was flowing. Then she’d retire to her chamber, which was directly next to the one Juno was sharing with Marina. She’d never know her daughter had been to the library.



Fortunately, the room was empty of people. It was, however, well lit with a cheery fire burning in the large fireplace. Juno browsed the shelves as Marina plucked books and flipped through them. She stacked one then another on a table before moving across the room to continue her search. Another tome landed on another table.

Juno liked seeing Marina's enthusiasm and wished it extended beyond books. Alas, Marina would be quite happy to closet herself in a room such as this and perhaps not emerge for months, even years. It was too bad she had such high expectations, but that was the position into which she'd been born. Juno somewhat understood what that felt like. As the granddaughter of a baron, she'd been expected to marry a country gentleman, not a dashing scholar who'd just taken a position as headmaster of a school.

Her parents had refused to endorse their marriage, and Juno hadn't seen them since—nearly eight years ago. She liked to think they'd be proud of the life she'd built for herself. Juno certainly was. Indeed, she had everything she could hope for: respectability, comfort, and independence. And she didn't have to answer to a man or parents.

"I'm ready."

Juno blinked, lost briefly in her reverie. Marina stood before her clutching five, no six, books.

"Are those just for tonight or for the duration of our stay?" Juno quipped.

"Oh, they won't last as long as we'll be here. Unless we get to leave early," Marina said eagerly.

"I doubt that," Juno said as they left. The only way that would happen was if Marina became betrothed to the duke. Which *could* happen if the duke was decisive. That trait certainly seemed to fit his demeanor. She couldn't imagine he was one to dither.

As they climbed the stairs, Juno asked if Marina liked the duke.

"It's too early to say," Marina demurred.

"It was nice of him to attend you after the incident on the dance floor."

“It was.” Marina hugged the books more tightly to her chest as they reached the top of the stairs. “That was particularly kind. I admit I was surprised. He seems so dour.”

“I suspect that outward crustiness covers a soft, sweet inside.” Juno hoped it did. If not, she would feel rather bad for him.

“You make him sound like a food. Perhaps a confection.”

“You are not unlike that,” Juno said softly. “Your exterior does not always reveal who you truly are.”

Marina exhaled. “I know. I do try. It’s just so hard to feel comfortable around people when I’d much rather be by myself. Not all the time, mind you. I do enjoy your company.”

“You didn’t at first,” Juno recalled with a laugh as they approached their chamber. “I distinctly remember you glowering at me for at least three days.”

Marina gave her another sheepish look. “I was angry at my mother for hiring you. I didn’t want ‘refinement.’ I took that out on you, and I’m sorry.”

Juno opened the door and motioned for Marina to precede her inside. “There is no need to apologize. I am used to young ladies not always welcoming me with glee.” Why would they when Juno was brought in to fix a disastrous or near-disastrous situation?

Marina went to deposit her books on the table next to her side of the bed. “I shall need to hide these in case Mother stops in later.” She frowned at the stack, then muttered something.

“Is there something amiss?” Juno asked as she removed an earring and set it on the dresser.

“I left one of the books downstairs.” Marina’s brow pleated in disappointment. “Naturally, that was the one I wanted to read first.”

Juno knew the effort Marina was putting into meeting her mother’s expectations and wanted to ease her stress. “I’ll run down and get it.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Marina said earnestly. “I can make do. I daresay I have plenty to read.” Her cheeks flushed as she glanced toward the

pile of books.

“I don’t mind. Truly,” Juno assured her.

“You are most kind,” Marina said gratefully. “It’s on the table near the windows at the back.”

Flashing Marina a smile and a wave of her fingers, Juno hastily departed, hurrying back downstairs lest an enterprising maid or footman replace the book on the shelf before Juno arrived. The library was no longer empty, however. Standing over the table Marina had indicated was none other than the Duke of Warrington.

He turned toward Juno as she approached.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” she said. “I see you’ve found my book.”

Picking up the book, he opened the cover and flipped a few pages. “You’re going to read about butterflies?”

“No, actually. It’s for Lady Marina. Although, I suppose I might find butterflies interesting.” Juno mostly read magazines and news. She liked to know what was going on in the world as well as the latest fashions. “Lady Marina is exceptionally well read.” Some gentlemen would find that irksome, but she suspected the duke would not.

His eyes glimmered with curiosity, and Juno was pleased to see she was right. “Are butterflies a particular interest?”

“I’m not certain. She typically reads whatever she can lay her hands on.” Juno clasped her hands in front of her waist. “You and she seemed to get on quite well at dinner.”

“Are you playing matchmaker, Mrs. Langton?” From another gentleman, it might have been a flirtatious comment, but from the duke, it was accusatory. Or perhaps it only seemed that way because of his infernal eyebrows. Thick and dark, they were magnificently expressive. Discerning. Commanding. Captivating.

What? *No*.

Juno blinked. “I was hired to ensure Lady Marina is successful on the

Marriage Mart. If that makes me a matchmaker, then I suppose I am.”

“You are more than an ordinary companion, then.” He scrutinized her, his dark eyes moving in a languid perusal. “How extraordinary.” The last came out in a low, rough murmur, but then everything he said sounded as if he’d swallowed darkness. She couldn’t say she disliked it. In fact, it was impossible not to rivet her attention to his every word.

Except she refused to do that. Or at least, allow him to realize she was. No man was ever going to wield a seductive power over her ever again. She was the provocative one now, and she was very, *very* selective.

“You seemed to enjoy Lady Marina’s company,” Juno said, focusing on the only thing that mattered—matching him with Marina.

“She’s quiet and pleasant.”

“Marina—Lady Marina—also enjoyed herself.” Juno purposely used her name, hoping the duke might begin to think of her in more intimate terms.

“Did that include the dance?”

Was that a bit of humor in his voice? Juno couldn’t help but smile. This match *could* work. “It did not. I’m afraid Marina is not terribly fond of dancing, even when it all goes well. I hope that doesn’t trouble you.”

“Not at all. In fact, I count that as a mark in her favor. I loathe dancing.”

“You dislike a great many things, it seems,” Juno said, not without a touch of sarcasm.

“I see no point in pretending to enjoy things I do not. If I said I liked house parties, I’d be invited to a plethora. If I pretended to love dancing, I’d be expected to gallivant across every dance floor. It’s best to set accurate expectations, don’t you agree?”

Juno found it hard to argue with that. “I admit I find your candor refreshing, if bemusing.”

“You’ll get used to it. Or not. I expect our acquaintance will be rather short-lived.”

He was right. Whether he wed Marina or not, Juno would move on to her

next client after her well-earned respite over the holidays.

His hand lifted, and he reached for her ear. She froze, expecting his touch. But it didn't come. He lowered his arm. "You're missing an earring. Did you lose it?"

She brought her fingers to her earlobe. "No, I removed it upstairs."

"I was going to offer to help you find it."

Was he? He was an odd gentleman. "What *do* you like, Your Grace?"

He hesitated, one brow moving higher than the other. "Riding. Walking. Being outside. Reading. Chess." His gaze moved toward a board on a small table flanked by two chairs.

Juno stored that information away, then redirected their conversation lest she continue finding him interesting. There was no point in that. "Marina appreciated your kindness after the dancing mishap."

His lip twitched, and he glanced away. Juno could have sworn he'd made a soft growl in his throat, but she had to be hearing things.

"It wasn't a kindness," he rumbled.

"Whether you meant it as such, it was exactly that." She wondered if compliments made him uncomfortable. Her mother was like that.

"Here." He handed her the book, and their fingers grazed as she took it from him.

A flash of heat danced up her arm. She jerked her gaze to his, surprised to find him looking at her with an intensity that matched the warmth suddenly taking over her body.

"Thank you. Good night." She spun about and hurried from the library, irritated with herself for not discussing tomorrow's picnic with him. He said he liked setting expectations. She should have told him they would all be sitting together. So he could anticipate it.

She was going to try her best to do the opposite.



AFTER AN EXHILARATING early morning ride on one of Cosford's finest mounts, Dare was feeling quite fine and fit. He was even looking forward to the picnic. Any entertainment that could be undertaken outside was instantly more desirable.

In fact, he was so eager that he left before thinking to accompany Lady Marina and her companion. He stood gazing out at the lake from the picnic area when the other guests began to arrive.

Lady Marina, her mother, and Mrs. Langton arrived in the middle of the pack. Dare's attention went first to the companion, positioned between the other two women. She was shorter than they were, her form more petite. Again, she wore a sleek costume that seemed beyond her station. She looked like a member of the family, not a paid employee. Except her blonde hair and green eyes, as well as her stature, were at odds with the dark hair and blue eyes of the taller Fellowes women.

As usual, Mrs. Langton wore a bright smile and seemed to be on the verge of laughter. If he had to describe her, he'd say she was perpetually delighted. He found it vastly irritating, but also intriguing. He ought to pay closer attention to Lady Marina. She wasn't irritating—or delighted—at all. She was reserved and reticent, the perfect companion for him. She wouldn't provoke him to smile, or nearly so, or hurl compliments at him.

Nevertheless, he found himself wanting to know more about Mrs. Langton. How had she come to be an *extraordinary* companion who dressed as if she managed Society with one hand? She radiated confidence and charm. She was the kind of woman a normal duke—one who cared about appearances and social dominance—would want. Except she was a paid companion.

Why in the hell was he still thinking about her?

Dare refocused his attention on his potential bride. He was so intent that he failed to notice his hostess had approached him.

“Duke, may I show you to your blanket?” she asked with a bothersome

smile. But then, were there any other kind? He supposed genuine ones were all right. Problem was, there were really so few of them. “I’ve seated you with Lady Marina.”

Of course she had. He almost asked if everyone in attendance, including the retainers, was part of the matchmaking, but held his tongue. Perhaps he didn’t need to say everything he was thinking, even if he did think it was helpful to be perfectly candid.

He simply said, “Thank you” and allowed Lady Cosford to lead him to the blanket where Lady Marina and her entourage were already taking their seats on artfully arranged pillows.

Frowning at his pillow, Dare moved it out of the way so he could sit beside Lady Marina. Mrs. Langton was situated behind them, while Lady Wetherby was on the other side of her daughter. Good. Hopefully she wouldn’t try to speak to Dare around Lady Marina. He’d already decided she was a pain in the arse.

Another couple joined their blanket, and Dare didn’t bother to remember who they were. He was here to find a wife, not make social connections.

“Good afternoon,” he said, initiating conversation with Lady Marina.

She barely met his gaze. “Good afternoon.”

Did she make eye contact with anyone besides her mother and Mrs. Langton? Dare didn’t think so, but perhaps he wasn’t paying close enough attention. It was too bad she had such a distracting companion. She would do far better with a doddering aunt who wore lace mobcaps and fell asleep in her sherry. Someone who wasn’t pretty or engaging. Or whose touch caused an alarming sense of...*oh hell*.

He almost asked Lady Marina about the butterfly book, but then he’d have to explain how he knew of its existence. Which meant he’d have to reveal that he’d met Mrs. Langton in the library last night. And what would be wrong with that? It hadn’t been scandalous.

Why did it feel that way, then?

“I enjoy being outdoors,” he said, disrupting the troubling direction of his thoughts. “Do you?”

“I suppose. I enjoy quiet.”

“You’d prefer if you were alone on this blanket.”

Her gaze shot to his, but only briefly. “Perhaps.” She’d hesitated as if she’d wanted to say yes, but decided it wasn’t right.

“Alone on this blanket and without all the other blankets, I’d wager. If I were a betting man, which I most certainly am not.” He didn’t like things that were unexpected or left to chance. All his investments were conservative and sound, and he didn’t so much as enter a gaming room.

He thought she might respond, and when she did not, he fell into silence. He wasn’t going to work overly hard to engage her. Why should he if they were both comfortable with mutual quietude?

As beverages were distributed, Dare nearly spilled his wine when Mrs. Langton leaned closer behind him. “You should ask her to promenade,” she whispered. “She’s shy, but if it’s the two of you alone, she will relax. Then you can become better acquainted.”

A shiver dashed across the back of Dare’s neck. Mrs. Langton’s fruity, floral scent overtook his senses. He took a fortifying drink of wine.

He didn’t particularly want to promenade with Lady Marina, but he supposed he must. If she was to be his wife, they had to get to know one another. It wasn’t as if they’d live their life in silence. Could they?

Turning his head, he asked Lady Marina if she cared to promenade. A footman took his wineglass.

Lady Marina looked toward her mother, who in turn glanced at Mrs. Langton. “Take Juno with you,” Lady Wetherby said.

*Juno*. Had she been named after the goddess?

Dare helped Lady Marina to her feet, then pivoted to perform the same service for her companion. Mrs. Langton’s sage eyes met his, and he knew she wasn’t being purposely provocative, but damn if he didn’t want to dive



right into their green depths.

Frowning, he turned his back to her and offered Lady Marina his arm. They strolled from the blanket toward the lake. He felt unsettled, agitated. Because of the goddess.

He forced his attention to being in his favorite place: outside. It was a fine October day—the morning had been cool and damp, and this afternoon was warm and bright. The trees were not yet at their peak colors, but already they flashed gold and orange. Inhaling deeply, Dare got a nose full of Mrs. Langton’s distinctive, delicious fragrance. He scowled.

Lady Marina broke the silence, but Dare hadn’t been paying attention. “Pardon?” he barked.

She hesitated. “Might we slow down a bit?”

Was he going too fast? He didn’t think so. Still, he decreased his pace until he felt as if he were walking through a swiftly moving stream.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“I like to walk quickly. I enjoy a long, robust constitutional most days.”

“I prefer a more sedate pace.”

“I can see that.” His mother would say he was being terse. However, he couldn’t help who he was or the fact that he preferred to speak without censoring himself. His future wife needed to understand and accept that.

They’d reached the lake, a small but pretty spot of blue surrounded by flowers and greenery and in one area, a muddy beach. That would be an excellent location to enter the water for a refreshing swim, which sounded quite pleasant. If it was an activity to be done outside, Dare enjoyed it.

“Oh!” Lady Marina took her hand from his arm and danced away, waving her arms madly.

He watched her in dismay. “What the devil is wrong with you?”

“There’s a bee!”

“It won’t hurt you,” he said calmly. “The more you move, the more you’ll agitate it.”

She continued to flail her arms as her hat became dislodged. She was also moving precariously close to the edge of the lake.

“Careful,” he warned, reaching for her just as Mrs. Langton moved between her charge and the water. Dare’s hand collided with the goddess’s shoulder, and she fell straight back into the lake.

“Christ!” Dare didn’t think twice before launching himself in after her.

Thankfully, the water wasn’t deep, and he quickly found his footing, his boots squishing into the muddy bottom. The goddess slapped her hands in and out of the water as she struggled to stand. It had to be much harder in a gown.

Dare swept her up into his arms out of the water. “All right?”

“I don’t swim.”

“I do. Perhaps you should learn.”

“If that was an offer of instruction, I think I’ll pass. I can’t imagine you’d be a pleasant teacher.”

Her words struck him like a stone.

“Nevertheless, I am glad you swim so that you could rescue me,” she said.

“Swimming wasn’t required. The water here doesn’t even reach my waist.” Cradling her in his arms, he lifted her onto the bank amidst a patch of now-crushed daisies.

She wobbled slightly on her feet, but found her balance. Looking down at herself, she laughed. “Good heavens, I’m a mess.”

Her laughter shocked him. He expected annoyance or upset but not *humor*. A smile tried to tug at his mouth, so he deepened his frown.

Lady Marina took her companion’s hand and pulled her away from the lake. “I’m so sorry, Juno!”

*Juno*. Dare would never tire of hearing that name. In fact, he refused to think of her as anything else from now on. He pulled himself onto the bank and straightened, water dripping from every part of him, particularly his hair.

He reached up and patted the top of his head, realizing he'd lost his hat.

Looking toward Juno, he nearly lost his breath too. Her gown was plastered to her petite, but incredibly shapely, form. The image left little to his imagination. Actually, it gave him all sorts of ideas. His body was already moving in that direction. He swore violently, and as the two women jerked their attention toward him, he realized he'd done so loudly enough that they could hear him. He swore again but silently this time.

"Mrs. Langton." A footman handed her a blanket, which she wrapped around herself.

"Are you all right?" Lady Cosford asked, having arrived just behind the footman. Lady Wetherby was following, but still had a few yards to go.

The goddess tried to adjust her hat, which was hanging askew from her head. "Just wet."

"We must thank the duke," Lady Cosford noted, looking toward him with gratitude.

"I suppose so," Juno murmured as she sent him a stunning glower that should have eviscerated him. Instead, he felt strangely and wonderfully *alive*.

And if that wasn't absolutely terrible, he didn't know what was.

"I'll walk back to the house with you," Lady Marina offered in her timid voice as she put her hand on her companion's arm.

"You can't go back," Lady Wetherby said, appearing winded as she drew sharp, fast breaths.

"I'm sure the duke must also return to the house, Mother," Lady Marina snapped in a rare display of emotion.

Juno looked upon her with a glow of admiration. "I need to get out of these wet clothes."

Dare nearly groaned at the thought.

Lady Marina and the goddess—she could be Aphrodite now, he realized a bit absurdly—started toward the house, but not before Juno sent him another perturbed glance. She was annoyed with him, and why shouldn't she be?

He'd knocked her into the lake in the first place. He owed her an apology. Yes, he'd make sure to do that later.

First, he needed to get out of his wet clothes. And probably make use of his hand lest he spend the rest of the day with a towering erection.

Juno had emerged from the lake smelling like a pair of boots that had sat outside in the rain for a week. Perhaps a month. She felt much better after a warm, fragranced bath. She felt better physically, anyway. Mentally, she was still angry with the duke. Not because he'd accidentally pushed her into the lake, but because he'd behaved like an obnoxious boor while promenading with Marina.

There was simply no way Juno could support a match between her charge and the Rigid Duke. And now she needed to convey that to Lady Wetherby.

Squaring her shoulders, she marched to the countess's chamber and knocked on the door, hoping she wasn't disturbing the woman's predinner toilette. Her maid answered and admitted her inside. Lady Wetherby sat with her hair half-styled.

"You're dry," Lady Wetherby said. Was she surprised that Juno had cleaned up after falling into the lake? "What a mess that was, ruining Marina's picnic."

Juno gave her head a light shake. The countess could be rather difficult to track. "Yes, it was quite frustrating, but I suppose we have the duke to blame for that." Juno was not above pointing out that he'd been the one to cause the "mess."

"Why would we blame him?" Lady Wetherby waved her hand as the

maid returned to styling her hair for dinner. “Oh, he knocked you in, didn’t he? I heard mention of that.” It seemed an afterthought to her.

“Yes. That was after he was quite uncharitable to Marina when she was being harassed by a bee.” Marina had been stung several times a few years ago—a story she’d related after they’d had a similar encounter with a bee last month—and was deathly afraid of them.

“Goodness, Marina needs to stiffen up. She was stung a few times and recovered quite well. That girl is stronger than she thinks.”

Juno blinked. While she didn’t always agree with Lady Wetherby’s demeanor toward her daughter, it was moments like this that reminded Juno of two things: the countess didn’t have a poor opinion of Marina, and she knew her far better than Juno did.

Moving closer to where Lady Wetherby sat, Juno changed her approach. “I wanted to speak with you about this proposed match. I’m not at all sure it’s working out.”

Lady Wetherby narrowed her eyes. “It’s only been a day, Mrs. Langton.”

“While that’s true, I just can’t see how it’s a good match. Marina and the duke are far too alike. With both of them being so...guarded, one wonders how they will get on—not just with each other but in Society. Though it’s difficult to tell, neither seems very interested in the other. Furthermore, His Grace was quite rude to Marina while they walked today. She deserves a husband who will treat her with respect and be a supportive partner.”

“He possesses a gruff nature,” Lady Wetherby said dismissively. “The fact that they are so alike is why they are a perfect match. From what I can tell, they’ll sit in companionable silence and won’t trouble each other at all. Honestly, that sounds like a splendid marriage indeed. Especially for Marina.”

Again, Juno blinked at her employer. Perhaps she was right. Juno didn’t like the duke—well, she didn’t like his treatment of Marina—and she was allowing her emotions to cloud her judgment. She should talk to Marina and

see if she was still open to marrying him. Was he even considering proposing? Given his behavior that afternoon, it might be that he didn't care to wed Marina.

Which was shortsighted on his part. Marina was lovely—smart, kind, and capable of running a household. Probably. Her mother was right that Marina was stronger than she realized. Juno would remind her of that at every possible opportunity.

“Do not be concerned that there doesn't appear to be a spark between them either,” Lady Wetherby said. “Most marriages don't begin with such rubbish.”

While Juno had enjoyed quite a spark with Bernard, she'd learned it shouldn't be the primary objective in a marriage. Still, it was important. “I would hate for Marina to be unhappy.”

“Her happiness isn't your goal—her marriage is.” Lady Wetherby exhaled. “I don't mean to sound uncaring, and I do appreciate your concern for Marina, but she will manage. You must agree that a man like the duke would be much better for her than someone else. Someone who, say, enjoys conversing.”

While it sounded insulting, the countess wasn't wrong. She knew her daughter and her discomfort with people she didn't know. Even when Marina did get to know someone, she could be rather reserved.

“I expect them to marry, Mrs. Langton.” Lady Wetherby directed a demanding stare toward Juno. “Remember that I have given you a rather large incentive. I would hate to be disappointed, particularly when I must write a recommendation for your next position.”

Juno rarely felt disgruntled with people, but Lady Wetherby was trying her typically pleasant nature. “I shall do my best with what I have. We shall have to hope His Grace will loosen up a trifle.”

Lady Wetherby turned her attention from Juno, giving the impression she was dismissed. Turning, Juno departed the room and went in search of her

ally in this matchmaking challenge.

After finally asking a footman, Juno met with Cecilia in the dining room, where she was overseeing the final arrangements for that evening. “Oh, Juno, I’m so glad to see you’re recovered from your earlier mishap.” Cecilia walked around the table to join her.

“I am, thank you. It was a rather chilling event,” she quipped.

“You seemed perturbed about it, and I’m just so sorry it happened.”

“I was annoyed with Rigid. He treated Marina rather obnoxiously during their promenade. She is justifiably afraid of bees and was being harassed by one. He had no sympathy for her situation.”

Cecilia’s brow pinched. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

“Not at all. I went to see Lady Wetherby to inform her that I didn’t think they would suit. She insists they are perfect for one another and expects them to wed.” Juno pressed two fingers to her temple. “This is going to be more difficult than I imagined.”

“I see.” Cecilia glanced toward the table. “I have placed them next to each other again, with you beside Lady Marina as you were last night.”

“I wonder if I ought to sit next to Rigid and try to encourage him to behave more politely. If he continues to act poorly with Marina, she will never relax around him. And if that happens, I can’t see him proposing marriage.”

“Unless he likes that about her. He’s rather...reserved himself.”

“I think you mean rigid.” Juno winked at her. “In truth, after listening to him speak with Marina during their promenade, I began to doubt his interest in her. Yes, I think I must sit next to him to prod him along.”

“I’ll make the change,” Cecilia said. “Tomorrow there will be a treasure hunt. The guests will be divided into teams to search for items on a list, and the winning team will receive a prize. I have made the duke, Lady Marina, and you a team.”

This would provide ample opportunity to determine if they would suit.



“Splendid. I’m sure I can find an excuse to leave them alone at some point.”

Cecilia’s eyes gleamed with intent. “I’ll do what I can to help.”

“You are an excellent accomplice.”

“It seems, ah, very important that this match happens. I will do whatever I can.”

“I appreciate your support. Together, I can’t imagine we won’t be successful.”

Cecilia laughed softly. “How I wish I had met you before now. How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“And what happened to Mr. Langton, if you don’t mind my nosiness.”

“I don’t mind at all. He died very suddenly within a year of our marriage.” Juno felt a moment’s sting as she recalled his senseless demise. Bernard was lovely but also foolish, and he drank too much.

“You seem to have landed on your feet. Do you have as many lives as a cat?”

Now Juno laughed. “Not yet, but I shall hope so. I have been very fortunate to establish myself.”

“You seem perfectly suited for your chosen profession. I take it you have no desire to marry again?”

“None whatsoever.” Juno had no need or inclination.

“Not even for male companionship?”

“Marriage isn’t necessary for that,” Juno whispered with a smile.

“How enterprising of you.” Cecilia tipped her head toward Juno. “Do you have a specific tactic in mind for how you will encourage the duke’s enthusiasm toward Lady Marina?”

“Not entirely. Perhaps he simply needs to be reminded that he came here to find a wife, and Marina is his only option.” Juno winced inwardly. She didn’t like thinking of Marina in that way. She deserved better than that. “He needs to give her—them—a true chance.” Juno was still dubious. Perhaps he

was too, which put them in agreement. She marveled at that for a moment.

“Are you talking about me?”

The gruff sound of the duke’s voice prompted both Juno and Cecilia to whip around and face the door. The rigid duke stood just inside the dining room, his perpetual scowl only slightly less etched into his face than usual.

“Yes,” Juno answered quickly, drawing a sharp glance from Cecilia.

The duke stared at her a moment. Juno heard Cecilia’s breath catch.

He shrugged. “I was just passing.”

“I must be off,” Cecilia said. “I’ve much to do.” She looked toward Juno with slightly widened eyes, her head tilting infinitesimally toward the duke in silent communication that Juno should speak with him. Or something.

The duke stepped out of the way as Cecilia departed.

“I imagine she’s planning another tedious event for the morrow.” His mouth slashed into a frown as his thick brows gathered.

Juno had suffered enough of his eternal disdain. Moving toward him, she threw her shoulders back and puffed up her chest as she sought to mimic him. “I hate house parties and picnics, and I’m the grumpiest man alive.” She pouted up at him, then bared her teeth, lowering her voice even more to a harsh rasp. “But I’m a duke, so I can behave like an ass and get away with it.”

His eyes rounded. He opened his mouth, then clamped it shut. “I don’t sound like that.”

“You sound *exactly* like that.” Juno relaxed her shoulders.

“I don’t say things like that. The ass part. I know I said I hated house parties.”

“Just because you haven’t yet said the ass part doesn’t mean you won’t.”

“You think you know me so well?”

“I think you’re a shallow, predictable, surly curmudgeon. Perhaps you’re more than that, but you won’t let anyone see.” She adopted her best rigid-duke growl. “I don’t need to be pleasant or kind, so I won’t. Not even to woo

a wife.” She stared at him with as much disdain as she could muster, then rolled her eyes for good measure. Satisfied that she felt better even if he never understood her point, she stepped around him to leave.

“That was actually pretty good,” he murmured from behind her as she sailed from the dining room.

There was a note of appreciation in his tone that gave her hope. Perhaps tonight would go better than the promenade at the picnic. If it didn’t, she wasn’t sure the match would happen, regardless of Lady Wetherby’s insistence.



DARE WASN’T SURPRISED to find himself seated next to Lady Marina again at dinner that evening. However, he was rather speechless—and not because he chose to remain stoic, which was typical—when Mrs. Langton sat on his other side. Still, the first course nearly passed in complete silence among them.

“Why aren’t you speaking with Lady Marina?” Mrs. Langton’s urgent whisper caught him off guard.

He turned his head to find she was much closer than he’d realized. She’d leaned toward him to deliver her query.

“She’s quite focused on her soup,” he murmured in response. A glance toward Lady Marina reaffirmed his assessment. She’d yet to make eye contact with him at all and had barely uttered good evening when she’d sat down.

“Don’t take her shyness for disinterest,” Mrs. Langton said brightly, still keeping her voice low. She looked at him expectantly, a smile hovering about her lush, kissable mouth.

Kissable?

Dare cleared his throat and snapped his attention back to his soup. A

moment later, he tried to engage Lady Marina. “How do you find the turtle soup?”

“Tolerable.” Her gaze didn’t so much as flick toward his. Or anywhere except her soup.

Frowning, he set down his spoon and pondered whether it was worth his time to bother trying again.

“You could ask her about the wine,” Mrs. Langton suggested.

“What about it?” he asked in a low growl.

“You aren’t very adept at conversation, are you?”

He couldn’t help shooting her a suffering glance. “No worse than your charge.”

“She’s *shy*.” Mrs. Langton blinked, her long lashes shuttering her eyes briefly. “Are you?”

“No. I merely prefer not to engage with most people.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I rarely meet anyone worth speaking with.”

She exhaled. “Not shy but boorish. Are you looking for a duchess or not? Ask her about the wine,” she prodded.

The footman removed the course, and while they laid the next, Dare tried again. Turning his head toward Lady Marina, he willed her to look at him. Did he think he was some sort of sorcerer that he could control her movements? He turned a snort into another growl. Unintentionally, that had the effect of provoking her to glance at him.

“Is the wine to your liking?” he asked, thinking this had to be the dullest, most painful, most inane conversation he’d ever had. No, it wasn’t even a conversation since she wasn’t participating.

“I can’t say.”

“Haven’t you tried it?”

“No.” She reached for her glass and took a delicate sip.

He noted the flash of distaste in her eyes and the slight wrinkle of her

nose. “You don’t care for it.”

“It’s rather sweet.”

Their plates were set before them, effectively interrupting their nascent dialogue.

Mrs. Langton leaned close again, tempting Dare with her orange-and-lily scent. “You could ask what she likes to read. That should launch a lively discussion.”

Tempting? Dare thought of their brief encounter that afternoon when she’d mocked him, lowering her voice to match his and thrusting her shoulders back to puff up her chest. Unfortunately, the action didn’t make her appear larger or more substantial like him. It had drawn his attention to her rather perfectly curved torso, most notably her full breasts. Perhaps it hadn’t been unfortunate after all.

That she’d teased him had stuck with him ever since. No one mocked him. Ever. Not even at school, where everyone was mocked.

Yet, Mrs. Langton talked to him in ways no one did. She looked at him with open hostility and agitation, all while continuing to smile and cajole him—in the name of her charge. She was utterly beguiling.

If only Lady Marina possessed even a fraction of her companion’s energy, Dare would have no problem offering for her. She did not, however. He watched her as she gingerly ate a green bean. Her features were blank, and he wondered if they were schooled that way or if she was just completely devoid of emotion or reaction.

“Does she ever smile?” he asked Mrs. Langton, shocking himself. He hadn’t really meant to share the thought aloud. Since when did he care about smiling?

“Do you?” Mrs. Langton countered.

“Touché.” He tamped back a smile.

“Perhaps you and Marina should find equal ground there. You ought to have realized by now that you’ve much in common.”

He supposed they *were* similar in demeanor. Turning his head once more, he took in her dark hair and pale, slender neck. She was an attractive woman, but he wasn't moved by her. There was no...spark.

"Do I trouble you, Lady Marina?" he asked softly.

Her head turned so sharply, he jerked, which caused her to flinch in return. "No." She immediately returned her attention to her pheasant.

Dare took the unsubtle hint and attacked his plate in earnest, ignoring both women despite being incredibly aware of Mrs. Langton. It was silly, but there was a heat to her that surrounded him. He reached for his wine.

"You really should ask her about books," Mrs. Langton persisted.

Dare downed the contents of his glass. "If you're so intent on seeing us matched, perhaps you should speak with her about how to engage with a gentleman she wishes to snare in the parson's trap."

Standing abruptly, Dare earned the attention of everyone in the dining room as conversation evaporated into silence. "Please excuse me."

He left the dining room, knowing his departure would be the talk of the house party. Not that he cared. People often talked about him, and he didn't care. Mrs. Langton and their hostess had been doing it just that afternoon, in fact.

Dare found himself in the library, where he plucked a book from the shelf and tucked himself into an alcove to read. If it hadn't been dark, he would have gone outside for a walk. A book about the wilds of Ireland would have to suffice.

He lost himself in descriptions of lush green hills and bold, crashing waves. He'd no idea how much time had passed when he heard a laugh.

"Poor Lady Cosford," a feminine voice said. Two women came into the library. Dare recognized them, but couldn't have recalled their names on pain of death. One was married to a member of Parliament. Huxley? Halsey?

"Don't pity her. This house party will be discussed for some—" The woman's voice cut off, and two pairs of eyes fixed on him in his alcove.

*Hell.* He'd hoped to be invisible.

"Oh dear. We beg your pardon, Your Grace," Mrs. H said, her face pale and her dark eyes wide.

"Were you discussing me?" Dare asked with a suffering sigh as he closed the book on his finger.

"Yes," the other lady responded, which earned her a stifled gasp and a shocked glare from her friend. The woman shrugged in response to Mrs. H. "Whom else would we be talking about?"

Mrs. H exhaled. She turned her focus to Dare. "You did cause a stir when you left dinner so abruptly."

"I know." And he didn't care.

"Oh, to be a duke, and do precisely as one pleases," not-Mrs. H said wryly.

Juno's words from earlier in the day came back to him. Perhaps he took for granted the fact that he could do as he chose and behave as he liked without consequence.

Not-Mrs. H cast him a cautious look, as if she expected him to react negatively to her comment. "I suppose I am allowed certain...foibles. Or at least forgiven for them."

Dare suspected Juno didn't forgive him for a thing. Had he done wrong? He hadn't been entirely...pleasant during his promenade with Lady Marina at the picnic.

"Are you disagreeable on purpose?" not-Mrs. H asked while Mrs. H once again shot her a look of shocked distress.

Dare liked not-Mrs. H in the way he liked Juno. Neither suffered his grouchy demeanor. Well, not *precisely* in the way he liked the goddess.

"Not entirely. I don't generally like people." He shrugged, his shoulders scraping the back of the chair, as if that sentiment were common.

Not-Mrs. H's light blue eyes gleamed. "How refreshing to hear honesty from someone of our station."

*Our.* Was she peerage, then? He probably ought to know her name, but he wasn't going to ask. It wasn't that he didn't have the nerve. He doubted he'd remember, so why bother?

"W-why don't you like people?" Mrs. H asked tentatively.

Dare wasn't sure how to answer that question or if he even could. So he chose to ignore it. "Shouldn't you ladies be in the drawing room?"

"There is no rule requiring it," not-Mrs. H said with a laugh. "We went for a walk." She lowered her voice, a twinkle in her eye. "So we could gossip."

"About me." They'd already said they were talking about him.

Not-Mrs. H grinned. "Of course!"

Mrs. H pursed her lips as another flicker of worry passed over her features. "Lady Wetherby was most upset."

"Indeed." Not-Mrs. H edged closer to his chair, her expression eager. "Does this mean you aren't going to offer for Lady Marina?"

While he appreciated the woman's forthrightness, that didn't mean he would contribute to her gossipmongering. "That's between us." He used an even haughtier tone than usual in case the woman decided to grow even bolder.

Thankfully, she did not. Exhaling with an air of disappointment, she pulled back to her position next to Mrs. H. "I had to ask."

"You really didn't." He actually gave her a half smile, shocking her, which made him inordinately pleased. He had the sense that little surprised not-Mrs. H. Perhaps he should go to the trouble of learning her name. Or pay attention to who her husband was in case he recognized the man, if he was even in attendance.

Mrs. H tittered softly, provoking her friend to look in her direction and then share in her laughter. "This is much better than a walk," Mrs. H said with a cautious glance toward Dare.

He was certain their exchange would be bandied about as soon as they



returned to the drawing room, not that he cared one whit.

“What of the treasure hunt tomorrow?” not-Mrs H asked.

There was to be a bloody treasure hunt? He longed to remove himself, but he’d come all the way to this party and ought to participate. Even if it grated his every nerve. “What of it?”

“It sounds most diverting,” Mrs. H said with a nod. “We’ll be put into groups. I daresay you and Lady Marina will be together.”

There was absolutely no question they would. He began to wonder if the entire purpose of this house party was to push him and Lady Marina together. Lady Wetherby wanted her daughter to snag a duke, and Juno was certainly doing her part, as was Lady Cosford. But if there wasn’t so much as a hint of anything between them, what was Dare to do?

He should give her one more chance. He’d been distracted by Juno at dinner, which had been foolish. Juno wasn’t a potential duchess—Lady Marina was. She deserved his full attention and his best behavior.

Standing, he strode to replace the book on the shelf. He turned back toward the two women and inclined his head. “I bid you good evening.”

Tomorrow, he would participate in the tiresome treasure hunt and try doubly hard to engage with Lady Marina. Hopefully, she would do the same with him, for he couldn’t make this match on his own.

Couldn’t he, though? He’d long told his mother that he didn’t need a wife he could love, just an exemplary duchess. Perhaps he should prepare a list of questions about running a household and performing the duties of a duchess and simply ask Lady Marina each of them. That would tell him definitively if they would suit.

He’d compose a list as soon as he arrived in his chamber. How orderly and efficient. Just the way he preferred things.

The following afternoon, Dare fortified himself with a small glass of brandy before striding into the drawing room where everyone was gathered for the insipid treasure hunt. His gaze went directly to Juno and then to Lady Marina, who stood at her side, head bent with her gaze locked on the floor as usual. Her mother, Lady Wetherby, was also there, but her attention was *not* on the floor. Her prickly stare was trained on Dare as he entered. He nearly turned and left.

“Good afternoon, Duke,” Lady Cosford greeted him with another of her endless smiles. “I hear you took a rather long ride this morning.”

Were the stables reporting his every action now? “Yes,” he said simply.

“I’m glad. Cosford says riding is your favorite pastime, and we’re delighted you find our stables to your satisfaction.”

This time, he merely grunted. Her smile didn’t falter, not that he’d intended it to. He didn’t try to be surly. He just was.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to explain how the hunt will work.” She took herself off to where her husband stood near the hearth.

Dare made his way to the trio of women he’d regarded when he came in. Since he would undoubtedly be grouped with at least one of them, he might as well put himself in their proximity. Plus, he could savor Juno’s intoxicating scent.

Lady Cosford discussed the treasure hunt, but Dare paid no attention. Instead, he went over the list of questions he'd drafted the night before. Today he would decide if he and Lady Marina would suit.

"I find it somewhat improper that I'm not part of your group." Lady Wetherby's acerbic tone cut into Dare's thoughts.

"I'll chaperone," Juno said brightly, glancing toward Lady Marina and then Dare, who stood just behind her, but also somewhat close to Juno.

"Very well." The countess gave Juno a pointed look rife with expectation before taking herself off.

Juno pivoted to face him and Lady Marina. "I'm confident we can win."

Dare appreciated the ruthless glint in her eyes. "Are you competitive, Mrs. Langton?"

She lifted a shoulder. "When I want to be. And when it's important." Her gaze darted almost imperceptibly to Lady Marina.

He had the impression Lady Marina was important and that Juno wanted her to win—not the treasure hunt, but Dare. Surprisingly, he wanted to support Juno in her quest. He would give Lady Marina his best today. Whatever that was.

Lady Cosford approached them and handed a paper to Juno. "This is your list of ten items. Whichever team arrives back here first with all their objects will win."

"What is the prize?" Dare asked.

"The winners will get to choose the seating arrangement for one of the remaining dinners."

He opened his mouth to say that was a terrible prize, but then clamped it shut. His gaze drifted to Juno, who gave him a slight, perhaps approving nod.

Lady Cosford moved on as Juno studied their list. She spoke while her eyes scanned the parchment in her hands. "An orange. I know where we can get one of those quite easily. The orangery."

Dare had seen the orangery from the exterior on his walks, but hadn't yet

visited. "Shall we start there?"

"Yes, let's." Juno looked to Lady Marina. "Would you like to look at the list?"

"I suppose I should." The young lady took the list between her gloved fingertips. "There's a book, and I know precisely where it is in the library. I can go and fetch it while you go to the orangery."

"No, you can't," Juno said rather hastily. She summoned one of her captivating smiles. "I believe it's against the rules."

Since when had her smiles gone from irritating to captivating?

"Is it?" Lady Marina didn't sound convinced.

"I take it you'd rather spend your afternoon in the library," he said, trying to sound...affable. How in the hell did one sound affable? Perhaps he ought to smile. The thought made him want to curse. He stretched his mouth but couldn't quite do it. His expression was probably the opposite of affable. He relaxed his features into their normal, unsmiling state.

Lady Marina's blue eyes flashed with surprise. "Yes. But we can do the treasure hunt," she added.

"We can always just pretend to do it," he said. "Perhaps we'll get stuck in the library."

She nearly smiled then, her face softening. She was quite pretty. He tried to imagine being married to her, and with that, the things they would do together once they were wed. Specifically, the things they would do in the bedroom. But a vision of Juno flooded his brain. He glanced toward her as heat suffused him.

That was *not* helpful to his cause.

Dare recalled his list of questions. Knowing that Lady Marina would while away hours in the library told him the answer to one: what she liked to do for amusement. "Do you ride?" he asked, ticking another off.

"A little. I'm not very good."

"Riding is overrated," Juno declared. "Let us make our way to the

orangery.” She gestured for them to precede her from the drawing room.

Dare hung slightly back, preferring to walk beside Juno so he could interrogate her about her silly statement. “Riding isn’t overrated. Perhaps you’ve never properly learned.”

Juno cast him a sour look, her lids low over her eyes. “Perhaps I simply enjoy other activities more.”

“We should take a ride, and I’ll show you how exhilarating it can be.”

“By we, I hope you mean you and Lady Marina, with me as chaperone.”

“Er, yes.” That wasn’t at all what he’d meant.

“Speaking of Lady Marina, perhaps you might wish to catch up with her. She is likely halfway to the orangery by now.”

“Of course.” Dare stalked from the drawing room, irritated that he’d allowed himself to be swayed from his goal. He would focus his entire attention on Lady Marina and not be distracted by her goddess of a companion. A goddess who didn’t care for riding. That fact should have disappointed him. Instead, he hoped he had the chance to change her mind.

*Lady Marina!* his mind screamed.

Moving quickly, he fell into step beside her and slowed his pace. He returned to his list. “I sense you are like me in that social gatherings are not your...preferred activity.” How else to put that? “Do you have any reticence about hosting a ball or a large dinner party?”

Lady Marina took a moment to answer, and Dare couldn’t read her expression. “I assume you have a butler and housekeeper who would help with such matters? And a secretary too.”

“I have all those people at my disposal, and they are most capable. However, a duchess must also be comfortable with such events.”

“Yes, I understand. I’m sure I can be up to the task.” She didn’t sound sure.

Ah well, she was right. Others could do most of the work. She need only be charming and look beautiful. How shallow that sounded. Surely he wanted

a bride who was more than that?

He glanced over his shoulder to see if Juno was following them. Perhaps she intended for them to be alone, despite the potential for scandal.

The goddess was there, trailing them at a discreet distance. Not entirely alone, then, but she was giving them space.

They reached the door that led to the covered walkway between the house and the orangery. He opened it for Lady Marina, who preceded him outside into the temperate autumn afternoon.

It was a short walk to the orangery, where he again held the door for Lady Marina. Inside, the temperature jumped several degrees. All around them sprouted vegetation, and the air was thick with the smell of dirt and life. He loved the scent of the outdoors, but this was different, perhaps because it was an artificial space. Things were brought here to grow in a controlled environment instead of allowed to flourish—or not—on their own.

Lady Marina was already making her way to the orange trees, which had been brought inside in their large pots. They sat at the opposite end of the building. He couldn't see any oranges from here and wondered if this would be a fruitless effort.

*Fruitless.*

“Are you *smiling*?”

He pivoted to see Juno standing just inside the door staring at him as if he possessed a second head. His pulse picked up speed, and his stomach knotted. The sensation was reminiscent of the time Cook had caught him pilfering a biscuit from the kitchen when he was six.

“No.”

“Yes, you were.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why wouldn't you want me to see you smiling?”

“I can't see any oranges.” He started walking toward the trees, hoping she would drop the matter of whether he'd smiled or not. Yes, he'd bloody smiled.

She hurried beside him. “You are the strangest man.”

He kept silent until they reached the other end of the building. “Find any?”

Lady Marina was on the other side of the grouping of trees. She poked her head around one. “Not yet. Oh, wait, there’s one.” She moved behind another tree, then reappeared with an orange in her palm. “What do I do with it?”

Juno held out a basket. “Just drop it in here.”

Lady Marina rolled the orange into the basket. “Now to the library.” She turned and strode purposefully toward the door.

Dare frowned after her. “Is she in a hurry to reach the library or to get away from me?”

“Did something happen?” the goddess asked sharply.

“No. I just don’t have the sense that she likes me.”

“She doesn’t know you.”

“I am trying to engage her. There is just no...” He’d been about to say attraction, but decided that wouldn’t be appropriate.

“No what?”

“No connection.”

She flinched. “You need time for that to develop. Instant...connection is very rare.”

“Are you speaking from experience, Mrs. Langton? Was there a Mr. Langton?”

“Yes, there was. However, my experience doesn’t signify,” she said imperiously, and damn if he didn’t almost smile again. He liked provoking her, apparently. That was nearly as surprising as him smiling.

“Just give it some time,” she repeated. “It’s only been a few days.”

“I don’t think time is going to change this situation.” There was no connection, no attraction, no anything drawing him to Lady Marina—or she to him—save the push of those who sought to match them together. The

goddess in front of him, on the other hand, provoked an extreme attraction. But he couldn't say that.

Why couldn't he? Since when did he censor himself?

"The situation doesn't need to change," she said icily. "*You do.*"

"Me?"

"You're obnoxious and rigid. I don't think you have it in you to do what's necessary to entice a woman to wed you."

"You don't think Lady Marina plays any role in this? She's perhaps less interested in this union than I am. At least I try to draw her into conversation. She behaves as if I'm anathema."

"So it's her fault that you're a complete boor?"

He winced, hating that his goddess thought so poorly of him.

She arched a brow at him and set a hand on her hip. "Perhaps you don't feel a connection with Marina because you're incapable of feeling that for anyone. Have you considered that?"

"I don't have to," he said softly. "I do feel a connection with someone. In fact, she drives me mad with her giddy smiles and forthright demeanor. I want to learn every single thing about her even though I shouldn't. More than anything, I want to kiss her and see if she'll taste as divine as I expect."

As he spoke, Juno's eyes went from narrowed to round. Her face paled shade by shade until she was the color of fine bone porcelain. "You can't mean...*me*?"

He moved toward her, his pulse thrumming as his body sang with want. "I can, and I do."



Juno froze as the duke invaded the space directly in front of her—far too close for a gentleman to come. She ought to move the basket she held between them, but didn't. Because her heart was beating frantically, and her breath was coming faster and faster.

He wanted to kiss her. She hadn't considered that. Not because she didn't find him attractive. She just hadn't allowed herself to think of him in that way. But now that was *all* she could think of. His lips covering hers, his hands touching her—

She shook her head. "That would be bad."

He stopped moving, one dark brow shooting up. "Bad?"

"You need to court my charge—Lady Marina. You should make her your duchess."

"I've already explained that I doubt the match will be acceptable to either of us," he said patiently.

He seemed utterly at ease, while she worried about her ability to catch her breath. He was the most frustrating man!

The sound of the door opening and voices in conversation carried from the other end of the orangery. They both snapped their heads in that direction before looking at each other.

"I thought I saw another door in the corner," he said, moving swiftly past

the orange trees.

She followed him, clutching the basket with both hands. Thankfully, there *was* a door, because the voices were moving closer.

He opened it, and unfortunately, it was only a cupboard for gardening implements. “Do we go inside or explain to whoever is coming why we’re here and Lady Marina is not?”

Juno swore under her breath and hurriedly preceded him into the cupboard. He stepped in behind her and closed the door.

Darkness didn’t descend, for there was a window high on the wall opposite the door. She held the basket in front of her, a sad shield between them. A shield? It was necessary, she reasoned. He’d said he wanted to kiss her. And she was not opposed. Indeed, the idea had rooted deep within her and taken hold.

She forced herself to listen to the conversation outside the closet. They were also looking for an orange. Hopefully, they would soon be on their way.

Juno let her gaze drift to his. His dark stare was fixed on her, coaxing the heat inside her to build. The small closet suddenly felt quite hot. She pressed one hand to her cheek and let the basket fall to her side, loose in her grip.

The voices outside began to diminish, as if they were returning to the house.

“I did try with Lady Marina,” the duke said quietly. “Whatever you think of me, I did try. I realize I’m not the most charming of gentlemen.” His mouth lifted in a small, self-deprecating smile, and it completely melted her.

He *was* an attractive man, but with a smile, he was absolutely captivating. She couldn’t look away.

The smile began to fade. “What?”

“You did it again,” she whispered. “Smiled. Why?”

“Because you’re here.”

“Oh bollocks.” She dropped the basket and grasped the lapels of his coat, dragging him toward her. Not that he needed much encouragement.

His arms came around her, and he kissed her. It wasn't gentle or tentative, and it sure as hell wasn't rigid. His lips were soft but firm, commanding hers as he tucked her against him, chest to chest, heat finding heat.

He angled his head as his tongue drove into her mouth. She reveled in his passion even as she was shocked by it. She clasped at his neck and shoulders, kissing him back with urgency and fire.

The press of his body was a delicious friction, but she wanted more. Twitching her hips, she arched into him. He was *definitely* the rigid duke.

Oh God, what was she doing?

Juno tore herself away, breathing harshly as she fought to regain her senses. "I shouldn't have done that," she murmured.

He stared at her, his gaze dark and hungry. "I didn't mind. I told you I wanted to kiss you."

"That doesn't mean we should have." Juno never regretted such things. Her independence gave her the freedom to engage in liaisons with whomever she chose—and she was usually quite selective. The duke had taken her by surprise, however, and if she wasn't careful, he was going to sweep her away. Just as her husband had done.

She didn't want a husband. And she certainly didn't want one like Bernard.

Plucking up the basket, she hurried from the closet without a word.

He followed her. "To the library, then?"

Just continue on their quest as though nothing had happened? She stopped and looked back at him, but the response she'd planned evaporated somewhere between her brain and her mouth. The latter had gone quite dry as she regarded him. No, it was the way he was regarding her—as if he wanted to devour her whole. Need throbbed in her core.

What could they do? It was bad enough that Marina was likely in the library without them. Perhaps the others who'd just left the orangery were there too and were wondering why Juno's charge was alone.

She groaned. “You are a terrible influence. Have you no redeeming qualities?” Actually, he did. As it happened, he was a very, very good kisser. “Don’t answer that,” she said as much to herself as to him.

Swinging around, she stalked from the orangery and into the house. He kept up with her easily, but was kind enough to walk a bit behind her. At least she thought he was being kind. Perhaps she was giving him too much credit. He had kissed her, after all.

No, she’d kissed him. The man her charge was supposed to wed. Whose match would earn her a bounty.

As they reached the library, she fished the list of items from her pocket and quickly scanned them. Presumably, Marina had already found the book they needed, and they could move on to the next object—an acorn. There had to be an oak tree close to the house.

“She’s not here,” the duke said simply.

Juno looked up from the parchment and still found his gaze unnerving. “What?” She glanced around the library and was dismayed to see they were indeed alone.

“She’s not here,” he repeated. “Do you suppose she continued on the hunt?”

“It’s possible.” Juno had showed her the list. “The next item is an acorn.”

“There’s a spectacular oak near the rose garden.” He walked to the window and pointed. “There.”

Juno joined him and looked outside. “She’s not there either.”

“May I see the list?” he asked politely.

She thrust the paper at him and craned her neck to see more of the exterior.

He handed the list back. “Perhaps she’s in the music room. A piece of music is after the acorn.”

“Do you think she grabbed the book?” Juno looked back at the paper and read the title aloud. “Where would we find this?”

“Over here, I think.” He strode to a bookcase near the corner and perused the shelves. “Not here. She must already have found it.”

Wouldn't she have come back toward the orangery, then? Or would she have continued on? Juno had a sinking suspicion Marina had abandoned the game entirely.

“Let's go to the music room,” Juno said, turning toward the door without giving him a chance to deter her. Or kiss her again.

*No, you kissed him.*

“Did you just growl?” he asked from behind her.

“No,” she lied.

“Here I thought I was the only one who did that.”

“Are you smiling again?” she asked without turning. He'd sounded like he was smiling.

“Perhaps.” Now he sounded like he was *grinning*.

Oh, this was a disaster.

They arrived at the music room, but Marina wasn't there either. But the piece of music they needed was.

It seemed likely that Juno's suspicion was correct. She exhaled. “I think Lady Marina may have quit the hunt. You'll need to continue on—or not—without us for now. I must go upstairs and see if she's retreated to our chamber.” She set the list into the basket and handed him the lot.

“I'll keep on it. How will you find me?”

“I've memorized the list. Though, I doubt we've any chance of winning.”

One of his impossibly dark, thick brows arched. “Planning the dinner seating was that important to you?”

She nearly giggled. “You've a sense of humor.”

“It's rather dry. Some don't appreciate it.”

*Well, I do.* She clamped her lips closed lest she say something she would regret.

Without a word, she swept from the music room and hastened to the

chamber she shared with Marina. As expected, the young woman sat in a chair near the hearth, her head bent over a book.

“Is that the book for our list?” Juno asked brightly, hoping Marina had just been distracted.

Marina looked up, her cheeks pink. “Yes, actually. I wanted to read it.”

“You’re sure you didn’t want to avoid continuing?”

The pink deepened. “You know me too well,” she murmured. “I did try to wait for you in the library, but you took so long to come that I thought you and the duke perhaps went somewhere else. It seemed I should retreat, and yes, I wanted to.” She looked down at the book in her lap.

“It’s all right. We were caught in the orangery with other guests.” And with kissing. Guilt tore through Juno.

Marina looked up at Juno, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I just don’t like the duke. It’s not his fault. He was trying to be pleasant even though he didn’t want to be. It’s obvious he doesn’t like me either.”

Juno’s heart twisted as she sat down in the chair opposite Marina’s. “Please don’t feel badly about this. I can’t agree that he doesn’t like you. He was only trying to get to know you. He possesses a gruff nature. Just as yours is tentative. I think you would grow to like one other. Indeed, the duke surprised me with a sense of humor just a short while ago.”

“I can’t see any way that we would suit,” Marina said with a surprising edge of steel. “I know it will disappoint Mama—and you.”

“I could never be disappointed in you.” Juno felt the sting of failure. Lady Wetherby was insistent that her daughter wed the duke. Would she try to force her into it if the duke decided to offer for her? Was the duke even considering it after kissing Juno in the orangery?

*What, you think he’d consider marrying you? You don’t even want to get married again.*

No, she did not. The sooner she banished the unfortunate encounter in the orangery from her mind, the better. Even so, she knew this marriage wasn’t

going to happen—she'd known it before she'd kissed him.

The door slammed open, making both Juno and Marina jump. Lady Wetherby stood at the threshold, anger emanating from her person.

This was bad.

The countess moved inside and closed the door with more force than was necessary. Her gaze landed on Marina and then shifted to Juno, who stood on wobbly feet.

“Is something wrong?” Juno managed to ask, though the question was ridiculous since something was clearly *quite* wrong.

“The duke has just informed me that he will not be offering for Marina.” She cast a livid stare at her daughter. “He said you do not suit.”

Marina said nothing but dropped her gaze to her book. Juno could see the young woman's shoulders quaking.

“He also said you agreed,” the countess said through clenched teeth. “Is that true?”

An unintelligible murmur slipped from Marina.

“What's that? Speak up, gel!”

“She said it is,” Juno answered. “I was going to speak with you after the treasure hunt. They both did try, but I'm afraid they mutually agreed the match would not benefit either of them.” The fib fell easily from her tongue as she sought to smooth this over as best she could.

“Not benefit them?” the countess shrieked. “Marrying a duke would be most beneficial to my daughter! She had to have done something to turn him away. But there's no help for it. This has been a complete failure.” Lady Wetherby's irate glare landed on Juno. “*You* have been a complete failure. Your employment is terminated immediately.”

“No, Mama!” Marina leapt to her feet, the book clutched to her chest.

The countess curled her lip. “And you have a book. You aren't supposed to have any books.”

“It was part of the treasure hunt,” Juno said, her own anger rising.

“Marina has done nothing wrong. The duke is a surly, unpleasant gentleman. Marina has avoided a lifetime of distress.”

Lady Wetherby sucked in a breath. “She would have been a duchess! That is worth at least a modicum of distress.” She held her hand out. “Give me the book. We’re leaving first thing in the morning. We’ll dine in our rooms.”

Marina handed her the book and sent her mother a mutinous glance.

“Ungrateful chit,” Lady Wetherby muttered. “You’re going to end up married to the rector if you can’t manage to pull yourself together.” She turned her attention to Juno. “You will not be returning home with us, of course. It is up to you to find your way wherever you wish to go. I’ll have your things sent to your residence in Bath. I will not provide a reference. Indeed, if asked, I can’t recommend you *at all*.” She clucked her tongue. “So disappointing since you were highly recommended.”

With a final glower at both of them, the countess spun on her heel and left.

“Oh, Juno, I am so sorry.” Marina’s voice caught, and she covered her face with her hands.

Juno put her arm around the younger woman. “Don’t cry over me. I’ll be fine. Truly.” Hopefully, Lady Cosford wouldn’t mind letting her borrow a coach to return to Bath. That was the least of her worries, however. Far more troubling was how Lady Wetherby’s anger would affect Juno’s future prospects.

Also vexing was how Lady Wetherby’s anger would affect poor Marina. Juno wished she could take the young woman with her. She’d be better off. She could read to her heart’s content, and no one would pester her to marry anyone.

“I’m sorry your mother doesn’t understand you,” Juno said softly. “Look at the bright side. At least you don’t have to marry someone you don’t want to.”



“For now,” Marina said bitterly. “She’ll find someone else who’s possibly more loathsome.”

“You didn’t really find the duke loathsome, did you?” Juno was finding him quite the opposite. Not that it mattered. Tomorrow, she would leave the house party and hopefully find a new position. If she moved quickly, she could secure something before Lady Wetherby had a chance to impugn her character.

Marina hugged her tightly, surprising Juno. “I’m going to miss you terribly.”

“You haven’t seen the last of me,” Juno said with a smile. “I’ll find a way to help you—if you want it.”

“You’re so very kind.” Marina stood back and wiped her hand over her eyes. “The kindest person I’ve ever known. And the bravest. I wish I could be like you. I’m going to try. Starting with telling my mother I refuse to have another Season—at least not this year. She should focus her attention on Rebecca.” Marina’s younger sister was seventeen and could perhaps make her debut.

“Perhaps I’ll run away to Scotland or Oxford. Yes, Oxford, where I can disguise myself as a man and steal into lectures.”

Juno laughed, feeling slightly better at having to leave her charge. She’d managed her mother this long and would be fine. Not that Juno had any choice in the matter.

Marina exhaled and clasped her hands together. “I’m feeling quite better about things. As you said, at least I don’t have to marry the odious duke.”

“I actually named him the rigid duke,” Juno said wryly, provoking a rare giggle from Marina.

“That fits him perfectly.”

Juno had thought so, but after their passionate encounter in the orangery, she wasn’t so sure. Nor was she going to find out.

And that left her with a twinge of disappointment.

After dining in her chamber—not with Marina, who’d had to dine with her mother in the countess’s chamber—Juno slipped from her room in search of a glass of brandy or port or whatever she could find. She was pleased to see the upstairs sitting room had a bottle of madeira set out with several glasses. Juno poured a small amount and situated herself in a chair to ponder her next move.

Cecilia strolled by the open doorway, and Juno called to her. “Care to join me?”

“I would, thank you.” Cecilia went to pour herself some madeira before taking a chair near Juno’s. “You were missed at dinner, as were Lady Wetherby and Lady Marina.”

“Does everyone know they’re leaving?” Juno asked.

“Yes. And it is just them?” Cecilia asked. “That’s what Lady Wetherby told the butler.”

“That is correct. I am not leaving with them because I am no longer in Lady Wetherby’s employ.” Juno pursed her lips before sipping her wine.

Cecilia’s brow furrowed. “I am quite sorry to hear that. Their failure to suit wasn’t your fault.”

“I doubt you’d convince Lady Wetherby of that,” Juno said wryly. “She let me go without a reference. I’m afraid I shall have to ask you for transport

to Wolverhampton so I may catch a coach to Bath.”

Waving her hand, Cecilia gave her a warm smile. “Nonsense, you must stay for the remainder of the party. Then I’ll send you to Bath in one of our coaches.”

“That’s awfully kind of you, but I couldn’t impose.”

“It’s no imposition. Furthermore, I’d be delighted to recommend you. As I said, none of this is your fault. Some people are not meant to be together.”

“I suppose, but I still feel we failed in our endeavors.” Juno frowned at her madeira before taking another sip.

“Perhaps we should have expected it,” Cecilia lamented. “There just wasn’t anything between them, not even a kernel of curiosity.”

“Plenty of people wed without so much as spending any meaningful time together.” Juno shook her head. “Which is terrible. I confess I am not disappointed for Marina. She didn’t like him.”

“Did she even give him a chance?” Cecilia blinked. “It doesn’t matter now.”

Juno grimaced. “I’m not entirely sure she did. However, the duke did seem to try, today at least.” Until Juno had ruined it by kissing him. Had she provoked him to speak with Lady Wetherby? Had her impulsive behavior cost her this position? Of course it had. She was quite furious with herself.

“He must have come to the conclusion that it was a lost cause,” Cecilia went on. “I understand he explicitly informed the countess that he wasn’t going to offer for Lady Marina.”

Flinching inwardly, Juno said, “Yes, that’s precisely what he did.”

“Perhaps Lady Marina is better off,” Cecilia suggested. “The duke is so very rigid and aloof.”

“I did have doubts as to whether she would have been happy,” Juno admitted. “Indeed, I think I may pity the woman who becomes his duchess.”

“He seemed more relaxed at dinner this evening.”

Juno sat up with interest. “Did he?”

Cecilia nodded. “He actually spoke with those around him and remained engaged throughout the meal. It was a far cry from the night before, when he abruptly left.”

Indeed. “How extraordinary.”

“He didn’t so much as flinch when Lady Bentham asked if he was going to leave too since his prospective bride is departing early.”

Juno bit back a giggle, briefly pressing her hand to her lips. “My goodness, what did he say?”

“He responded with a succinct ‘no.’ I did wonder if his behavior tonight is further proof that the match would not have worked. Without the pressure of having to determine if he and Lady Marina would suit, he was able to be more of his true self.”

Juno snorted. “Doubtful. He’s far too guarded to allow that. I’m just so shocked that he plans to stay when he hates house parties. What could possibly keep him here?” She cocked her head. “Perhaps it’s your stables. He does seem to enjoy his morning rides.”

“You’ve come to know the duke rather well. Likely due to your efforts to match him with Lady Marina.”

“Yes.”

Or was it something else?

“I wish you would stay too,” Cecilia said. “Why not enjoy the house party as a guest?”

“I’m not sure your other guests would appreciate that. I’m not—”

Cecilia held up her hand. “Don’t say you aren’t one of us. I know your grandfather was a baron. *Is* a baron. I do believe he’s still breathing.”

“You are frighteningly well informed,” Juno said good-naturedly.

“My mother ensured I committed *DeBrett’s* to memory. It’s settled, then. You’ll stay.” Cecilia didn’t ask and likely wouldn’t accept Juno’s refusal.

“I shouldn’t.”

“But you will because we are now dear friends, and I’ll be bereft if you

leave.” She pouted for good measure, but ended up grinning instead.

The giggle finally escaped Juno before she could press her fingers to her lips. “Fine. I’ll stay. But I wager the duke will end up leaving. Again, what possible reason could he have to stay?”

Cecilia shrugged. “As you said, perhaps he likes the stables. Whatever the reason, clearly something at Blickton has captured his attention.”



DARE LEANED against the wall just down from the room Juno shared with Lady Marina and crossed his arms. Perhaps he should stand here all night so that he could catch Juno in the morning before she left. He couldn’t let her leave without seeing her again.

And what did he expect would happen?

His former potential bride, Lady Marina, could very well come out first, and then what would he say? “*Pardon me, but I must speak with your companion.*”

He dropped his arms to his sides and squirmed, feeling awkward just at the thought. If it actually happened, he’d probably leap out of his skin.

Then what was he doing here?

He couldn’t seem to make himself leave. He’d likely never see Juno again if he did.

*Just what will you do if you happen to see her?*

He had no bloody idea. Exhaling, he pushed away from the wall. But before he could turn and leave, he caught sight of her. She was coming right toward him.

Garbed in a simple but elegant gown of dark pink and pale green, with her blonde hair styled exquisitely atop her head, she looked like a sugary confection. Certainly good enough to eat.

She walked past her door, slowing as she neared him. “Good evening,

Your Grace. Have you come to tell Lady Marina that you've changed your mind? That you're a blockhead?" She smiled sweetly—definitely good enough to eat, even when she was insulting him.

She wasn't wrong.

"I *am* a blockhead. However, I have not changed my mind about Lady Marina. I came to see you."

That silenced her for a moment. "Oh. Why?"

"I didn't want you to leave before I said goodbye."

"You're loitering outside my room to say goodbye?" She snorted, and he found the sound absurdly attractive. A lady had never done that in his presence. But she was no ordinary woman.

"Is that so strange?"

"For you? Yes."

"You think you know me so well."

"Don't you start with that half smile again." She took a step back. "You've said goodbye. Now you should go to bed."

How he wished that was an invitation. Bed sounded very inviting, especially if she were in it. "Actually, I didn't." He couldn't bring himself to do it. Saying goodbye would make it real. Final.

She exhaled and put a hand on her hip. "It doesn't matter, because I'm not leaving with Lady Wetherby and Lady Marina."

A giddy thrill tripped through him. "You're not?"

"My goodness, you actually look and sound quite relieved." She narrowed her eyes at him. "What's gotten into you? In fact, why aren't *you* leaving tomorrow?"

"I'd planned to be here for the duration of the party. I don't like to change plans."

She blinked at him. "Even if it means staying at a house party when you loathe house parties?"

"I don't loathe this one."

“Why?” She sounded incredibly skeptical.

“Because I met you. Now that I know you aren’t leaving, I’m particularly keen to stay so that I may get to know you better.”

She stared at him and repeated, “Why?”

“I should think it was obvious. We kissed earlier. It was quite nice.” He scowled and shook his head. “It was bloody brilliant.”

“How charming of you to curse in reference to my kissing ability,” she murmured. “It was a horrendous mistake. Anyway, I’m leaving day after tomorrow. I wanted to be on my way tomorrow, but Cecilia convinced me to stay.”

“And Lady Wetherby doesn’t mind?”

She narrowed her eyes until they were almost slits. “Lady Wetherby dismissed me.”

“Because I don’t want to marry her daughter?” He swore, and his gaze flew to hers. “My apologies. Sometimes I forget to keep such things in my head.”

“It takes much more than that to offend my sensibilities.”

Another point in her favor. Was there anything about her that wasn’t wonderful? Even her smiling was growing on him. Though, she wasn’t smiling now. “That Lady Wetherby let you go because of my actions says far more about her than it does you.”

“If only everyone thought so,” she murmured. “It doesn’t matter. She was unhappy with how things turned out, and I am the scapegoat.”

“Better she’s unhappy now than her daughter is for a lifetime. Neither of us wanted to marry the other. Lady Marina never failed to look positively tortured whenever she was in my presence.”

Juno shook her head. “You aren’t as self-aware as you think. You looked much the same in her presence.”

He exhaled. “In my defense, I look like that most of the time when I’m in the company of others, especially at an event like this.”

“Is it really torture?”

“It’s...uncomfortable.” He shifted his weight, feeling a flash of that familiar discomfort just from discussing it. “I prefer solitude or smaller gatherings.” He was more than comfortable at the moment in only her presence. “It’s quite taxing to spend so much time with so many people.”

“Is it?” She seemed to contemplate his revelations, which he never shared with anyone. “You’ve described Marina exactly. It’s too bad neither of you could get past that, for you have much in common.”

He arched a brow at her. “Are you still trying to play matchmaker?”

“No. I need to move on, and I am ready to do so. I will search for my next position and hopefully find more success than I did with Marina.” She sounded disappointed.

“I’m sure you did your best. Our failure to match wasn’t your fault.”

“Perhaps. However, I’d hoped to effect more change in my charge than I did. She improved her skills while I was with her, but overall, she’s no more ready to wed than she was when I started.” She pursed her lips. “Lady Wetherby was right in that I didn’t achieve what I was hired to do with Marina.”

“Somehow, I doubt that’s your fault either.”

Amusement creased the fine lines at the outer edges of her eyes. “How can you possibly know?”

“From what I can tell, you’re extremely capable, so much so that you’re in high demand. Doubtless, you will find another position quickly.” He hoped not too quickly. Perhaps she’d end up staying more than just tomorrow.

“I hope you’re right. If Lady Wetherby’s dissatisfaction spreads, my demand may plummet. I must get to bed. It will be an early morning seeing Marina off, and I’ll need to get started on my correspondence. I will likely spend most of the day doing that.”

She started to turn, and he felt a surge of longing. He nearly begged her not to go, but they couldn’t continue to stand outside her chamber. “Surely it



won't take so long. If the weather is fine, take a walk with me. We'll visit the oak that would have provided us with our winning acorn."

Her brow creased, as if she was confused. "Why are you suddenly charming? You are a most bizarre gentleman. The acorn would not have ensured our victory. We had several other items to obtain."

"I am confident we would have emerged triumphant."

"Because of the acorn."

"Why not?" He felt the side of his mouth tick up and noted her reaction.

Her beautiful green eyes narrowed once more. "Why are you behaving in this manner? Forgive me, but your current demeanor is not at all what you've presented the past few days."

"I like you. I have no discomfort when I am with you."

She froze for a second, then blinked. "Oh. Well, good night, then." She abruptly turned and went into her chamber.

He stared at the closed door for a moment, pleased with how the conversation had gone. Perhaps coming to this house party wouldn't be a complete waste of time after all.

Satisfied with her progress, Juno shook her hand out after drafting four letters to people who'd inquired about her services in the time that she'd been working for Lady Wetherby. She'd ask Lord Cosford to post them and hope at least one would bear fruit.

She rose from the desk and glanced about the room, which was rather disheveled from Marina's departure and the fact that since Juno hadn't left it yet that day, no one had come to tidy it. She supposed she should give them that chance, meaning she should leave.

A look toward the window said it was a fine day indeed. Perfect for a walk with a rigid duke. A handsome and suddenly charming rigid duke.

*I like you.*

Those three simple words had stayed with her all night and were currently propelling her to accept his invitation. The memory of his lips on hers, of his tongue licking erotically into her mouth, of his hands clasping her body and leaving her aquiver, rushed over her. He'd invited her to walk, not to engage in a liaison.

Would she?

She was between positions, and she'd made a habit of taking a lover during those periods. None of them had been dukes, however, rigid or otherwise. In fact, none had been titled at all. Was his lofty station a

deterrent? Certainly not. His disagreeability was.

Except he'd become far less brusque, at least with her. He'd been gruff with Marina, but then Marina hadn't been exactly pleasant to him. She also understood his behavior now, that he truly struggled around most people. Honestly, he and Marina really were so very much alike. Perhaps that was why they didn't suit.

Saying goodbye this morning had been difficult, but Marina had displayed a steel and determination that had alleviated Juno's fears. She suspected Lady Wetherby would be in for a shock if she pushed too hard. Perhaps Juno had been more effective than she'd originally thought.

A golden leaf floated past the window, and Juno decided to take advantage of the glorious day. Quickly changing into a smart, dark blue walking dress, she grabbed her gloves and a fetching wide-brimmed hat, along with the post she intended to give to Lord Cosford, before dashing downstairs.

Finding the butler, Juno gave him the letters, asking him to deliver them to her host. Now, where would the duke be?

As she neared the drawing room, which seemed to be the headquarters of the house party, she heard voices. Walking inside, she was met almost immediately by Cecilia. "Oh, there you are, Juno. I was just going to send up for you. We've planned an impromptu walk to the village since the weather is so lovely."

Juno scanned the room and found the duke standing in the corner, wearing his usual scowl. What had happened? Why had he reverted to his ill-natured self?

"We'll walk to the village and take refreshment at The Wayward Knight," Cecilia continued. "Then coaches will bring us back so that we have time to rest and change for dinner."

"That sounds splendid," Juno said, darting a look toward the currently *very* rigid duke. "Pardon me a moment." She went to where he stood in the

corner. “You look as if someone has stolen your horse.”

He blinked at her in surprise. “I can’t possibly look that angry.”

She laughed softly. “I don’t know how angry that would make you, but you do appear quite disgruntled. What’s happened to cause your wretched mood?”

“I don’t want to walk to the village with everyone.”

“But you invited me to walk today. In fact, that’s why I came downstairs.”

Another flash of surprise, but different from the previous—there was a spark in his gaze too. Anticipation, perhaps. “Is it?”

“Now I wonder if I should find someone else to walk with.”

“No,” he said quickly. “I just... This is not the walk I had planned.”

She cocked her head to the side. “What *did* you have planned?”

“Just the two of us.”

“I see.” She thought of what he’d said the night before about not being able to tolerate so many people and about not liking to change plans. “What if we walk behind everyone else?”

He relaxed, his shoulders dipping. She could see some of the tension leave his frame.

“Why are you so very rigid?”

“I like routine. I like knowing what’s expected.”

“You don’t like surprises, and this spontaneous activity has set you off-kilter.”

Appreciation warmed his gaze. “You understand.”

“I think I do.”

A smile teased his lips, and she wished he would just outright grin. He was even more handsome when those flashes of humor lit his face. If he allowed it to take over, she suspected the effect would be devastating.

Cecilia came toward them. “Ready, then? We’re going to leave in a few minutes. Unfortunately, Lord Cosford isn’t able to join us due to an

emergency with one of his horses.”

The duke’s brow furrowed. “I hope everything is all right. Does he need any help?”

“I’m sure all will be well. Thank you for your concern, Duke.” She inclined her head toward him, then departed.

Juno was a bit surprised she hadn’t lingered. She rather expected Cecilia would want to walk with her, which would ruin the duke’s revised expectations. Perhaps she wouldn’t. And if she did, well, Juno would deal with that problem when and if it arose.

She turned to him as the others began to leave the drawing room. “I suppose we should be on our way.”

“I’m amazed you’re able to perceive me so well.”

She cast him a sly look as they waited for everyone to precede them from the room. “I’m not sure that’s flattering.”

“I only mean that you’re so different from me. You aren’t rigid—I believe that’s the word you used—at all. You’re cheerful and charming, obviously quite comfortable with any number of people around you. I wonder if you thrive on it.”

“I do. Somewhat. I’m always keen for a reprieve.” She sent a look toward the last of the guests leaving and whispered, “Especially with Society types.”

He laughed. “Am I not a Society type?”

She stared at his face, shining with amusement. Absolutely devastating. “Oh, do that again.”

“What?”

“Laugh. Promise me you’ll do it again before the day is over.”

“With you beside me, I’d say that’s a great possibility. I don’t recall the last time someone provoked me to laughter.” He looked at her in bemusement. “That’s what I mean—we’re so very different. You are light, the very sun, while I am darkness. Not even the moon, for that can glow brightly. Rather a void.”

She frowned at him. “You can’t think that about yourself. You are certainly not a void.” She grasped his forearm and gave him a squeeze. “See? You’re flesh and bone, a man.” Suddenly, she was thinking of him in the most primal way.

“We should go before we can’t catch up.” She spun on her heel and started from the drawing room.

He walked beside her once they left the room. “You didn’t answer my question. Am I not a Society type?”

“Heavens, no. You’re a duke, of course, but I gather you loathe Society. And you certainly don’t behave like anyone I’ve met in Society.”

“You’ve met a great many people like that?”

“My grandfather is a baron, so yes, I’ve met enough.”

He looked genuinely surprised. “How on earth does the granddaughter of a baron end up as a paid companion?”

“My dear duke, we’re all just a decision away from a completely different life. Only think of your near engagement to Marina. If you’d decided to propose, everything would have changed for you already.”

“This sounds like a story I’ll need to hear on the way to the village. Will you tell me?”

“You’ll have to tell a story of my choosing in return.” Juno didn’t yet know what she would ask, but she’d think of something.

They stepped outside into the sunlight, and Juno looked up at him. “Do we have an accord?”

“We do.” He looked at her intently, his dark eyes seemingly trying to see every part of her. “Now tell me about the decision that changed your life.”



IT WASN’T what Dare had envisioned when he’d invited Juno to walk with him today. It was better. He hadn’t anticipated the curl of joy threading

through his chest or the absolute rightness of how it felt to be with her, as if there were nowhere else he was supposed to be.

They walked several paces behind the nearest trio of people. Everyone was somewhat spread out along the track, golden sunlight bathing them as trees painted in a riot of color lined the right side.

“Deciding to marry Bernard Langton changed my life,” she said simply. Then she smiled and shook her head. “Actually, it wasn’t the deciding part exactly. It was when I informed my parents that I wanted to marry the dashing schoolteacher I’d met at the local assembly. They were horrified.”

He looked over at her, resplendent in her dark blue walking gown trimmed with bright gold. “Because he was a schoolteacher?”

“Not *just* because of that, but yes, that was a factor. He was also boisterous and charming—excessively so is how my mother described him.”

“He sounds like he was a good match for you. You’re very charming.”

“My mother would argue that was why I needed a husband who was more sedate.”

“She thought you needed calming?” Dare wouldn’t change a thing about her. *Now*. When he’d first met her—a scant few days ago—he’d thought she smiled too much, that she was too...energetic. That seemed ludicrous given how much her smiles and energy lit the world. *His* world.

Another laugh. “Why, yes, she did. More importantly, she wanted me to marry someone respectable. Bernard was loud and opinionated. People either adored him or reviled him. I fell into the former category, of course. He also tended to drink more than he ought.” She winced, and he wondered how Langton had met his demise.

“What happened to him?”

“I’m not entirely sure. He didn’t come home from the pub one night. The blacksmith found him at the bottom of a hill just outside town, facedown in a stream.” She spoke matter-of-factly, as if she either no longer grieved him or hadn’t grieved him at all. Except she’d said she adored him.

He studied her profile, noting the slight pucker of her brow. “Do you suspect something sinister?”

“Not really. It’s likely he was intoxicated and suffered an unfortunate accident.”

“Had you been married long?”

“Less than a year. As you can imagine, he left me in a bit of a state,” she said wryly. “I couldn’t go back to my family, not after they refused to even attend our wedding. I responded to an advertisement for a paid companion in Bath. While there, I helped my employer’s wallflower granddaughter to secure a husband. Another woman offered to double my salary if I would come and help her daughter do the same.”

“So you left your employer?”

She shook her head. “Lady Dunwoody gave me a chance when I most needed it. I stayed with her until she passed away about a year later.”

“You’re loyal.”

“To a fault, some might say.” She grinned at him. “I think it’s important to stand by your principles and alongside the people you’ve pledged to help or who mean something to you.”

He suspected her fierce loyalty stemmed from the fact that her family hadn’t stood by her. A need to remain at her side, to show her that she was valued rose strong within him.

“What an admirable quality to possess,” he said softly.

“I’ve told you about my life-changing decision. Now it’s your turn to answer my question.”

“I haven’t made any life-changing decisions,” he said.

“I didn’t think you had. You wouldn’t like your life changed. You didn’t even like the parameters of today’s walk changed.” There was humor in her tone, and he couldn’t help but feel a buoyancy that only she evoked.

“Is that why you didn’t give Marina a chance? Marriage is a massive life change. Perhaps you’re not ready for that.”



He flinched inwardly. A direct hit. “I did try to give her a chance. She just wasn’t what I’m looking for.”

Juno tipped her head as they walked, one eye assessing him. “Then here is my question. What are you looking for in a wife? What would motivate you to completely upend your life?”

When she put it like that, he wasn’t sure he wanted to upend his life. But he must. “I am a duke, and I need a duchess. I came here because my mother insisted I would find her. I believe she worked with Lady Cosford to set up this entire house party for the purpose of matching me with Lady Marina. Everyone, it seems, believed we would suit perfectly.”

“Except you didn’t.”

“No, we did not, and it wasn’t for lack of trying. You either engage with someone or you don’t. I realize many people wed without feeling a sense of connection or...rightness, but I am not one of them.”

“This is also an admirable quality,” she said solemnly. “Truly. I must apologize for haranguing you about not trying to make it work.”

“As you said, on the surface, the match seemed ideal. However, appearances are not always what we think. Only consider you and Langton—you were deemed an unsatisfactory match by your family and yet you knew it was the right decision.”

“I suppose you’re right, but in the end, things didn’t turn out well for me and him. Perhaps my parents weren’t entirely wrong.”

“You mustn’t doubt yourself, especially about things that have already transpired. You can’t change what happened. You can only determine how it affects you.”

“My goodness, but you possess far more depth than I anticipated. And that was my mistake,” she added with a soft smile. “You still haven’t answered my question. What sort of woman will provoke you to wed?”

He thought for a moment before answering. “Someone who appreciates life—not the trifles of Society, but the simple joy of a walk on a beautiful

autumn day. Someone with courage and strength, who doesn't need the title of duchess to feel accomplished." He hesitated before adding, "Someone who won't cower from me or find me too...rigid."

Her gaze met his with sympathy and a tinge of something else—regret, perhaps. "I hope I haven't insulted you. Sometimes I should really learn to hold my tongue."

"Not at all—on either count. Your forthrightness is another admirable trait." He realized everything he'd said described her perfectly. She radiated joy and strength. She was a woman who'd made the choices she wanted and made no apologies.

She also provoked him to smile and even laugh. To step outside his rigidity—to use her word—and to even find joy in spontaneity.

The silence stretched between them, punctuated by the nearby song of a bird. He hoped he hadn't made things awkward. He wasn't the most socially adept person. "Perhaps I ought to hire you to help me find a wife."

She sent him a sharp look, then laughed. "You're joking."

"Yes. I realize I don't do that very often."

"You're loosening up, then?" she asked.

"Apparently. I came on this walk when I didn't really want to, didn't I?"

She sent a gentle elbow into his arm. "Come now, did you really not want to come? I heard you take a walk every day. And a ride."

"I love being outside. Just not with a host of others." He inclined his head toward everyone in front of them.

"Are there other people here?" she asked coyly. "I hadn't noticed."

In truth, he'd barely registered them either. He'd been too focused on her, too engrossed in their conversation. Her green eyes glittered in the afternoon sunlight, and he silently acknowledged that he'd never met a more beautiful woman—and not just on the outside.

The village came into view as they crested a small hill. He didn't want this surprisingly idyllic walk to end.

“I’m glad I decided to stay at the party,” he said. “Are you?”

“I am.”

And yet she would leave tomorrow. Unless he could persuade her to stay. For what reason? Because he couldn’t bear for her to go.

“Will you change your mind about departing tomorrow? We could take another walk. Or better yet, ride with me in the morning. You said it was overrated, but I’d like to prove you wrong. I could also help you improve your chess game.”

She slowed, almost to a stop. “My goodness, that would be quite a full itinerary, and I admit to being enticed. I should love to improve my chess game, and I’m just as eager to prove to you that riding *is* overrated. Still, I should probably go. I’ve posted letters today in the hope of securing my next position. I’ll need to get home to Bath, where I can receive responses.”

“What if I hire you?”

“To find you a wife?” She smiled softly. “I thought you were joking.”

“I was, but now I’m not.” He’d do anything to get her to stay.

“Thank you, but no. I have no expertise in that. I work with ladies, not gentlemen.”

“Can’t you see I’m in need of learning flexibility and charm? It can’t be any harder than working with young ladies.”

She laughed then and touched his hand. Though they wore gloves, the connection jolted him. He wanted to take her in his arms and rekindle the kiss they’d abandoned yesterday.

He glanced toward the people who were now rather far in front of them, for they had managed to stop walking. While the others weren’t close, any one of them could look back and would see them embracing. If he kissed her. Which meant he couldn’t. He let the anticipation and sexual tension curl inside him as she withdrew her hand.

She licked her lower lip, and he nearly groaned. “I don’t think I can help you. Indeed, I believe you already possess the ability to relax and allow your

humor and charm—yes, I think you possess charm—to come through. Just stop keeping everyone at arm’s length. I understand it’s difficult, but the more you allow yourself to be vulnerable, the more rewarding relationships will be.”

Yes, he wanted exactly that. With her. He’d already shared more with her than he ever had with anyone. He liked how that felt. He didn’t want to go back to locking everything up inside.

“We should keep moving,” she said with a smile before hastening into a fast walk.

He wasn’t going to let her avoid answering his question. “Even though you’ve refused my offer of employment, will you stay? At least one more day?”

She looked over at him, another smile—how had he ever disliked them—teasing her lips. “I’ll consider it. Now don’t pester me. I’d much rather hear about your favorite horse. I assume you have more than one.”

Dare launched into a discussion of his favorite horses and did his best to enjoy the present. He’d savor every moment he had with her.

By the time they reached The Wayward Knight, Juno wasn't sure she knew the duke at all. She also wished she wasn't still calling him "the duke" in her head. She knew his name. He was Alexander Brett, Duke of Warrington. Did his family, which seemed to just be his mother, call him Alexander? Alex? Probably not. Presumably, he had a courtesy title, not that she recalled what it was. His mother likely called him that.

Juno noted that Cecilia hadn't slowed along the track even once for Juno and the duke to catch up. She had, however, cast a few glances backward, which told Juno that her hostess was aware they'd been lagging behind. Had others noticed she and the duke walking together?

Not wishing to spark any gossip or speculation, Juno made a point of leaving his company when they reached the inn. She made her way to the refreshment table to fetch a tankard of ale and moved to the edge of the private dining room allotted for their party.

As soon as Juno sipped her ale, another woman from the house party approached her. Lady Gilpin was perhaps forty with dark auburn hair and a warm disposition. She was a close friend of Cecilia's. "Mrs. Langton, did you enjoy the promenade?"

"I did, thank you. What a splendid day."

"Indeed. I pray you won't find me intrusive, but I've heard you're no

longer employed by Lady Wetherby. Dare I hope you're looking for a new position?"

"I am, actually." Juno assumed Cecilia had told her. "Seeking a new position, that is." She refrained from mentioning Lady Wetherby or Marina at all. It was better that way.

Lady Gilpin's eyes lit. "How fortunate for me—and my daughter. She will be embarking on her first Season in the spring, and I would dearly love for you to prepare her."

"Tell me about her," Juno said with a smile.

"She's quite shy. She can never seem to find the right words when in social situations. It's as if her tongue is twisted in knots."

"I see. Well, that is something we can work on. How are her other skills?"

"Good, I think. Though, she could use a bit of help with comportment. If there's something to be spilled or an item of clothing to be torn, Dorothy will be the one to suffer it. I suppose she's clumsy." Lady Gilpin flashed a worried smile.

"I've helped other young ladies who are very similar to how you describe your Dorothy. I'm confident we can have her ready to conquer London next spring." Did that mean Juno would accept Lady Gilpin's offer? Companion to the daughter of a baronet wasn't the most illustrious position, but it was right in front of her. What if no one else responded to her inquiries because Lady Wetherby made quick work of denigrating her? Better she secure a position now before she wasn't able to.

"Does that mean you'll come?" Lady Gilpin looked so happy that Juno couldn't possibly decline now. "Your reputation is exemplary. Indeed, I considered writing to you a few months ago, but my mother assured me you would be too busy to help someone such as my Dorothy."

Juno winced inwardly. The inquiries she'd sent were to a viscountess, two countesses, and a marchioness. If given the choice, would she have selected Dorothy?

It didn't matter, and she wouldn't feel bad for working to place herself in the highest echelons of Society. She was a woman alone in the world, and she'd been fortunate to build an independent livelihood. She'd be a fool not to take the best-paying, most distinguished position she could find. Just as she'd be a fool now to decline a job that was hers for the taking.

"I'd be delighted to help Dorothy," Juno said. "I don't ever commit to a specific time period, however. It may be that we complete our work together before the Season begins. I'll be able to give you a better assessment after I spend time with her. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Oh yes. Thank you so much." The woman's relief was palpable, and Juno was doubly glad she'd agreed. "I can barely contain my excitement. When can you start?"

"I need to return home to Bath first, but I can come to you a week after the house party ends. Will that give you time to recover?"

"That would be just lovely. Dorothy will be so pleased to have help. She can be so nervous."

Juno looked forward to helping her. She sounded a far sight easier than Marina had been. That thought made Juno feel bad. She'd come to care for Marina a great deal, but she was rather difficult. She was the only young woman Juno had tried to help who hadn't really wanted assistance. Indeed, she would rather have been left alone.

They chatted a few more minutes before Lady Gilpin excused herself. Juno felt her own sense of relief at having secured a new position before Lady Wetherby could malign her. And now she had a bit of time before she had to start.

Her gaze strayed to the duke. He stood across the room with a pair of gentlemen, but he seemed rather disengaged. He was staring at her. When her eyes met his, he lifted his tankard in a silent toast.

An unexpected flash of heat swept through her. Unexpected? It shouldn't have been. Not after yesterday's kiss or the way her entire body had tingled

when she'd touched him during the walk to the village.

The idea of spending a few days tucked away with the duke was incredibly alluring. And she was nearly certain he'd be interested in a liaison. Weren't house parties perfectly suited to such endeavors?

No, she couldn't risk her livelihood in that way. If Lady Gilpin were to catch wind of any impropriety on Juno's part, she wouldn't allow someone with such a base character to supervise her daughter. Juno would need to be on her best behavior until she left for Bath.

Cecilia approached her. "What did Lady Gilpin want?"

"To offer me a position helping her daughter. I assumed you'd told her I was looking for a new arrangement."

"I did, in fact. I've known Penelope for years. Are you going to help Dorothy? She's such a lovely girl but a rather awkward bundle of nerves." Cecilia smiled faintly.

"Yes, I've agreed to help. Thank you for mentioning me."

"It was my pleasure. I also came to tell you that you'll be riding back to the house with the duke and me."

At first, Juno had thought she was going to say only the duke. Because she hoped that would be the case? She couldn't deny there were far worse things than sharing a coach alone with the duke.

"I'd hoped to ride back with Sir Edmund and Lady Gilpin," Juno said. "So we could discuss Dorothy."

"Oh dear, I think they've probably already left. They were in the first coach. Anyway, you're the only person I trusted to ride with the duke. He frightens everyone else." Cecilia laughed.

Juno wasn't amused. Now that she knew the duke better, she understood his eccentricities. He wasn't at all scary. "Is that true?"

Sobering, Cecilia pursed her lips briefly. "Not exactly, no. He doesn't frighten most of the gentlemen, but they are all riding with their wives." Right, and there were no other single gentlemen. By Cecilia's design.



Cecilia turned toward the door. "I'd best oversee the departures. The conveyances are already outside."

Juno finished her ale and set the empty tankard down on a table. As she started toward the door, she noted that most people had already left. Except the duke. He was waiting for her just inside the threshold.

"I understand we're to ride back together," he said. His voice was always so deep and tinged with that gruff growl that she liked more than she realized.

"With Cecilia," she clarified, lest he think it was to be just the two of them. Would he have looked forward to that?

"Yes." There was a darkness to the word, as if he were disappointed that they wouldn't be alone. A delighted thrill shot through her.

They moved into the main room and then outside into the yard, where the last group was climbing into a barouche. That left a rather small conveyance for the three of them who remained.

Except a gig pulled into the yard, and it was driven by Lord Cosford. Grinning, he waved at his wife. "I'm here, my darling!"

"Oh!" Cecilia put her hand to her chest, then smiled broadly. "What a wonderful surprise."

"I couldn't let the entire outing go by without an appearance," Cosford said. He looked toward the duke and Juno. "You don't mind if I steal the countess away, do you?"

Cecilia was already walking toward the gig as he jumped down to help her inside.

What could Juno say? She glanced sideways at the duke, who gave her an infinitesimal shrug. Furthermore, did she even want to say anything? Now she would be alone with the duke.

Her suspicions that Cecilia was orchestrating opportunities for them to be alone crystallized into certainty.

"See you back at the house!" Cecilia waved as her husband drove from the yard.

“I suppose that means we’ll have the coach to ourselves,” the duke noted. He offered her his arm and escorted her to the conveyance where the coachman waited.

The duke helped her inside and climbed in after her. The space in the coach seemed smaller than normal. And dim. *Intimate*. The sun was low in the sky. Not quite dusk, though it would be soon. There was a lantern, but it hadn’t been lit. Presumably, they would arrive at the house before it was dark, so lighting it hadn’t seemed necessary.

Or perhaps Cecilia was trying to set a mood. Had she transferred her matchmaking to Juno now that Marina was gone? Juno didn’t need a match. She was quite capable of remaining on her own and happy to do so.

“I do think Cecilia planned this,” Juno murmured as the coach began to move.

“Do you?” The duke’s thigh wasn’t touching hers, but if she moved slightly, it would be.

Juno shook her head. “Who knows. We’ll be back at the house shortly.”

“Pity that.”

She jerked her head toward his. “Why?”

“Because there are at least a dozen things that have come to mind—and more by the moment—that I should like to do to you in a private setting such as this.” He angled himself toward her. “The question is, will you allow me to?”

The world fell away so that it was just Juno, the duke, and the crashing beat of her heart. Oh hell, she couldn’t keep thinking of him as “the duke.” “What do people call you?” she asked throatily. Swallowing, she added, “People you like, I mean.”

He grinned, and she nearly threw herself at him.

“Dare. It’s short for the courtesy title I held before I inherited—I was Marquess of Daresbury.”

“Dare.” That was possibly the best and worst name she’d ever heard. She

didn't want to be dared by him, and yet she was. Thoroughly and devilishly tempted.

His eyes slitted, and desire pooled in her core. "No one has ever said my name like that." He was so close, she was enveloped in his rich, masculine scent. His raspy breathing filled the coach, matched only by her own short, shallow breaths.

"It's a very short trip to the house." She curled her hands around his neck. "We'd best hurry."



DARE ENCIRCLED his arms around her waist and hauled her against him. He slanted his mouth over hers and lost himself in the intoxicating rapture of her embrace.

This was spontaneous and reckless—completely at odds with who he was. He didn't care. He couldn't help himself. Everything he expected, everything he knew, disappeared next to Juno. She was a light, a temptation, an absolute craving.

He kissed her deeply, pouring all his pent-up tension and emotion into this moment. She clutched him tightly, her tongue sliding against his with a fervor that matched his. That she wanted this as much as he did made his spirit soar. This was bliss. He'd never felt it before.

Their positioning on the seat was awkward, made doubly so when they hit a bump on the road, and she nearly fell. Dare clasped her more tightly. She slid her leg over his lap and straddled him, rising over him.

"Better?" she murmured between kisses.

He growled into her mouth and kissed her again, one hand holding her nape and the other gripping her hip. Yes, better, but not good enough. He wanted her against him. Completely.

No, he wanted to be inside her. But there wasn't time for that. They'd

arrive at the house before either of them would finish. Or not. The level of his desire was a heretofore unknown height.

He tugged gently on her neck as he kissed down her jaw, his lips and tongue finding their way to the hollow of her throat. How he wished she was wearing something that didn't button up so high.

She began to adjust her skirts, which were bunched between them, pulling at the yards of fabric until there was less separating them—just his clothing. Then she sank down on him, her sex a delicious heat against his stiff cock.

Arching up, Dare pressed against her, simulating intercourse. How desperately he wanted to sheath himself inside her. She rose up, then ground down again. He moved with her and brought her mouth back to his, holding tightly as he tried to maintain some semblance of control.

She whimpered into his mouth, and he slipped his hand from her hip, finding the end of her skirts and the start of her flesh. Grazing his fingers along her thigh, he sought her sweet core. As she lifted up once more, he touched her there, teasing her clitoris and drawing a low moan from her throat.

“Let me,” he whispered as he worked his fingers over her flesh.

“Yes,” she breathed. Then louder, “Yes.”

He stroked her into a frenzy, her body moving against his hand. “Come for me, Juno.”

“I need you inside me. Please.”

Happy to oblige, he thrust his finger into her and pumped. She cast her head back and moaned. He felt her muscles tighten around him just before she cried out.

“Shhh,” he urged, claiming her mouth again as she rode her orgasm.

She barely stilled, her ragged breaths filling the coach, when they stopped in front of the house.

“We're here.” He gently pulled his hand from beneath her skirts.

She looked down at him, her eyes shining with satisfaction. “Thank you.

I'm sorry you didn't get to..."

"Next time." He held her gaze and deliberately put his finger in his mouth, sucking the taste of her from his skin.

Her eyes narrowed with renewed desire as she slid onto the seat beside him and rearranged her skirts. Just in time too, for the door opened.

Dare climbed out, then helped her to the ground. He offered his arm, and they started toward the house.

"There shouldn't be a next time," she said, keeping her voice low. "I've just accepted a position from Lady Gilpin. I'm afraid I must be on my best behavior while I'm here."

"I'm sure we can be discreet. Ask anyone who's conducted a liaison during a house party. It happens all the time."

"That may be, but I can't risk my livelihood. I do hope you understand."

He couldn't let that be the end of it. He stopped before they reached the door, which was being held open by a footman. "Then let's go somewhere else."

She was a step in front of him and looked back. Her eyes glinted with amusement. "Where?"

"Anywhere. So long as you're there."

Lady Gilpin stepped from the house. "Oh! My coach is already gone. I'm afraid I left my hat inside. I had to take it off after one of the pins came loose. Ah well, I'll have a footman fetch it." She smiled at Juno. "Coming in?"

"Yes." Juno gave Dare a rather enigmatic stare as she let go of his arm. Then she disappeared into the house with her new employer.

Dare frowned. That wouldn't be the end of it. Juno had opened something inside him, and he'd be damned if he'd let it slam closed.

By the time the final course was removed from the table, Juno realized her cheeks hurt from smiling. That was remarkable since she was a generally pleasant person, most often with a smile on her face. This was different, however. Tonight, she'd been singularly engaged with the man beside her. The man she'd once called the rigid duke, which seemed asinine now.

Not that *he'd* spent the entire evening smiling. He was still far more reserved than her, especially in the company of others. She noticed he was distinctly different, more at ease, when it was just the two of them.

Thinking of that brought to mind their short carriage ride back to the house that afternoon. It was no wonder she'd spent the evening in a state of elation.

Now it was time to remove to the drawing room with the other ladies, and Juno found she didn't want to leave. "Thank you for a delightful dinner," she murmured to Dare.

His eyes met hers with a smoldering heat, and she had to clench her thighs together against a wave of arousal. "The pleasure was entirely mine."

"Not entirely. Don't make me argue with you." She winked at him before departing the dining room.

As she entered the drawing room, she looked for Cecilia. Her new friend owed her an explanation.

Unfortunately, Juno had to patiently wait to draw their hostess away from Lady Bentham and Mrs. Hadley, two ladies who liked to talk incessantly. At last, she had Cecilia alone. Then a footman offered them glasses of madeira.

“Why thank you, Vincent,” Cecilia said, taking one of the wineglasses.

Juno also took one and swallowed a sip as the footman moved on. She fixed an expectant stare on Cecilia. “Are you playing matchmaker with me and the duke?”

Surprise rippled across her features. “Of course not. Why would I do that?”

“I can’t think of a single reason, particularly since you also recommended me to Lady Gilpin. However, I can’t discount the ways in which I’ve been alone with the duke today.”

“Because of the ride back in the coach?” Cecilia waved her hand. “I do apologize for abandoning you to travel with my husband.”

“You also didn’t spend any of the promenade with me, despite looking back to check on my progress.” Juno narrowed her eyes. “You weren’t checking my progress, though, were you? You were trying to see if I was still with Dare.”

Cecilia’s lashes fluttered. “Dare?”

A low sound vibrated in Juno’s throat.

“Goodness, you sounded like him just then.”

“I did not.” Perhaps a little.

“Why are you calling him Dare?” Cecilia asked coyly.

Juno rolled her eyes. “Because I grew tired of calling him the rigid duke.”

Cecilia’s eyes rounded. “Did you call him that to his face?”

Ignoring the question, Juno took another sip of wine. “You also sat me next to him at dinner again when there was no reason to. Do you deny that you’re playing matchmaker?”

Lifting a shoulder, Cecilia also drank. “Do you deny that you and he are attracted to each other?”

Was it obvious? Juno tamped down a surge of apprehension. “That doesn’t signify.”

“Doesn’t it?” A glint of triumph lit Cecilia’s eyes.

“You can’t think he’d marry me. I don’t even want to get married.”

Cecilia looked down at her wine. “I’m sorry. I should have spoken to you first. It’s only that, well, you seem to share the connection that he and Lady Marina lacked. Call me a romantic, but I believe in love.” Her gaze drifted in the direction of the dining room, and Juno thought she must be thinking of her husband.

“I used to,” Juno said quietly. “I think perhaps I stopped—at least for me—when my husband... Well, when he turned out to be not quite what I’d hoped.” His penchant for drink and general lack of focus on her and their marriage had become troublesome before his death. She’d hoped they would get back to the bliss of their courtship, but then he’d tumbled down that hill.

“That sounds like quite a tale. If you believed in love once, you will again,” Cecilia said with a smile. “You just need to meet the right person. Perhaps you already have.”

“The duke?” Juno scoffed. “I am not in love with him.” She was something, though. He wasn’t at all the type of man she would have expected to provoke romantic thoughts. Yet she’d thought of him far too much since kissing him. Thoughts that had only multiplied—and intensified—since their ride together in the coach earlier.

“I just hope you aren’t closed to the idea,” Cecilia said warmly. “It would be a shame to miss out on something special, even if it isn’t forever.”

Of course it wouldn’t be forever. He needed a duchess, and that could never be her. As tempted as she was by him, she needed to keep her eye on the future. That future contained Lady Gilpin’s daughter.

To that end, Juno ought to go and speak with her. But the gentlemen started to filter into the drawing room, and Juno held her breath waiting for Dare to appear.



He filled the doorway, commanding her complete attention—from the thick, dark hair atop his head that she hadn't yet gotten to run her fingers through to the delectable athleticism of his body, obvious when he walked, but even more so when he held her in his arms. Heat suffused her, and she wondered how she would stay away from him for the duration of her stay.

No, she wondered *why*.



DARE'S GAZE found Juno perched on a chair, her attention focused completely on him. His body instantly reacted, his pulse picking up speed and his cock twitching. He'd desperately wanted to frig himself after their encounter in the coach, but there hadn't been much time before dinner. Plus, he was rather enjoying the sensation of being wholly on edge. Dinner had been a delicious torment. He only hoped there would be sweet relief later—not with his hand, but in Juno's arms.

Before he could make his way to her, he was intercepted just inside the doorway by the ladies from the library the other night. He'd since determined that Mrs. H was Mrs. Hadley; however, he still couldn't recall the other woman's name.

"Good evening, Duke," not-Mrs. Hadley said. Since she was referring to him in that manner, he could confirm at last that she was peerage. Unfortunately, that didn't help him recall her name. He really ought to have paid more attention during dinner. Not that he could have dragged his focus from Juno. "You seem in lively spirits despite the departure of Lady Marina this morning. Whatever happened?"

Both ladies looked at him with candid anticipation. Normally, their nosiness would annoy him. However, it seemed he was currently impervious to irritation.

That didn't mean he would allow their intrusiveness to pass. "You seem

quite excited to gather the details. I'd rather not provide you with gossip."

"Pshaw," not-Mrs. Hadley, who was the bolder of the pair, expelled with a wave of her fingers. "You can either provide the truth, or people will come up with a story they like and that will become the truth."

He growled in response, but in the end, he didn't care. "I did not have romantic feelings for Lady Marina, nor did she have them for me."

Mrs. Hadley blinked up at him. "That's all? You simply decided not to wed?"

It hadn't been that explicit, of course. Perhaps he should have made sure. No, he was sure. She hadn't wanted him any more than he'd wanted her. "You see, it's not very interesting."

Not-Mrs. Hadley pursed her lips. "It is, though, because you were both allowed to make that choice. I married Bentham because my father decreed it."

Lady Bentham!

Mrs. Hadley nodded in agreement. "I did the same. My father-in-law and my father came to the arrangement a year before I even met my husband. How nice it must be to be able to choose for yourself."

Dare felt a pang of pity for them. Along with that came a wave of awkwardness. He didn't know what to say. He tried, "I'm sorry you're unhappy."

"We never said we weren't happy," Lady Bentham said with a chuckle. "I've done quite well with Bentham. Better than some." She arched a brow toward Mrs. Hadley, who again nodded toward her friend.

"Oh yes," Mrs. Hadley said earnestly. "We've both been fortunate."

"Well, you perhaps more than me, but I am a viscountess, so there's that."

The ladies laughed together, and Dare's awkwardness increased. He wanted to get to Juno.

Lady Bentham sobered as she pinned Dare with a serious stare. "You were wise to wait for someone for whom you will have romantic feelings. I

do care for Bentham, but it's not a passionate love affair, which my dear friend enjoys." She cast a slightly envious glance toward Mrs. Hadley. "I am most grateful for my children, however. Bentham will always have a place in my heart for them, if nothing else."

"I must disagree," Mrs. Hadley said, surprising Dare. "I don't think His Grace needs to wait for romance. I didn't have that when I wed Hadley. I liked him when we met. I found him dignified and charming. It was a good basis for marriage." She looked to Dare. "I would encourage you to find a lady you like and respect. Passion may very well come later as it did for me."

"You think I should have wed Lady Marina," he suggested.

Mrs. Hadley arched a shoulder. "Not necessarily. But love may have come. You'll never know now, of course."

That stung. Not because he thought he'd missed out on some grand love with Lady Marina, but because he could very well miss that with someone else. He flicked a glance toward Juno. Rather, where she'd been and was no longer. He found her seated beside Lady Gilpin on a settee near the center of the large room. They were likely discussing her forthcoming employment.

Dare didn't want to have any regrets. He looked back to Lady Bentham and Mrs. Hadley. "Would you marry your husbands again, then?"

"Absolutely," they both said almost in unison.

"Excuse me," he said, finished with the conversation. He wanted to go to Juno, but she looked rather engaged with Lady Gilpin. Furthermore, he didn't want to raise any suspicions from the two busybodies. He ought to feel bad thinking of them that way, but they'd likely agree. They made no secret of trying to ferret out information wherever they could.

Fetching a glass of madeira from a footman, Dare went to brood in the corner. Normally, he would just have retired, but he was far too anxious to do that. Anxious? More like stretched taut with lust and hope.

Hope?

Because the future—even later tonight—was completely uncertain. And

for the first time, he wanted something for that future. For tonight and perhaps even all the nights after.

Was he considering something...permanent with Juno? He certainly liked and respected her, as the ladies had advised he should do. Hell, what would his mother say if he came home with the intention to marry a paid companion—who was also the granddaughter of a baron? Surely the latter would count for something.

Scowling, he brought the wineglass to his lips and drained half of it. When had he ever cared what people said? Yes, that included his own mother. Not that her opinion didn't matter. But in this instance, perhaps more than any other, the only one that mattered was his. And Juno's.

He watched, patiently despite the roil of emotions and sensations inside him, as she conversed with Lady Gilpin.

“Did you enjoy the promenade to the village today, Duke?”

Dare dragged himself to the present and glanced toward the new arrival. Lady Cosford with one of her overly sweet smiles.

“Yes.” He didn't bother keeping the growl from his answer.

She frowned briefly. “I beg your pardon for my frankness, but has something happened? You were so pleasant at dinner. I thought perhaps you'd finally settled in and decided house parties aren't so loathsome after all.”

They weren't, but that was entirely due to Juno. That he couldn't be with her right now, that he had to allow her to talk with her new employer, drove him mad. This was a new experience. He typically did what he pleased. He'd never before had to consider someone else and whether his behavior would affect them.

He was a rather selfish prick.

“I can't help but notice your attention toward Mrs. Langton,” Lady Cosford said quietly, leaning toward him. “I'm sorry you didn't match with Lady Marina, but perhaps all is not lost.”

Slowly, he tilted his head toward hers. “What are you saying?” Did she know something he didn’t?

“It seems to me that both you and Mrs. Langton enjoy each other’s company. I would hate for the party to end without either of you determining how much.”

Her vagueness was also going to drive him mad. “If you have something specific to say, I wish you would do so, Lady Cosford. I am not a man who appreciates innuendo or subtlety.”

She stifled a laugh. “Just so. Juno likes you. She’s attracted to you. She’s also concerned about jeopardizing her employment with Lady Gilpin. So you must be discreet.”

“Has Juno indicated she wants...” He didn’t know how to finish that. Had she told Lady Cosford about what had happened in the coach? He couldn’t see her doing that even if the two had become friends, and it seemed they had.

“She’s indicated nothing specific. I’m only trying to be a good friend. You know where her room is located?”

“Yes.” He swallowed, his body already roaring into full arousal.

“Then you’ll know it’s precariously close to Lady Gilpin’s. You’ll need to find another way inside.”

“Are you certain she wants me to come?”

“No, but if she doesn’t, she won’t be shy about asking you to leave. And you will.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You will, won’t you?”

“Of course. I’m not a scoundrel.” Excitement thrummed within him. “Are you going to tell me how to gain access?”

“I am, but so help me, if you treat her poorly, there will be nowhere you can hide.” She gave him a blistering glower.

“I may be disagreeable, but I am honorable and trustworthy. You have my word that no harm will come to Mrs. Langton. Indeed, I would put myself in the way of that ever happening. With my dying breath.” The ferocity of his

pledge surprised him. He meant every word.

Admiration sparked in her gaze. “Excellent. I believed you to be just that type of gentleman. Now, listen to me carefully.”

She explained in exacting detail how he could access the servants’ stairs and find his way to the dressing chamber that adjoined Juno’s room. The idea of seeing Juno filled him with a thrilling anticipation.

What if she didn’t want him to come?

Then he’d leave. Utterly dejected. But he had to try. Anything else would mean regret, and he’d already decided he wouldn’t suffer that. Not with Juno. Not with the only woman who’d ever made him feel like a whole person.

He could hardly wait.

**B**y the time Juno had finished speaking with Lady Gilpin, Dare had left the drawing room. Disappointment had dimmed her mood and stayed with her, even now, two hours later.

After speaking with Lady Gilpin, Juno had decided to leave for Bath tomorrow. The house party lasted three more days, but Juno wanted to get home and prepare for her new position.

Normally, she'd be filled with a joyful anticipation at the prospect of working with a new young lady. This time, however, she felt a slight unease, as if she was forgetting something. Not forgetting—ignoring.

She was apparently doing her damndest to pretend Dare didn't exist. Or that the smoldering attraction between them had petered out. Only it hadn't. Not for her anyway. She had no idea if he felt the same, especially since he'd left the drawing room without a word.

Rising from her dressing table, she flipped her long braid over her shoulder as she made her way to the bed, which a maid had turned down invitingly. Juno stared at the empty space and wished she wouldn't be sliding into it alone.

Not in the six years since Bernard's death would she have described herself as lonely. Yet tonight, she felt that emotion quite keenly.

Oh, hell.

She wished she hadn't dismissed Cecilia's matchmaking efforts so hastily. She did want Dare. For tonight, at least.

Pouting, she altered her direction and went toward the dressing chamber. She stopped short, gasping as a large figure appeared before her.

"Dare!"

"Forgive me for barging in. It was the best way to reach you, I'm afraid."

She took in his banyan, dark black silk against his black pantaloons. "You look like a man on his way to an assignation."

He glanced down at his costume and gave her a fleeting smile. "I suppose I do. But then I am." His gaze met hers. "Hopefully."

Juno hesitated. He was behaving rather presumptuously. But was he really, given her behavior in the coach? She'd certainly given him the impression she wanted him. And anyway, didn't she?

She narrowed her eyes. "How did you find your way here?"

"Luck?" He was clearly lying and realized she knew it. Exhaling, he said, "Lady Cosford told me how."

Juno swore, which drew a broad grin from him. "Why are you smiling?"

"I like it when you curse."

She swallowed a laugh. "It's horribly crude. I shouldn't do it. I'm afraid it was a bad habit of Bernard's, and once I adopted it, I haven't been able to shake it. Unless I'm in polite company, of course." She flinched. "I didn't mean to insinuate you aren't polite company."

He didn't look insulted in the slightest. "No need to feel bad. I'm quite flattered. I hope you'll swear in front of me often." He smiled again, and her heart flipped over.

"You're so handsome when you smile. Irresistible, really. It's good that you rarely do, for every woman in England would throw herself at your feet."

He stepped toward her until they were merely a breath apart. "I don't want every woman in England. Just you." His voice, always tinged with a growl, had dropped to a feral rasp.



If she hadn't wanted him already, she definitely would now. She slid her hands up his chest and curled them around his neck. "It's very convenient, then, that I want you too."

He clasped her in his arms and lifted her against him as their mouths crashed together. If she hadn't been wearing a dressing gown and night rail, she would have wrapped her legs around his hips.

Not that she would have had much time to do so, for he carried her to the bed and pushed her down on the mattress as he came over her. He pulled back, staring down at her. "Wait." He traced his hand across her forehead, along the side of her face, across her lips, and down her chin and throat. He moved lower still, his eyes never leaving hers as he trailed his fingers between her breasts. He unfastened the clasps holding her gown together and spread the garment open.

"You're more beautiful than I imagined." He cupped her breast through the thin lawn of her night rail.

"You can take it off," she whispered, need pulsing through her along with a deliciously sweet longing.

"I will. Soon." He pinched her nipple, sending a cascade of pleasure straight to her core.

She arched up into his touch, gasping. "More. Please."

He did as she asked, pulling on her flesh with a gentle but firm grasp. Heat flooded her. It wasn't enough, and yet it was perfect.

She pushed up from the bed and struggled to pull her arms from the dressing gown. He helped strip it away, leaving her in just her night rail, which seemed an offensive barrier at the moment.

"Patience, darling," he admonished, pushing her back down.

"I want it off. Touch me, please."

He did, but through the fabric of the night rail. It was both enticing and frustrating. She wriggled beneath him as his mouth descended on her breast, his lips and tongue tormenting first one nipple, then the other. He alternated

between sharply tugging on her and gently laving. She panted with need, wondering if she'd ever been this aroused.

“Have I tortured you enough?” he asked huskily, his hand moving to her thigh. He pushed the garment up to her waist.

“More, please.” She spread her legs, inviting him to touch her there as he'd done in the coach. But he didn't. Instead, he slid the night rail up her abdomen and over her breasts, moving with a slowness that made every sensation more intense.

He gripped the fabric in his fist, pulling it against her upper arms and across the top of her breasts as he lowered his head and took her nipple into his mouth. Sucking hard, he moved his other hand between her legs, his fingers grazing her sex with light, tantalizing strokes.

She wanted him to claim all of her. She wanted more of what she'd tasted that afternoon. How had she ever thought she could just leave without a night like this?

She ran her fingers through his thick, dark hair as she'd longed to do. “Dare, I need—”

He stroked her clitoris as he drew on her nipple, and she writhed with pleasure. “What do you need?”

“Everything.” She pulled at his banyan. “Can we start with you naked, please?”

“You're so polite. Even now,” he murmured against her. “Do you ever lose control?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you forget to say please? Do you ever demand instead of ask? Take instead of invite?”

Her blood heated. “No. Not really.”

He straightened, leaving her cold and bereft. She whimpered softly as he removed his banyan. Underneath, he wore a shirt, which she found horribly disappointing. Thankfully, he removed it with great speed, exposing his

incredibly muscular chest, covered with dark hair.

Standing between her legs at the edge of the side of the bed, he splayed his palm over her lower abdomen, just above her sex. Her body twitched with need, her breasts aching for him to touch them again.

He narrowed his dark eyes at her. “Put your arms up over your head and clasp your hands together.”

She did as he commanded, her breath coming in short pants.

“I love what that does to your breasts.” His gaze dipped to her chest in appreciation.

“Touch them. Please.”

He shook his head. “No more please. If you use that word, I won’t do it.”

She arched a brow at him. “You want me to be disagreeable like you?”

He chuckled low in his throat. “I want you to lose control. Leave the charming companion somewhere else. Right now, in this bed, I want Juno. I want the goddess who can’t stand it when I don’t touch her.”

Goddess? She was surprised to realize he made her feel like one. “Touch me. *Now.*”

“What shall I touch you with? My hand?” He wriggled his fingers. “My mouth? Or my cock?”

“All of them. Pl—” She pressed her lips together. “Hands on my breasts—I like when you squeeze my nipples. Mouth on my sex.”

His lips curled into the most alluring smile she’d seen on his face yet. She swore she grew even more wet just from that.

He put both hands on her, gently stroking her for a moment. “Happy to oblige.” He pinched her nipples, pulling until she cried out in ecstasy. “Like that, then?”

“Yes.”

Repeating the motions, he pinched and pulled as he kissed her mouth, his tongue claiming her while she twisted beneath him. She clung to him, her fingers digging into his scalp and shoulders. She wrapped her legs around his

waist and arched up against his groin. The length of his cock, still covered by his pantaloons, pressed into her sex, sending a wave of white-light pleasure through her.

“Not yet,” he murmured before kissing down her throat. He stopped at her breasts, alternating his mouth and fingers on each until she was on the edge of release. She’d never gotten there like this before. The depth of her desire for him was astonishing.

His lips trailed down her abdomen, moving meticulously as he kept up his attention on one breast. His other hand slipped down between her legs and teased her folds.

“So wet and ready for me. But I think I need to taste you first. The sample I had earlier wasn’t nearly enough.” His mouth descended on her sex, his thumb pressing on her clitoris as he licked along her flesh.

She gripped his head as he skimmed his hand from her breast to her hip. He brought her leg onto his shoulder and thrust his tongue inside her.

The orgasm that had been lingering just beyond reach rushed toward her. She was both desperate for release and didn’t want the anticipation to end. Ultimately, there was no choice. He stroked her clitoris, then sucked her flesh until she cried out, her muscles clenching as she came. She froze for a moment, her body caught in that state of sheer ecstasy when she felt as if she floated somewhere outside herself. Wave after wave crashed over her, and he was relentless, his fingers and mouth working her until she was completely spent.

Her legs began to quiver, and she opened her eyes to see he was removing his pantaloons. His cock sprang free, tall and hard amidst a nest of dark hair.

She licked her lips, and he groaned. “Next time, Juno. Right now, I’m going to slide so deep inside you that we’ll have no notion of where one of us ends and the other begins.”

His words tantalized her, but it was more than that. They carried weight, a promise of something that went beyond this physical joining.

No, she wouldn't think of that. They had tonight, this blissful moment, and that would be enough.

"Take me, Dare," she demanded, doing as he told her. Pushing up from the mattress, she rearranged herself lengthwise on the bed and spread her legs in invitation. She reached for his cock, curling her hand around the hard velvet shaft.

His hips jerked and he climbed onto the bed, settling between her thighs. Slipping his hands beneath her backside, he tilted her hips. She bent her legs and guided him to her sex. His flesh nudged at hers, and passion tightened within her once more. She'd thought she was spent, but she had much more to give.

Juno gripped his backside and pulled him into her, squeezing her legs around him. He thrust deep, just as he said he would.

She wanted him hard and fast, her body eager for another release. But he moved slowly, sliding in and out as he kissed her.

"Faster, Dare."

"Shhh. In a moment. This is the greatest moment of my life, and I'm going to enjoy it."

Pleasure flushed through her and she kissed him back with a fervent sweetness, wanting to sear this memory onto her brain for all time.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, his body moving over and within her. "So joyful. My world was so much darker before you walked into it."

Emotion welled inside her. Then he began to move fast, and she lost herself in the rhythm of their bodies gliding together. Rapture built, and she fell over the edge once more, mindless as he drove into her until his orgasm swept him away.

She felt him tense just before he cried out. It started as that low, wonderful growl and ended with something primal that made her shiver.

Holding him tightly, she kissed him—shoulder, cheek, forehead, mouth. How could she let him go after this?

She wouldn't. Not yet.

"Do you mind if I stay awhile?" he asked softly, his lips grazing hers.

"Not at all. But you have to go before the maid comes to light the fire. It's still dark."

He nodded as he slipped to her side and onto his back. "We won't get caught." He looked over at her. "Will you ride with me in the morning so I can prove to you that it's not overrated?"

She laughed softly, rotating so she faced him. Placing her hand on his chest, she ran her fingertips through the dark hair between his nipples. "I'd planned to leave tomorrow, but you offer a compelling reason to stay. I will ride with you. Thankfully, I have a riding habit. It's quite smart."

One of his brows arched. "You don't ride, but you have a costume for it?"

"I always try to be prepared. And I'm afraid I have a crushing vulnerability for clothing."

"Do you? I noticed you are rather well dressed for a companion."

"I'm not your typical companion," she said coyly.

He smiled, and she knew she would never tire of seeing him do so. "No, you are not. You are exceptional in every way." He turned and pulled her braid over her shoulder. His fingers began to pluck her hair free. When it was loose, he arranged it over her shoulder, so the curls caressed her face "This is better."

"Is it?"

"Yes, but it could be even more improved if you climbed on top of me and let it fall against my chest." He rolled to his back. "If you were so inclined."

"As it happens, I am." She straddled him, feeling his cock stiffen against her sex. "It seems you are too," she murmured.

"Exceptional," he breathed as he pulled her head down and kissed her.

“You’re doing quite well,” Dare said as they slowed their horses to a walk after an exhilarating, though brief, gallop.

She cast him a skeptical glance with a wry smile from beneath the jaunty hat crowning her golden curls. “You’re lying, but I won’t fault you for it.”

“I’m not at all. When we started, you said you wouldn’t go faster than a canter.”

“I shall credit your persistence far more than my comfort in the saddle.” She shifted in her seat.

“You look magnificent.” She’d been quite right about her habit—she was stunning from head to boot. “Shall we take a respite? There’s a small, somewhat hidden folly up ahead.”

“Is there? How charming. Yes, a short rest would be delightful.”

Dare led her around a copse of trees to where a dilapidated miniature faux temple stood at the apex of a squat, flat hill. Shrubbery and flowers grew wild around it. Not terribly wild, actually, which made Dare believe it was all part of the effect of creating a “ruin.”

He dismounted and spoke softly to the horse, telling him to stay put for a bit. Then he went to help Juno down. She put her hands on his shoulders and moved her knee from the pommel. Clasping her firmly, he gently slid her to the ground.

“All right?” he asked.

“It’s been ages since I rode. Over a year, at least. I daresay I will be sore tomorrow.”

“I hope it will have been worth it.”

“Ask me when we get back to the stables.” She cast him a sultry glance, then started up the hill toward the folly. “How did you find this?”

He followed her, enjoying the sway of her backside as she climbed. “Lord Cosford told me about it. I’ve been riding out every morning. The estate is quite nice.”

“You like the outdoors a great deal. Do you ride every day?”

“I do. And walk, usually.”

She glanced back at him. “And does your estate have a folly?”

“Three. I’m building a fourth. To me, they’re outdoor rooms.”

“That sounds rather lovely.” She reached the top of the hill and turned to face him. “Have you always liked being outside?”

“Yes. My father encouraged it. He wanted me to know and appreciate the land in a way that some of our class do not. The land defines us, gives us purpose, and makes us whole. We could not survive without it.”

“What a beautiful sentiment. I hadn’t stopped to think about it in that way.”

“What did your parents encourage you to do?” he asked, wondering if he’d ever stop being eager to know more about her.

She wrinkled her nose slightly. “Lady things, I suppose. And reading, but that was mostly my grandfather’s doing.” Her features softened. “I do miss him terribly, but at least he writes.”

“Does he?” Dare was inordinately pleased by this information. He’d hated thinking her entire family acted as if she didn’t exist. How could they ignore such a vibrant, wonderful person whom they were fortunate enough to call their kin? “I’m glad for you.”

“Have you been inside the folly?” She turned and walked toward the



small stone structure. Four pillars stood along the front, and a set of steps led up to the interior. The roof was partially open, as if half of it had collapsed. Inside, there was a bench, and the back wall was solid.

“I have. The bench is an excellent place for contemplation.”

She moved inside and sauntered behind the stone seat. “What did you contemplate?”

“Whether Lady Marina and I were compatible. Why the devil I agreed to come to this party. How much I wanted a certain companion.”

Facing him, she fixed him with a provocative stare. “How much was that?”

He stalked toward her, lust roaring through him. “Less than I do now, but still a rather staggering amount.”

“It’s too bad this folly isn’t equipped with a bed.” She tipped her head back as he stopped in front of her. “Are any of yours?”

Inhaling her scent, he traced his fingertip along her jaw. “Not yet. Anyway, I can make do. That is, if you’d like me to.”

“I most definitely would.” She slid her hands up his coat as he lowered his head to kiss her.

Fire and delight sparked through him the moment their lips touched. Groaning, he clasped her to him and plundered her mouth. She clung to him, kissing him back with passionate abandon.

He guided her back to the wall, pressing her against it. She gasped, and he pulled back, asking, “What’s wrong?”

“The stone is a bit cold. But I don’t care.” She dug her fingers into him, and he kissed her again.

Driven by need, he cupped her breast, frustrated by the layers of clothing separating them. Using his teeth, he removed his glove, tossing it aside, then clutched at her skirts, wresting them upward.

She took them from him, freeing his hand so he could stroke her. “Yes, please,” she rasped. “No, I mean, touch me, Dare. Make me come.”

Her words made his cock twitch with want. “How shall I do that?” he asked, sliding his fingertip along her folds as he kissed her neck. “With my hand like this?” He caressed her clitoris, then thrust two fingers into her wet sheath. “Or perhaps with my mouth.”

“Your cock.” She gripped his head, dislodging his hat so it fell to the ground. “I want your cock. All of it. *Now.*”

How he’d found a woman like this at a bloody house party of all places would never cease to astound him. “I will never hate another house party,” he muttered as he unbuttoned his fall.

She laughed softly. “I’m so glad to have changed your mind about them.” Her hand joined his as he pulled his shaft from his smallclothes. She stroked him, and he savored her touch for a moment, his eyes closing and his head falling back. She’d taken him in her mouth last night, rather, early this morning before he’d left her bed. The memory nearly made him orgasm in her hand.

“Enough.” He gripped her hips. “Put your legs around me.”

He lifted her, pressing her against the wall as she curled her thighs around his hips. She tucked her hand between them and guided his shaft inside her. He thrust deep, holding her steady against the stone as he seated himself within her.

She moaned—loudly, which only fanned his desire—and clenched her legs around him. It was all the urging he needed.

“Hold on to me,” he ordered, rubbing against her before he began to move. He drove hard and fast, careful not to hurt her.

“Yes, Dare. Just like that.” She kissed his cheek, his jaw, then gently bit his earlobe. “*Faster.*”

She *was* a goddess, and he would worship at her altar for the rest of his days. He pounded into her, feeling her muscles clench around him as she clamored for release.

Then she came in a torrent of cries and desperation, her fingers digging

into his neck and shoulder. He cast his head back, his balls tightening, and cried out as rapture claimed him.

When his body unfurled, he slowly lowered her to the ground, but he didn't let go. He guided her to the bench, sitting her down so she could collect herself.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, panting as he fought to regain his breath. Perhaps he ought to build a fifth folly. With a bed.

Grinning, he opened his eyes to find her watching him. "I think I've proved without question that riding is not overrated."

Juno tipped her head to the side, then slowly rose from the bench. "I think the opposite is true. When you think of this ride, what will you remember most? I daresay it won't be the actual riding." She gave him a saucy smile.

He shouted with laughter and grabbed her to him. "I am corrected, my goddess. I have never been more happy to be wrong."

Actually, he'd just never been more happy.



IF THE RIDING didn't make Juno sore, all the sexual intercourse she and Dare had engaged in over the past twenty-four hours would. She didn't think she'd ever spent so much time in bed not sleeping. Not that all their activities had occurred in bed. She would remember their tryst in the folly to the end of her days.

She'd been loath to get back on the horse after that, but she'd managed. They'd ridden straight back to the stables, and then she'd stayed away from him the rest of the day. Avoiding him lest they spark any rumors, she'd spent the afternoon with Lady Gilpin, who'd told her all about Presley, their estate where Juno would come to live and work with Dorothy.

Typically, Juno would be filled with an excited anticipation. However, she found herself feeling sad about leaving Dare. She was only disappointed

because she was used to her liaisons lasting longer than a few days. This time with Dare would be abbreviated—the party was only two more days—which was a pity since he was the finest lover she'd ever known.

She looked over at him, dozing next to her in the bed. He'd stolen in through the dressing chamber as he'd done the night before. They hadn't discussed it, but they'd known it would happen. All during dinner—where they'd sat next to each other again thanks to their matchmaking hostess—there'd been an undercurrent of desire swirling between them. She'd barely kept herself from touching him. In fact, she'd managed to stroke his thigh a few times during the meal. He'd done the same with her.

There was no sweeter torture or richer anticipation than a secret affair.

She turned and snuggled back against his side, closing her eyes. Tomorrow, they were going to play chess. And perhaps find a cupboard to shag in.

“Mmm.” He growled against her nape, his arm coming around her and cupping her breast. He pinched her nipple, drawing a low moan from her throat.

“Shouldn't we sleep?” she asked, even as desire pulsed between her legs.

“Wasn't I just sleeping?” He played with her breast as his cock hardened against her backside.

“I wasn't.” She sighed as he trailed his hand down her abdomen. He stroked her clitoris, tracing languorous strokes along her flesh as he teased her arousal into a flame of need.

“Should I let you?” He kissed along her neck and shoulder, nipping her flesh.

“Not *now*.” She lifted her knee forward on the mattress, exposing her sex to him in invitation.

“I see. What if I insisted?” He caressed her hip and then her backside, his fingertips sliding down her cleft.

She pressed back, seeking his touch, needing him inside her. “You're

being a terrible tease.”

“Yes.” He stroked her flesh, everywhere but the place she wanted him.

“Are you going to put yourself inside me or not?” Frustration began to war with her desire.

“Like this?” He speared his fingers into her.

“Oh, yes.” She closed her eyes and moved with him, her hip sliding along the bedclothes as he coaxed her to completion.

Then he was gone, but only for a moment. He guided his cock into her and took her on a slow, languid journey. They moved together, his hand caressing her breast, hers stroking his thigh. This was a level of bliss she’d never experienced. Just when she wasn’t sure how much more she could take, he rotated, pressing her down into the mattress as his hips snapped against her backside.

Squeezing her nipple, he ordered her to come. Unable to deny him, she fell apart, her body stiffening as an enormous wave of ecstasy swept over her.

He gripped her tightly and spent himself inside her. Kissing her shoulder, he gently eased from her.

Juno smiled, feeling so utterly satisfied and wonderful. “Come to Bath with me when the party is over.”

“I can’t.”

She rolled over to face him. “Why not?”

“I have to be in London to supervise renovations at my house.”

“Really?” She pushed her hair behind her ear. “Surely you can delay that and come to spend a few days with me before I go to Presley.”

“I can’t. My plans have been set for weeks.”

She leaned up on her elbow and put her head on her hand. “It’s only a few days. Just a small change to your plans. Hardly significant.”

He frowned. “Of course it is. I’m expected in London.”

Oh dear, the rigid duke had returned.

“I understand it can be difficult for you to alter your plans, but I know

you can do it.” She gave him an encouraging smile.

“No, I cannot.” He sat up, his features set into a surly glower she hadn’t seen all day. “Perhaps you should come to London with me instead.”

“I can’t do that. I need to return home before I go to Presley. A trip to London wouldn’t allow that.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t be going to Presley.”

Juno sat up, holding the coverlet to her chest. “I should come to London with you, trailing after you like a mistress?” She’d never allowed others’ expectations to dictate her choices—her marriage to Bernard and the subsequent loss of her family being the prime example. That Dare would ask such a thing of her cut to the quick. “I am an independent woman, Dare. I don’t trail after anyone. I make my own choices. For *me*. Perhaps you should go.” Emotion made her quiver. She squeezed the coverlet tightly to try to make it stop.

He slid from the bed. “I will.” He snatched up his banyan and tugged it on. Scowling, he grabbed his shirt and pantaloons from the end of the bed and thrust his feet into his slippers—at least it seemed that was what he was doing since she couldn’t see over the edge of the bed.

Half turning, he sent her a frown. “You can’t expect me to change my plans. Or who I am. I thought you knew me.”

“I do,” she said quietly, exhaling. She thought she did anyway, but what did it matter? It seemed he didn’t really know her. But what had she expected? This had been a lovely interlude. One they’d known would end.

Still, his expectation that she change her plans and conform to his reminded her too much of her parents and their painful abandonment. She’d forgotten the depth of his rigidity, and it was good that he’d reminded her. He’d saved her future disappointment.

Dare left without another word. She stared at the emptiness and felt it deep in her bones.

Yes, it was time for this to end. She needed to get back to her life.

Dare had barely slept the night before last and had still felt positively wonderful the following day. He'd actually gotten a little more sleep last night and yet today felt like he'd been dragged behind a coach. Sleep, it seemed, had nothing to do with anything. Happiness—or a lack thereof—did.

There was no happiness today, just misery. He'd taken a brutally long ride that morning and had spent the last hour, or perhaps two, walking. Anything to avoid the house.

No, to avoid Juno.

Except he wasn't really avoiding her. Not completely, anyway. He'd spent time at their folly—it would forevermore be *their* folly—and was now lingering outside the orangery.

Why was he being so...rigid? Because he didn't know how not to be. He was expected in London. He *needed* to go to London. He certainly couldn't upend his life to continue a liaison with a young lady's companion.

Why not?

He growled, his lip curling. Because spending a few days with her in Bath before she left him to go to her next job was unacceptable. It was too short a time. That she'd expected it of him made him think she hadn't really come to know him at all.

Sorrow ate at his insides. He thought she *had* come to understand him, in

spite of his quirks and general disagreeability. For the first time in his life, he'd made a connection with someone that seemed mutually beneficial. She absolutely made him a better man—he was certain of that. And he'd rather thought he'd had a positive influence on her, and it had nothing to do with his status.

Perhaps he was wrong about that. She'd had no hesitation in simply going on with her life, pursuing her work without sparing a thought for him. It seemed she hadn't been as affected by him as he was by her. The notion was a knife twisting in his chest. He'd thought he'd found someone who finally saw past his outer shell, who made him feel comfortable—and accepted—at last.

This pain pricking through him was the reason he'd left last night. He hadn't been able to see past what felt like her abandonment of him and what they'd found together.

*Except she invited you to Bath. Clearly, she wasn't abandoning you, not completely. Furthermore, going with her would have given you more time with her, and isn't that what you want?*

It was. He didn't want the happiness he'd unexpectedly and miraculously found with her to end. And yet he'd behaved like an ass, insisting he couldn't alter his precious plans, proving to her that he was inflexible and demanding—*rigid*. He suddenly thought of her family and their inflexibility—and rigidity—when she'd married and they hadn't approved. His behavior wasn't much better. But that was who he was, wasn't it?

No. He wanted to change everything for her.

She deserved the best he could give her. She'd certainly evoked that in him. She'd given him joy, anticipation, love.

Love?

The word hit him like a stone. Could he love her? He'd felt strong passion, but never love. It was a messy, unnecessary emotion. Except right now, it felt as critical to him as breathing.



He loved her. Desperately. The thought of only sharing a few days with her made him feel ill. But the thought of never spending time with her again made him feel much, much worse.

The urge to go to the house and tell her was overwhelming, but he hesitated. What if she didn't feel the same? She was a strong, independent woman, eager to get on with her plans—which didn't include him. She didn't need him.

But was there a chance she wanted him? Would she be willing to give up the life she'd created for herself to become his duchess? That was quite a shift—for both of them. It was absolutely what he wanted. He knew that with a soul-deep certainty.

Dare paced behind the orangery, his stride changing speed as new thoughts arrested his brain. None of this had been in his plans. It was no wonder he was in a dither. He stopped, forcing himself to take a deep breath.

He loved her. He'd behaved like an ass last night, and if he let her go without telling her both those things, he'd regret it to the end of his days. And he'd already decided he wasn't going to suffer regret.

Pivoting, he stalked to the house and went in search of his goddess. Would she be in her room? He heard voices from the drawing room and went there instead. It was a good place to start.

“Here is the duke!” Lady Cosford said warmly as he paused just inside the threshold. She was perched on a settee and was speaking with Lady Bentham and Mrs. Hadley. Both ladies perused him, and he realized he was still in his outdoor clothing. He probably should have gone to change.

He scanned the room in search of Juno. Most of the guests were present. But not her. Damn.

Moving another few steps into the room, he fixed his attention on Lady Cosford. “Might I speak with you a moment?” he asked quietly but loud enough for her to hear.

“Of course.” She rose from the settee and joined him. Then they moved

back toward the doorway.

Dare got right to the point. “I wonder if you could tell me where I might find Mrs. Langton?”

Lady Cosford’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry, but she’s gone.”

The world seemed to fade around Dare. His lungs squeezed and his appendages felt odd, as if they weren’t even there. She was gone. It was over.

*No, it’s not, you idiot. Go after her.*

He twitched, rolling his shoulders. “Where did she go?”

“She went to Bath.”

“When?”

“An hour ago?” Lady Cosford looked uncertain.

“How can you not know?” His voice began to rise as all the wonderful emotions he’d just fucking recognized begin to melt away.

None of this was supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to have fallen in love or have been stupid enough to let her go.

“We can ask the stable when she left. She took one of our coaches.” Lady Cosford spoke in a calm, helpful manner, but it did nothing to alleviate his agitation.

“Is there something amiss?” Lady Bentham called from somewhere. Dare had tunnel vision at the moment and could only see his hostess. Truthfully, he couldn’t even really see her. He saw Juno, but she was so terribly far away. Could he ever get to her? Was he too late?

Dare’s heart pounded a harsh, staccato rhythm. Cold sweat dappled the back of his neck.

“Are you all right?” Lady Cosford asked, sounding as if she were down a hole.

“He doesn’t look all right.” Lady Bentham again, closer than before, but still as if she were behind something.

He felt a touch on his arm and instantly jerked away, stepping to the side. He blinked, and the room came into focus. What the hell had just happened to

him?

Looking about wildly, he found Lady Cosford. “I need to go after her. Immediately.” He wasn’t even going to change clothes.

“I’ll have your coach prepared,” Lady Cosford said.

“What a magnificent surprise this is,” Lady Bentham murmured. “And how titillated the ton will be.”

Lady Cosford turned on the older woman, her eyes narrowed. “Have you no shame?”

“I have plenty, but not about this,” she said with a laugh. She looked to Dare. “The duke knows how the world works. He knew the minute he declared his intent to pursue Mrs. Langton that his secret—whatever the specifics are—is out in the world. To think those present in this room wouldn’t share such delightful information is beneath his intelligence.”

She was right. But he hadn’t considered it before he’d spoken. He hadn’t thought about it at all. There had been no strategy to his utterance, just a primal need to reach the woman he loved. Juno would be thrilled that his rigidity had been nowhere in sight.

Buoyed by this, he turned to Lady Bentham. “It’s not a secret. I am in love with Mrs. Langton and need to tell her so as soon as possible. If it makes you happy to spread that information, then by all means do so. Honestly, I don’t care if the entire world knows. Although, I would prefer she heard it from me,” he said wryly, surprised and grateful that his equilibrium had mostly returned.

“I just did.”

Dare thought he was hearing things. But he turned to the doorway and she was there. His goddess had returned.



JUNO STARED AT DARE, thinking she couldn’t have heard him right. He loved

her? And he'd said so in front of everyone in this room?

Every guest present was focused intently on the drama playing out just inside the threshold. Juno wondered what she'd missed. Although, she wasn't sure it mattered. Not if he'd actually said what she thought she'd heard.

"You came back," Dare said simply, his features radiating joy. It was an odd thing to behold, and Juno had to blink, as if she were looking at the sun.

"I did," she said slowly. "Did I just hear—"

"Me say that I love you. Yes. I was an ass. An inflexible, overthinking, single-minded curmudgeon. Who would like to beg your forgiveness."

"Are you sure you want to have this conversation here?" she whispered, glancing particularly at Lady Bentham, who was watching—and listening to them with rapt interest.

"I do. I don't care who hears what I have to say." His brow creased. "Unless you do. Perhaps you'd prefer I close my mouth and never speak again."

She couldn't help smiling, overcome with joy that he would put her feelings in front of his. She'd been so wrong to compare him to her parents, to forget that he struggled with his inflexibility. "I admit I'm shocked to hear you say so much, let alone display...so much, but I am quite delighted to hear whatever you have to say however you wish to say it." If she cared about her professional future as a companion, she would silence him. However, she was fairly certain her role as a companion was already at risk since Lady Gilpin was seated nearby, and her attention was completely focused on them.

Furthermore, she could see Dare's rigid outer shell cracking apart, and she couldn't bring herself to stop that. This was an important moment for him. And hopefully for them together.

He dropped to his knee before her, and several gasps filled the air. Juno's heart picked up speed, clamoring against her ribs as happiness and anticipation collided in her chest.

"In addition to begging your forgiveness—"

“You have it,” she cut in, not wanting him to go another moment thinking she was angry or disappointed. “There’s nothing to forgive. I should have been more understanding. I do know you, and I love all your eccentricities.”

His lips curved into the most dazzling smile he’d yet displayed. Juno had to keep herself from leaping onto him and tackling him to the carpet.

“You love me?”

She nodded.

“How unexpected,” he murmured, taking her hand. “And wonderful. In addition to begging forgiveness, when apparently none is required, I also planned to use this opportunity to beg you to be my wife. Juno, my goddess, will you do me the honor of becoming my duchess?”

A duchess! Juno had considered many options when she’d decided to turn the coach around and return to Blickton, including marriage. However, she’d instantly determined that would never happen. What duke would propose to a paid companion? Particularly a duke with rigid plans and expectations.

She clapped her free hand over her mouth as emotion overwhelmed her. She hadn’t expected him to say he loved her. And she’d certainly never imagined *this*.

“You planned?” was all she could manage to say, briefly lowering her hand to her chin.

He arched one of his gloriously thick brows at her. “You can’t be surprised by that?”

A giggle slipped from her mouth, and she moved her hand back up to seal her lips. Inhaling through her nose, she dropped her hand and tried to calm the torrent inside her. “No, I should not be surprised.”

“Are you going to give him an answer?” Lady Bentham demanded, grinning.

“Yes,” Juno said softly, reaching to caress Dare’s cheek. “Yes, I will marry you, though I can’t imagine why you would choose me.”

He frowned at her, looking much more like the rigid duke, whom she also

loved. “Because you’re intelligent, witty, strong, charming, and you make me smile.”

“That last part should be enough,” Lady Bentham said drolly. “You may be the only person in existence who can do that.”

A small smile broke across Dare’s lips, and Juno laughed. “Not true, Lady Bentham. But your point is well taken.” She squeezed his hand. “I will spend the rest of my life making you smile so much that your lips will want to fall off.”

He stood and lifted her hand to press a kiss to her wrist. “I shall pray that does *not* happen, because my lips are of particular and essential use to me. And to you,” he added in a husky whisper.

“You make a better point than Lady Bentham,” she said softly, her chest tight from an overwhelming barrage of emotion. She’d never felt this full, not even when she’d fallen for Bernard. That had been a different sensation, she realized, a young love rife with enthusiasm and passion. This was mature and whole, and loving him made her feel...right. Which was something, since she hadn’t felt at all wrong. Indeed, she’d been perfectly content with her life. So content that she’d almost talked herself out of coming back. Until she’d finally acknowledged that Dare had quite destroyed that contentment when he’d glowered his way into her life. It seemed that love came when one least expected it.

“I have to tell you,” she whispered up at Dare. “This isn’t what I expected. I thought we would form an attachment, but not marriage. I made a commitment to Lady Gilpin, and I don’t feel right abandoning her.” She glanced toward her almost employer with a pang of guilt.

“Of course you don’t,” he said. “You’re as loyal as the day is long. Do you still want to help her?”

“I do. But—and I want to be very clear on this point—my primary loyalty is to you. To us.”

“You humble me.” His voice was deep and soft, his expression full of

love. He slipped his arm around her waist and pivoted them toward Lady Gilpin. “If it’s acceptable to you, Mrs. Langton will still help your daughter prepare for the Season. After we are wed.”

Lady Gilpin’s eyes rounded. She lifted her hand to her chest. “That, ah, that isn’t necessary.”

“Perhaps not, but Juno’s word is her bond, and she would very much like to honor her commitment.”

“It would give me great pleasure to help Dorothy for my final act as a companion,” Juno added, loving Dare so much for his support.

“Then yes,” Lady Gilpin said with a grateful smile. “We would be thrilled to have the Duchess of Warrington prepare our daughter for her Season.”

Put like that, Dorothy was bound to have an unforgettable debut. Juno would make sure of it.

“Well, I think this calls for a celebratory dinner,” Cecilia said, beaming. She gave Juno a look of pure delight and gently inclined her head.

*Thank you,* Juno mouthed.

“Can we leave now?” Dare murmured against her ear.

“Yes.” She looked about the room. “See you at dinner.”

Then she and Dare left the drawing room, and he steered her outside.

“The orangery?” she asked.

“Seems fitting.” He held the door open for her as she stepped inside the warm building.

Moving farther inside, she sensed he wasn’t behind her. Turning, she saw him standing against the closed door, his gaze fixed on her with dark intent.

She shivered, but in the best way. “I really am sorry for not being more understanding last night. I shouldn’t have been so demanding. In hindsight, I was afraid that you were abandoning me as my parents did.”

He rushed toward her and took her in his arms. “My dearest, I could never do that. It will be torture for me when you go to help Lady Gilpin’s daughter.”

She kissed him, joy threatening to swallow her whole. “It will be torture for me as well.”

“As to you being demanding, what did I tell you about that?” he growled, kindling her desire. “I want you to do that with me. Always. One of the things I love most about you is your complete impatience for my nonsense. You make me a better man.”

“That was never my intent.” She caressed his cheek. “I’d never met anyone so stoic. You provoked me to provoke you. I never meant to change you, and I shouldn’t have expected you to do that last night.”

“I like that I’m less rigid—with you, at least. I don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks.” He kissed her again. “Only what you think.”

“I think I’m glad that we both realized we’re better together than apart.” She bit her lip. “I just hope people—such as your family—are accepting of me.”

“My mother will adore you because I do. In fact, I can’t wait for you to meet her. I’m more concerned about your family.”

“Why? They don’t even signify.”

“I think they do,” he said softly. “I intend to drag them back into your life, and if you decide you don’t want them there, then it is us who will do the ignoring. Not them.”

Emotion clogged her throat. “You are the very best man. My mother will be shocked I am marrying a duke.” She shook her head. “I’m not sure I’ll believe it until it’s true.”

“I thought we’d wed by special license since you have other obligations. Is that acceptable to you?”

She met his eyes with love and gratitude. “It’s more than acceptable. It’s lovely. Where do you want to have the ceremony?”

“London—and not because I *need* to go there.” He rolled his eyes, making her laugh. “That will be easiest for obtaining the license. I’ll send for my mother to meet us there, if that’s all right with you.”



“That would be splendid.”

“I’ll write to your father informing him of my intent. Shall I invite them to come too? I expect we’ll be married within the week, so if they can’t make it in time, that’s too bad.”

She stood on her toes and kissed him. “I love you so, my rigid duke.”

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. “I’m trying not to be. Rigid, that is.”

Rotating her hips against his to press against his hard cock, she said, “I would say you’re failing quite spectacularly. And I have no complaints about that. In fact, promise me you’ll never stop.”

He threw his head back and laughed with abandon, something a rigid duke would never do. “You have my sincerest vow, my goddess.” He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her thoroughly. Then he drew back and looked into her eyes. “My love for you is firm and unchangeable. Forever.”

## EPILOGUE

### LONDON

“**C**heckmate.”

Dare stared at the board. He'd seen it coming, of course, but he was still astounded at how far her skill had come in such a short time. He should not have been, however, since she was the cleverest woman he'd ever known. “Well done,” he murmured with great admiration, his gaze finding hers.

She grinned with pride and looked toward his mother, who sat nearby doing needlework. “I won, Mama.” The dowager had insisted her new daughter-in-law call her Mama. She adored Juno, just as Dare had predicted.

“Huzzah!” His mother put down her needlework and reached for her glass of sherry. “A toast to the duchess and her victory!”

Dare picked up his glass of port at the same moment Juno did the same. They all lifted their glasses and took a drink.

“It's too bad your parents and grandfather left this morning,” his mother went on. “I daresay the baron would have been thrilled with your triumph.”

The baron had been surprisingly charming. Dare had liked him a great deal. Her parents were less...likeable, but that was probably because Dare was holding a grudge for the way they'd treated Juno these past several years. He hadn't been able to resist pointing out that their daughter had married without their permission yet again, though it seemed this one was more to their taste. Juno had elbowed him sharply for that. Then later, she'd tended

his (nonexistent) hurt and thanked him gleefully for being the best husband ever.

“I think I’ll turn in.” Dare’s mother stood and bid them good night. “I shall miss you when you’re off with your charge,” she said to Juno.

“I’ll miss you too, Mama,” Juno said warmly. “But we’ll be together again for Yuletide, and then you’ll come back to London for the Season.”

“I can hardly wait. Good night, my lovelies.” She gave Dare the same look she’d bestowed on him since she’d arrived in London to meet Juno—one of absolute love and gratitude. She was so very happy that he was happy.

And that made him even happier. He’d turned into soft pulp or whatever was the opposite of rigid.

“Hmm, should we go up to bed too?” Juno asked. “We’ve only two more nights until I leave for Presley.”

“I’m beginning to think I should come with you.”

She shook her head. “No, you’d be a huge distraction, and I can’t have that. Even though I didn’t really fail with Marina, I still feel the need for this to be my most successful position yet.”

“Of course you didn’t fail with her,” he said softly. “She has told you as much.” Lady Marina had written to them upon hearing of their betrothal and wished them every happiness. She’d seemed in good spirits—at least on paper.

“I suppose not. I do hope I’ll get to see her in the new year at some point. Perhaps during the Season. In the meantime, our separation is only a month.”

“Closer to five weeks,” he corrected.

“I love that you are aware of every day we’ll be apart. The time will fly, and then I’ll be with you for the holidays.” She stood from her chair and came around the small table.

He pushed his chair back, angling it so he could pull her onto his lap. “I’m still coming to fetch you. I insist. In fact, I should also deliver you. That would give us two more days—and one night together.” He buried his face in

her neck and kissed her warm flesh.

“Two nights, actually, since you’d have to stay over at Presley before leaving.”

“You’re not saying no.” His blood heated in anticipation, both for the journey to Presley and for the next ten minutes.

“I suppose I’m not.” She ran her hands through his hair, her fingers massaging his scalp as he feasted on her neck and collarbone. “Yes, come with me. But not to stay.”

He cupped her nape and pulled her down for a long, torrid kiss. “We’ll see if I can’t change your mind.”

“If anyone can do that, it’s you, my love. But then unlike you, I have always been rather flexible.”

“Mmm.” He kissed her again. “Show me.”

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**PART I**

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**THE BACHELOR EARL PREVIEW**

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OCTOBER 1803

The sky had grown increasingly darker as they neared the Blickton estate, and not because night was falling. A fat raindrop hit the window of Eugenia St. John's coach as they turned up the drive toward the manor house. Trees dressed in gold and orange swayed in the wind, and Genie wondered how many leaves would be left on the branches come tomorrow.

Pity, for she loved the glorious colors of autumn. As had her dear husband. The familiar ache in her chest had lessened gradually over the past two years since his death, but it was still there. She wondered if it would always be. At least now when she thought of him, she smiled, and any tears she shed were due to fond memories instead of grief.

The house finally came into view, its pale stone Palladian structure rising into the blackening sky. Built less than a hundred years ago, Blickton was not as grand as Lakemoor, but then few estates were. Her husband, the Duke of Kendal, had kept Lakemoor and its land in excellent condition, and his son and heir was continuing that commitment, which Genie observed from the dower house.

The coach came to a stop in front of the door, and a footman rushed out with an umbrella. The rain began to fall in earnest as Genie stepped from the coach and hurried inside, her maid trailing behind.

"Welcome, Your Grace," the butler greeted her. "The guests are gathered



in the drawing room.”

Genie might have asked to go to her room first to change out of her traveling costume, but the hostess, her cousin Lady Cosford, bustled into the cavernous entry hall, her shoes tapping on the marble floor.

“Genie, you’re here at last! Come and meet the rest of the guests. I promise you can retire after a short introduction.” Cecilia smiled broadly, her sherry-brown eyes sparkling. She was always effusively cheerful. Genie had been particularly grateful for that trait after her husband had died.

It was because Cecilia had been so supportive and wonderful that Genie had agreed to come to her house party. The event would be her first major social occasion since Jerome’s death.

Genie summoned a smile. “Of course.” She removed her hat and gloves and handed them to her maid.

Cecilia linked her arm with Genie’s and swept her through several rooms until they reached the large drawing room that overlooked the vast parkland of the Blickton estate. “Everyone, please welcome the Dowager Duchess of Kendal!”

Dowager. Genie bristled inwardly at that title. She’d never thought to be a widow at the age of forty-two.

Surveying the room, she recognized only a handful of faces. She estimated there were twenty or so people in attendance. It also seemed at first glance that there was a rather equal ratio of men and women.

“Welcome, Genie!” One of the people Genie knew came forward, smiling brightly, her pale blue eyes sparkling with delight. Lady Bradford, a fellow widow, had been a dear friend.

*Had been.* Because Genie had isolated herself at her dower house at Lakemoor for the past two years.

Genie smiled warmly, genuinely glad to see Letitia. “I’m so pleased to see you, Lettie.”

“And I you.” She lowered her voice as she moved closer so that only

Genie could hear. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I nearly didn’t,” Genie whispered, surprising herself at the disclosure.

“Now that everyone is here,” Cecilia said, “let us have proper introductions. We’ll go around the room, and when it’s your turn, say your name and something about yourself.”

“What should we say?” one gentleman asked, his brow arching.

Cecilia lifted a shoulder. “Whatever you choose. Though perhaps refrain from something so mundane as how many children you have or what you ate for breakfast. I’ll start. I’m Lady Cosford, your hostess, and I sleep with the window open all year round.”

“Even on a day like this?” a lady asked from the other side of the room.

“*Especially* on a day like this. I love the smell of the rain.” Cecilia turned her head to the gentleman on her left. “Your turn, Mr. Sterling.”

Since Genie stood on Cecilia’s right, she would go last. Another quick review of the room said this was going to take forever. Genie exhaled softly.

Slightly taller than average, Mr. Sterling possessed a charming smile and dark blue eyes that crinkled at the corners, giving the impression he was a man of good humor. “Then I shouldn’t start by extolling the virtues and follies of my four children.” This was met with laughter and shouts of “No!” from a few gentlemen, followed by more laughter.

“All right, then,” Mr. Sterling said, stifling his own chuckle. “I keep a hothouse with exotic flowers.”

“Ooh, that sounds lovely,” said the woman standing to his left. She took her turn next, and so the game—for that was what it seemed to be—continued around the room. Somewhere across the circle from Genie, she began to lose focus, her brain and body tired from the journey even though she simply rode in a carriage. What was it about travel that was so exhausting?

The sharp point of Cecilia’s elbow jolted Genie from her reverie. “Say that again, Lord Satterfield?” Cecilia said, fluttering her lashes.

“I said my favorite color is purple.”

Cecilia shot Genie an arch look that was clearly meant to communicate something. Then her lips pursed, and she dipped her gaze to Genie’s traveling costume. Which was...purple.

So? Genie glanced about and quickly registered that she was the only one in purple. She looked across the room and saw Lord Satterfield—that was his name, wasn’t it?—staring straight at her. Heat bloomed in Genie’s chest and spread outward, warming her blood and flushing her skin. It wasn’t just that he was staring at her. It was the way he was staring—he had the most arresting eyes, dark like a black coffee, with what should have been feminine lashes but that looked wholly perfect on him. He looked at her as if he simply couldn’t tear his attention away.

But then he did, as the game continued. Genie let out her breath, and only then did she realize she’d been holding it. She spent the next several minutes thinking about why she’d felt that sudden flash of fever. Perhaps she was becoming ill.

At last, it was almost her turn. She had no idea what she was going to say. Why hadn’t she spent this time thinking of something witty or at least interesting? Probably because she was the least interesting person she knew. Or so it seemed that was what she’d become.

Cecilia looked at her encouragingly. “It’s your turn,” she whispered.

“I’m...” Genie croaked. She coughed gently. “I’m the Dowager Duchess of Kendal, but then Cec—Lady Cosford already told you that. This is my first house party in some time. I, ah, like to dance.” How perfectly boring and predictable.

“Excellent, for there will be plenty of dancing!” Cecilia said, clapping her hands together. “Lovely, now we all know one another. We’ll adjourn shortly so that those who wish to retire for a time may do so before we gather for dinner. We’ll meet here at half six and then proceed to the dining room at seven. After dinner, there will be cards and dancing. Tomorrow, we have

entertainments planned, including a picnic and a walk to the River Swift.” She looked behind her toward the doorway and frowned. “I do wonder where Cosford has taken off to.” She smiled brightly. “Ah well, he’ll be here soon, I imagine. If you haven’t yet been to your room, a footman will escort you. And here are some refreshments!”

Several footmen entered bearing trays of food and drink. Genie’s stomach growled softly in response, and she dearly hoped no one heard it. As tired as she was, apparently she was even hungrier.

The food—sandwiches, biscuits, and cakes—was set on a table situated in one corner of the room while the drinks went to another table in another corner. Genie went straight toward the food, but was almost immediately intercepted by the first gentleman who’d spoken, Mr. Sterling.

“This is my first house party in some time too,” he said with a half smile. “I’ve just come out of mourning.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Genie realized there hadn’t been a Mrs. Sterling. At least that she’d heard of. But then her attention had waned. Still, she’d caught many names, and wouldn’t his wife have been standing next to him?

*Except there is no wife.*

Genie thought back to the game. Had there been *any* wives? Rather, had there been any married couples? Save their hosts, of course. No, she didn’t think there were. How peculiar.

“I know you understand,” Mr. Sterling said. “It’s not easy to carry on after losing one’s spouse. Particularly with children. Do you have children?”

There was always a deep ache when someone asked that question. Genie had long ago learned to ignore it, bury it, and once in a while indulge it. Now was not that time.

“Just my stepson, but he is twenty-four and quite capable of managing on his own.” Mostly. He still allowed her to mother him, and for that, she was grateful. He’d taken his father’s death perhaps even harder than Genie. He’d certainly spent the last two years proving he would be as excellent a duke as

his father had been.

“Right. I like to dance too. Hopefully, I’m still as spry as I was in my youth.” Sterling chuckled. He looked to be around the same age as Genie, with some gray streaking his dark hair. He was attractive in a distinguished, mature way. What did that even mean? It meant she hadn’t considered anyone attractive since she’d met Jerome almost twenty years ago. “I hope you’ll save me one this evening?”

“Certainly.” Genie’s stomach made another desperate sound, much to her horror.

Sterling chuckled again. “Shall we move to the refreshments?”

“Yes, please.” Genie continued toward the table, and from the corner of her eye caught Lord Satterfield watching her.

*You find him attractive.*

Yes, she did. Fine. So she hadn’t found anyone attractive *except* Lord Satterfield since Jerome.

Heat jumped through her again as she picked up a plate and selected a few items to eat. Glancing about for somewhere safe to partake, her gaze landed on a small, and thankfully empty, seating area on the opposite side of the room.

Genie strode there with purpose, eager to satisfy her hunger and be on her way to her room to fortify herself for the evening ahead. Fortify herself? Was she going into battle?

She was being quite absurd. This was a harmless house party, meant to help her transition from mourning back to life. But what life was that exactly?

Reaching the seating area, Genie sank into a chair and took a bite of a small sandwich. The ham was deliciously smoked. She briefly closed her eyes in delight.

“Good sandwich?” The masculine voice nearly made her choke. She opened her eyes, swallowing, as she looked up.

Lord Satterfield sat down beside her. His dark eyes perused her with

warm appreciation. He was broad shouldered and fit, with a handsome visage marked by a small but distinctive cleft in his chin and the sort of angular cheekbones that made them look as if they'd been sculpted. His dark hair was thinning, resulting in a wide, masculine forehead. His dearth of hair did not detract from his good looks in the slightest.

He held a glass of something, brandy perhaps, and raised it to his lips for a sip. Genie fixated on his mouth before realizing—much to her horror—that she was staring. Dropping her gaze to her plate, she finished the last of her ham sandwich.

“My brandy is delicious,” he said, perhaps prompting her that she'd failed to answer his question. Because she'd been too busy staring.

Genie picked up another sandwich. “The ham is quite good. You should try it.” It was a thinly veiled attempt to get him to leave. Why was she so eager for him to go? Wasn't the point of coming to the party to reestablish social connections?

Taking a deep breath, Genie summoned a smile. Then she took another bite of sandwich. This one was fowl—pheasant, she thought. It wasn't as good as the ham.

“I'm not terribly hungry,” Satterfield said. “I am thirsty, however.” His eyes sparked with mischief before he took another sip. “I'm trying to think if we've met before. I knew your husband, of course. We worked together in the Lords.”

“Did you? Kendal was quite dedicated to reform. Are you?”

“I am indeed. Sometimes it makes me unpopular, but I don't mind. Kendal didn't either.”

It felt strange to be discussing her husband, in part because “Kendal” now meant her stepson. In her mind, Titus was still Ravenglass, which had been his courtesy title, but to everyone else, he was now the duke. Genie's husband—and their time as duke and duchess—was gone.

“Is this difficult?” Satterfield asked softly.

“No.” It shouldn’t be. Quite enough time had passed. “It’s actually nice to speak of him, especially with someone who knew him.”

“I admired him very much, actually. He offered guidance to me when I first came to the Lords—fifteen years ago or so.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I often called him the Shepherd, for he was fond of guiding everyone who would allow it.” Genie didn’t have to summon the smile that rose to her lips this time.

Satterfield smiled with her. “What an excellent name for him. I wish I’d known to call him that.”

For the first time since her arrival, Genie began to relax. Perhaps this would be just what she needed.

Satterfield studied her a moment. “I was surprised to see you here, Duchess.”

Something in his tone made Genie sit up straighter, her senses tingling. “Why is that?”

“I’d heard you were in deep mourning and that you may sit out a third Season come spring.”

Of course there were rumors about her. Gossip made London go round. “Well, this isn’t exactly the Season,” she said, feeling a trifle defensive. “It seemed just the right opportunity to dip my toe back into the sea.”

Satterfield’s brow creased, which only further pricked Genie’s awareness. However, before she could think on his reaction further, Lord Cosford strode into the drawing room.

“I’m so pleased you are all here! Please forgive my tardiness.” He looked around the assemblage until his gaze settled lovingly on Lady Cosford. After a brief moment, he readdressed the room. “As I said, I’m so pleased you are all here, because if you weren’t already, I’m afraid you wouldn’t have made it. The rain has washed out the road, and given the way it’s pouring, it may be that way for a few days. It’s a good thing you’d all planned to be here for a week!” He chortled. “In fact, you may be here longer, and I daresay you

won't mind." He winked, and this was met with laughter from nearly everyone. Only nearly, because Genie wasn't sure what was funny.

"Needless to say," Lord Cosford continued, "we'll be making some adjustments to our activities." He looked to his wife once more. "I know my darling wife has alternate plans, so rest assured there will be amusements for all. Now, I think it's time I had a brandy!" He turned toward the nearest footman, then stopped. "I nearly forgot. If you haven't yet received your map, raise your hand, and Vernon will bring it to you."

Genie swallowed the rest of her second sandwich, then looked at Satterfield. "What map? If we can't go outside, why would we need a map?"

The earl cocked his head, looking at her...dubiously. Again, Genie had an odd sensation. And she was finally beginning to realize that she was missing something.

Satterfield raised his hand, and a moment later, the butler delivered a folded parchment to him. "I already have one," he said to Genie. "This one is for you. However, I take it you don't know what it's for." He frowned slightly. "Did Lady Cosford not explain the purpose of this party?"

Purpose? What purpose did a house party have aside from providing social opportunity and amusement? Genie took the map and opened the parchment. "Is this the house?" She glanced over at the earl.

"Upstairs, to be precise."

She could see that. In each bedroom was written someone's name or initials. She found hers—at least she thought DDK meant her, the Dowager Duchess of Kendal. Why on earth would they give out maps of everyone's bedrooms? Unless... No, that was too scandalous.

Genie looked around the room at the people assembled. Not one wife. Not one husband. No one was a couple, save their hosts. In fact, Genie was fairly certain every woman in attendance was a widow. What the devil kind of party was this?

Standing so quickly she upended her plate, Genie felt heat rush to her



face. Before she could bend down to pick up the biscuits that had tumbled to the floor, as well as the plate, Lord Satterfield did it for her.

When he stood, he took a step closer, so that there was scarcely any space between them. Their proximity both terrified and excited her. She hadn't been this close to a man in some time. She hadn't been this close to a man who wasn't her husband *ever*.

"I'm sorry you didn't know," he said softly. "But I'm glad you're here."

Genie couldn't move. Her heart beat faster, and she wondered if he could hear it. He turned and walked away, taking her plate and biscuits with him. Which was fine since she'd quite lost her appetite.

She located Cecilia across the room, standing with her husband, and made her way quickly in that direction. "Cecilia, may I have a word?" Genie tried to keep her voice pleasant.

Cecilia turned toward her, smiling. "Of course."

"Welcome to Blickton, Duchess," Lord Cosford said cheerfully. "We're so glad you came."

Genie narrowed her eyes slightly before pinning her attention on Cecilia. "Privately, please?"

Concern flashed in Cecilia's gaze. "Certainly." She walked with Genie from the drawing room. Once they were several paces away from the doorway, she stopped and turned toward Genie. "Is there something amiss?"

Holding up the map, Genie struggled to keep her emotions in check. "What is this?" No, that wasn't the right question. Genie knew what it was. What she didn't know was *why* it was. "What is this party about?"

Pink dotted Cecilia's cheeks, validating the shock and distress Genie felt. "Oh dear, I can see you're upset. I should have told you straightaway, but I was afraid you wouldn't come."

She was damn right Genie wouldn't have come. "Everyone here is unmarried."

"Yes. Our hope was to provide an opportunity for those who are unwed

and perhaps wish to be wed again to meet and establish connections.”

“What sort of connections?” Genie glanced toward the paper in her hand. “*You provided a map with everyone’s bedrooms.*”

The color in Cecilia’s face deepened. “Ah, yes, we did. We are also providing an opportunity for more...intimate connections, should someone desire.”

Genie stared at her, unthinking, for a moment. “This is mad.”

“It isn’t, really. Lady Greville hosted a party like this a couple of years ago, and it was a great success.” Cecilia’s fixed on Genie with a half smile, her eyes shining with empathy. “I actually thought of hosting it precisely for you.”

“You can’t think I would want to wed again. Or...anything else.”

“Why not?” Cecilia’s russet brows gathered together. “You’re young, beautiful, intelligent. There’s no reason you should be alone.”

“No reason at all, except that I want to be. I’m leaving.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized departure was impossible.

“You can’t. The road—”

“Is impassable.” Genie ground her teeth. “I feel as though you tricked me.”

Cecilia reached out to touch Genie’s hand, but Genie stepped back. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to. I truly thought you would be amenable. You’ve always been the most cordial— even gregarious—woman.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to marry again. Or have an affair. I was looking forward to a house party, not...whatever this is.”

“Forgive me.” Cecilia’s face fell, and she twisted her hands together. “This can still be just a house party for you.”

Genie wasn’t sure she believed that. She opened her mouth to respond, but, deciding there wasn’t anything she could think to say, she simply turned on her heel and began to walk away. Thankfully, the inconceivable map would show the way to her room.

“I’ll see you at dinner!” Cecilia called, her tone bursting with hope.

Again, Genie didn’t respond. Because she didn’t know what she was going to do.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darcy Burke is the USA Today Bestselling Author of sexy, emotional historical and contemporary romance. Darcy wrote her first book at age 11, a happily ever after about a swan addicted to magic and the female swan who loved him, with exceedingly poor illustrations. Join her [Reader Club newsletter](#) for the latest updates from Darcy.

A native Oregonian, Darcy lives on the edge of wine country with her guitar-strumming husband, artist daughter, and imaginative son who will almost certainly out-write her one day (that may be tomorrow). They're a crazy cat family with two Bengal cats, a small, fame-seeking cat named after a fruit, an older rescue Maine Coon with attitude to spare, an adorable former stray who wandered onto their deck and into their hearts, and two bonded boys who used to belong to (separate) neighbors but chose them instead. You can find Darcy in her comfy writing chair balancing her laptop and a cat or three, folding laundry (which she loves), trudging along on the treadmill, or enjoying game night with the family. Visit Darcy online at [www.darcyburke.com](http://www.darcyburke.com) and follow her on social media.





# **THE EARL ON THE TRAIN**

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**KERRIGAN BYRNE**

Sebastian Moncrieff palmed his blade in the darkness, anticipating a kill.

He waited, listening to the boisterous night, savoring the sensation of the ground moving beneath him.

Always moving.

In fact, the only time he felt unstable was when he stood in one place.

He'd built sea legs as the first mate on one of the most famous—er *infamous*—ships in the entire world, The Devil's Dirge. Now that the Rook had regrettably retired, Moncrieff sought other ways to keep ahead of the relentless demons giving him chase.

To keep the ground beneath him from falling away.

The fastest steamships, most expensive coaches, wildest stallions, and even a novelty such as a hot air balloon provided escape from the prison to which he'd been sentenced.

For the next three days, it was the clack and sway of a train mobilizing the floor beneath his feet. The sumptuous luxury locomotive followed the tracks of the Orient Express from London to Constantinople.

He'd booked his passage with the intent to assassinate one Arthur Weller.

As luck would have it, he'd the opportunity to do it tonight, before the train even reached Paris, with no one the wiser. For the rest of the trip to Constantinople, he'd sit back and watch the resulting chaos whilst indulging

in expensive cigars and baccarat, before retiring to his private car.

Where he'd sleep with the unburdened conscience of an innocent baby.

At least where Arthur Weller was concerned.

He'd plenty of sin staining his soul, and plenty of ghosts to haunt his dreams...but they'd be silent tonight.

They always were after these kills.

Arthur Weller eschewed a rail steward, preferring to be attended by his personal valet. Thus, no one stood sentinel as Sebastian let himself into the railcar, shaking the skiff of snow from his hair.

His own accommodations were three cars away, as only an idiot would murder his neighbor and not expect suspicion.

No one, however, would imagine someone would be mad enough to let himself out onto the landing of the speeding train, and proceed to climb onto the roof in order to leap several cars forward.

Few people built their strength spidering about a ship for a decade, clinging to dubious handholds while the sea did its level best to claim anyone foolish enough to be out in a gale.

Compared to a steamship in a hurricane, the roof of a train might as well have been a stroll in Hyde Park.

It had rails and everything.

Measuring his breath, Sebastian flattened his back against the wall of the Weller's first-class car and peeked around the corner to assure no one moved about the narrow hall. Unlikely at this hour, but one never knew if a family member needed a midnight snack or use of the necessary.

One wouldn't want a murder interrupted by something so pedestrian as a wee.

Empty. *Excellent.*

The lone lamp provided little better than a golden well for shadows, and Sebastian melded with them as he crept along the hallway.

Three doors shielded the opulent cabin suites in which the Weller family

slept. According to the information he'd paid handsomely for, Arthur Weller's cabin was the last one on the right.

The knife felt like his own appendage as he passed the first door belonging to Weller's daughter, and the middle cabin in which his wife, Adrienne, slept.

He pressed his ear to Weller's door and listened for any movement before sliding it open and easing inside. The elite nobles could hardly abide squeaks, and God love the well-oiled luxury of first-class. It made stealing about so much easier.

The drapes had been left open, revealing the meager glow of the city as it reflected off the delicate flakes of snow to mingle with various lights from the train. It illuminated just enough of the cabin to outline the shadows of furniture and glint off crystal, silver, and his blade.

Tucking the knife against his cuff, Sebastian slithered closer to his mark.

The vile fuck would finally get what was coming to him. Perhaps he should light a lamp so he could watch the life bleed from Weller's eyes.

Sebastian had never been a macabre sort of fellow. He left that to men with darker predilections. But this...*this* was personal.

Drifting to the bed, he loomed over the outline of a slim body, his every muscle coiled like a snake.

When he struck, it was with a viper's speed and precision, and before his victim could blink from slumber to awareness, he'd a knife to his throat and arms pinned helplessly to his side.

*Wait.*

He released one alarmingly slim arm to test a curious softness he'd not expected.

*Breasts. Shit.*

"Please." The feminine plea feathered over his flesh and arrowed down his breastbone, landing in his cock. "Please, no."

Lord, but he loved it when they begged.

Begged for pleasure, to be precise, never for their lives.

*This* was a disconcerting development, to say the least.

Sebastian snatched his offending hand away from the lovely orb with no small amount of reluctance and regret. The shape had fit his palm like a dream, the warmth of the plentiful flesh beneath a thin cotton night rail a balm to his frozen fingers. The plump nipple beaded against the cold.

Who was this, the wife or the daughter? Thinking swiftly, he returned the knife to his cuff with the swiftest sleight of hand. If he was lucky, he could rely on what he always did to get out of trouble with a lady.

His charm and general magnificence.

“Do pardon me, madam, or is it miss? I fear I have the wrong railcar.” He released her carefully and straightened, hoping to convey chagrin from the shadows. “I was...invited by a woman, you see, and this is the car number she gave me along with orders to be stealthy. I dare think we both might have been had.”

“Moncrieff?”

The disbelieving whisper froze the blood in his veins and his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

*That voice.*

He'd recognize it anywhere. Heard it in his most salacious dreams.

And the mild ones, as well.

Her features were little better than shadows, but it didn't matter. He'd committed her every feature to memory more than a year ago. The curve of her cheekbone, sharp yet delicate. The silk of her ebony hair and the cream of her skin.

The veritable perfection of her incomparable beauty.

Veronica Weatherstoke.

A woman possessed of every virtue he'd lost along the way.

She was loyal, erudite, patient, measured, clever, strong...

*Kind.*

It was rare for such a beautiful woman to develop such deep wells of compassion, rarer still a countess. Hers was not a refined sort of empathy.

She'd been born into this merciless world with a tender heart, soft eyes the color of the finest jade, and a full, kind mouth...

The *kind* of mouth he often pictured stretched around his cock.

His astonishment gave her time to sit upright, clutching the covers over her pale, high-necked gown.

"Sebastian Moncrieff, what the devil are you doing here?" she hissed in a loud whisper.

"I told you, seducing the wrong woman, apparently." Or the right one, if fortune favored his cursed soul.

"With that knife you hid up your cuff?"

"Saw that, did you?" Fortune, he remembered, was a fickle bitch.

"One does not forget the feel of steel against one's throat."

Sebastian had never before put a blade to her lily-white throat.

Which meant someone else had.

Just as he was about to inquire as to the name of the dead man walking, she said, "Tell me the truth, Moncrieff. What are you doing here?"

"Attempting to kill Arthur Weller," he answered blithely. "What are *you* doing his cabin? Wait..." He swallowed a surge of bile as he calculated the possibilities with abject disgust. "Tell me you're not warming his bed. I'll slit my wrists right now if you and he—"

"I'd rather warm my innards with a hot poker than the likes of *Arthur Weller*." She said the name as if it tasted rotten in her mouth.

*Thank Christ*. He'd known she had more scruples than to take such a cretin as a lover. Did she have a lover? He wondered. Was she in need of one?

He certainly would apply for the position.

For *every* position she would allow.

"W-what will you do now?" she asked, a tremulous hint of vulnerability

escaping on her voice. He could see her clearer now, the outline of her dark braid, the motions of her lips. Just shapes and shades, and no less alluring for it.

“I’ve hardly made up my mind,” he confessed, wondering what she’d do if he kissed her.

Would she submit to his seduction, yielding that soft body to his skillful caresses?

Or would she knee him in the nads?

With a jerking, almost violent motion, she tossed the bedclothes off and scrambled to her feet, standing before him with her shoulders thrown back in challenge. “I *refuse* to become a prisoner of yours again, do you hear me, you villainous troll?”

“*Technically*, you were a prisoner of my captain, the Rook,” he corrected indulgently, placing a hand over his heart to advertise where she’d wounded him.

If he were possessed of a heart.

“And...*troll*?” he tutted. “I *hardly* believe that’s an apropos comparison. Trolls are unsightly and unwashed, famously living beneath bridges and such nonsense. Whereas I am fastidiously clean and have been told I’m at least tolerably attractive.” Words like masculine perfection, Adonis, Eros, and even the title *handsomest man alive* had been bandied about, but manners dictated he remain humble. “Let us find another villainous creature to assign to me.”

“Ogre, then,” was her next suggestion.

“My Lady, I don’t mean to hound a point, but surely you’re aware ogres and trolls are in good company together. Might I suggest—”

She splayed her hands against his chest and pushed with all her adorable strength. He even let her budge him a little, to soothe her ire.

“Whatever fiendish demon you find acceptable, I care not! Either kill me or... Get. *Out*.”

Sebastian hissed in a breath through his teeth. “I’m in a bit of a conundrum, you see, as I can’t seem to do either. We *both* know I won’t kill you...

“Oh, do we?”

When he realized she might not be able to read his sardonic look in the dimness, he made an audible sound conveying his impatience. “Secondary, I cannot allow you to alert Weller to my plans...so what to do with you, is the question.” He tapped a thoughtful finger on his chin.

“You do nothing *with* or *to* me, you piratical bastard. Touch me again and I’m going to scream until my breath runs out.”

*Bastard?* She had no idea.

“Go ahead.” He shrugged. “The first person who comes through that door catches my blade. So, I very much hope it’s no one you’re overly fond of.”

“You pigeon-livered ratbag!”

Reaching out, he caught her hand before it connected with his cheek. “Come now, don’t let’s dwell on the past. Tell me where Weller is, I’ll slit his throat and be out of your hair before dawn.”

She snatched her fingers away cringing toward the bed. “My *God*, but you’re cold.”

“Trust me, woman, if you knew Arthur Weller’s sins, you’d be sending him to Hell yourself.”

“No, I mean, you’re as frozen as a corpse.”

“Apologies. It is beginning to snow out there, and I had to use my hands to steady myself so as not to fall off the roof.”

A beat of silence passed. Then another. “The roof?” she echoed, as if she’d never before heard the word.

“How else would I attain entry to the car undetected?”

“I—I couldn’t say.” Lifting her hands, she scrubbed them over her face a few times, as if to wipe away stress, or sleep, or the sight of Sebastian, himself. “Why do you want to kill Arthur Weller?”



“For all the reasons you don’t seem surprised, I expect,” he replied darkly, as he realized that a provocative question had yet to be answered. “You never told me what you’re doing in his bed.”

She snorted with derision. “This isn’t his bed, it’s his daughter Penelope’s.”

Sebastian swallowed once. Twice. Momentarily paralyzed by lascivious images of what she and Arthur Weller’s young daughter got up to in bed. “I never took you for a Jack the Lass... Lucky Penelope.”

She instantly crossed her arms. “No, you rank *pervert*, I’m both her chaperone on this journey to meet her betrothed in Bucharest, *and* I’m designing the wedding trousseau.”

“Hmmm...” he drew out the speculative sound. “Do you suppose there will still be a wedding once her father is dead? What is the requisite mourning period in Romania?”

She stared at him with her arms crossed over her breasts for an uncomfortably long time. The silence ate at him, as it was wont to do. The stillness swirling with the ghosts of his sins ready to catch him up.

He needed to move. To do something.

And here they were in the dark, with a bed. Him, shivering with the cold, and her, all warm and soft and effectively naked. What rotten fucking luck. The one woman who would likely never permit him to touch her.

The one woman he did his best to forget...if only his dreams would allow it.

“Moncrieff...” She hesitated, and his breath refused to draw at the sound of his name on her lips, spoken with a return of her innate gentility.

*My name is Sebastian.* He wanted her to say it. Over. And over. And again. He wanted her to sigh it. To moan it.

To scream it.

She ventured a step closer, beguiling him with the whisper of cotton against the bare skin beneath. “I’d say after everything you put me and

Lorelai through, you might agree that you owe me a boon—”

“Come now,” he interrupted. “I was properly careful that not one hair on your head was harmed on that ship—”

“Could you kill him tomorrow night, instead?”

It took a great deal to stun Sebastian. Most often something cataclysmic. But hearing such a request from her lips did the trick. “Let me make certain I’m comprehending you, my lady.” He held up a hand. “You’re not asking me to spare Arthur Weller’s life. Only to wait to murder him until tomorrow night.”

“You heard correctly.”

He cocked his head, thoroughly bemused. “I’ve never been more curious in my life as to someone’s motives. You are not a murderer. In fact, I remember you begging the Rook to spare my life after I organized a mutiny against him, and abducted his wife, your sister-in-law, as collateral.”

“I fully remember what you did,” she said crisply. “But as you mentioned, Arthur Weller is a man who deserves the worst a villain like you could do to him. In fact, I have already hatched a plan to spirit his wife and daughter away. All I ask is time to do so before you send him to Hell.”

*A villain like you.*

Sebastian had always been more than happy to play the scoundrel. He’d never let his roguish reputation bother him in the least—in fact, he’d nurtured the status with vigor, until he was considered the perfect mélange of Guy Fawkes, Sir Francis Drake, and Cassanova.

Most women found him irresistible.

But not Veronica Weatherstoke.

Sebastian remembered watching as the Rook slid a dagger into her husband's brain. Her reaction to the murder had been horrified.

And yet, she'd not shed a single tear for the man.

The Earl of Southbourne, Mortimer Weatherstoke, had shanghaied an injured boy and sold him to a captain in need of a crew. The boy who'd become the Rook, the most terrible pirate in this century. Mortimer had broken his own sister Lorelai's leg over a toy, and killed her beloved pet rabbits before feeding them to her in a stew. He'd separated the Rook and Lorelai for twenty years on a cruel whim.

What must he have been like as a husband to Veronica?

As it always did, the thought hit him like a hammer to the guts, and the urge to commit murder surged to a fever pitch. "Where is Weller now?" he growled.

She flinched, and he instantly tempered his rage. "He's with his mistress somewhere in second class."

"Excellent. Why don't I simply find him and kill him tonight, and then his wife and daughter no longer have to worry? We can all sip Tuica in Bucharest by week's end."

Veronica shook her head vehemently before he'd finished his sentence. "Penelope doesn't *want* to marry the Romanian count to whom she is promised. The ink is dry on the contract. The dowry already sent. But if we can lose her in Paris, she can be married quickly to the man she truly loves, and on a ship bound for America by the time she is missed. Penelope is with him now, going over the plans for tomorrow night one last time."

"You trust this boy?" Sebastian asked.

She nodded. "He will care for her. He's young, but from a good family with plenty of means and, furthermore, decency. I know them from...from before."

"From when you were a countess?"

“From when I was nothing more than a shipping magnate’s daughter with an obscene dowry of my own.”

He made a soft sound in his throat. “I forgot you were not born nobility.”

“I was *never* allowed to forget.” The bleak note that stole into her voice tugged at the empty hole in his chest.

“Do you know the Wellers from then also?” he queried, Weller being a shipping magnate of his own.

“I had heard of him. He and my father were friendly rivals.”

Sebastian’s lip curled with distaste. “Did your father *also* take refugee and immigrant children and sell them to deviant men on far continents? Did he use his ships to smuggle stolen sarcophagi, relics, and pillaged art?”

“Of course not,” she answered, horrified. “My father was an honorable man, but Weller is a brute and a bully. What he does to his own family is shameful enough, but to learn that he...that he is cruel to children...” She passed a hand over her eyes and then turned to him. “Are you, a *pirate*, really passing judgment? Do you see yourself as better than scum like Weller?”

“We were not those kinds of pirates,” he defended. “We *took* from men like Weller. We had no quarrel with refugees or the poor, and often we freed them from such ships, and even added several to our crew.”

“Oh *please*, don’t make yourselves out to be some sort of Robin Hood figures. There is no such thing as a *good* pirate, and your lot were among the worst of them. The Rook, at least, was redeemable because he’d been forced into the life, and everything he’d done was for Lorelai’s sake.”

Bending closer, he inhaled the scent of orchids and amber radiating from the warmth of her skin. God, but he hungered for a taste of her. Of every part of her that opened and bloomed. “I never claimed to be good, my lady—if anything, I am one of the most wicked men you’ll ever know.”

She retreated one step, which was all the space the tight quarters would allow. “I know you are wicked, which is why I don’t trust you.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Trust is a dangerous fallacy. The only thing I trust is that a person will always act in their own self-interest. Because of that, my lady, you can rely on me to keep my word in this respect. What is that old adage? The enemy of my enemy is my—”

“We are *not* friends.”

“Uncomfortable allies, then,” he offered. “You do what you have to do, Countess, and then I will rid the world of Arthur Weller.”

“I’m not a countess any longer. I’m a dowager...little better than a seamstress now.”

“Modesty doesn’t suit you,” he quipped. “You’re becoming quite a name in the world of fashion.”

“How do you know that?” The rank skepticism in her voice brought out a teasing smile he wished he could turn on her.

“Well, you kidnap a person once or twice and you tend to get attached,” he admitted. “Tell me you haven’t experienced something of the same issue. That you have not looked for mention of me here or there?”

She groaned with more disgust than the moment warranted, in his opinion. “I’d all but forgotten you existed.”

*Lies.*

Sebastian had many skills, and the chief among them was being able to tell when someone fed him a falsehood.

“Will I ever be anything but the villain to you, Veronica?” The question had left his lips before he could call it back.

“How could you not be?” She gestured wildly. “You turned on your captain and took my sister-in-law and best friend hostage during a mutiny. You threatened to kill her!”

He rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t have *done* it. Everyone knows that. I only needed to make a point.”

“No one knows anything of the sort! How the devil did you escape

prison? I was *certain* you'd have hanged for your crimes by now."

His brows met in confusion. "Surely you've heard."

"Heard what?"

She really didn't know? Oh, this was a *lark*.

"How long have you been on the Continent?" he asked.

"Since Ash married Lorelai, and don't you *dare* change the subject."

Ash. The Rook. His captain. His brother. His best friend. He'd have died for that man. He'd killed for that man. He'd hung his future, such as it was, upon the life they'd built at sea.

Only to have it disintegrated by the Rook's forgotten past. Ash had bound himself to a lost love and a brother he'd been twenty years without.

And Sebastian, his first mate and his most loyal friend, was set adrift.

And he might have acted...hastily. Now that time had separated him from the debacle, he had regrets.

Especially when it came to Veronica.

"I agree that I owe you this boon," he granted. "I will wait to assassinate Arthur Weller until you have carried out your plans."

"Thank you."

"Let us shake on it." He offered his hand.

"I'd rather not touch you."

Another lie.

*Interesting...*

"I'm glad we met again, Veronica. I didn't like how we parted." He couldn't remember the last time he'd said something so genuine. It made him feel exposed. Vulnerable.

He'd certainly not make a habit of it.

"You mean you disliked being led away in irons by Chief Inspector Morley?" she clarified with a syrupy sarcasm.

"I meant I regret you saw me like that. On the day I lost everything."

"On the day you *surrendered* everything," she corrected. "You brought it

all on yourself, you know.”

He knew.

It was a truth he often ran from, which meant he needed to get moving.

Yet, his feet didn't seem inclined to obey. He wasn't a man to look over his shoulder at the past, and yet...here she was. One of his most intrusive, pervasive memories.

So close.

So dangerously, alluringly close.

His heart sped. His breaths intensified as a dagger of dread threatened to skewer his tightening throat. If he thought about what he wanted to do, he'd take the deserter's road. He'd been many things in life, but a coward wasn't one of them.

Then why fear this? Fear her? What power did she have over him?

None.

Power was given or taken.

She wasn't the sort to take it. And he'd die before he gave it up. So, he needed to do this. It was what they both deserved.

“I'm sorry.” The words tasted foreign and foul on his tongue, but he managed to spit them out.

It wasn't that he expected a parade or procession. Hell, he hadn't really even imagined forgiveness was forthcoming, but he thought she might have said *something* in return.

He groped about to fill the resulting silence. “I'm sorry,” he repeated. “The thought that I might have frightened or distressed you offends me in every way.”

“Thank you.” Her reply was colored with astonishment.

With a practiced bow, Sebastian turned and eased the door back open, trying to ignore the warmth of her gaze on his chilly skin.

“Moncrieff,” she called after him in an elevated whisper.

He paused, unable to turn around, half afraid she'd found the words to



rebuke his apology.

“Do be careful on the roof. The snow is getting worse.”

Sebastian didn't bother to fight the grin spreading across his face as he once again melded with the shadows.

Veronica Weatherstoke didn't want him to fall to his death from a speeding train.

And *that* felt like progress.

Veronica thought she'd reached the upper limit of irritation at Sebastian Moncrieff.

Yet here she was, mere *hours* after their nocturnal encounter, seething at him with uncharacteristic vigor. Even in his absence he was a sliver beneath her skin.

An unrelenting prick.

She'd rolled like restless waves in the night, doing her best to escape fevered memories of the man. Recollections that became lurid dreams, once she'd finally wrestled sleep into submission.

Though morning had been her nemesis since she was a girl, Veronica was particularly fond of breakfast. Coffee and scones, biscuits and bacon, soft boiled eggs in their little cups, and toast drenched in butter. These were the things that beckoned her from the warmth of her bed each day.

And Sebastian Moncrieff, that arrogant bully, had deprived her of that pleasure this morning.

Had stolen it, like the knavish pirate he'd been.

That he apparently still *was*.

Because, though she was seated in one of Europe's most opulent first-class dining cars, sinking her teeth into the butteriest croissant she'd had in ages, she could hardly taste a single morsel.

His scent had taken her olfactory senses hostage, filling her with the extraordinarily masculine flavors and aromas that were distinct to *him*. Warm, wild, and clean. Like bergamot and citrus...both sharpened and sweetened with notes of honey.

Should she bottle the essence, she'd make a bloody fortune.

*Damn* him for being free to walk the world she inhabited! For confining them into a space from which there was no escape. Were she to flee, she'd run out of track.

And even were she to leap from the train, he'd find her still.

She intrinsically knew that, somehow.

In her unbidden thoughts, she had often wondered if their paths would cross again. Of course, she'd always immediately rejected the idea. He'd been arrested by none other than Carlton Morley, the Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard. She'd watched as they'd led him away in irons.

Surely he'd have been tried for kidnapping, theft, privateering, even murder. As it was more than a year after his capture, he should have had his neck stretched by a rope.

Which was one of the reasons she avoided British papers. She found she didn't want to know. Because in all reality she *should* be relieved that justice had been done.

And yet...

A sudden cold dread clenched in her stomach, and she glanced across the table to see Penelope Weller's eyes widen in her elfin face with a brief flash of unmasked trepidation.

Veronica was horrifically, *intimately* acquainted with all that was hidden behind that very expression. The instant physical tension at the approach of an oppressor. The shattering of any pretense of inner peace. The anticipation of humiliation or condemnation. Of punishment and peril.

During her marriage to Mortimer Weatherstoke, the Earl of Southbourne, Veronica learned to read the most insignificant indications of emotion. Such

as the tremble of Mrs. Adrienne Weller's teacup as she returned it to its saucer. The tight, compulsive movements of Penelope's throat as she worked to swallow her fear more than once. Hoping her voice wouldn't reveal the chaos within. The returning of both women's hands beneath the table, to grip at each other. To draw strength from a fellow captive.

Veronica steeled her own spine, measuring her voice and breath the moment before Arthur Weller joined them.

"And here I rushed to breakfast, beset with worry that your food would cool whilst you waited for me." He scowled down at his wife and daughter's breakfast plates, on which the food had been more poked and nibbled at than consumed. "I see I needn't have bothered."

This was how Weller expressed his disapproval. Sneering over the spectacles perching on his hawkish nose, he expelled the politest words from his mouth.

Yet they landed like a threat.

The subtext always being: *You will suffer for my displeasure.*

Men like him had so many vast and varied ways of collecting their dues. The range was incredibly wide, spanning from slight cuts and pinpricks of hurtful words, to physical blows that would beat a grown man into dust. Men like Arthur Weller didn't just break bones, he reached inside the people he should have protected and broke their spirits as well.

To say nothing of their hearts.

"I'm sorry, Papa," Penelope whispered, her gaze never leaving the table.

Because his wife and daughter could not speak up, Veronica did it for them, taking perverse pleasure in doing so.

Arthur Weller was always pleasant in public.

"Lend us your pardon, Mr. Weller, we were uncertain if you would join us this morning, as you did not yesterday." She kept her tone conversational, as if oblivious to the fraught atmosphere between the entire Weller family. "In fact, I didn't see you in your cabin at all, so it was assumed you'd awoken

early and breakfasted already, seeing as how breakfast began a quarter hour past.” Picking up a muffin, she slathered it with preserves and bit off an unladylike mouthful, chewing it *at* him.

This one tasted like strawberries and spite.

Veronica didn’t have to look at him to recognize the wrath burning down at her from his dark eyes. Her attention remained firmly affixed to her food, not only because she didn’t want to give Weller the satisfaction, but because she disliked the sight of him. He wasn’t unsightly, *per se*. A wealth of silvering hair and an impressive mustache bracketed by muttonchops were affixed to rather mild features, weathered by his early years as a seaman. He’d kept that lean, rangy figure into his fifties, and stood taller than most men. Though he’d a volatile intensity about him that she’d noticed cowed people beneath him and his peers, alike. But he hadn’t a build she would describe as intimidating.

Not when she’d stood in the presence of leviathans such as The Black Heart of Ben More and the Rook.

Of the tremendous titan that was Sebastian Moncrieff.

“How extraordinary you are, Countess,” he replied in an indulgent tone. “Most women so devoted to fashion take care not to eat so much or so often. Though I suppose you are lucky to be possessed of the skills to let out your own gowns as the need, no doubt, arises.”

Veronica offered him a smile she hoped did not bare as many teeth as she desired. “Dowager Countess,” she corrected. “I know you were not educated with nobility, so I don’t mind reminding you that it is commensurate to address me as ‘my lady.’”

His eyes narrowed as his smile widened into something that would be accompanied by a snarl in the wild. “Ah yes, how very sad. You are often so jolly, I forget the man who lifted you out of the mire of mediocrity was murdered.”

*And so shall you be.*

The savage thought astonished her.

Veronica was feeling less and less conflicted about his impending demise, and she'd only spent a matter of minutes in his company.

This man sold women and children, or so Moncrieff had mentioned. Just when she didn't think he could be any more evil...

Weller snapped his fingers at the staff and demanded his breakfast, cutting off any need for a reply. The Weller women didn't touch their food again until he'd received and dug into his own, and even then, they chewed as if the delicacies tasted of ash.

"I learned something from a...loquacious companion this morning," Weller said around a bite. He obviously referred to the mistress with which he'd spent the night, intending to embarrass or hurt his wife.

Men like him rarely realized that their absence was, in fact, a relief.

"You don't say, darling," Adrienne replied dutifully, batting her pale eyes at her husband in a most disarming way. She'd been a scandalously young bride, thereby possessed of an eligible daughter before her fortieth year. However, marriage to a man like Weller, and eight subsequent failed pregnancies, had pinched deep grooves into her forehead and bracketed her tight frown. Shadows haunted the skin beneath her eyes which sagged from exhaustion, and even her honey-colored coiffure seemed to droop in his presence.

Veronica remembered that self-same expression in the mirror.

Lord, but she wished she could take Adrienne with them, but like so many women she insisted on staying with her husband.

"What did you hear, Papa?" Penelope asked over-brightly, a white pinch encircling her smile and the skin on her knuckles as she stirred her tea.

He puffed out his chest. "Not only are the Duchess of Lowood and her daughter aboard, but also is the Erstwhile Earl. I met him in the observation car last night. Capital fellow, not at all like one hears in the papers."

Veronica froze.

*The Erstwhile Earl.* She'd heard that moniker before. When the Countess of Northwalk had mentioned it in regard to Sebastian Moncrieff.

Earl of Crosthwaite, she'd called him.

As tempted as Veronica had been to investigate the matter over the months since she'd encountered the man, she'd never allowed herself to do it.

To look into his past would be to admit that Moncrieff had a powerful effect on her, enough at least to arouse curiosity.

"Why do they call him the Erstwhile Earl?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Oh, you don't know?" A victorious chuckle washed her in revulsion. Men like Weller delighted in schooling the uninitiated. "Crosthwaite's father died when he was a lad away at boarding school. The title is old, granted back when a York held the throne, but old Henry Moncrieff lost the last of the fortune and began to parcel off the land to pay debts. Most everything else was taken in taxes upon his death. So, the boy never returned to the drafty ruin that even the Crown didn't want to bother with taking from him."

"He became a pirate, instead." Moncrieff's voice was as smooth, cold, and lethal as his blade from the night before.

Veronica nearly dropped her cup and was unable to avoid a slosh into the saucer as it landed with uncontrolled clatter.

Awareness poured down her spine, and every hair on her body vibrated at an alarming frequency. The electric sensations skittering through her threatened to set her aglow.

It was what his nearness always did to her.

She didn't turn to look, choosing instead to be completely absorbed by her breakfast plate. Yet, she knew exactly where he stood behind them, as if every nerve in her body recognized the proximity.

"My lord." Weller stood, wiping his mouth and turning to greet the Erstwhile Earl. "You'll forgive my idle gossip; I was regaling the ladies about your exploits. You're rather a legend."

"No forgiveness needed," came the amiable reply. "Though my deeds are

hardly proper breakfast conversation.”

Veronica witnessed his approach through Penelope Weller’s reaction. Her irises, dark like her father’s, gave way to dilating pupils. Her pert nose flared, and her delicate jaw went slack as she arched her neck back, and then further, in order to take in the man’s sheer immensity. A hand went to her hair, fluttering like a butterfly over the honey curls before smoothing over a lush green morning dress of Veronica’s own creation.

Why did the girl have to look so comely in it? So young and unfettered?

Veronica blinked herself back to sanity.

*Why the devil did it matter?*

“Would you join us for breakfast?” Weller offered Moncrieff, snapping at a waiter and pointing at a chair he wanted taken from another table.

*Don’t accept. Don’t say yes, Veronica pleaded inwardly. Please just move along.*

“I’ve already dined,” he answered, allowing her to expel her relief on a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. “But how could I refuse at least one cup of tea with such lovely companions?”

*Drat and damn and blast!* She dug into her recollection of even more foul curses when the hem of his grey morning suit jacket found her periphery as he stepped to the table.

What in God’s name was he doing? A man bent on murder should *not* be seen dining with his intended victim. How could he smile into Weller’s face all the while expecting to slide a knife into him at the first appropriate moment?

“My lord, allow me to present my wife, Mrs. Adrienne Weller, and our daughter, Penelope.” Arthur Weller swept a hand across the table as the women in question struggled to stand.

“Please, don’t get up my account,” was Moncrieff’s pleasant reply. “I’ll sit.”

Weller made a grand gesture at Veronica who sat on his other side. “And



this is the Dowager Countess Southbourne, the Paris fashion prodigy we've engaged to make Penny's wedding trousseau."

He loved to parade her in front of important people.

"My lord," she murmured in greeting. She could no longer avoid looking at him without drawing notice to her odd behavior, so she steeled her spine and lifted her gaze.

Instantly, she regretted it.

The shadows had been kind last night, concealing the full force of Sebastian Moncrieff's presence.

She'd forgotten he didn't belong to the darkness. That he was this lambent creature of almost blinding splendor, possessed of the depraved sort of good looks that one would ascribe to a pagan god of opulence and sensuality.

On a ship beneath the open, endless horizon he'd been an exceptionally large man.

But on a train where space was at a premium, he took too much of it for the comfort of regularly built people. Like Goliath, he was both a giant and a philistine.

With the scruples of a tomcat.

"A dowager countess employed by a shipping magnate?" Eyes the color of Brandywine lazily touched every part of her visible above the table. Veronica felt quite molested once he'd finished. "My how the world has changed in my years at sea."

Veronica's jaw went slack.

How casually he addressed his crimes. Wore his scandal on his skin and bared it to the world—nay, displayed it in pride of place, as if mischief and malice might be awarded a trophy.

A chair appeared behind him, and he rucked up his trousers as he sat, making room for his powerful thighs. Dismissing Veronica, he turned the full weight of his charm toward Adrienne and Penelope. "I understand

felicitations are in order on your impending nuptials, Miss Weller.”

“T-thank you,” the girl breathed, her cheeks staining a soft shade of pink.

It took nothing more than a slight smile in the direction of the staff to incite a parade of food and drink in an elegant dance performed only for men of his rank and power.

Ultimately, he ended up choosing an Irish breakfast tea, and pouring an offensive amount of cream and sugar into a cup that looked preposterously small in his hands. “Tell me, Miss Weller, who is the lucky groom?”

“A Count Gyürky in Bucharest,” her father answered for her. “He’s a direct descendant of Catherine the Great. Much like many of our own noble houses.”

“A count, you say?” Belying his words, Moncrieff’s sip of tea was decidedly unimpressed. “Ah, well...if you can’t find nobility close by, it’s worth looking abroad to the Continent.”

“Yes—well—Gyürky’s holdings are the size of Hampshire,” Weller spluttered, not immune to the implied insult.

Veronica leveled Moncrieff with a scathing look, one he summarily ignored.

How abominably he was behaving. Did he not know that the pique coloring Weller’s features would be felt by his family? That he’d take it out on the women as if his mortification were their fault?

“He’s wealthier than so many of our impoverished noblemen,” Weller said with a sniff.

“Yes, I’m certain his goats are well cared for,” Moncrieff chuckled, then shrugged. “At least he’s not an American.”

“Or a *pirate*,” Veronica said, finally drawing his notice.

“We were more privateers, my lady,” he corrected with a solicitous smile, one that turned her insides rather slippery and soft. “Regardless of reputation, we generally pillaged according to the rules of maritime law.”

“Generally?” Veronica wrinkled her nose and clenched her thighs. “Last I

checked, the Royal Navy is not at war, nor was the Devil's Dirge under contract with the crown."

"Semantics." Moncrieff waved them away as if they held no bearing whatsoever. "It could be argued that any attack on a British vessel could be considered an act of war."

Was that how he'd wriggled out of trouble with the law?

Or was it because he'd turned the incomparable power of his pulchritude on the queen herself, and the besotted woman granted him full pardon?

*Un-bloody-believable.*

A handkerchief drifted on an invisible breeze, landing like a silken snowflake at Moncrieff's feet. It heralded the arrival of a strawberry-haired beauty, thrust into view by an older woman with similar features, but which drooped at the jaw like the jowls of a hound.

"Jessica, you are too clumsy," berated the matriarch, with overwrought affectation.

"Allow me." Sebastian bent in his chair and retrieved the scrap of fabric, offering it back to the girl, who was scarcely old enough to have been presented to society.

"Thank you," she demurred with a coy bat of her lashes. "I'm ever so much obliged."

Obliged? He returned a scrap of fabric, not the stolen family jewels.

"Think nothing of it," he replied to the moon-eyed girl, whose entire face bloomed crimson at his wink.

"A true gentleman," the mother cooed from behind her daughter.

Veronica lowered her lashes to hide the complete orbit of her eyes. Surely, she couldn't be the only one to notice that all available debutantes seemed to be thanking him for his mere existence.

"Few who know me accuse me of being a gentleman, madam." His eyes glimmered with merriment as he took another measured sip of his tea.

"I see you don't recognize me," the elder woman addressed the table. "I

am Heloise de Marchand, Duchess of Lowood.”

This time, the assemblage stood with alacrity. One did not remain seated in the presence of a duchess until she gave her leave.

“Your Grace,” Sebastian executed a perfect bow as the duchess nudged the girl forward with alarming blatancy.

“This is my daughter, Jessica.”

“A pleasure, Lady Jessica.” He caught the girl’s forearm and slid his hand down until her gloved fingers curled over his as he bent to press a kiss over her knuckles.

Veronica’s own hand curled, her nails biting into her palms.

“I am Sebastian Moncrieff, the Earl of—”

“We are well aware of you,” the duchess interjected, as a woman of her age and standing was excused for lapses in manners, so long as they seemed to have done so on purpose. “One does not travel without knowing the importance of one’s fellow passengers.”

“Indeed.” Sebastian flicked a glance at Weller. Or was it Veronica? They stood close enough in the cramped space it was impossible to tell. “Allow me, then, to make presentations to—”

“We’ve not the time, Moncrieff.” The duchess sniffed toward the table, her only recognition of the existence of other people thus far. “Now that we’ve been introduced and you’ve proven yourself a gentleman, I’d like to invite you to our private car for breakfast.”

His eyes lit with interest, and Veronica felt her own demeanor darken.

*He’s a bloody pirate!* She wanted to scream. How could a woman—a *duchess*—be throwing her young, buxom daughter at the man? Did she not know his seat was in ruins? His family in shambles?

He’d been arrested only a year past!

“It would be rude to leave the lovely Wellers and the Dowager Countess Southbourne’s company.”

The duchess finally glanced over at them as if they were mud she’d

scraped from the bottom of her shoe. “I’d have invited the Countess if she’d not regrettably returned to her origins in *trade*.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Moncrieff slid Veronica a speaking glance. “Fashion is more of a passionate hobby than anything. Much like the Duchess of Trenwyth does with her paintings.”

Veronica’s fingers itched to curl around his obscenely thick neck.

Opening her fan, the woman used it as a shield against the now awkward assembly. “The difference is vast, dear Moncrieff. The Duchess of Trenwyth’s painting hangs in the Queen’s own private quarters. She does not lease her services to *new money*.”

New money. The phrase encompassed and oppressed the social standing of entrepreneurs such as manufacturers, transporters, and merchants who were quickly amassing fortunes, often far greater than those held by the landed lords.

Veronica couldn’t see Weller’s features, but his neck turned an alarming shade of purple.

“You are wicked,” Moncrieff teased indulgently, though she noted that his smile was confined only to his lips. “Men like me are forced to dowry-hunt amongst new money, so I cannot share your sentiments.”

The duchess’s eyes glinted. “Follow me, Moncrieff, there’s more to discuss on the topic of dowries.” Her head gestured toward the door before she flared her skirts and sailed away, her diminutive daughter trailing in her wake.

Affecting a regretful expression, Moncrieff turned back to the table. “It seems noble duty calls.” Rather than hurrying away, he bent and kissed the hand of each lady at the table, leaving Veronica for last. He reached across Weller to envelope her fingers, lips only hovering above her knuckles.

“It’s been a rare pleasure,” he said before sauntering away.

They all watched, mute, until he was forced to tilt his shoulders to the side in order to fit through the door.

“Insufferable man!” Weller threw his linen on the table and sat down in a heap. “I didn’t like him from the moment I laid eyes on him,” he said, as if he’d not been close to licking Moncrieff’s boots only a moment before.

“I don’t think he meant us disrespect,” Penelope murmured, her voice painted with awe. “It’s impossible to refuse a real-life duchess.”

“Do you mean to disrespect me by defending him?” Weller snarled, his knuckles whitening as they gripped the side of the table.

Adrienne placed a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, as the girl had gone several shades of green. “She meant nothing by it, Arthur. I’m certain we were all overwhelmed by our first brush with a woman of such rank and an earl of such...such...”

Weller leaned forward, his cheeks mottled with barely-leashed rage. “Such. *What?*” he asked from behind clenched teeth.

“Such infamy,” she finished quickly.

His nostrils flared for a fraught moment, and then he leaned back into his chair, taking up his cutlery. “One wonders how a body would fare being thrown from a train at this speed,” he speculated, apropos of nothing. “Do you think the snow would cushion a fall?”

Veronica didn’t remark on the ill-concealed threat, directed at no one in particular. Her entire being was focused on the piece of rolled-up paper Moncrieff had tucked into her hand.

Sebastian most often found anticipation a delicious form of torture.

However, that was before he'd had to wait in the third cargo car back from second class, wondering if Veronica Weatherstoke would be the first woman in his personal history to deny an invitation to meet him.

Rather than luggage, his surroundings were dedicated to freight and shipped goods of every imaginable kind. Copper pipes lashed to the right wall gleamed in the wan light from the window. Across from them, bolted shelves propped up gluttonous bags of barley and seed. Crates of frozen butter were stacked neatly by fragile boxes of wine glasses.

There *would* be a battalion of wine glasses. Their next stop was Paris, after all.

When the far door opened, he breathed a sigh of relief and flattened his back to the wall, hoping the shelves and shadows would provide him cover.

Veronica swept in and turned instantly to lock the door against the winter wind, before glancing at the gloom of the interior. Her attentions were immediately diverted by a tightly packed pile of worn furniture. Chairs with torn velvet upholstery were stacked upon three-legged tables and the corpses of armoires, all secured by leather straps and chains.

As she'd not yet alerted to his presence, Sebastian took the opportunity to observe her in an artless, uninhibited moment. She inspected every piece of

abused antiques furniture as she pulled her peach gloves from each individual finger.

Why he found the action unbearably erotic, he couldn't say.

It was bloody cold in these unheated cargo cars, why would she be taking off her gloves?

Oh... Oh fuck.

Questioning fingertips entranced him as they tested the textures and details of several pieces while thoughts and opinions escaped her throat in slight speculative sounds. A wordless murmur of discovery, a crestfallen sigh, a small *oh* of surprise as she discovered something unexpected.

He'd been a fool to suggest they meet in such confines, though he did note that it was safer than anywhere with a bed.

Not that he'd ever needed a bed to enjoy sex. Any surface would do, really.

Carefully, almost reverently, Veronica stroked the scratched, pocked surface of a desk, her fingers finding the grooves and following them to their fruition. Closing her eyes, she indulged in a private moment, as if she shared a memory with the desk that caused her to gain three shades of peach to her cheeks.

Sebastian had flirted with, fondled, and fucked an untold number of beautiful women. He was a hedonist at heart, and did his utmost to live up to his reputation at every turn. A man driven by desire, by the indulgence thereof, he consumed whatever pleasure a moment could provide, stretching it out to the final drop.

In the bacchanalia that had been his life, he couldn't ever remember wanting a woman with such ardency.

Truly, it bordered on violence.

Not violence *toward* her, so much as a ferocious, primitive reaction slamming into his body with the power of a war hammer. Skewering him with wicked lances of lust before mocking him with her indifference.



Not only did this leave him intensely perturbed, but also uncharacteristically perplexed. Though painfully ardent, this was no rutting need to throw his hips forward into a warm orifice with a pretty face.

His hands itched to build things for her. To break what insulted her. He wished for a bullet to throw his body in front of. Or a tyrant to topple in her name.

These almost sophomoric desires and drives hadn't been a part of his intentions toward women since he was a lad of fourteen, desperate for a dragon to slay to win his damsel.

As a man, he'd become the monster.

Still was, in her eyes.

Driven by an intensifying inquisitiveness, he crept forward, no longer hiding himself, but also not calling attention to his presence.

Something about the old desk had absorbed her notice so thoroughly, he'd moved close enough to reach for her and she'd yet to register that she was not alone.

He adopted a sprightly tone, so as not to startle her overmuch. "What a lovely old piece. I was fond of one very much like it in my quarters on the Devil's Dirge."

Veronica whirled toward him, pulling her hand away from the surface of the desk as if it'd burned her.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Same door as you."

"You mean...you've been here all along?" Her winged, ebony brows met in a scowl. "You did not announce yourself upon my arrival."

"I hope you can forgive my wickedness," he murmured, thinking of all the multitudes of meaning that statement could convey. "It is only that you swept into the gloom looking like a Caribbean sunrise, and I was too breathless to greet you."

Her wary gaze had yet to meet his, and he was getting the idea she found

his flirting more aggravating than amusing. His compliment did not go entirely unappreciated, he noted, as she smoothed an idle hand down her bodice and scrutinized the drapes of her lovely skirt before tugging at them.

“What do you want with me?” she inquired of the ground with no little amount of impatience. “Because of your shameful behavior today, I’m keen to stay close to Penelope and Adrienne as Arthur Weller is now in a rotten mood and likely to take it out on them.”

“I’ve been told Weller is in the casino car with his young mistress...the Weller women are safe from his moods for the moment.”

“Excellent,” she clipped, reaching out to pick at a sliver from the edge of the desk. “I don’t want to keep you from courting the duchess’s daughter, so if you’ll just state your business, I’ll be on my way.”

His lips twisted into a grimace at the thought of the vapid lady Jessica and her militant mother. “They’re courting me, more like. I’d rather leash my life to a leathered old sow.”

“Even with her excessive dowry?” she asked, lifting a skeptical brow.

“You forget, my lady, that I’ve a pirate’s hoard of treasure, and no one’s whim but my own to spend it on. I need a debutant’s dowry like the lake district needs more rain.”

“Oh.” She blinked rapidly. “But I’ve been told your estate and finances are in ruin.”

“Come now, Countess, do you believe everything the gossip mill has to offer? Besides, why restore a defunct ruin when I could spend my ill-gotten gains on myself rather than a legacy I’m not likely to sire.”

Though his response seemed to trouble her, she still refused to lift her eyes above his cravat. “I suppose your answer in that regard shouldn’t surprise me. So, if you please, would you tell me why you’ve summoned me, and we can both return to the business of the day.”

“That very business is why I’d like to speak with you,” he said. “I awoke curious as to exactly how you plan to spirit poor Penelope and her lover to

America. And also to offer my assistance, such as it is.”

“Why would you do that?” she asked suspiciously.

Because Arthur Weller was a dangerous man to cross. Because the conscience he thought he’d buried whispered that her broken trust in him was a fault he needed to work to regain. *Because* something about her overrode every selfish instinct he’d carefully cultivated over the decades.

He could say none of this out loud.

“Because, dear lady, I cannot do my part until yours is done, and impatience is chief among my vast assortment of flaws.”

“I see.” His answer seemed to mollify her. “Well, the plan is a simple one, really. Once we pull into Gare de Lyon, I’ve a contact that will conduct us in his coach to Le Havre where they’re booked on a steamship to America under pseudonyms.”

“I’m impressed.” Sebastian examined her with different eyes. She was so shrewd for someone so gentle. A ruthless mind did not often maintain such a soft heart, encased in all that exquisite loveliness.

Lord but she transfixed him.

“You said ‘us’ when discussing the journey to Le Havre. Does that mean you’re going with them?”

“Yes.”

The idea of such distance curdled like bad cream in his gut. “To America?”

“No, to the ship. I want to see them off safely, but I also want to come back for Adrienne. She doesn’t know that she’ll be alone in this world once her husband and only child are gone.”

“What if Weller does something to subvert this elopement?” he asked. “Do you have contingencies?”

“Of course.” She rolled her eyes, crossing defensive arms over her chest, doing lovely things to her décolletage. “It will be night when we pull into Paris, so in the unlikely event that Arthur Weller disengages himself from his

mistress to prevent us from leaving the train, I suppose I'll just have to create a diversion."

"That, at least, will be simple, as I'm certain you're aware you're one of the most diverting creatures on the planet." He reached toward a wayward ringlet that'd come loose from her coiffure and fallen in front of her eyes.

She jerked her head back before he could touch her and retreated several steps. "Please don't."

His hand froze mid-air. Several dark suspicions swirled about in his chest, ones that condemned all those of his sex into a lake of eternal hellfire. A fire he'd often the mind to stoke himself. "Veronica, why can you not look at me?"

"I *am* looking at you."

"My throat does not count. Look at *me*."

Her brows knit together, and even in the dimness her cheeks flared a color vibrant enough to rival her dress. "Do not presume to tell me where to look or what to do, sir. You are not my keeper nor my master."

"On the contrary, my lady," he murmured. "I am but your humble servant."

Her gaze latched onto the desk against which his hip now rested. "Are we finished? Or was there something else to discuss?"

"Something has driven you to a pique," he observed. "Was it Weller?"

"It was not."

"Was it me?"

Her silence answered for her as she scratched at a wound in the wooden desktop.

As much as he desired it, he made no move to go closer to her. "Do I frighten you?"

She scoffed. "Not in the least."

*Lie.*

"Come now, I know I've been a cad and a rogue the whole of my life, but

are you really afraid that I'll hurt you?" He held his hands out, offering himself up for scrutiny. Surely a woman with your fashion sense would deduce that a man with such a light-grey suit wasn't planning on getting any blood on it. And the fit of it didn't at all allow for tight maneuvering—he'd split the seams.

"You're a criminal and confessed pirate, Moncrieff," she stated with a droll huff. "Your crew was rather famous for hurting people."

"Never women," he asserted, holding up his finger to make the salient point. "It was a veritable creed of ours that women and children would always be spared much possible distress from our pirating. One of Rook's sticking points, with which I heartily agreed. You and Lorelai were among the first ladies to ever board the ship."

To his utter astonishment, she snorted. "You are a filthy liar."

"Uncalled for," he admonished her without letting his good nature slip. "How do you figure?"

She gaped at him as if he were the largest, dimmest bulb she'd ever had to contend with. "Our second night on that ship, the captain brought a veritable contingent of prostitutes to entertain the entire crew."

Laughing that away, he waved his hand at her. "That doesn't count—our anchor was down."

"Gah!" She threw her arms up and shifted as if she wanted to pace the length of the aisle. "You are the most ridiculous, infuriating man. How you avoided the noose is one of the great mysteries of our time."

"It really isn't." He chuckled, enjoying how lovely aggravation made her, even in the pallid, grey light of winter filtered through the grime of the window. "I was given an ultimatum, of sorts. It was either declare myself the Erstwhile Earl of Crosthwaite, take up my political seat and lordly responsibilities...or prison, and likely the noose. I will tell you it was one of the most difficult decisions I've yet made. The life of a lord is tedious in the extreme. There are days I would have preferred the gallows."

A noise, half disbelief, half frustration, burst from her chest. “This is why everyone hates the aristocracy.”

“Says the countess.”

“Dowager!” she cried. “And I never *asked* to be a countess, I fell for Mortimer Weatherstoke before I knew he was an earl’s son.”

Now it was his turn to be incensed. “If you tell me you loved that cretinous bastard, I’ll pitch myself from the train right now.”

“Tempting as that outcome may be, I cannot claim to have loved Mortimer Weatherstoke. I found him charming whilst we courted. He was one of the handsomest men I’d met in society, and never revealed the rot he’d festering in his soul until it was too late.”

Questions crowded into Sebastian’s throat until they choked him into silence. He wanted to understand her damage. To not merely patch up the holes perforating her soul and spirit...but to truly mend them.

*How can someone as broken as you fix her? queried his conscience. She is better than you will ever be.*

This whisper was precisely why he’d locked his cursed conscience away some time ago, and never planned to set it free again.

What fucking key did this woman hold to spring his better self from its carefully maintained prison?

“I did not desire a title,” she continued. “I wanted to be a wife. To bring my family pride. To care for a grand home and devote myself to various philanthropic causes. I wanted to raise kind sons and strong daughters. I wanted... Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because I’m going to kiss you,” he blurted. “I thought that was bloody obvious.”

“You are *not*.”

Except...she didn’t step back this time.

“You want me to.”

Her luscious mouth dropped open. “I *never*.”

*Gigantic. Lie.*

“And why not?” he asked, mindful of the fact that many people lied to themselves, most of all. Especially when it came to affairs of the heart.

Or any affairs, really.

Her eyes lifted above his tie, for once, but stalled on his lips. “I know where that mouth has been.” She made a disgusted face.

“As they’ve always been attached to my face,” he teased, “I can vouch for their whereabouts exclusively. I vow they’ve never ventured where they ought not.”

“I know they’ve found their way between the thighs of a common strumpet,” she accused. “They could be diseased.”

“Have they?” He scratched his head, thoroughly enjoying himself. So, the countess was a gossip? What fun—he’d found a delightful flaw they could share. “There are simply too many strumpets to remember them all, though I’m not at all in the habit of paying for anything considered common.”

“How could you forget?” She threw her hands up in the air as if giving up. “You were feasting—nay—*fiending* on her that day in the ship. I thought you might be in danger of losing your tongue in her—”

“You. Watched?” Every muscle in Sebastian’s body clenched at the very idea. Not with anger or embarrassment, no, with something much more dangerous than that. Suddenly his desire had teeth and claws, ripping his skin and his uncultivated self-discipline to shreds.

Luckily, she was too irked to notice. “I was looking for an escape! I certainly didn’t install that lens between your stateroom and my prison.”

“It was hardly a prison,” he defended. “That bedroom boasted the most comfortable mattress on the entire ship. The crystal alone cost—”

“The door locked from the outside!”

“Only to keep you from doing yourself a mischief. You were threatening to leap into the ocean in the middle of a storm to attempt an impossible swim back to shore.”

“To avoid a fate as offensive as that poor prostitute had to suffer beneath you.”

Sebastian remembered the encounter, because he’d been so inflamed by the woman in the next room, he’d selected a strumpet with similar hair and blazing green eyes. He’d feasted upon her, and then he’d filled her every orifice with the singular enthusiasm he’d felt toward this particular prisoner.

He’d watched the wall that separated him as he’d come, not knowing that she was pressed to the very oculus they used to keep an eye on their captives.

Watching him in return.

He’d be damned if that didn’t send every available drop of blood straight to his cock.

Luckily, he’d spent twenty years learning to layer indifference over any other emotion as he interacted with the world. “As a point of clarification, I wonder just what about my performance offended you so?”

“The entire bloody thing offended me,” she exclaimed. “From start to—to—finish.”

*I’ve got you*, he thought, unfurling the smile of a Cheshire cat.

“One must wonder, my lady, if you found what you saw as offensive as you claim, then why watch the entire display?”

It was cruel, really, to remain silent while she sputtered and groped for an answer she likely didn’t understand. But the discovery was too delicious not to dine on for a few moments before taking pity on her. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Countess, we’ve all a bit of a voyeur inside of us...some more than others, apparently.”

“I am *not*—”

“I’ve a point of contention, however.” He held up a finger. “At no time was that woman—or any woman of my intimate acquaintance, for that matter—in a state of suffering. Were you watching closely, you’ll notice I pleased her to fruition at least twice before allowing my own. That is a personal point of pride for me.”



Wrapping her arms around her middle in a decidedly protective gesture, the Veronica still didn't cave to his excellent point. "Women like her are paid to stroke the ego of a man. They can manufacture their pleasure as well as any wife."

He did not miss her inadvertent admission there, but smoothly avoided picking at it. "I've paid a woman to stroke many parts of me, madam, but my ego has never been in need."

"Now *that* I believe," she said acerbically. "Though I suppose your overinflated sense of self would not allow you to imagine that a woman might have faked her enjoyment of your attentions."

"Never happened."

"So, say you all," she challenged. "But I know there are ways to manufacture one's enjoyment to appear like the real thing."

"Certainly," he agreed. "But there are ways to tell, so many men ignore it, either because of ignorance or simple selfishness. These are impossible to fabricate."

"If you say so."

"If a man is simply searching for writhing yips, then he could certainly be fooled," Sebastian conceded, lowering his voice and leaning toward her. "But, like so many untamed creatures, a woman's desire is so often conveyed with unspoken, uncontrollable signals. Take, for example, the dilation of her eyes. The plumping of her lips with blood and the tightening of her nipples. Her breath will come more quickly, and her delicate nostrils will flare."

Sebastian very much enjoyed the fact that she did her level best to measure her rapid breaths and tuck her full lips against her teeth.

"The same could be said of a frightened woman, as an aroused one," she said, in a voice husked with sensation and tightened with strain.

"If I cannot tell from a woman's reaction if she is aroused, then it is indisputable that her sex will reveal all."

"You're...you're being absurd," she accused.

If he reached out and touched her cheek in that moment, Sebastian might have diagnosed her with a fever. She was ripe and primed, and that likely contributed to her temper.

A gentleman would allow her a moment to recover.

But he never claimed to be a gentleman, and the predator within him could scent her arousal like a shark sensed blood in the water.

Now was no time for a retreat.

Instead, he splayed his hand close to hers on the desk and leaned down until his lips hovered above the shell of her ear. Not one part of them touched the other.

But every nerve in his body was alive with the feel of her. Attuned to the very vibrations of her atmosphere. “Your intimate skin flushes with color,” he continued, in a voice barely above a whisper, threatening to be swept away by the rhythmic cacophony of the train. “The hood of delicate flesh becomes swollen, engorged, revealing the clever, magical button it protects. That delicious little place where so much of your pleasure is contained. The folds will be slippery with desire, and if paid the correct attention, you’ll release a flood of moisture upon your climax that would take me two swallows to contain. Your muscles would clench at my cock with powerful, chaotic little spasms. Trust me, my beauty, these are things that cannot be feigned. Surely you know that.”

She said nothing. *Did* nothing.

In fact, they stood like that for so long he straightened and pulled away to examine her with a twinge of concern.

“*Do* you know that? Have you ever...”

She stared down at their fingertips splayed on the desk, as close as they could be without touching. Breath sawed in and out of her with marked difficulty, unsteady with the force of her trembles.

These were no small vibrations, Sebastian noted. But great, bone-racking tremors, wrought by overpowering emotion.

He knew the answer, and the heart he claimed to have left on some deserted island somewhere broke at the injustice.

“Veronica. Look at me.”

She flinched, but didn’t retreat. Perhaps he was being unintentionally crueler than he realized. He wanted to torment her with arousal. But...what if arousal was a torment for her?

What if Mortimer Weatherstoke created wounds that were still taking time to scar?

Swallowing a surge of rage, he slid his hand closer, allowing the energy to arc between them before the pads of their fingers touched.

“Look at me,” he pressed, gentler this time.

With infinite slowness, she tilted her neck back until their gazes met and held. Even in the dim light, her eyes gleamed the color of the most exotic eastern jade.

To Sebastian’s astonishment, something within him calmed.

In the past, he’d been told that to look into the eyes of the right woman was like falling, losing oneself in their color, or perhaps drowning in their depths. The earth would move, the planets would align, and all that melodramatic, romantical nonsense.

How intriguing to learn they’d been wrong.

This was neither falling nor drowning. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The earth had ceased to move entirely.

For once in his bedeviled life, Sebastian quieted. He stilled. Cords of velvet and silk encircled his limbs and secured him to this spot, to this moment, forcing him to remain in one place long enough to catch up with himself...

And take a breath.

A slow, easy inhale, flavored with notes of orchid and amber, bloomed inside of his chest with the languid deliberation of a sunset. Refusing to bend to the will of Man, God, or the relentless influence of Time itself, the

sensation struck him dumb and stripped him of the wits upon which he so heavily relied.

Miraculous.

There was no other word for it. With each breath taken deeper into his chest, the consistent tightness eased, replaced by another need that surprised him as precious little did in this world.

His desire, though all-consuming, had lost its violent edge. The possession and provocation thrumming through his veins paused in his chest to expand and melt, before flowing in languid, honeyed beats to the rest of him, carrying a foreign substance as dangerous as any toxin.

One to which he couldn't subscribe an exact identification.

Tenderness, perhaps. Vulnerability. Need, in its most generous form.

The need to worship the parts she kept hidden, even from herself. To adore what had never even been appreciated. To give to her what had only been taken.

He knew the bliss of unrepentant indulgence. He'd tasted the sweetness of discarded inhibitions. He'd drenched himself in pleasure so heady it'd bled into pain and become all the more intense for it.

And this vision of desire had never even been allowed a taste?

In-fucking-tolerable.

"Veronica." Lord how he loved to say her name. How he hoped he could whisper it against her sex. "Let me make you come."

“I am *not* having sex with you.” It wasn’t a sentence Veronica imagined she’d be forced to utter today.

Or ever.

Especially not to this man.

Furthermore, she’d never even considered that the denial would be a difficulty.

Sebastian Moncrieff had her pinned down. Not physically, but in every other conceivable way. Somehow, he’d guessed at the desire she’d discovered more than a year ago, as she’d witnessed him fornicate with another woman.

On a desk very much like this one.

His head had danced between the woman’s thighs, and drawn by a macabre curiosity, Veronica had watched in fascination as the woman had cried and strained and screamed beneath his attentions.

Veronica’s disbelief had been accompanied by another distressing discovery. One that’d made her thighs clench on an aching pulse accompanied by a yawning chasm of emptiness deep in her womb.

The sight of his naked body had intensified the ache. The play of muscle swelling and cording in his arms and shoulders. The flat of his tongue on forbidden flesh. The strain of his taut abdominals as he hammered her into

the desk.

It was the first time she'd watched a woman climax. That she'd known such a thing was possible.

Her body had responded by releasing a rush of wet desire, and the ache had been so overwhelming that even the friction of her thighs with each step was impossibly, *unbearably* sensual against the slick thrum of need.

She'd resisted him then, and hadn't had to contend with such unwanted sensations in the time since.

Until today, when he insisted upon invoking the wicked memories, along with her body's reaction to them.

He'd explained her own desire to her, which should be the most aggravating factor in the entire world.

And yet, here she was, a pulsing puddle of slick arousal, her legs ready to give out at any moment.

She refused to give him the satisfaction.

"I'm never doing *that* again," she vowed. "I know you think you are some legendary sort of lover, and I'm sure you've honed your skills with untold multitudes of women, but I will not yield. You can look to take your pleasure elsewhere—am I understood?"

Closing her eyes, she wished her voice carried the same strength as did the words, but alas, her voice trembled as pathetically as her legs did.

"I think it is I who am misunderstood by you, dear Veronica," he said. "I'm not after taking pleasure, only giving it."

She did her level best to wither him with a look. "I have not given you leave to address me so informally. It is 'my lady' or nothing at all." She wasn't the sort that insisted on such proprieties, except when her hackles were so thoroughly engaged. She needed space. Air. A moment to think! All of which was in short supply in his presence.

"Seeing as we're contriving a murder together, I reckoned we were past such distinctions."

“Well...” She groped about for a witty rejoinder and came up with exactly nothing. “We’re not. It is just such distinctions that keep us civil.”

“Fine—then allow me a kiss, my lady?”

She eyed him warily, unstitched by the dimples beneath his puckish smile. By the width of his jaw and the roguish sparkle in his otherwise lethal eyes. He was the embodiment of carnality. Temptation incarnate sent from the Devil himself, to entice her.

“Only a kiss?” What was she doing? Surely not considering this madness. “You’ll expect no...no pleasure from me?”

You have my word.”

“Words are empty,” she said on a hitch of breath as he lifted a finger to her lips, tracing whisper soft trails of fire on the outline of her mouth.

“One finger.” That finger traced down her chin, the tiny buttons of her high-necked gown, down the center of her throat, awakening nerve endings she was unaware she’d possessed. “And a kiss. That’s all I ask. If I touch you with anything else, you have my permission to cut the offending appendage off.”

Curiosity overcame her contrariness. “One finger?”

“So long as it has free rein to roam where it likes.”

Intimate muscles gave an involuntary clench. “I don’t know...”

“It is a proposal of zero risk, my lady, with only pleasure to be gained. To be guaranteed.”

“But what if...” She paused, a familiar insecurity gripping her.

Mortimer had always been angered at her lack of response, her grimaces of pain, and her general discomfort in the marriage bed. He’d humiliated her in front of doctors and mocked her openly about her frigidity. After so long, she’d been beyond caring what disappointed the brute, let alone what pleased him.

But this man? Something told her she would not withstand his disdain. Could not risk it.

“What if I am not able?” she whispered.

A storm gathered on his features that somehow made him all the more beautiful. “Woman, during this impossible and purely hypothetical event, the fault would entirely be mine. I would have failed us both and would immediately request another attempt.”

*It wouldn't be her fault.*

None of this was her idea, responsibility, nor was it incumbent upon her to even perform her duty of *receiving* the pleasure...

How many nights had she lain awake, beset with the memory of that woman writhing beneath him? How many times had she wondered? Wanted? Yearned?

For a mere taste of what he did to her.

“One finger,” she acquiesced.

The splendor of his victorious smile blinded her, and it took an embarrassingly long time for her to figure out just why he patted the top of the desk. “I would help you climb up, but alas even *my* finger is not so strong.”

She opened her mouth to verbally protest, while her body moved to comply, sliding onto the desktop until her feet swung above the floor.

Eyes gleaming like a predator who only stalked at night, his mouth descended, claiming hers before she could change her mind.



It was just as well.

His kiss melted away any objection with a suffusion of instantaneous warmth. In contrast, his lips were cool and dry as they swept and slanted across her stunned mouth, quietly unraveling every knot of her taut, anxious muscles. She'd expected passion from him—skillful, artful seduction, and dominant, masculine impatience.

What she found instead was a coaxing, tender exploration. Unhurried and uncomplicated. Even though he carefully held his tremendous body away from her own, he somehow imprinted upon every inch of her.

And yet...she was not distracted by roaming hands or the fervent press of his demanding arousal.

Her entire being was focused on the firm, shifting pressure of his mouth as he nibbled at the corners of her own before exerting the tiniest sucking tension, pulling her passion-plumped bottom lip to roll between his.

Lord but it was lovely and—*oh!*

A velvet swipe of his tongue against the seam of her mouth stole all breath from her body and all the thoughts from her head.

She lost herself in the seductive heat of this act. So familiar to a woman once married, and yet so foreign. This man was different in every way to her husband.

The shape of him, the scents and sentiments.

The safety.

That word gave her a moment's pause. This man exuded danger. Radiated wicked disregard for all things reliable and reasonable.

For heaven's sake, he was there to murder a man.

So why did she suddenly want to enfold herself against him? To crawl into his arms like a child and make a cradle of his strength...

When his seeking tongue once again tested the topography of her mouth, she opened for him with a sibilant sigh, before fully realizing what she'd done.

Alarmed, she braced herself for the invasion. The wet, smothering plunge that would create a mash of lips against teeth and a gagging sort of fullness in her throat.

She nearly expired when he met her own tongue with his before retreating, testing the curve of her lips as he did. That soft sucking motion invited her tongue into his mouth, enticing her to explore the warmth there.

He tasted divine.

Both bitter and sweet, like the finest, darkest chocolate. He made way for her exploration while caressing and teasing her with silky darts and swirls. It was not a dance to which she knew the steps, but he led her with a precision and expertise she relied upon.

Hollow, guttural noises and deep, appreciative sounds encouraged her on, vibrating across her lips, into her mouth, and down her spine to land at the very core of her desire.

So absorbed was she in the kiss—the first kiss that truly curled her toes—she'd been oblivious to his other designs until cold air kissed the tender skin above her stockings.

Ripping her mouth from his with a gasp, she clutched at the pile of skirts he'd gathered above her knees.

“Yes, do secure them there, that will be ever so helpful,” he urged with a

playful tone, though something both savage and devious glinted in his eyes.

“This isn’t—what the devil are you—I don’t think we—”

He pressed that infernal finger to her lips. “Now is not the time to think, Countess, but to *feel*.”

Hot breaths exploded around the flat of his finger and arrested his gaze, while she trembled and struggled with her desires, her past, and her crippling anxieties. “I don’t know what I feel,” she confessed, unable to keep the wobble from her chin. “I don’t know how to feel. How to do any of this in the way that—”

He smoothed the back of his knuckle over her chin, hooking the finger beneath it to lift her face to meet his.

“Do nothing,” he said firmly.

She shook her head, but he didn’t release her. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve a delightful task to perform. However, *your* entire—and might I say delectable—body has but one job. To think and do as little as is possible. Do not feel on my account, only yours. Don’t go looking for pleasure, let it find you.”

“But—”

“Do your best to resist me, to remain unaffected. Do nothing at all, if you are so inclined.”

“But then you won’t be able to make me—”

His hand left her mouth and stole its way beneath her skirts. The fingertip traced the seams of her stockings against her thigh robbing her of the ability to speak. To breathe.

“Doubt me all you dare,” he said darkly against her lips. “But do not rush your satisfaction, my lady. I am eager for the challenge.”

He stole what was left of her sanity with another kiss, this one more ardent and impassioned than before. It drew from her a surprising form of impatience as he unleashed the full force of his seductive prowess upon her unsuspecting, insignificant defenses.

A spin of his tongue accompanied the rasp of his rough finger against the edge of her stockings. A barely-there nip of his teeth drew her attention from the line he traced up her thigh.

When he found the seam of her drawers, she couldn't tell which of them uttered the deep, needy moan. Though he was gentle and methodical, she could still sense the pace of his heart, hammering with a rhythm as furious as her own.

And then he was *there*.

One finger, true to his word, stroking through intimate hair and delving into soft, wet flesh.

She liquified beneath his touch, her legs melting further apart, her pulse abandoning its vocation and her lungs emptying of breath. She needed none of it to survive...

Not when the slippery warmth of his hand suffused her with such electric sensation.

With life.

Crooning soft, unintelligible words against her skin between worshipful little kisses, he smoothed his lips over her hairline, her eyes, her nose, her chin, and her cheekbones before dragging his mouth down the sensitized curve of her jaw, igniting erotic sparks of sensation over her entire body.

His leisurely explorations through engorged ruffles of her feminine sex was a turbulent lesson in frustration. Not only had her anxieties fled, she was instantly overtaken by a demanding urgency.

One he apparently seemed inclined to ignore.

"Dear God, but I could do this all day," he groaned against her ear. "You are so sweet, so slick, so abidingly perfect."

She couldn't summon the words to reply. Not only because of what his diabolical finger was doing to her, but because of the deliberate depth of his voice. The gratification she identified in the words and the fervency of his tone.

It was suddenly as if someone else had taken control of her body. For surely, *she* would not undulate her spine forward, rolling her hips against his finger, seeking the one touch that he couldn't seem to give her. She was not the sort of woman who squirmed and gasped in wordless, artless physical pleas.

It was only that the aggravating man had touted his skills so adroitly, and all he seemed to be able to do is build some sort of throbbing, arching, aching, almost painful pressure to a fevered pitch.

Sweat bloomed on her body and her spine cracked with her next demanding arch.

“Why?” the question ripped from her dry throat.

He lifted his mouth from her throat. “Why what, my darling?”

“Why won't you just...” She had no idea what he needed to do. To move, to find that place that throbbed and release it before she screamed.

“Oh, my poor lady, I am being exceedingly cruel. Selfish even.”

“Why?” she whispered again, hating him a little. Wanting him a lot. Needing him more than she liked to admit. Craving what he was doing to her. Among other things.

“Because I didn't think that you'd come apart so easily...so quickly. I hoped to play for longer...” Upon a reluctant sigh, his clever finger did something that made her entire body jerk before pulling back.

Play? Was this recreation for him? When he was so obviously not the focus of the game, but the arbiter of it... How could he be enjoying it so much?

She rolled her hips in a display beyond the reach of shame. “Please.” The plea escaped on a desperate sound, closer to a whine than she cared to admit.

“This is why you are dangerous,” he growled, as if to himself. “No matter what I want, it seems I am powerless to deny you anything.”

With that, he unleashed an erotic assault upon her sex that appropriated what was left of her dignity. Carnal strokes evoked torturous shivers that built

upon themselves until they coalesced into clenching pulses. She cried out. Her arms reaching for him, clutching at his shoulders with helpless claws as wave after wave of unencumbered ecstasy threatened to drag her out into an ocean of lust and languor. Just when she thought the moment might pass, it escalated into another thrilling, soul-searing burst until the sensation became so exquisite, she could no longer distinguish the difference between pleasure and pain.

When she began to writhe, to seek escape, the pressure of his finger lifted but did not leave her. He let her down slowly, bringing her back from the brink and allowing her to float upon the smaller waves as they pushed her back toward the shore.

When she returned to herself, bedraggled and half-drowned, Veronica realized that Sebastian had kept his word. He'd not touched her with aught but his mouth and one finger.

One magical, maniacal finger.

She, however, had attached herself to the thick column of his body as if he were the only thing keeping her from being swept away and lost.

Realizing that she was clinging to him like a ridiculous ninny, she disentangled herself from him, suddenly tentative and shy.

His arms moved, as if to hold her in place, but he stopped short of touching her.

“My God.” If she had to ascribe a word to his tone, it would be *marvel*. “I’ve been to every place claiming to be a wonder in this world. I’ve handled treasure you wouldn’t believe existed. I’ve toured galleries and museums with the greats, names you would expire to hear. And never in this lifetime have I witnessed anything so beautiful as your body arched in climax.”

A strangled giggle escaped her, and she placed a hand on his chest to halt the kiss he intended for her lips. “You needn’t flatter me,” she assured him.

He made a wry sound. “I have never flattered you, Countess. Were I a sculptor, I’d recreate it so you could agree with me. But, alas, I was born

without talent in that regard.”

She couldn't be so certain of that. She'd been nothing more than a boneless, shapeless heap in his hands, and with untold skill he'd...

Well, he'd transformed her.

The realization was a bitter one. She didn't want something so irrelevant to him as a passing tryst in a dusty cargo car to be a formative moment in her life.

But here she was, adrift in a storm of her own making.

Up until now, her entire existence had been about what she could do for others. How she appeared to them. She'd been so aware of her every movement, what her features conveyed, how to modulate her voice and moderate her words in just such a way. She'd been the creation of her social-climbing parents, her finishing school, the rigorous life of a countess, and ultimately the quick temper and heavy fists of her husband.

For one surreal encounter, Sebastian Moncrieff had stolen that capability.

No, she was being unfair.

He'd *relieved* her of that *obligation*. Had converted her into a creature of need and hunger and unfettered pleasure. A pleasure he'd offered. Gifted. Without so much as a whisper of *quid pro quo*.

What kind of man did such a thing? Here she thought she had his measure. That she'd peeked into his empty heart and found it beat only at his pleasure.

Was there more to the Erstwhile Earl than even he realized?

Pulling back, she arched her neck to look up at him.

The taut mien of his skin pulled across hungry bones made him look older and even more dangerous. His gaze was feral and greedy, his jaw hard.

When his lips parted, fear lanced through her, turning her pulse to thunder.

The Devil was about to demand his due. What would he do to her if she refused?

“Let me use my mouth. I could coax another from you if you’d let me.”

She blinked. Once. Again. Uncertain she heard him correctly. He wanted to give *her* another climax. With his mouth?

Unbidden, her eyes traversed the length of his body to find the barrel of his erection straining the front of his trousers.

Lord but he was large.

“Don’t.” The snarl rumbled from deeper in his chest than she dared to venture. “Don’t look at me like that. Don’t touch me or I—” He cut off, taking a long moment to compose himself. “Just let me taste you?”

“I can’t.” Her tight throat worked over a swallow. “I can’t right now.”

“Oh, trust me, Countess, you can.”

“No. I mean...” She struggled with her skirts, shoving them back over her knees and sitting straight. “I have to go to Penelope. There is too much to do... Weller could be returning for them.”

He pushed himself away from the desk with a tortured groan. “Say the youngsters escape without a hitch and are on their cheerful way to America. *Then* would you consider my offer? If I don’t taste you, I’ll probably expire of thirst.”

“I’ll be going with them.”

Pursing his lips, he considered this. “I’ll meet you in Le Havre. There’s a lovely grand hotel—”

“I’m not going to have intercourse with you.” She wriggled away from him, doing her best to ignore the curious pulses and aftershocks of what he’d done to her.

“You’ve said that already,” he reminded her with a solicitous smile. “It’s a stipulation I’ve unenthusiastically agreed to.”

Veronica attempted to stand on legs now made of wet clay and shot him a look of disbelief. “Then why offer to—that is—what do you get out of it?”

He shrugged. “I’ve had plenty of orgasms. This was your first. You have some catching up to do. I promise you’ll enjoy yourself.”



She pressed her hands to fevered cheeks. “The question is why *you* would enjoy it when I’m giving you nothing in return.”

“Because...” He lifted his finger and pressed it between his lips, his eyes never leaving hers as he drew it out slowly. “You have no idea how divine you taste.”

“Dear God, don’t do that.” She seized his elbow and tugged on it.

His smile was utterly wicked. “You cannot stop me unless you relent. This cannot be the last time I appreciate flavor of your—”

Surging forward, she slapped a hand over his wicked mouth. “Christ,” she huffed.

“Blasphemer.” The accusation was muffled by her palm, which he licked, playfully.

Snatching her hand back, she closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, actively refusing to be charmed. “You’re impossible.”

“Come now, Countess, you must admit. The danger is splendid, isn’t it?”

Her head snapped back up. “What are you talking about?”

“It makes everything better. More intense. The secret meeting in a place we might be discovered. The excitement of a clandestine adventure to facilitate two young lovers. I can see it in your color, in the brightness behind your eyes. You are made for this, and you are magnificent.”

“And *you* are categorically mistaken.”

He laughed at her then before swooping in for an intoxicating kiss.

“Until tonight, my lady,” he vowed before sauntering out and leaving her in the chill of the cargo car, still trembling with the memory of his heat.

And the impossible hunger he’d awakened inside of her.

Veronica didn't allow herself to breathe until she spied Penelope Weller and her lover, Adam Grandville, making their careful way toward her on the train platform.

Parisians and travelers blurred together in the colorful chaos of the Gare de Lyon, performing a polite waltz as they either disembarked or boarded the train. Any other day Veronica would have enjoyed the spectacle, but she couldn't allow herself a moment's peace until the train pulled away from the station and the young couple was out of Weller's reach.

Pasting on a smile at their approach, she felt it melt immediately from her face as she took in their identical expressions. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Rather than answer, Penelope and Adam stepped to the side, revealing a third companion.

Adrienne.

She'd a carpet bag gripped in two hands and even the veil of her emerald velvet hat couldn't hide her swollen lip and blackening eye.

*Blast and damn.* While Veronica was dallying with Sebastian in the cargo car, the poor woman had been suffering her husband's violent displeasure.

"Please don't be cross with us," Adam pleaded earnestly, swiping his fine hat from his dark head to clutch in front of him. "But Penny and I couldn't leave her. I kept thinking...what if she were my own mother? I'd do anything

to save her from such a monster.”

Veronica had to blink back tears, so touched was she by Adam’s decency. A kind heart was often hard to find. Gentlemen abounded these days, but a truly gentle man?

A rare treasure, indeed.

“Adrienne...” Veronica paused, struggling with the secrets she held. “What if I told you that you might very soon become a widow? Would you still want to go? To give up everything your husband might leave you?”

“My husband has nothing but vices and debtors, my lady,” the woman answered with downcast eyes. “His wealth has become sham. I will be left with less than nothing...but if I stay, I will become nothing.”

“I’m so sorry,” Veronica hugged the fragile woman to her.

“Dear Adam has invited me to live with his family in Boston. They’ve a summer home somewhere called Montauk, right on the sea.” The little spark of hope in Adrienne’s voice ignited something inside of Veronica as well.

Struck with anxiety, she pulled away. “Of course, you can have my seat on the coach to Le Havre, but are only two tickets on the ship. Your cabins —”

“We’ll manage.” Adam said with confidence. “This is a trip I’ve taken often in my life. I can navigate preparations easily.”

Veronica found a new appreciation for the lad. He might look boyish and a bit innocent, even for his age, but he’d the steady gaze of a capable man.

“What about your travel papers?” she remembered with alarm. “I only have two forged copies for Penny and Adam. Should anyone look at the register...they’ll know where to find you. Furthermore, you won’t be able to board the ship without them.”

“I don’t care if I’m found, I won’t return.” Adrienne’s eyes blinked against instant panicked tears. “But...*he* keeps my papers and all money. Somewhere in his cabin. He wouldn’t tell me where.”

Adam stepped forward. “I will go back and get them.”

“No.” Veronica put a staying hand on his lean chest. “You won’t be allowed near his car, as the porters and ushers don’t know you. But I’ve been Penelope’s companion since London and will gain easy access.” Taking the bag from Adrienne, she pushed it into Adam’s hands and pointed to the coach in which she’d hired three seats to Le Havre. “You two help settle her into the coach and let me search for the papers.”

Whirling on her bootheel, she dashed back for the train, weaving in and out among some rather incensed travelers.

Lifting her skirts to ascend the steep, unsteady steps to the train, she grasped the large hand that reached down to lift her up and came face-to-face—or face to chest, rather—with Sebastian Moncrieff.

“You came back.” His pleased smile broke over her like the rays of spring sunshine dawning over a late winter’s night. “Couldn’t wait until Le Havre to collect on my promise?”

His what?

A tongue smoothed over his full lip, reminding her what he intended to do.

*Oh...* No. She couldn’t think of that now. Couldn’t allow the inconsequential parts of her to awaken when she had such an important task in front of her.

Which was?...

*Papers!* Dear God, how was it a man could be so handsome he made her forget what she was about?

Scowling up at him, she snatched her hand from the warmth of his enveloping grip. “Adrienne Weller took my place in the coach. She’s leaving him.”

His smile became impossibly brighter, revealing both rows of even, white teeth. “Excellent. I applaud her decision. I’ve been thinking, I could take my blade to Weller now, and then maybe you and I should find a bed here in Paris. It’s a city for lovers, after all.”

Veronica blinked up at him in disbelief for a split second before shoving her shock aside. “I hardly have time for this—please move.” She made to shoulder past him, unsuccessfully.

“What’s happened?” he asked, sobering only slightly.

“Adrienne needs her travel papers and I have to retrieve them before the train takes off again.”

Sebastian checked a fine watch hanging from his silk vest. “We hardly have time.”

“That is precisely what I just said!”

“So it is. What can I do to assist?”

“You can stay out of my way.”

To her utter astonishment, he turned to the side like an opening door, making a sweeping motion for her to pass.

She shot forward, painfully aware that she needed to traverse three cars of crowded hallways...

*Drat.* She should have stayed on the platform and boarded on Weller’s car, though a look out the window told her the platform was no less congested than the halls.

“Don’t follow me,” she snapped to Sebastian over her shoulder. “It’s conspicuous. Suspicious, even.”

“But it isn’t,” he corrected. “I’m often seen following pretty women.”

For some reason, his words tasted both sweet and sour. “You should keep your eye on Weller,” she muttered. “That is how you can help.”

“I was, but he is busy doing what I’d rather be doing with you.”

She turned with an aggravated growl that only seemed to amuse him further. “Might you not be—whatever this is?” She hadn’t the words for it.

Charming? No, too infuriating for that.

Romantic? No, too wicked for that.

“I beg you to be silent so that I might focus on the task at hand.”

To her surprise, he said not another word, but remained her shadow. It

occurred to Veronica to be incensed at his audacity, but then his presence was actually useful. The crowd parted for him like a biblical hero—or plague—making way for the width of his shoulders and the force of his presence. Sebastian Moncrieff didn't merely occupy space. He claimed it. He owned it. He was the master of whatever ground he walked upon, and she was currently under his protection.

A part of her wanted to resent that fact.

To begrudge the feminine pleasure it brought her.

But there wasn't the time for that, either.

When they reached the Weller car, she went straight to Arthur's cabin and began to rifle through the few drawers bolted to the wall by the expensively appointed bed.

In contrast, Sebastian flipped over the mattress and checked within every pillowcase before lifting Weller's entire trunk and dumping the contents on the bed.

That was one way to do it, Veronica supposed.

Finding nothing, she pulled open a cupboard and froze.

"Blast and damn it all! The papers must be in this safe." Stronger curses perched on her lips, but she didn't allow them to escape.

"Say it." The dark command rumbled so close to her ear, she could feel the warmth of his breath tease at wisps of her hair.

"Say what?"

"The word that's itching your tongue. Say it. I imagine it's something like... *Fucking hell.*"

That word.

In her ear.

From behind.

*Fucking.*

"I don't say such things," she informed him, her voice stiffer than her melting legs. "I'm a lady."

“It’ll make you feel better,” he promised.

Needing him to back away before his scent overwhelmed her, she elbowed him in the chest. Not hard, but enough to feel like she might have elbowed a statue made of granite or marble. “What would make me *feel better* is getting into that safe.”

“I could do it, rather easily,” he boasted.

She turned around, finding his mouth entirely too close for comfort. “I-I don’t believe it.”

“Please, this thing is child’s play.” He lifted one sardonic brow, before drawing his finger down the ridge of her nose as if she were an adorable child. “You *can’t* have forgotten I’m a pirate.”

She slapped his hand away archly. “Then do it.”

“First you have to say it.”

“No.”

“All right,” he almost sang the words while making a dramatic show of checking his watch once more. “I think we’ve only ten more minutes until we pull away from here. I suppose I should leave you to your—”

She seized his elbow. “Are you really going to abandon—”

He turned back with a sinful smirk. “Come on, my lady, say it.”

*Fine.* Fine she would say the bloody word! “*Fucking hell* but you’re impossible.”

His laugh was low and rich and exasperatingly victorious as he crouched in front of the safe to inspect it. Holding his hand back to her without looking up he said. “I need one of your two-pronged hairpins and that hat pin with the golden feather.

Veronica put her hand up to her braided knot held in place by three stick pins and topped by a little fascinator of dark gold skewered through with a single feather pin.

“The quicker the better, Countess,” he prodded.

Plucking the pins from her hair, she took the hat from her head and

smoothed her crown with anxious motions. His large fingers made astoundingly deft motions with the delicate pins in the lock and the safe was open in less than half a minute.

Veronica reached in to find the papers conveniently tucked into a well-labeled leather file.

Heedless of the mess, they both burst out the door and made for the rear of the car. Just as Veronica would have leapt from the train onto the platform, she was bodily lifted from around the waist and set behind Sebastian in one graceful sweep.

“Unhand me, you oaf, I have to—!”

Sebastian plucked the papers from her grasp. “I’ll get it to them faster.”

“But—”

“You go up the train four cars and wait for me there,” he instructed. “I don’t want you here should Weller wander back whilst I’m gone.”

“But you don’t know where the coaches are.”

“Yes, I do, I saw you return from them.”

“You don’t know which one the Wellers are in.” She swiped for the papers, but he held them out of her reach. “There’s no time for this argument, Moncrieff. Give them back.”

“Have some faith in me, Countess,” he prodded. “A little trust.”

“*Me*. Trust *you*? That’s rich!”

He looked truly wounded for a moment, which made her angrier.

“Go check on Weller,” she suggested. “What if he returns before the train pulls away?”

“I left my valet to watch him,” he shrugged.

“You what?”

“Brannock. You met him on the Devil’s Dirge. Now, I am not commanding you, but I’m beseeching. Go to my car. Just as a precaution.”

He was asking. Not ordering. Had a man ever done that before?

He softly caressed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. They were too



rough to belong to an earl, abrading her soft skin enough to lift goosepimples all over her body.

And yet, his eyes were so gentle. So sincere.

With a lithe motion of a sailor, he swung down to the platform, skipping the steps altogether. “I shan’t let you down, Veronica,” he vowed before surging toward the line of coaches at the end of the vast concourse.

Veronica...

She’d corrected him before. And wanted to again, as he shouldered his way through the crowd.

Because her heart did a little extra beat each time he said her name.

Sebastian broke into a run as the train chugged into motion.

He bounded around travelers and leapt over porters and their carts of attaché cases. Never having been an apt French student, he only recognized the curse words hurled in his direction and summarily ignored them.

If anyone stood in between him and the raven-haired woman on the platform of his car, their fate was a fault all their own.

Veronica stood clinging to the rail, her eyes owlsh with fear as her lips moved in encouragement.

Had she no faith? He would get to her. He would not leave her to face the aftermath of this adventure alone.

Besides, he'd a promise to collect on.

He might have leapt onto one of the cars next to him, but he wanted to reach her. To grip the hand she stretched out, and have no one in between him and the lush bed on the other side of the door.

Spurred by that thought, his legs churned faster beneath him, and his heart pounded in his chest, feeding his body the speed and stamina to leap into her arms right as the platform fell away.

She made a soft squeal of shock as he hauled her into his arms, tugged at the latch to the door, and swept her inside. Throwing the lock, he shut out the East Parisian winter, the Wellers, and the anything that might bring her to her

senses before he could get his tongue between her thighs.

The locomotive accelerated beneath them, but Sebastian's own engine was already purring and thrumming, anticipating a rhythm of his own.

He could feel it in her, as well. A pulse of expectancy, the gnawing of primitive hunger awakened.

She'd been given a satisfying appetizer...a mere taste of what he could do.

And now she was ravenous for the meal.

Except he was the one with the watering mouth. *He* was the diner and *she* the feast. And now that he'd done a bit of sprinting, he'd worked up an even greater appetite and warmed up his body to perform.

Trying not to dwell on how perfectly she fit in his arms, he lowered his head to claim a kiss, and was stopped by her fingertips against his lips.

"You saw them pull away?" she asked, anxiety overshadowing the excitement dilating her lovely eyes.

"And turn the corner," he said against her fingertips before gently nibbling on them. "There's no way Weller or anyone else would know where they've gone."

She went lax with relief in his arms, her fingers dropping away from his mouth.

Thus liberated, he took her lips in a searing kiss as he carried her to the lavish coverlet of burgundy velvet embroidered with gold. He draped her across the foot of the bed, her skirts a river of golden silk over a sea of the most luxurious wine. The tableau was so appealing Sebastian stood for a moment to take it all in, seriously questioning for the first time how much self-discipline he'd be able to maintain.

Her sumptuous body, constricted by so many buttons and contraptions to conform an unnatural shape, called to his fingers to unravel the fashion she hid behind. She could craft that image for the world, and it was a lovely picture, indeed. But he wanted her unbound and undone. Exposed to his gaze

alone, her beauty unfettered and undeniable.

He wanted it with such violent fervor, he forced himself to stand still. To remind himself of her fragility, of her permissions and her desires. Her past and her fears.

The gods, for some benighted reason, had seen fit to grant him this rare taste of Heaven. He didn't bloody deserve it, but by Jove he would fucking drain every drop. Extend every moment so that he might take the memory and lock it away in that shallow vault of truly joyful reminiscences.

Perhaps this hadn't been a celestial gift to him, but an ultimate, inevitable torment. He'd know perfection, only to have tasted what he didn't deserve.

What he couldn't keep.

Her delicate throat worked over a swallow as she lifted herself onto her elbows, apprehension leaking into her gaze. Her hair had loosened from where he'd taken the pin, and he decided to begin there. It was that or drown in the verdant infinity of her eyes.

"This is one of the first times I've seen you look so serious..." she ventured, as he released the rest of her braids to fall from their confines. "Are you reconsidering—"

"Have you ever enjoyed a book with such delight, that you're afraid to open it again because the turn of each delicious page brings you closer to the end?" He could hardly look at her as he said it, because he meant it too keenly to laugh the truth away. He was forever turning sentiment into a jape, because if it was real...

It was terrifying.

"I—I've often been afraid of losing something so much, that I didn't allow myself to reach for it. I denied myself altogether." She reached up for him, gripping the lapels of his jacket and tugging him down. "What fools we both are."

Her lips rose to meet his in a searing, soul-stealing kiss. This one containing the desire she'd long denied and the hunger long unfulfilled.

Soft, questing hands tucked into the shoulders of his jacket and smoothed it down his arms until it landed in a puddle on the floor.

When her fingers went to his collar to tug at the knot there, Sebastian broke the kiss and gently enfolded both her busy hands into his own. “If you touch my skin, I’ll be lost,” he confessed, pressing her back to the mattress before making a titillating journey down her body to where her knees draped over the edge. “So you lie back, my lady, and let me play.”

“What if I’m already lost?” she asked the ceiling as her chest worked over hastening breaths.

“I hope you lose yourself more than once before I’m through...” As he lowered to his knees before the bed, he smoothed his hands up the silk of her stockings, lifting her skirts along the way. Charting a course over shapely calves, he paused to kiss the dimples by her knees and caress the soft places behind them. Eventually reaching her undergarments, he pulled them over her hips, down her legs, and had to free them as they caught on the hooks of her short boots.

Sebastian loved nothing so much as the sight of a beautiful naked woman...but somehow the idea of her coming while wearing those boots threatened to drive him out of his mind.

He didn’t force her legs apart, merely kneaded at the taut muscles there, eliciting a little whimper as she allowed them to splay open. She couldn’t see much over the mountain of skirts he’d rucked up to her waist, and it was just as well.

For surely he looked like a man who’d found an oasis in the middle of the Sahara, and perhaps the intensity of his regard might have overcome her.

The sight of a glistening cunny bared by parted thighs was a thing he always enjoyed.

But this.

*This.*

It wasn’t the usual enchantment he experienced. Not merely a delicious

thrill of discovery, but something far more powerful.

Indescribable.

Veronica was pink and peach and perfect.

He indulged in the sight for so long, she began to tense and squirm with violated modesty. “Moncrieff? Is everything...”

Her question died on a moan as his fingers petted through the soft triangle there, awakening little quivers that twitched and trembled through her entire lithe body.

God she was so responsive. So prone to unrestrained movement erupting, alongside sighs and sounds so primitive and visceral they mesmerized him. Veronica was a self-possessed woman naturally, but she was also honest.

And good. So fucking good. In every imaginable way.

Sebastian generally left good girls alone. He wasn't one to delight in deflowering the virgin or teaching the uninitiated. He tended to bed women who could contain his wickedness, and demand a few things of their own.

Why was she different?

Someday, when he wasn't about to taste her sweet sex, he'd take the time to figure it out.

Lowering his head, he dragged his lips across her inner thigh, where the skin was thin and alive with nerves. Once she'd seemed to recover from the shock of his attentions there, he drifted to the seam of her leg and her hip, nuzzling the softness there, before moving to the very core of her.

He hovered for a breathless moment, heart pounding in a rough staccato.

Every muscle knotted with craving.

Sebastian was a man always battling the rule of his fathomless desire, lest he become overwhelmed by them. Tonight...he knelt at the altar and pledged his fealty to a hunger that now demanded his surrender.

Closing his eyes, he drew his tongue up the seam of closed lips, parting them with sinful slowness.

Christ she was, in a word, delectable.

Veronica's entire body jerked, but she made no sound. Not until he reached that soft bud at the apex of those folds. He thought he might have to coax it out, to play in the little pleats and ruffles of flesh until it revealed her need.

But she came to him ready. Not just once, but twice in a day.

Perhaps her heart had been too broken to know desire, or to identify it, but her body... *oh*, her delicious body was a conduit for pleasure. She'd been crafted to tempt, to entice, to lure, and to make love.

She'd been wasted on a cruel man, and her real tragedy was that she'd ever lived a life without someone to worship her. To make her sing this throaty melody he'd coaxed from deep within her as he nibbled and supped at the edges of her folds, tickling her with his breath. Teasing her with playful lips and gentle flicks of his tongue. Pressing vibrating moans of encouragement against her wet flesh.

*So wet. So sweet. A nectar only rivaled by ambrosia...*

*And even then.*

Between her trembling thighs, he felt like a god. And soon, he'd convert her to belief.

*Not in the divine, but in *him*.*

*I'll worship your body, my lady, he thought. But you'll be praying to me before I'm through.*

Apparently, she'd had enough of his teasing, because she slid impatient fingers through his hair. Pausing, she seemed unsure whether to pull him closer or push him away.

Her features contorted into a mask of misery, but the noises she emitted were raw with pleasure.

Taking pity on her, Sebastian splayed her open with his fingers, thoroughly exposing the little peak of her sex. With slow and tender precision, he pressed the flat of his tongue over the pulsating opening of her body, coating it with her slick desire before drawing it up against the

quivering bud.

She made a sound that shot straight to his already aching cock. It kicked against the confines of his trousers as she tugged on his hair with just enough strength to cause a delicious sort of pain.

*Fuck.* He might not survive this.

Drawing upon every ounce of—admittedly underdeveloped—willpower, he let his tongue slide over and around the delicious little hardness amidst all that soft, pliant flesh. Touching it. Flicking away. A languid stroke. A gentle glide.

She shuddered beneath his ministrations. Said things in a language he didn't recognize. Maybe one that never existed.

His hands had to move to her thighs as he dined, using his strength to keep them plied open so he could work. She bucked and trembled, jerked and moaned, as if he were an inquisitor and the lashing was meted out by a weapon more painful than his tongue.

“Moncrieff,” she finally sobbed. “I—I can't—Please. *Please.*”

He lifted his head to look up over her body, glad and also bemoaning that he'd kept them both clothed.

Her lush ass fell back to the bed and her legs splayed in an exhausted collapse.

“Sebastian,” he said, his breath feathering over her core, causing it to visibly throb.

She seemed unable to speak, blinking down at him in obvious, foggy-eyed confusion.

“I want you to say my name when you come,” he ordered in a growl he didn't recognize as his own. It was everything he wasn't. Dark. Demanding. Possessive.

She nodded, curling her pelvis forward in a wordless plea for release.

Lifting a finger, he drew wet little circles around the entrance to her body, probing the tight flesh there until she made a plaintive little sound.



“Say it,” he commanded.

“S-Sebastian.” Her broken whisper filled him with an emotion he couldn’t begin to identify. Something he knew he’d been seeking but didn’t know what to do with now.

True to his word, he parted his lips over the little pearl of her pleasure and insinuated his finger deep into the recesses of her core.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck!* He wished he hadn’t done that.

Even as her hips surged up with a sob of bliss, he accepted that he was a fucking doomed man. He’d forever regret knowing what she felt like from the inside. What hot depths of slick velvet pulled at him with such exquisitely feminine flesh.

Everything that had ever happened before, everything that might come to pass after this, dissolved beneath the devastating perfection of the moment. He suckled and slid, licked and laved, all the while rocking his finger inside of her, letting her body drench him with the gripping, pulsating release that took her much too soon.

Thighs clamped against his shoulders and her hands fell to the bed beneath her, bunching and ripping at the coverlet. She screamed in breaths and sobbed his name—or at least raw, broken syllables of it. Over and again. Both an invocation and a benediction, a plea for mercy and a hymn of praise.

Beautiful spasms clenched his fingers, inviting him deeper as she bowed and writhed like a wild creature set free after so long in captivity.

A devil’s whisper slithered through him in the dark. *Seduce her. Claim her. Release your cock and finish making her your own.*

*She will not stop you.*

Surging away from her, Sebastian stumbled to the small water closet and stuffed himself inside, slamming the door.

Panting as if he'd only just run for the train, he braced both of his hands on the tiny sink and stared at someone he didn't recognize in the mirror.

He'd the same sand-colored hair, once kept long but now cut fashionably tame. The same pale whisky eyes and sunbaked skin, weathered over his brawny bones just enough to leave winsome grooves that deepened when he smiled.

Except now, they were carved with something he'd never spied on his own features. Something he did not battle often. If ever.

Fear.

Stark and sinister, it glared back at him, creating an ugly portrait of features so often and so frankly admired.

In his entire life, he'd given over to indulgence. To a rebellious rejection of all things considered decent. Tasting the vitality of life had become a tonic to the rigid rejections he'd experienced in his youth.

And yet, he'd always known what he was doing. What his actions might do to him. He took risks, knowing the outcome always tended to turn in the favor of people like him. Strong. Handsome. Proud. Teutonic. Charming. Male. Skilled. Noble. Educated. Wealthy.

Ruthless.

Indeed, he generally only need smile in the direction of a lady to entice her, and it took a few inviting compliments to see her legs parted.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been denied something—someone—he wanted.

And here he was, wanting someone more than he could ever remember, and apparently her favorite word was *no*.

It should have been enough.

This taste of her. This pleasure he'd promised. He was a libertine and a hedonist and all the things of which she'd accused him.

By choice. The vices and violence, the pleasure and the pain had been measured and controlled by palatable doses. He'd seen so many other men have their sins turned against them. Losing their money to wagers. Their health to sexual disease. Their dignity to drink or the drugging euphoria of other substances.

He'd flirted with all of it and promised himself to none. He was ruled by his passions, not owned by them.

Until now. Until *her*.

Veronica Weatherstoke was a dangerous phenomenon. An obsession he could feel building in his blood, threatening to overtake him completely.

His entire life he'd spent bedding women who could have no claim to him. Not to his body, his money, his time, nor his heart. Neither did he seek to keep them once he'd had them. Not even a mistress. A handful of lovers had been amusing enough to dally with more than once. But even upon that rare occurrence he'd made certain feelings were never involved.

And the moment a woman twitched a possessive eyelash in his direction, he'd disappeared like smoke in the sea mist.

A pirate's life was lucky in that respect.

Lucky... And lonely.

Why did she make his loneliness feel less like freedom and more like a

consequence?

A soft knock on the door caused him to flinch, though he should have known it was coming. He'd left her so abruptly, he couldn't even remember if she'd been finished with her orgasm.

"Moncrieff?" came the hesitant call from the other side.

"I'll be a moment longer," he croaked out, turning on the water to wash his hands and splash over his face, hoping to cool the fever there.

What was he going to tell her?

The woman already didn't trust him, for better reasons than he'd admitted to her. If he told her the truth now, she would run from him in terror.

How could he explain that he'd become so overcome by lust he'd almost lost his humanity? That the sight, and scent, and taste of her pleasure had driven his tattered dignity into the dirt... That he found a quickly fraying thread of decency and used it to shut himself in here.

He'd wanted to take her, in every possible way. To steal her. Claim her. Own her. Possess her.

Only her.

*Always* her.

He'd wanted to thrust himself inside of her body, so that the last man who'd had her was not the monster she'd married. A beast Sebastian carried forward from the seed of his Viking ancestors convinced him he could fuck the memory of any man out of her. Could turn her into a vessel for him, alone. To shape her to his cock...

And even *that* wasn't the worst of it.

Images of her, wrapped in the richest fabrics he could provide and adorned in gems he'd draped over her, glittered in his mind's eye. While he'd had his tongue buried in the most wicked parts of her, his imagination had summoned other fantasies.

Ones he'd never before entertained.

If he could make her come, could he make her laugh? Could he make her

feel safe and protected?

Could he make her happy?

Make her *his*?

Groaning, he ran his hand over his face, doing his best to wipe away the lunacy.

He was not a man a woman would want to keep.

The knock sounded again, this time more urgent. “Is everything...are you all right?”

Categorically not.

Sebastian looked down to where his cock throbbed painfully against the placket of his trousers. Even the fine fabric felt like sandpaper against the sensitized flesh.

Perhaps if he relieved his pent-up desire, some of the madness would abate. At the very least, he’d be able to think more clearly.

“I’ll only be a—” He gasped in relief as he undid his trousers and released the shaft into his hand.

“Sebastian?”

*Yes. Say my name.* The column flexed in his grip, a bead of moisture trickling from the head.

“A moment, Countess, *please*,” he implored. I can’t—”

The door slid open, and there she stood, silently taking stock of him.

His brain stalled completely at the sight of her. Flushed with passion and her pale skin painted with shadows, she was the purest vision, and he was a vulgar catastrophe.

And yet, Sebastian could do nothing but remain as he was. One hand on the sink, the other around his sex.

God, but even the calluses on his palms was torture.

His gaze lowered to her hands. So soft. Supple.

“I need you to go,” he gritted through clenched teeth.

Rather than turn away, she took a step forward, eyes both hot and soft. “I

*know what you need.”*

Sebastian had always been a man of action, but he found himself transfixed to stillness as she reached for him, first touching his shoulder, her fingers warm and tentative through the thin shirt. Both of their eyes followed her questing hand as she stroked down the curve of his bicep, to his elbow, and traced the veins in his forearm down to his wrist.

They both caught their breaths as her cool fingers joined his. Her touch seared through his shaft like a shock of lightning, pulling his balls in tight to his body and causing an involuntary convulsion of pure, electric pleasure.

He released himself to her softer, smoother grip with a helpless, wordless sound.

She joined him in the mirror, her features at once serene and knowing. Benevolent and bold. The most beautiful woman on Earth. And he?

Checking his own reflection, he quickly looked away. Who was this creature he'd become? Wild-eyed and flushed with reckless dread. A sheen of sweat at his hairline. Every muscle tightened over his thick bones in a mask of agonizing bliss.

Just when he thought he could take no more, her head lowered, disappearing from the view of the glass.

Releasing the sink, his body turned to face her as she blocked the door with the pool of her golden skirts as she sank to her knees.

*Holy God.*

Usually, he'd be goading a generous lover on with sinful encouragements, lacing his fingers through her hair and massaging her scalp. Touching her mouth, sinking his fingertips into it.

But he did none of those things as her hand remained gently locked around him, her mouth tantalizingly close.

When her breath caressed the throbbing tip of his sex, his knees weakened.

When she slid soft, curious lips over the thick head, they buckled

completely.

He caught himself by slamming his palms into each wall at his side, pressing out like Sampson—hoping these barriers would hold.

Nothing about her ministrations were particularly skilled or confident, and in that he found even more satisfaction. Her lips were full pillows of pleasure, her mouth smooth and hot, slick and succulent. Her tongue, tentative and curious, found thrilling little ridges and sensitive veins beneath the thin skin stretched over steel. Each stroke sent delirious sensations surging through him to dizzying effect.

He searched his empty mind for something to say until her eyes locked with his. The need to speak died as something so tender and profound passed between them, he dared not profane it with words.

After her initial exploration of his sex, her motions became bolder. Her eyes blazed up at him, eternal wells of jade desire, as she took him as deep as possible, then sucked with a gentle brutality as she drew her head back. The many inches she could not take, she stroked with her palm, moistened by her mouth and his need.

Sebastian panted like a wolf after taking down a fresh kill. Blessing her and cursing her as his emotions varied violently from heart-rending tenderness to demanding desperation. Nothing in this world could be so sweet as this goddess on her knees, tending to his cock.

When she used her tongue to swirl around his head in rhythm to her strokes, he caved in upon himself a little, seeking to pull away before the pressure gathering in his spine found its escape into her awaiting mouth.

“Stop,” he rasped. “If you don’t, I’ll—”

She gripped him harder, increased her pace as he grew larger against her lips. The desperate pull of his muscles locking down tore away the last vestiges of his control as his climax gathered in his blood.

He threw his head back with a primal roar as his hips jerked once, twice, and then his entire body was imprisoned by pleasure. Incapacitated by

pulsating ropes of velvet and silk.

He belonged to her now.

She'd drained the very substance of his life and swallowed it. Consumed him with warm little licks and soft, encouraging sounds until he was nothing but her leftover scraps.

Happily so.

She could discard him at her will. Throw him to her hounds, and he'd lie there and yearn for her as he was ripped apart. For another touch. For another kiss. Just one more taste.

When he was able, he reached down and hauled her to her feet, crushing both her body and her mouth to his.

This time, she met him with equal fervor, her tongue sparring brazenly as they melded the flavors of the other into one irresistible sexual delicacy.

Never in his life had Sebastian savored anything so sweet.

By the time she broke the kiss they were both struggling for breath. She tucked her head against his chest as she visibly sought control of her lungs.

Calling upon one final, rational thought, he disengaged his hips to tuck his sex back into his trousers, chagrined to discover he was still half-hard. After such a powerful release, he'd expect to need at least half an hour to fully recover.

As it was now, he wasn't certain he ever would.

"You didn't have to do that," he said, concerned by the tension in her body against his.

"I needed to," she said, her forehead still pressed into his clavicles as if she couldn't extricate herself to face the enormity of what they'd done. "I-I wanted to."

Swamped with compassion, he smoothed unsteady hands over her shoulders. "Tell me what you are thinking," he murmured, pressing a kiss into the wreck he'd made of her tidy hair.

She still didn't look up, so he had to strain to hear her. "Would it be



possible to—I know this isn't what—that we aren't—but... I..." Several unformed sentences died with a trembling sigh.

Hooking a finger under chin, he pulled away so he could lift her gaze to his. "Tell me what you need."

She pressed her lips together, gathering strength. "Would you...hold me?"

"Woman, if you asked me to, I'd hold up this train."

He turned her around and did his best not to stumble as he directed her toward the bed. It was difficult not to sweep her up and carry her, but something stopped him. Not just the lack of available space in a railcar, but also a sense that she needed her physical autonomy just now.

Taking the initiative, he sat on the bed and reached for her, allowing her to slide between his open legs and once again tug at the silk knot at his throat.

"I know I'm ridiculous," she said with a self-effacing smile. "But I can't relax knowing this is tight and confining."

"Undress me at your leisure, my lady," he teased, hiding a spill of bittersweet warmth in the cavern of his ribs.

"I *won't* be undressing you," she informed him crisply. "I just need you to be comfortable."

That warmth... It spread like sun-warmed honey through his limbs as he sat with uncharacteristic stillness, submitting to her ministrations.

Her eyebrows drew together as she plucked and grappled at the loops he'd secured rather tightly.

*I need you to be comfortable.*

How many women had told him they needed him? Too many to remember.

In fact, he'd forgotten every single one... Every woman who'd ever needed him. To fuck them. To adore them. To pleasure, arouse, and excite them.

Women were often very generous, especially in bed. It was one of the

things Sebastian loved about them the most.

But never in his life had one offered something so genuine and uncomplicated as this. A consideration of his simple comforts.

Sebastian could not detect one hint of sex or seduction in her movements, no coy glances from beneath her lashes. No moistening of lips. Just concentration, and eventually, victory, as she finally grappled it loose and slid the offending tie from his neck.

He swallowed, unencumbered by the garment, and still something threatened to choke him with a suspicious heaviness in his throat. Something concerning.

Terrifying, even.

Women had undressed him before. Had stayed for a cuddle, a drink, or even a night.

But never in his life had he felt such intimacy. Such immense vulnerability. This was no prelude to wickedness, but a quiet aftermath.

Something a wife would do.

Unstitched by the thought, he reached for her, smoothing his hands over the shape of her slim waist confined in her corset. "Should I unlace you?"

She shook her head, parting only a few buttons of his collar and splaying it open before she nudged him to lie down.

Sebastian did as she directed, stretching long across the bed and creating a cradle for her head in the divot between his shoulder and chest. She settled in exactly the place he'd hoped, fitting against him like a missing piece of a puzzle before resting a hand on his breastbone.

How strange to be so tranquil and unnerved at the same time, he thought as his arms encircled her.

They lay there for a silent moment, their muscles melting together, breaths slowing and eventually synchronizing as Sebastian watched the play of the lantern light on the canopy above.

Never in his life had he sat in silence with a woman, not contentedly at

least.

What was Veronica Weatherstoke doing to him? What sort of man would she make of him if they spent more than these precious hours in each other's company?

It was a question he couldn't allow himself to ponder. So, he posited one to her instead, one he'd been contemplating since rediscovering her on this train.

"What keeps you from allowing me to make love to you?" He kept his tone casual, as if the answer meant nothing more to him than any passing curiosity. "Are you afraid I'll get you pregnant?"

Her head shook against his arm. "It isn't that... In fact, I don't think you could."

He grunted. "I assure you, Countess, I come from a *very* fertile line of—" He felt tension steal back into the hand at his chest, bunching her shoulders closer to her neck.

*Not everything is about you.* He chided himself, feeling like an absolute ass. "You mean you are not able to..."

"I don't think I am," she said matter-of-factly, though the tension didn't abate as she idly plucked at a button on his shirt. "Surely you don't want to talk about sad things just now."

His hand stroked up the soft arm of her gown, and he lifted it to her hair to finish unraveling the few onyx braids that remained intact. "I find I want to know all your secret joys and sorrows."

She nuzzled in deeper, allowing him more access to her hair. "More sorrow, I'm afraid," she admitted without dramatics. "Though I'm learning to find joy. To...allow myself the opportunities for discovery and the liberties of pleasure."

"I suppose children are not conducive to liberty," he postulated.

"Though I know they can become great sources of joy." A long breath left her deflated against him as he finished with her braids. Meticulously,

Sebastian combed thick fingers through the silken waves of her hair, sifting through little knots or tangles with infinite care, and then massaging the scalp. It was something he'd enjoyed when his locks had been long, and he sought to give her the same shivering delight.

"I am sorry that you were ever denied joy..." he whispered.

A kiss tickled his rib through the thin cotton of his shirt. "I conceived once," she confessed after another silent beat. "Early on in my marriage. But in my third month, Mortimer...he...he kicked me in the stomach, and I lost the child."

A red-hot rage poured through Sebastian's entire being, setting his cursed soul on fire. He took out the memory of Mortimer Weatherstoke's death and relived it with effusive, savage delight.

Thank God the bastard had never been able to procreate.

The dark, selfish thought was accompanied by shame.

Sebastian himself was proof one didn't turn out like one's father. And perhaps a child would have made her life less frightening and lonely. Or conceivably she'd have been subjugated to the hell of a mother forced to watch her husband hurt their child.

The very idea tore through him with claws and teeth, shredding the sweet languor he'd enjoyed only moments before. He shouldn't have asked the question, not only for his own benefit, but he was certain she'd rather not relive the agony.

Veronica smoothed patient hands over his shoulder. "I don't want your fury," she said, low and gentle. "It is done. He is gone from this world, from my life, thanks in part to you."

"I only regret it was not my hand that wielded the blade." He didn't realize he'd spoken the wrathful wish until she replied.

"The Rook had more reason. I'm glad he took his vengeance."

Sebastian didn't argue the point, Mortimer had kept Ash and Lorelai from each other for almost twenty years. He was the reason the boy had become

the Rook...had survived the pits of Hell to bring his damned soul back to the woman he'd loved as a child. To inflict his wrath on the foul fiend who'd separated them for no reason but his own cruelty.

But Mortimer Weatherstoke spent a handful of years *hurting* the woman that Sebastian was—

Was what?

He couldn't even think the words... Could not turn the strange maelstrom of his emotion into a tangible thing.

He didn't know how.

What he did know was that she'd asked him to stow his anger. She needed his deference. His gentility. His understanding. He could grant her those things and indulge in his own rage later.

It was the least he could do.

"You don't have to tell me anything," he said, measuring his voice. "But it might do you some good to unburden your mind."

She took in a preparatory breath. "I never conceived after that. Some doctors said my womb was too small, others that my body temperature was too low, or things weren't...shaped correctly inside of me. I was examined in all manner of ways, and no one could give me an answer."

That did less than nothing to abate his ire. "What about your husband? Was he examined?"

The question seemed to startle her. "No one...no one suggested that the fault might lie with him."

"Unbelievable," he snapped. "There's every chance the infertility is his."

"Oh? Are you a doctor as well as a pirate and an earl?" she asked, with surprising levity.

"Obviously not. But surely if a woman can...malfunction internally, it stands to reason that a man would as well. There's no way to look inside of our bodies, so who is to say what...pipes and channels and bits and bobs could be defective. It only stands to reason."

“I love that you think that, but the medical community seems to agree that if a man can finish then he is able to breed.”

He snorted his naked derision. “I think they’ll someday figure out that I was right, and then I’ll delight in telling you that I had once informed you thusly.”

She let out a soft little sound of mirth. “I look forward to you finding me on that day.”

Finding her? Where would she be?

Then it dawned on him, stealing his breath with the bloody obviousness of it all.

Of course, they would go their separate ways. Would she even want to see him again after this?

Was tonight all they had?

There was a man he needed to murder several railcars away. A room they’d ransacked that would be discovered before morning. Questions regarding a missing family that would most certainly arise once the patriarch was found dead.

Pure unmitigated chaos would ensue.

Would she disembark the train now that Penelope and her intended had escaped? And even if Veronica remained until Constantinople, they’d run out of track eventually. What then? Back to her life at Southbourne? Paris? London?

Swallowing a surge of unexpected misery, he allowed himself to ask another question burning within him for the past year.

“Do you see them often, Lorelai and Ash?”

“All the time. She is my closest friend and I find I like Ash the more I am in his company.”

“And...” He drew little circles around her knuckles with an errant finger. “They fare well?”

“They are disgustingly happy.”

He was glad to hear it. Truly.

“Why are you not with them? It will be Christmas soon.”

She shifted as if the question had made her uncomfortable. “They’re newlyweds, and I wanted them to adjust to life together without me being a dark cloud over their happiness. Reminding them of just how it had fallen apart in the first place.”

“Lorelai fought for you. She adores you. And the Rook—Ash—is used to having people to care for. He wouldn’t mind you sheltering under his roof, beneath his wing. I know him well.”

“I believe you, but I left for selfish reasons, as well. When two people are so entwined, being an outsider is almost cruel, and I wanted some space from Southbourne. I’d been a prisoner there for so long, I’d seen very little of the world. I wanted to travel, design and make my dresses, and fall in love with other places in the world. To see women of beauty in every shape, color, and culture. To find textiles made in foreign and exciting places. To find other passions...”

“Other men?”

She scoffed. “I have very little use for other men. The last thing I considered is confining myself to another husband. I have enough money to live on the rest of my life, if I’m frugal, and my creations are lovely supplements to my income.”

“How very independent of you.”

Lifting herself onto her elbow, she frowned down at him. “Don’t be cruel.”

“I mean it.” He reached up to sift fingers through the silken waterfall he’d made of her hair. “I admire your ambition. I do not blame you for wanting to remain free. I have always lived just so and realize now more than ever what a privilege that is. It is why I joined up with the Rook in the first place. Why that part of my life was so important to me.”

His answer seemed to mollify her, but then she blinked down at him with

naked speculation.

“Then why did you betray him?”



Veronica became suddenly afraid that the truth would drive her from his arms.

She didn't want that. Not yet.

What kept her pressed against him was the certainty she felt that he would tell her the truth. She was coming to learn that Sebastian Moncrieff was many things, but not a liar.

Even if that honesty was cruel, as truth often tended to be.

In the pregnant silence that followed her question, she took the moment to truly appreciate the sumptuous railcar splashed in the golden glow of lamplight. The sway of the train beneath them had lulled her into a gentle torpor cocooned in immense masculine heat. Somehow, it'd made her feel safe enough to speak about the past and the pain she'd left in it. And for once in her adult life, she'd allowed herself to trust the sense of security she'd found in his embrace.

It was beyond reason, really, when he'd been such a villainous figure in the lives of those she called family. Ash had been so angry at Sebastian, it'd taken an act of God to keep them from spilling each other's blood.

But Veronica had learned that villains were often the protagonists of their own narratives.

She remained silent as she watched a plethora of emotion darken his

resplendence, and gave him the time he needed to truly contemplate her question.

She'd been married to a villain, and though she'd considered Sebastian a diabolical, even deviant degenerate, the word "villain" never truly stuck.

Even when she was the one to hurl it at him.

It was why she'd been able to do what she'd done for him, even after vowing that life would never again find her on her knees for another man.

He didn't ask her to. Didn't push her head down toward his lap, nor did he make her feel guilty for her pleasure when she offered him none in return.

Sebastian Moncrieff had kept his word and respected her wishes... He'd asked nothing of her and delivered what he'd promised.

Of course, he was a beautiful specimen of a man, but that fact was what had made him truly irresistible to her.

Her entire life she'd been expected to exist at the whims and for the pleasure of men. How easy it had been to offer *him* pleasure, when he'd not demanded it from her. How delightful she'd found his astonished reaction.

When she'd found the act otherwise demeaning, she found power on her knees. She'd known, somehow, that he was her creature. Her beast.

Her villain.

Finally, after the silence stretched into a tangled, uncomfortable place, the man beneath her tilted his chin away and studied the canopy while a long exhale deflated him.

"You don't have to tell me," she recanted, searching for a way back to their intimacy of before.

"It's a question I often ponder," he responded, his fingers still tangled in her hair, though he couldn't seem to meet her gaze. "And all the answers that present themselves feel inadequate and pathetic."

She knew he'd done wrong by his friend, and by hers, but the despondency in his voice tugged at a deep-seated sympathy in her soul.

"If I've learned anything in life, it's that anger is little more than fear,

pain, or grief wearing a protective mask.” She fidgeted with the finely stitched hem of his collar. “You were so furious at Ash,” she recalled. “Was it because he’d hurt you, he’d taken something from you, or he’d made you afraid?”

“Do I have to pick only one?” he scoffed.

“Of course not.” She waited patiently for him to gather a few more thoughts, discovering the soft golden hairs fleecing his breastbone with curious fingertips.

“You asked me once how I’d escaped a prison sentence,” he said stonily, his dazzling eyes dulled as they remained locked on the canopy above them.

“You’re changing the subject,” she gently chided.

“Not really.”

“What do you mean?”

He hazarded a glance at her, and what she read in it broke her heart. She’d expected defiance and excuses and his singular sense of blistering humor.

What she found was a bleak, fathomless indignity.

His gaze skittered away when he spoke again, as if he couldn’t both look at her and examine himself at the same time.

“I’m not the Earl of Crosthwaite,” he confessed to the shadows above. “My mother, may she rest in peace, was trapped in a loveless marriage to an impotent earl. She had a lover, several in fact. None of them noble.”

“Do you know which one of them sired you?” she queried.

“I don’t even think she did, or she died before she was able to reveal it to me or the earl.”

“And the earl always understood you were not his progeny, for obvious reasons...”

Sebastian shifted, and when she would have raised herself to give him more room, his arms tightened around her, keeping her close. “He hated me for it, but he hated worse the cousin that would inherit. Though, to save face,

he named me his heir, and publicly claimed me as his own. Privately, I lived my youth as a prisoner of his rage.”

“That’s awful,” Veronica murmured, pressing a hand to his chest.

“It wasn’t so bad. The earl trotted me out when he was supposed to. Granted me the education due my station—er—his station. All the while, he pissed away any inheritance, ruined my childhood home, and dismantled all other properties that might have provided income. I swear to Christ, he even salted the earth in the fields. And so, when he died, I was seventeen and left with nothing but tax debt and a title I’d usurped through no fault of my own. I was the Earl of Nothing.”

“That must have been so lonely,” she commiserated, resting her chin on the meat of his chest.

He summoned a wan smile that must have meant to be cheerful, but fell short of the mark. “I’ve never wanted for company,” he boasted, more out of habit than pride, she thought.

“Yes, but don’t you find that sometimes a crowded room is the loneliest place in the world?”

He tucked her hair behind her ear, stroking at the little diamond bob in her lobe. “Stop looking into my soul, Countess, especially when I’m trying to bare it to you. Sometimes it feels you know me better than I know myself.”

Driven by a quick impulse, she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. “So, you took to the sea to find your fortune,” she prompted.

He gave her an arrested stare before continuing. “Fortune found me on the Devil’s Dirge, where I climbed in rank rather quickly as I proved my usefulness to the Rook. Eventually we formed a kinship. The Rook violently obtained things, and I violently enjoyed those things.

For me, pirating had begun as a rush of life-affirming exhilaration. The freedom of calling no man king and no country home. And then, it was about something bigger than myself, as well. Revenge on the very system that still took liberty from others. The seas are such a dangerous and wild place...not

only because of nature, but because of the types of men that move goods around the world. It was the Rook's own tragic story that tied me to him so utterly."

"Which brings us to the betrayal in question," he said, seeming to notice the confusion wrinkling her forehead. "What the Rook didn't know—what I'd never told him—was that he'd become a brother to me. We'd planned to follow that ancient Roman treasure, the Claudius Cache, to the end of the world, and then retire to paradise. We'd even spoken of doing exactly what I do now, finding the bastards who make a living off the broken backs of shanghaied men, and helping them from this world, starting with your late husband."

Suddenly it all made sense to Veronica...and she finished the story, herself. "But instead, he found Lorelai—and me—and in doing so, he connected with his past and the brothers he'd left there, neither of whom were fond of you or his life as a pirate."

His jaw hardened as he dipped it in verification of her assessment. "I knew the life he was thinking of building with Lorelai, Blackwell, and Cutter had no room for me or the rest of the crew of the Devil's Dirge in it. The future we'd been working toward was quickly disappearing and...and I did something drastic to—I don't know—to snap him out of it all, I suppose. But Lorelai was never truly in danger, I simply figured If I took her with me to find the Claudius Cache, he'd see her next to it and realize what treasure truly was."

"Which he did," she said gently. "Just not in the way you intended."

"I never understood the decision he made..." He lifted his hands until they both cupped her jaw with infinite tenderness, his eyes bright and fervid as he gazed up at her.

"Until now."

The kiss was one of equal fervency and mutual need.

Veronica couldn't say which of them had made the first move or the response to it. Their mouths simply met.

Melded.

And the rest of them seemed to follow. Their torsos, hips, legs...

Hearts.

The man beneath her was no longer a creature of charm and mirth or of mischief and wickedness. He was real. A man with arcane depths and the capability for profound compassion.

He'd bared that part of himself to her, which had somehow made her want to see more.

To see everything.

As they devoured each other, her fingers found the buttons of his shirt, and began to tug restlessly, freeing them one by one.

His hands buried themselves in her hair as a guttural groan urged her on.

Finally, she laid the shirt open, displaying an impeccably sculpted torso dusted with hair only slightly darker than his mane. Her fingers slid over taut skin, jolted by an almost electric sensation that coursed through her entire body, landing heavy and hard in her core.

Pulling back, she broke the kiss, momentarily entranced by the glisten on

his swollen lips as he watched her with rapt eyes. Motionless. Vigilant. As if she were a bunny that might bolt into the underbrush at the first sign of danger.

Emboldened, Veronica smoothed both hands over his wide shoulders and meandered down the mounds of muscle on his chest and lower, discovering the spectacular corrugations of his torso.

The tendons of his neck tensed and flexed, his jaw clenching and grinding against a powerful need.

Pausing, Veronica glanced down to the bulge straining against his trousers.

*Never again.* She'd once vowed. Never would she lie beneath a man and let him rut and sweat and dump his seed inside her. Never would she be made to feel like some rubbish receptacle after, lying used and discarded on the bed in a puddle of her own tears and shame.

And yet, today seemed like a day for breaking those vows. She'd also promised never to be on her knees before a man, and she'd enjoyed every moment she'd had him in her mouth. His scent, his taste, his heat and girth and shape. The circumference of him matched his own impressive dimensions, and still she was not afraid.

She was not afraid...

A myriad of emotion swirled within her. Arousal, excitement, curiosity, hope...

But not a single hint of fear.

She'd tasted the ocean on his lips when he'd kissed her after. And he'd tasted his own release as well, lingering on her tongue. Their release had created a heady mélange of flavors and erotic delicacy that undoubtedly belonged together.

Her body fit so perfectly next to his, soft and round where his planes were hard and unyielding.

So far, he'd surpassed every previous interaction she'd had with her

husband, the only other man with whom she'd been intimate.

Could he pleasure her from the inside as well?

"I want you," she whispered, her body suddenly thrumming with the truth of those words.

He levered up to sit, the motion doing intriguing things to his abdominals as she melted away from his chest to kneel across from him. "What are you saying?" He eyed her warily.

"I want you, Sebastian Moncrieff," she told him, her voice stronger this time. "I want you to take me like that woman on the desk."

He reached out to caress her face. "Not like that, Veronica, not you. I will be gentle and—"

"No." She reached for the lapels of his shirt, yanking them down the cords of his impressive arms as a violent maelstrom gathered within her. "You've shown me gentle. You've given me that. But I don't feel gentle anymore. I want you to take me like you took the women whose stories made you one of the most infamous lotharios in the Empire." Climbing into his lap, she straddled him. "I can't explain this...the violence of this hunger, but it has eaten at me since the day I watched you with that woman and hated her for having what I wanted. What I was *afraid* to want."

She bracketed his face with both her hands, gazing deep into Brandywine eyes, alight with a fire she now understood. "I don't want to be afraid anymore. I want to meet you as an equal, do you understand? I want to feel the full force of your desire, whatever that is."

His nostrils flared as he sat beneath her, every muscle rigid as even the air seemed to still around them. "You have to be *sure*."

She kissed him. Hard and fast. "I'm sure."

A demonic smile toyed with the edge of his lips, as the banked coals in his gaze became a pagan inferno. "So be it."

Without warning, he reached up and rent her bodice down the middle, sending little pearl buttons scattering to the whims of fate, their clatter eaten



up by the sounds of the train. In several rather deft and mystifying motions, he'd stripped away the torn fabric, corset, and chemise, and tossed them into the shadows.

Before they landed, she was suddenly on her back beneath him, looking up in limp, open-mouthed astonishment as he divested her of her skirts and undergarments, peeling them from her body with unholy expertise.

Veronica didn't know whether to be impressed or jealous as he discarded it all to the foot of the bed. And then, she forgot what she'd been thinking about when his trousers and boots disappeared.

He was on her before she could recover, a low growl reverberating through his throat as he looked at her as if he'd unwrapped the only gift he'd ever desired.

A hand closed over her breast, his palm abrading the sensitive peak budded from the winter chill and the ferocity of her arousal. He stroked and caressed her, molding her like clay in a sculptor's hand, as his lips found the protuberant nipple and teased it into an almost painful peak.

She'd already been wet for him, ready, but now she released a river of need, her loins melting and pooling in preparation for him. With a throaty sound she didn't recognize as her own, she arched into his mouth, fingers digging into his scalp.

After ravishing one breast, and then the other, he dragged his mouth down a few of her ribs, angling for her sex.

"No." She tugged at his hair to stop him, and he looked up over her body with a wordless question. "Just... Just... Be with me?" Her cheeks burned as she manifested what she wanted into words. Words that now seemed almost inadequate for what she asked of him.

He kissed the thin, sensitive skin beneath her breast with a mischievous smile. In one, smooth, graceful, ever so predatory motion, he moved up her body, lifting her knee to wrap around his hip.

His thick sex slid into the folds protecting the tender opening to her body.

“I am with you, Countess.”

“Then...please.”

“Please, what?” he gritted, as he paused above her to search her face. The muscles in his neck seemed tight enough to tear, and the brackets around his neck were now deep grooves of restraint.

The bastard was going to make her say it. “Fuck me.”

With an animalistic sound, he buried his face in the curtain of hair next to her ear, and buried his cock deep in her body.

A strangled gasp of surprise wrenched from her, as little jolts of discomfort accompanied the pleasure.

He hovered for a moment above her, his arm bunching with strength as he supported his weight, the other gripping her thigh, as she wrapped it tighter against his waist.

“Sweet fuck, you’re wet. Warm. Tight. Perfect. *God.*” Each word escaped on a breath as he remained still, allowing her to adjust to his intrusion.

How had she never known it was supposed to be like this? No sting or struggle. No pain or bearing down against the clench of her body. She was so struck by the disparity between this moment and the act she’d suffered with her husband, tears burned behind her eyes.

Happy ones.

This was what it was like to welcome a man into her body.

Veronica luxuriated in the fullness. The tensile heat of him above her, inside of her. Hard and smooth and hot everywhere. A feverish beast of flesh and steel.

A sudden, primal need to move overtook her, and she opened wider beneath him, lifting her hips in an invitation to move.

Sebastian choked on a groan, but he obeyed her silent command, rocking his hips at first, testing her reactions with motions both careful and sure. Her name tore from his throat, raw and untuned, lost to the sounds of the storm gathering around them both.

She clung to him, lifting her other leg to take him deeper, hooking her calves around the curve of his muscular ass.

Sebastian didn't kiss her. He didn't croon sweet nothings or smooth at her hair.

He watched.

Every twitch of her muscles, every flutter of her lashes. When she parted her lips, and how fast her breath sawed in and out of her as he moved. Modulating his rhythm to her silent instructions, he went deeper, harder, faster until she was a wild, inarticulate thing only made of chaos and bliss. Her nails bit into his arms and raked down his back, her teeth bared at him more than once until he finally snarled back his reply, slamming his hips against hers in a merciless war for release.

Her ascension was like the train beneath them. Rhythmic, unstoppable, storming through her with all the speed man could muster, and letting every vessel and sinew, top to toe, aware of its ephemeral presence.

Dimly, she heard a guttural roar above her. Felt him clench and tremble as his motions became less measured and more frenzied.

Then they were clenched in a freefall like eagles, the ground rushing toward them.

Let it. She didn't care. She could be dashed on the rocks and not feel a thing but the molten pleasure of her blood and bliss of his hot seed spilling against her womb.

Veronica was nothing but a limp puddle of exhaustion when his forehead finally came to rest against hers. They breathed together in the silence for a moment. Eyes open. Bodies joined.

After a tender kiss buttoned closed the wildness of their joining, he lifted himself away from her and went into the washroom. Returning with a cloth, he washed her, saying soft things she couldn't understand, let alone reply to.

He left again and returned without the cloth to extinguish the lights and slide them both beneath the sheets. Arranging the covers around her, he made

a nest with the curve of his body and pulled her into it.

Nestling in, Veronica realized she'd barely slept since London. Due to anxiety over the Wellers and the success of this plot...

Fear and uncertainty hovered in the cold outside of their cocoon. There was so much still unsaid between them.

"Don't do that," he breathed against the crest of her ear, nibbling at it without teeth.

"Hmmm?" She still couldn't summon the strength to form actual syllables.

"Don't start dreading tomorrow. The light will dawn, my lady, and all will be well. We will say the things we cannot say in the dark."

That's what he didn't understand, she thought as she wriggled closer to his big body, allowing the hairs on the tops of his thighs to tickle her backside.

She could tell him anything in the dark. That she was becoming attached to him. That she'd been thinking of him. Mourning him. Missing him. Fantasizing about him. These were little secrets she could share under the cover of night.

But the light of day was for truths. And the truth was that Sebastian Moncrieff might think of her fondly as a one-time lover...

Veronica, however, would never stop yearning for the safety of his arms. For this.

She would never stop wanting him, even as he walked away.

Veronica had awoken wrapped in Sebastian's dark scent and the luxurious memory of their lovemaking. Momentarily, she'd forgotten that the world was waiting to tear them apart, until she reached over and found his side of the bed empty.

Now she raced as fast as a body was able down the dark, cramped hallways of the train, praying she wasn't too late.

They were pulling away from Venice in the wee hours of the morning. A scant few passengers were up and about. They peered at her as if trying to figure out if she were a ghost or a madwoman as she ran, barefoot and clad in naught but her chemise and a belted velvet smoking jacket she'd found in his wardrobe.

What if it was already too late? What if she couldn't change his mind? What if—

An arm snaked around her waist from behind, and she was hauled into a cabin with two benches facing the other. Only a stunned squeak escaped before a large hand clamped over her mouth.

"What the hell are you doing?" demanded a familiar voice from behind her.

*Sebastian. Thank God.*

She wriggled and writhed until he loosened his hold and took his hand

from her mouth. “I came to find you.”

“Dammit, Veronica, I could have been in the middle of—”

She seized his lapels. “Tell me Weller is still alive.”

“Why?” He eyed her skeptically. “There’s no decent reason to wish him so.”

“I realized something when I woke and you were not there,” she panted, noting an indefinable flare in his eyes as she struggled to regain her breath. “You’ve been going about this all wrong.”

His gaze became as flat as his tone as he replied, “Is that so?”

“Weller may be higher up in this Shanghai operation, but he’s not the head. Perhaps the neck, or even the hands—it doesn’t matter.” She waved the metaphor away. “What is important is the information he could give you. If your design is to dismantle the entire system, you’ll need names, places of contact, ports of refuge for these criminals. You are an earl with a seat in this empire and a voice that demands to be heard. Not only are you wealthier than most men can imagine, but you are a born leader.” She shaped her hands to his jaw and stared hard into his eyes, willing him to mark her. “You have power, Sebastian, *use* it. Use it to do good. To be better.”

He covered her hands with his, pulling them away from his face and encompassing his fingers in her own. “I told you, I’m not a good man. I’m wicked and—”

“I know!” She jerked her hands from his grasp. “But you can be wicked and still do the right thing sometimes. Yes?”

To her amazement, he laughed. Low and rich with a mercurial glimmer in his dazzling eyes.

“I fail to see what is so funny,” she said testily, trying not to lose her hope.

“I can’t lie to you, my lady.” He reached for her hand again and brought it to his lips to press a reverent kiss on the knuckles. “The authorities are holding Weller in Venice until Scotland Yard can send someone to oversee

the extradition. He will be tried for his crimes...and interrogated as to his associates.”

Stunned, she stared at him as the lights of the Italian coast played havoc with his skin and bounced off the fair streaks in his untidy hair. They’d not spoken of this. Last she knew his plan was to murder the man. “Why—why did you do that?”

“Because I knew you’d want me to.” Sliding his thumb into her clenched fist, he pried her fingers open and dragged his lips against her open palm.

“Ohhhhh...” She hadn’t meant to moan that.

“And...” He drew the word out between playful samples of the delicate skin on the underside of her wrist. “Because it was the right thing to do.”

“The—the right thing?”

He released her hand and took a step back, holding her only with a solemn gaze that sat stark and strange on a face as splendid as his. “I realized something as well, Countess, when I woke to find you beside me.”

Lanced by anxiety, she hitched in a preparatory breath. “Oh?”

“I know you never want to feel beholden to another man, and that is your prerogative. But I am yours, Veronica Weatherstoke. Body, heart, and soul. I give myself to you freely and without reservation, to do with whatever you wish.”

Her heart sputtered, stalled, and then kicked over in her ribs twice as fast as before. Surely she was misunderstanding. “But...you have often said you are not a man who wants to be tied down.”

He shrugged. “Historically—metaphorically—that’s been true, but in the strictest sense of the word, I very much like to be tied—” With one look at what must have been a distressed expression, he apparently decided not to finish the thought. “We can discuss that later. Listen. Veronica...I’m in love with you. I think I have been since that time you slapped me on the Devil’s Dirge.”

She shook her head in disbelief. Love? Him? Could he truly love anyone

but himself?

“I thought I’d already lost any chance at being with you because of all the reasons you have so eloquently stated against me,” he continued, with a wry quirk of his brow. “But I wonder if we could move past all that. If we might see where this journey could take us.”

Just as she’d begun to recover her breath, it was taken again. “Where... where would you want it to go?” she fretted. “Neither of us really have a home.”

“I never have, and I believe your spirit is much like mine. We don’t have to settle anywhere, you and I. We can make the entire world our home if we like. Or we can plant our flag if we reach a place that calls to us.”

“Sebastian...think about what you’re saying. About what this would mean. Can you truly be a faithful man? Because that *is* what I want—what I need. I have a plan already, one that involves my work. I love what I do, and I only want to get better at it. I cannot allow a husband to eclipse that part of myself. The fashion world would certainly bore you.”

His arms stole around her, and she stepped into the embrace, daring to hope this wasn’t all a fever dream called forth by her inner most yearnings. “I am a sailor, a drifter, and all I need is a North Star, someone to guide me when it is dark.” He feathered kisses over her temples, her brow, her hairline, and worked his way down to her lips. “But I am also a man of my word. I will walk in your wake and watch you take flight. I will never raise a hand or even a voice to you. I will cherish and adore you and try to make you fall in love with me every day until you do. I’ll let you win arguments at least eighty percent of the time, even though I’m usually right. I will give you two orgasms *at least* to every single one of mine—”

A harried giggle escaped her, and she pressed her fingers to his lips in order to take a silent moment to listen to her heart. “What would I do with such a wicked man as my—?”

Oh God, she’d almost said *husband*. They’d not even discussed what this



arrangement would look like on paper.

He held those fingers to his lips, only pulling back to speak. "I would make you a countess again, if you'd allow it. Give you a new name, even if it shouldn't belong to me."

"I would love that more than anything," she sighed, unable to help being swept away by the fervency of her reaction to his words. "With everything that's happened to us both...do you think we could truly ever trust each other?"

"I will strive to earn your trust," he vowed. "But it will take time...time I'm willing to give. As long as you need. Forever, if that is what it takes."

A brilliant smile broke over her features and reached in to set her heart aglow as she saw an identical joy lift his lips. "I think...I would look forward to forever. I'd be much more interesting with you at my side."

"Lovely!" He kissed her, lifting her against his chest. "Let's get married, then! Today, if you like."

She laughed in earnest this time, squirming to be let down. "Do you call that a proposal?"

"I call it a suggestion until I can get a ring." He rubbed his jaw, now rakishly prickled by a night's growth of beard. "Shall we go buy one at the Turkish Bazaar? Or perhaps I should take you to Antwerp or—"

"Take me to bed first?" Sliding her arms around his neck, she stretched up to seal her lips over his in a searing kiss, while rubbing her body against him like a hungry cat. "We could stay there until the train runs out of track... then decide what happens next."

That wicked smile spread over his breathtaking features, the one that'd first arrested her attention so many months ago. "My lady, your wish is my command."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerrigan Byrne is the USA Today Bestselling and award winning author of several novels in both the romance and mystery genre.

She lives on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington with her two Rottweiler mix rescues and one very clingy cat. When she's not writing and researching, you'll find her on the beach, kayaking, or on land eating, drinking, shopping, and attending live comedy, ballet, or too many movies.

Kerrigan loves to hear from her readers! To contact her or learn more about her books, please visit her site or find her on most social media platforms: [www.kerriganbyrne.com](http://www.kerriganbyrne.com)



# **ONLY FOR HIS LADY**

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**CHRISTI CALDWELL**

## PROLOGUE

FALL 1809, LONDON, ENGLAND

Following the very public humiliation of Richard Rayne, her eldest brother, Lady Theodosia Rayne found there was no greater agony than witnessing a family member's tangible heartbreak.

Theodosia hovered at the edge of the Billiards Room. The door slightly cracked, she inched it open, and peered inside. She searched for a glimpse of Richard, heir to the earldom.

A bleating snore pierced the quiet and she ducked her head all the way inside, and found him.

“Oh, Richard.” Those two words emerged on a whispery sigh of regret.

Her brother lay sprawled on the leather button sofa with one arm draped over his face, while his other hung loosely over the side. The muscles of her stomach tightened as she took in this man who was more of a stranger than a brother. Ever the romantic, grinning, carefree brother, he'd lost his heart, to Miss Candace Roberts. In the grandest romantic gesture, he'd gone down on a knee in the middle of Hyde Park to offer for her—only to be rebuffed before all Society. In the end, the lady had chosen another. Theodosia balled her hands into tight fists.

Nay. Not just *any* other.

Seething fury burned to life as fresh now as when she'd read of Lady Candace's treachery in the gossip columns. The young woman had rejected

Richard and given herself, instead, to Charles Renshaw. Of the same Renshaws who'd stolen the ancient heirloom from Theodosia's family years earlier and left the Raynes cursed.

Now another theft had been committed...her brother's heart.

With a vicious hatred spreading like a conflagration inside, Theodosia quietly cursed the Renshaws and all who loved them.

Richard emitted another shuddery snore, forcing her attention to him, once more. His face marred with several days' growth, his jacket discarded, and his remaining garments wrinkled, he had the look of a man who'd lived in the bottom of a bottle since he'd had his offer rebuffed. Which by the glimpses she'd had of him these weeks and the stories written in the papers, was, in fact, just what he'd done.

*I cannot stand to see him like this...*

Theodosia pushed the door all the way open and stepped inside. Suddenly, a hand snaked around her wrist. That unexpected hold had wrung a gasp from her and she spun around.

Aidan, the youngest of her brothers, stood before her, a hard glint in his eyes. "Do not," he ordered her.

"But—"

"Leave him." That quiet command raised a frown on her lips. Yes, Aidan was older than her one and twenty years, but not by more than two years. Even with that, there had always been a cocksure arrogance to him where he'd challenged her at every turn.

"He cannot remain in this room," she said quietly while Richard slumbered on noisily from the sofa.

"He doesn't remain in this room," Aidan corrected in hushed tones.

Theodosia pursed her mouth. "No, he doesn't," she concurred. "He visits his wicked clubs and gaming hells and—"

"It has been but a month," Aidan put in.

But a month. A month of Richard drinking himself into a stupor and

slurring his words and stumbling around.

Theodosia cast another look over at Richard's frame. Even in sleep, the sharp planes of his face were wreathed in agony and despair.

"Nothing you say or do will erase his hurt," Aidan said, following her unspoken thoughts. "He doesn't require your lecture, or your friendship. So leave him be," he ordered.

They remained locked in a silent battle. And glaring into his dark brown eyes, she resented him for being right, in this moment. There was nothing she could say or do that would undo Richard's pain. His heart had been broken by a woman who'd never deserved him and Theodosia had no words with which to help him put that shattered organ back together.

The truth of that realization stabbed like a dagger being plunged into her chest. When you loved your family, you loved deeply. Their joy was your joy. And their hurt became your own. Her throat worked painfully as she drew the door closed behind them.

Theodosia stalked off.

"It is their bloody fault," Aidan gritted out, as he easily fell into step beside her.

She didn't pretend to misunderstand whom he spoke of. "Yes," she seethed. Their age-old hatred of the Renshaws went back well beyond the sale of the Theodosia Gladius, a coveted heirloom their families had fought for. A prized gladius unlike all others for its sheer size and power. An heirloom so special, Theodosia herself had been named for it.

Where the Raynes' investments had failed and they'd found themselves with depleting coffers, the Renshaws had thrived, flourished, and become the epitome of success and power.

But this crime...stealing Richard's love...this was beyond the pale. The depth of treachery and ugly that had defied mere wealth.

A sound of frustration escaped Theodosia and she threw her hands up. "There has to be something we can do to help Rich—"



A sharp cry went up. An eerie call of desperation that froze them in their tracks. Shivers raced up Theodosia's spine and a numbing chill went through her.

Moments later, a wrenching sob filtered down the hallway, springing Theodosia into movement. Heart pumping, she sprinted down the corridor and skidded to a stop outside her father's office. With fingers that shook, Theodosia tossed the door open, and her stomach lurched.

*Oh, God.*

Her mother, wrapped in her father's arms, wept with such force her slender figure shook. "No," she cried, pounding at her husband's chest.

And Theodosia knew.

Not because the words had been uttered. But rather, because of the despair that poured from her parents' trembling frames.

*He is dead...*

Her legs weakened under her and she dimly registered Aidan capturing her at the waist. "Luke," she whispered, managing nothing more than that one name. Her elder brother in the King's Army. Her protector. The honorable man who'd vowed to slay the monsters in her nightmares when she'd been a girl afraid of the shadows. He'd then pledged to defeat Boney and all his forces.

"What is it?" Aidan, his voice usually exuding confidence and strength, broke.

Their parents, faces ravaged with tears of grief looked up, as one. The desolateness in their empty stares raised gooseflesh on Theodosia's skin.

"It is your brother."

She'd been expecting it. Knew it. And yet, even so...the air left her on a swift exhale. The weight of despair brought her eyes closed. *No.*

"He is gone missing." Their father's voice emerged threadbare. "From the fields of Talavera."

Mother fell in a heap on the floor, landing hard on her knees. Face buried

in her hands, she dissolved into a keening wail that sent tears spilling down Theodosia's cheeks.

How wrong she'd been earlier. There proved a far greater despair than bearing witness to Richard's heartbreak. This gripping, aching agony, no words could heal, that came with this news of Lucas.

And just like that, the threads of a once beautiful fabric, came undone, so all that remained were the frayed and ruined pieces of the Rayne family.

*We are cursed.*

---

LONDON, ENGLAND, SPRING 1810

“Not at all, honorable, I’ll say. Not at all.”

Lady Theodosia Rayne knew Herbert, the Viscount Fennimore, quite meant those words. He’d uttered them eleven times, and that was only since she’d climbed inside his and his sister’s carriage. Their families were long-standing friends. In fact, the only friends they’d known since the string of scandals had struck.

That blasted sword.

“Sneaking into a man’s ball, uninvited,” he mumbled under his breath. “Not at all honorable.”

*Twelve* times. “I’ll not overstay my welcome.” She leaned over and patted the top of his hand. Theodosia was not so self-absorbed that she’d not feel some string of guilt for forcing the oft-nervous viscount to assist in this, her latest, but most worthwhile, scheme. But sometimes, there were things far more important that merited those dishonorable acts.

“You already have overstayed your welcome,” he mumbled. “Dishonorable sneaking into a man’s masquerade all to steal another man’s property.”

*Thirteen.*

Apparently his sister, Miss Carol Cresswall, Theodosia’s only true friend in the world, had also tired of the dishonorable charges being leveled. “Oh,

do hush, Herbie.” She kicked him hard in the shins.

He grunted. “You shouldn’t go about kicking a person. Not at all—”

“I swear if you say dishonorable, honorable, or any variation in between, then I will do more than kick you.”

Herbie clamped his lips tight, indicating he’d been well on his way to fourteen.

Carol gave a flounce of her curls. “Theo is merely retrieving something that belongs to her family.”

The something in question was the great Theodosia sword. Legend held that ancient weapon was cursed and would bring great fortune to the holder. Yet, Theodosia knew enough of her own family’s history to know that Antonia Varyshkova had ultimately found the sword to open one to love and happiness. She squared her jaw. And through the hasty sale from a vile, if prosperous, shipping magnate, that good fortune had been transferred to the Duke of Devlin and his horrid kin. No, Theodosia’s family had been robbed of the artifact. They’d known their share of the toil and bad luck that went with that legend. “I promise, Herbie, I shall retrieve the weapon and be on my way. The Duke of Devlin shall never even know I’ve entered his hallowed home.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “Still not the very least honor—oomph.” Carol buried the tip of her boot in his shin once more.

Theo gave her friend a smile, a way of showing she truly appreciated her support. She did. And with the Raynes’ luck, these years, she’d take any and all support she could get.

“All I am saying—”

“I do not care what you are saying,” Carol, the viscount’s younger by two years sister, snapped.

As brother and sister launched into a squabble about the word honor, and Theo’s actions, and a pairing of that word dishonor that resulted in further grunts from Herbie, Theodosia turned her attention to the window. She

tugged back the curtain and peered out into the passing, dark, London streets, her masked visage reflected back in the crystal panel.

The rub of it was...she did see the merit of Herbie's argument. It wasn't honorable, even if it was common, to enter someone's ball without an invitation. But the Duke of Devlin and his lucky-in-every-way family were not going to be handing out invitations to any member of the Rayne family. It just wasn't going to happen.

The rivalry between them was an age-old one that dated through the years; a bitter feud fought for some beautiful lady and the rights to that lady. The animosity between their two families had only been intensified when her family's great sword had been sold off to none other than one of those monstrous Renshaw ancestors. Even with all the years that had passed since that theft, the acrimony burned just as strong.

She pursed her lips. Particularly when one of those blasted gentlemen went and stole another man's love. Her poor brother. The carriage hit a particularly nasty bump in the road and she knocked into Carol's side, interrupting her friend's impressive rant.

"Pardon," she murmured as Carol steadied her.

Her friend waved her hand dismissively. "Where was I?" She jabbed a finger at her brother and launched once more into her diatribe for poor Herbie. "I've not finished with you, Herbert Harold Cresswall."

Before, Theo had felt just a niggling of guilt, now she felt all manner of guilt. When Carol was in one of her tempers it really wasn't pleasant. When one of those tempers was directed at one person, it was all the worse. She should know. Closer to sisters than friends, Theo had been on the receiving end of one of those jabbing fingers far too many times.

Theo returned her attention to the surprisingly quiet streets as the carriage rattling through them at an impressive clip. Unease turned in her belly. She brushed it back. Or she tried to. The nasty little churning remained. She'd so carefully considered this whole scheme, knew the rightness of her plan, and

her family's claim to that sword, and yet now...unease rolled along her spine.

"Don't be silly," she muttered under her breath. Neither the Duke of Devlin nor any of his three devilish siblings would dare find her hidden amidst their masked guests at their annual, famed masquerade.

She pursed her lips. One of the most famed, favorite events of a London Season, which she'd never had an opportunity to attend. Granted she'd only just entered her third Season, but it never felt pleasant to be left out—of anything. She should know. Plenty of doors were closed to the Raynes, all because the Duke of Devlin and his devilish kin had done nothing to hide their disdain of the Rayne family.

Who would welcome a mere earl's family when it would earn the displeasure of a duke? You didn't do it. You just didn't do it.

The carriage jerked to a sudden, unexpected stop. Her heart dipped. "We're here?"

Carol's lips, turned up in a gleeful smile. "We're here." Then, Carol had always found romanticism in subterfuge.

The driver pulled the door open and Herbie stepped down, wincing as his feet collided with the pavement, likely sore from having so many kicks dealt him by Carol in her shepherdess' costume with those serviceable boots. Carol allowed the servant to hand her down, and turned, looking back questioningly at Theo, who was frozen inside the carriage.

The frisson of unease grew, spiraling inside her. And she knew it must be madness because she never worried about Herbie, the habitual worrier, well...worrying. But the manner in which the thick, London fog rolled over the pavement, and the night clouds eerily rolled past the moon bespoke doom. *Oh, don't be a ninny.*

"Well, what are you waiting for? Come along then, Th—" She clamped her lips tight.

Giving her head a shake, Theo stepped down from the carriage. The metal of her costume rattled noisily. She adjusted her armor and then reached back

for the enormous, and more importantly, *fake* broadsword upon her seat. Just a small piece in her plot. A necessary piece that would ensure her actions this night attracted no suspicious looks.

She fell into step alongside Carol and hurried after Herbie. As they walked, Theo studied the pink stucco townhouse awash in the soft glow of candles. The Devil, as she'd come to call him, of course, lived in London's most fashionable end of Mayfair and likely had an elegant, white marble foyer and a grand sweeping staircase.

She climbed the handful of steps and the butler, resplendent in a mask, drew the door open. Theo filed in behind Herbie and Carol, entering...the elegant foyer resplendent in, of course, the white marble floor and grand sweeping staircase.

"Of course," she mumbled to herself.

Footmen rushed forward to relieve them of their cloaks. She hesitated and then shrugged out of the green muslin garment, feeling entirely naked, even as she was fully concealed in her armor, piecemeal, and black breeches.

"Quite scandalous donning breeches," Herbie muttered.

Yes. But then, it was the least scandalous thing she'd done yet this evening, and would do for the remainder of it.

He looked as though he wished to say more on it but then Carol quelled his words with another dark look.

Then, the butler led them toward the noise filtering from deep within the townhouse. The ballroom. Her heart sped up, a thrill that had nothing to do with the excitement likely filling every other unwed, young lady present. Those ladies would be seeking stolen kisses and the promise of a mere taste of passion.

Theodosia had only one manner of theft on her mind...and had for the better part of a fortnight.

Carol slowed her step and Theodosia adjusted her stride to match the pace set by her friend. "You're blinking."

“Of course I’m blinking,” Theodosia muttered. Except she knew what her friend meant.

“Oh, come, you know what I mean.” Yes, those rapid, too many blinks that had made her a deplorable liar as a child.

*Did you steal your brother’s biscuit? Blinkblinkblink.*

*Did you cut up your brother’s shirt and stitch a gown for your pug?* Blinkblinkblink.

*Did you—*

Carol caught her hand. She passed her gaze over her face. “You’ve... we’ve, worked through all the details.”

Theodosia looked after Herbie and the butler...of course wildly— blinking. “I’ll not be discovered,” she said, not sure if she sought to convince herself or Carol.

“You’ll be in and then you’ll be gone.” The driver had, of course, been instructed to wait at the opposite end of the street for Lady Theodosia and Carol. Her faithful friend would forego the evening’s fun for her.

“It shall go perfectly smoothly.” She shifted her weapon to her other hand.

Carol took her by the other and pulled her down after Herbie, who stood in wait beside the butler, a pained expression revealed even through the black domino he’d donned as...a king’s jester. It really was the perfect costume for the ever-worrying Herbie.

At last, they reached the ballroom and Theo became an interloper from the enemy family, hidden by a mask and some armor and a carefully conceived plan. And as she slipped into the ballroom alongside Carol and Herbie, gay laughter and the thrum of the orchestra blared loud, nearly deafening in its exuberance.

For a moment, she allowed herself, who’d been far too serious for far too long with her hopelessly unfortunate family to forget that she’d snuck in uninvited, to steal the host’s ancient weapon.



Er...*her* family's ancient weapon. For the promise she'd made Herbie to steal her sword and be on her way, she'd allow herself but a small moment to enjoy the evening's festivities. Purely to avoid attracting notice is all.

Yes, that was it.

"You said you were leaving," Herbie hissed.

"Do hush." She nudged him with her elbow. "You've injured my feelings."

He frowned. "It wasn't my intention."

She'd merely been teasing him. She knew he wasn't trying to be unkind, but rather feared the duplicitous role he'd agreed to. "Do not worry, I'll slip out and then you'll..."

"Yes, yes, I know my role." Sweat dotted his high forehead. Obviously, the fear of being discovered stealing something from the Devil Duke was a far more egregious offense than agreeing to secret her into the duke's home. All entirely accurate.

"I shall meet you in the foyer," Carol said from the side of her mouth.

Everyone knew his or her respective roles.

"Now, go," she ordered brother and sister. It wouldn't do for them to be discovered speaking or together...but for the end...when she was triumphant in her plan.

Herbie sprinted off, entirely too eager, by her thinking, to be free of her.

"That one gives me doubts," Carol whispered hurriedly and then without another word, disappeared into the crowd.

Theo hesitated and surveyed the crowded room. She shifted her armor, wishing Joan of Arc had managed to fight a battle in something at least less sweltering. Then, gossamer or satin or silk provided little protection against an enemy's blade.

The orchestra concluded a lively country reel and the room erupted into a blaring cheer. An involuntary grin pulled at her lips and, for a moment, she forgot what brought her here. Forgot that her brother Richard had taken to

overindulging in spirits after his heart had been broken and forgot that another brother had gone missing after fighting Boney's forces.

For in this moment, if even for just a bit, it felt nice to simply be any other young lady lost in the merriment of the evening. On the heel of that was the tug of guilt. Even if all her efforts here this evening were for her family... all they would know is that she'd entered the Devil's lair.

Theo eyed the door. She really should be after the broadsword, now. In fact, she should have begun her search as soon as she'd arrived. And yet... she lingered in the corner of the ballroom, on the fringe, unnoticed by all.

Which was best. It was far safer this way. Yes, it was best if she remained as invisible as possible. Anything else would be calamitous.

## Chapter Two

He'd noted her the moment she walked in the room.

And Damian, the Duke of Devlin, made it a point to not notice anyone. A duke who noted the appearance of young ladies often found himself inevitably trapped, tricked, or seduced into more with those young ladies.

He peered over the heads of the couples now filing onto the dance floor for a tedious quadrille. At three inches past six feet, his height proved rather advantageous in this moment of studying the young woman.

The young lady alternated her gaze between the dance floor and the door, and even through the silver helmet she'd donned, the damned piece obscuring the color of her eyes, he saw the pull of longing.

Only, he couldn't determine whether she one, wanted to dance, two, wanted to leave, or three, made eyes at a lover and pointed the nameless gentleman to the exit, an idea he found not at all palatable.

Damian preferred the first. Because in her armor-clad frame and too tight breeches that clung to generously abundant hips and buttocks, it would be quite a shame to see her leave. Not without knowing who the diminutive, if plump, warrior, in fact, was.

Someone took up position at his side. He silently cursed at the sudden and both untimely and unwelcome appearance of his younger brother, Gregory. “You can, at least, try to appear as though you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I am not enjoying myself,” Damian said coolly, from the side of his mouth, to his most bothersome sibling.

Gregory grinned widely and Damian forced his stare away from the stranger in her armor. He held out a glass of champagne. “Ah, yes, but now you are in disguise and you shan’t have all those ladies fawning over you if you’re your usual boorish, ugly self.”

“I have little interest in having anyone fawn over me.”

His brother gave a mock shudder. “Egads, have a care what you say, man.” He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Should Mother hear you so disinterested in your Minerva she’ll have a fit of the vapors.”

Clearly not enjoying the evening’s festivities as he ought, Gregory opted to stay at his side and continue to make a nuisance of himself. “Though, I daresay I can never understand your appeal to the ladies. You’re deuced ugly.” There was the scar. “And you’ve a foul temper.” Which was more a product of devoting more attention to the title duke and the responsibilities that went with it, since he’d inherited the title and tasks charged him at age eighteen. But more importantly he had a dukedom, and that mattered to young ladies. And old ladies. Really, all women it often seemed.

“Shouldn’t you be off doing whatever it is you do at these events?” So he could attend the business of studying the plump warrioress across the hall.

“Dance,” his brother said with a wink. “You dance at these events.”

Damian ignored Gregory’s baiting in favor of studying the plump warrioress who now skirted the edge of his ballroom, with her back pressed against the plastered walls. He narrowed his eyes. Whatever was the chit doing?

“Though I daresay I’ve not seen you dance with anyone but your betrothed.”

The expectation had been there since he'd been a young boy of twelve and she'd been a proper, English girl of five. There'd been the talk with his father about the connection between their two great, ducal lines. However, "She is not my betrothed," he muttered. She would be, or his father would turn in his grave.

His brother snorted. "Do not allow Mother or your Lady Minerva to hear you say as much."

"Yes, that much is true," he admitted. His mother would dissolve into a fit of vapors if he hinted at not offering for the Lady Minerva Quigley. Stunning, blonde, and with a sultry set of blue eyes for one just on her second Season, he supposed there could be any number of worse candidates for his future duchess than the daughter of his late father's closest friend, a fellow duke. He thought of the creeper. "Though there is no formal arrangement," he felt inclined to point out. For himself?

Another snort escaped Gregory. "And most assuredly do not let Mother hear you say *that*."

The dancers parted, allowing him an unfiltered view of the lady warrior creeping along his wall like a growing vine of ivy. From across the room, their eyes locked. Where everyone was a Greek goddess or ruffled shepherdess, she, even in her bid to not stand out—stood out. Through the lady's visor, he detected the rapid one-two-three blink of her eyes, and then she jerked her attention away...and continued her creeping. What was the lady doing in his ballroom, attempting to blend her form to the plaster of his walls?

Gregory cursed, jerking Damian's attention away from the mysterious young woman. He followed his brother's stare.

"Mother," they said in unison.

Even with the first spare to the heir, Charles, very nearly wed, their mother would not be happy until her remaining children were properly wed. More precisely—Damian. She bore down on them with an intentness in her

hard, ice blue stare.

Gregory groaned. "She has the look."

"Yes, yes she does." They all knew the one. The look that said, even with the costumed ball, she planned on matchmaking, and as she'd already settled on Lady Minerva for Damian, this matchmaking likely involved the youngest Renshaw brother.

"Go."

Gregory's eyebrows shot to his hairline. "You're being magnanimous? You're never magnanimous."

Mother was nearly upon them. "Unless, you'd care to meet the young woman she's selected..."

His brother spun on his heel and disappeared into the crowd.

"Wherever did Gregory take himself off to?"

Damian glanced from the corner of his eye. "Mother." Unbidden, he looked for the lady plastering herself against his wall. He scanned the ballroom for the glint of metal, but it was as though she'd at last managed to merge herself with the wall and disappear from sight. Gone. Damian set aside the fleeting intrigue. With the exception of the members of his family, he didn't make it his business to wonder after anyone or worry about them, and a lady likely meeting a lover certainly held little appeal.

"Blast, I was trying to coordinate an introduction between him and Miss Carol Cresswall, the Viscount Fennimore's sister." She jerked her chin toward a shepherdess. "Regardless," she said on a wave. "Minerva has arrived."

"Has she?" he asked in clipped tones. He found this annual masquerade quite tedious. In fact, he found balls, soirees, trips to the theatre, all of it tedious.

"Must you act as though you find your own ball tedious?"

"It's hardly my ball," he drawled. In truth, none of it interested him. Nothing, really interested him. There were the responsibilities to see to: his

three brothers, one particularly trouble-seeking and an oft-displeased mama. The armor-clad warrior, however, had interested him.

He turned to go.

“Are you leaving?” she squawked.

Damian paused. “I’ve put in my requisite appearance, Mother.” He tugged out his watch fob and consulted the timepiece. “Good evening.” He spun on his heel and left the indignant duchess gape-mouthed.

He marched through the crowd, glad to put the boisterous cheer behind him and enjoy the quiet calm of his office.

THEO STOLE DOWN THE CORRIDOR. Her thin-soled, booted feet were noiseless against the blood red carpet. Perfect shade for the Devil Duke. She wrinkled her nose. After all, it was likely red because he’d used her family’s ancient weapon and slayed his foes, of which he had many. He must. Granted he was a duke, but by the reports, he was a scarred, foul-tempered beast. She paused at the end of the hall and looked left and right. With the corridors empty of servants and couples stealing away from the festivities, Theodosia then darted across the intersecting hall and came to an abrupt stop.

Then tiptoeing past, one, two, three, and four doors indicated by Herbie, she paused. Before her courage deserted her, she shoved the door open and slipped inside. Her eyes struggled to adjust to the dimly lit space. Theo closed the door quietly behind her with a click that sounded like a shot in the silence.

Her heart hammered, the steady beat of her pulse deafening in her ears. So this was the Devil’s lair. She scanned the massive space, wrinkling her nose. Or was it the Devil’s den?

*Den. Lair.* He probably had both. As did the Duke of Devlin.

She gave her head a clearing shake. “Focus, Theodosia,” she muttered to herself and did a slow circle about, searching for the broadsword. Nay, her

family's broadsword.

She took in the broad, immaculate, mahogany desk. "Likely because he doesn't actually see to any real work," she whispered to herself. A man whose family stole from others and built their successes off those same people he'd trampled upon would likely turn his responsibilities over to hardworking stewards and barristers.

A gold framed painting hung over the fireplace mantel caught her notice. Drawn to the glimmer in the dark, she wandered close. Tilting her head back she stared at the tragic image captured upon the canvas. A chill coursed along her spine. There was nothing romantic or beautiful in the image. A warrior in full armor with his head bowed while a massive weapon was brought down, forever frozen with the edge of steel one sliver away from the end.

What an awful way to be memorialized in time. In spite of herself, she hugged her arms to herself, and her own armor clanged noisily. The shiver of apprehension spread out, filling every corner of her being at the similarity between her and this unknown figure forever a brush-stroke away from death. The implications of her being here at last fully registering. Even as her family knew their rightful ownership of the weapon, the Devil Duke, and the rest of the world, would not see it that way.

Her family wielded little power and influence where Devlin and his kin were concerned.

"The sword, the sword," she reminded herself, giving her head a shake as she returned to her purpose in stealing into the duke's home. She scanned his office for a hint of metal.

What if Herbie had been incorrect? What if—

Her breath caught.

*The Theodosia sword.* With her heart suspended in her breast, she stood transfixed. She'd only heard the legend, but had never before glimpsed the legendary weapon possessed by the great Rayne ancestors many years before. Her namesake. Drawn to it, her feet, of their own volition, carried her across



the hardwood floor. Theodosia set down her sword quietly and then removed her helmet. She placed the headpiece beside the fake weapon and paused at the foot of the sideboard. With her heart thumping wildly, she stared up at the massive weapon.

Even in the darkened room, there was an almost mystical quality to the sword. The night shadows reflected off the shimmering, hard steel and glinted in the night.

This was the Theodosia Gladius.

The loss of *this* is what had brought great strife to her family. The recent history had the weapon stolen and sold by Captain Tobias Ormond, a great shipping rival to her great ancestors. As the rightful owners, when the sword had been in her family's possession, it had brought great happiness. Since being stolen and sold by Ormond to the Duke of Devlin's devilish ancestors, her family's fortune had deteriorated. Eagerness replaced all earlier reservations. It built steadily in her chest and threatened to spill past her lips on a giddy giggle.

But she didn't giggle.

She was a blinker and a talker. But she'd never been one of those giggling ladies.

A giggle fought past her lips. She slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the damning sound and stared up at the Theodosia sword once again. Then her mirth faded. She stitched her eyebrows into a single line. However was she to wrestle that massive weapon from its position upon the duke's wall. She looked about for the time somewhere in this sweeping office and found it under the grim, massacre painting.

Herbie would be here soon. He'd pledged to meet her in the corridor in twenty-three minutes after their arrival, with a loyal friend who owed him a debt. The specific time chosen by Theo, that was no mere coincidence. Twenty-three...the number of words etched upon that legendary weapon.

Still, she'd little time to waste this evening.

Theo eyed the sword a moment and then captured her chin between thumb and forefinger studying it. Nearly eight feet up on the wall, she couldn't simply reach it with her fingers. Certainly not with her mere five feet and barely one inch of height. She searched around for...She widened her eyes and before her courage deserted her, hoisted herself up onto the duke's sideboard, grunting as she struggled up with her heavy costume.

Her heart thundered and a haze of fear momentarily clouded her vision. "Do not be silly, Theodosia Tonie Phillipa," she demanded under her breath, pressing her palms to the wall, as the dizzying spell nearly overtook her. Since she'd been a small girl who'd tumbled from an oak tree, she'd had no business climbing. She'd had a deuced, awful fear of heights. Which defied logic. She forced her eyes open and stole a downward glance at the..."Bloody hell," she gritted out past her teeth, as the room swayed once more.

It really made little sense. She was not even four feet from the floor and yet...she may as well have been forty feet up. "Focus, Theodosia Tonie Phillipa." Taking one more deep breath, she inched to the right. Her foot knocked into a crystal decanter and the bottle teetered left, right. Her breath caught as it rocked and then tipped onto its side. It hovered at the edge of the sideboard.

She braced for it to roll off the edge and shatter, but the decanter lay upon its side frozen. *Splendid!* She'd long ago learned to look for the messages contained within the stars of life. Theo continued tiptoeing along the massive, mahogany sideboard. She stepped over the bottle. This was one of those messages that assured her that what she did was right, and would be all r...

The heel of her slipper caught the edge of the bottle. Her breath caught as it rolled, rolled sideways along the mahogany piece and then, as if in slow motion, tumbled over the edge where it exploded into a thousand shards of crystal. Amber droplets sprayed the floor, splattered her breeches. She blanched and looked to the door bracing for some servants to charge through

the door, jab their fingers at her, and yell “Thief”, calling for the constable.

When no discoverers appeared, she breathed again. She continued moving inch by agonizing inch right, onward toward the symbol that had come to represent the reason of her family’s great misfortune, and her hopes for happiness. Theo stilled under the powerful weapon and, for a moment, even the crushing fear of heights to have dogged her all these years slipped away.

Breath suspended, she reached up on the tip of her toes and brushed her finger along the metal hilt. She didn’t know what she expected. A flash of shining light illuminated by the heavens raining down upon the sword? The ancient whispers of the secrets contained within its metal contours breathed into existence.

Not this...this...coldness. She cocked her head, studying it. Then, what had she expected of an ancient Roman gladius? Well, it mattered not what it elicited upon touch, it mattered what it elicited by its presence in her life.

With that, she reached her fingers for the hilt and then closed around the piece. She pulled.

Nothing.

She pulled again and merely served to dislodge a black curl sending it tumbling over her eye. Had the Devil Duke’s ancestor’s anchored the dratted thing to this spot since his family had purchased it from Ormond and committed that great theft, hundreds of years ago?

Theo yanked once more and then it loosed free from its spot with such alacrity, she staggered under the enormous weight of the weapon and the suddenness of the movement. She shrieked, her heart dropping into her stomach and released her hold upon the powerful sword. *I’m going to die here, in the Devil’s lair.* Theo flung her arms open to keep from toppling to the floor.

Her efforts proved futile. Theo grunted as she sailed over the edge of the sideboard. In her ignoble fall, she took with her a number of decanters and

tumblers and landed hard upon the floor, amidst a sea of shattering glass and liquid. She rolled out of the way just as the Theodosia sword came down where her right foot had been. Pain radiated up her hip and sent agony racing up her spine and down her legs.

*This is not worth dying for.*

Stiff with pain, she shoved herself to her feet, shattered crystal cracking under her slippers. “I am not going to die.” Be thrown into Newgate as a thief, yes. Die. No. She leaned over the weapon, eyeing it a moment.

All the pain and the horrifying terror that she’d be discovered were replaced by the growing sense of victory. She had done it. She, the most unsuspecting of all the Rayne siblings. One brother who’d been lost in battle. Literally, lost. No one had any idea where he’d gone. One brother who spent the better part of his days and nights mourning the loss of a woman, betrothed to one of their enemies. And then, she prone to trouble and mishaps had managed...*this!*

With a grin, she bent to retrieve the Theodosia sword. Her smile withered and she winced from the soreness of her recent fall. Hilt in hand she straightened and staggered backwards, dragging the gladius with her. “Oomph.” She scraped the giant blade along the immaculate hardwood floor.

Or the once immaculate hardwood floor. Theo paused, halting her retreat. By God, the sword was bloody heavy. *By the legend, what did you expect? A child’s toy?* “Certainly not this,” she mumbled. It was after all, a *gladius*. But again, it was a gladius unlike any other.

She took a moment to study the mess she’d made. The damning evidence shattered about the room. The entire collection of spirits upon the Devil’s sideboard. Another black curl tumbled over her brow. With her free hand, she brushed it back, tucking it behind her ear.

Herbie was to meet her in the corridor, and even if she somehow managed to drag it from this room undetected, she’d wager the sword and her family’s safe, happy future that the young viscount wouldn’t be able to hoist

the weapon.

The door opened.

She stared at the plaster wall where the gladius had once hung. The door opened? *Blinkblinkblink.*

“May I help you?” the cool baritone drawled from the doorway.

The sword slipped from her fingers and she spun around to face the dark, towering, muscle-hewn gentleman who’d caught her notice in the hall. The gentleman who’d been watching her. Ah, yes, it all made sense. Herbie had likely realized they’d require help handling the weapon and he’d sent this stranger—which explained why the man had studied her in the ballroom a short while ago.

She smiled. “Herbie sent you.” Theodosia motioned to the sword. “Which is splendid. I desperately require assistance.”

### Chapter Three

Damian took in the empty space above the sideboard, the shattered glass throughout the room, the broadsword lying upon the floor. And then slowly, back to the diminutive, yet well-rounded, armor wearing miss who'd caught his attention in the ballroom.

"I do not have much time." Her voice clear like bells recalled his attention. "If you'd be so good as to pick that up," she pointed to the sword. "I would be tremendously appreciative. I imagine Herbie realized it was entirely too cumbersome for the both of us."

Herbie?

"And he surely realized one of your..." Her cheeks blazed red. "Er...he surely realized you could handle it with a good deal more ease than myself." Or him, he swore she muttered.

The lady was no warrior. Why, she was a thief. The lady was stealing. Nay, correction. The lady was not just stealing. She was stealing from *him*, the Duke of Devlin. People were subservient and simpering around him, and they most certainly did not filch his personal belongings.

"Hullo?" She waved her hand.

"Yes?" he asked, closing the door behind him and turning the lock.

She cocked her head. Apprehension settled on the delicate planes of her face, and then her eyes brightened. “Oh, splendid idea. It is far safer to close the door in case someone happens to come upon us.” The lady lowered her voice to a hushed whisper. “Especially the Duke of Devlin. They say he is a horrid, odious beast.”

*They would be right.*

Damian strode over. He should be focused on the fact that some stranger had stolen into his home, invaded his office, and made a proper mess of his sideboard, and... He glanced down at the jagged marks upon his floor.

The lady’s wide, cornflower blue eyes followed his stare. “Oh, that.”

Instead of proper outrage, he stood transfixed by the riot of midnight black curls piled atop her head. He didn’t bother to point out that he’d, in fact, not issued any questions or statements.

“I’m afraid the sword is responsible for that.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth. “Do you suppose the duke will note the damage to his floor?”

“I daresay he will,” he drawled.

The young lady bobbed her head up and down. “Yes, yes I fear you’re right.” She jabbed her finger to the remnants that used to be his collection of brandy and whiskey. “We’d be wise to at least put the space to rights.” She scanned his office and then her eyes lit once more. “I have it!” She bounded across the room, her metal breastplate clanging noisily as she skidded to a stop beside a large urn. The thief held it aloft, as though she’d unearthed James Cook’s treasure and then grunted, staggering back under the weight of it. “Will you carry this for me, sir?”

Damian stalked over and wordlessly accepted his urn. She raced back to the pile of broken decanters and glasses. “Well, come over. We don’t have much time.”

He lowered his brows. By God, the chit was ordering him about. Color bloomed on her cheeks as she added, “Please.”

Damian closed the distance between them. In the course of his nine and twenty years, no one had dared order him about. Not his tutors, his nursemaids. Not his instructors at university. Even his own mother was wise enough to not issue orders to him.

The clink of crystal hitting the metal of the urn echoed. “Are you always this quiet?” she asked, pausing to look up from her efforts.

“Yes.”

Her lips twitched.

He narrowed his eyes, and her smile withered. “Oh, I thought you were making light of me.” She returned to her clean up.

“I do not make light of people.” And people didn’t make light of him.

She wrinkled her nose. “What an odd friendship,” Nor did he have friends. “You and Herbie are an unlikely pairing.”

Who in hell was this Herbie fellow? He ran the name through his mind, the partner to this thief who’d wrestled the great family relic from his wall.

She paused once again. “Do you intend to help?”

“Help?” He sent an eyebrow arching up.

Her color deepened. “I understand you didn’t come to clean the Devil’s den.” Despite himself, his lips twitched. “And of course I know it was my fault, however, I’d be grateful if you helped me tidy this, please.” The armor-clad thief expected him to *clean*?

Silently, he went to a knee beside her and began picking up shards of glass, setting them into the urn. If a single member of his staff, family, or acquaintance saw him, they’d have him committed to Bedlam. In silence, he and the bold miss picked up shard after shard, in a tight, yet companionable silence. He stole a glance at her as she diligently cleaned his floor, dropping the larger shards into the urn. Feeling his gaze, she stopped and looked up.

“What?” She was a fearless, unrepentant thing.

He jerked his chin at her costume. “And what are you supposed to be?”

“A shepherdess.”



He passed a dubious stare over the lady.

She grinned. "I'm merely teasing." She waved a particularly jagged piece about and he leaned away from the lethal shard, not entirely sure the lady thief didn't also intend murder that night. "I'm Joan of Arc."

Of course she was. Except, unlike that honorable, gallant defender, this one was, well, dishonorable. "You have me intrigued," he said on an icy whisper.

She stilled and picked her head up, with but a handbreadth of space between them. "I do?" And close as they were, he detected the trace of rosemary and sage that clung to her, as though she'd danced through a garden before infiltrating his home.

Damian paused and captured a black curl that had tumbled over her brow. He tucked it behind her ear and the lady's breath caught. "I gather you're stealing the sword."

"Broadsword."

He looked at her askance.

"I'm stealing the *broadsword*." She frowned. "Well, I am not stealing it."

He'd learned long ago to live life in absolutes. Either she was or she wasn't. There was no shade of in between. "Aren't you?" What would the lady call her sneaking into a man's office and filching a family artifact from his wall?

She bristled with indignation. "I suspect Herbie didn't take time to explain the situation to you, which is very like him. He was not at all comfortable with this rescue."

Rescue?

She glanced about, searching for interlopers, seeming to forget he'd turned the lock. "The Devil Duke stole it." Her soft whisper floated up to his ears.

"I beg your pardon?" he barked. Damian didn't give a jot about the legend and lore around the sword. He did, on the other hand, care a good deal

about her casting aspersions on his family's actions.

The lady was either too cracked in the head to detect outrage, or was something of a lackwit, for she failed to show any hint of nervousness. Then, any person who'd steal into his home, all to abscond with his personal property was likely a combination of the two. She nodded emphatically. "Precisely. Stole it. Nicked it." Purchased it for a significant sum. "Made off with it." Had it turned over to his care by that Ormond fellow. She paused. "Or his vile ancestors did, anyway." She looked to the sword, her expression serious, and then raised her eyes to his once more and firmed her jaw. "It is my family's sword."

By God. It could not be. One of them wouldn't have the audacity to dare enter his home and yet the lady's knowledge of the history and interest in that weapon made sense. "What is your name?" he demanded. Because only one other family had maintained a claim, an erroneous claim to the revered artifact. And this plump, dark-haired siren was not—

"Theodosia," she pointed to the sword. "And that, sir, is the Theodosia Gladius."

Well, Lucifer's army. It would seem she was.

A Rayne.

THE LACONIC, not at all smiling, mostly scowling gentleman certainly didn't seem the type Herbie would keep company with. And certainly not the type of gentleman the shy, always-nervous, young viscount would best in a wager. Oh, she wasn't judging the viscount unfairly. She'd sat across from Herbie in a game of whist and faro on a number of scores to know his exact abilities. Yet this man exuded a primal vitality not reserved for the mere mortals of the world such as Herbie, and all others she'd known.

More than a foot taller than she, the powerful stranger's muscle-hewn frame bespoke power and strength. Even through the black mask obscuring

the stranger's face, Theo appreciated the hard, chiseled planes of his cheeks. She detected the glint of intelligence in the gentleman's ice blue eyes and was left to wonder as to what the gentleman would look like with the disguise removed.

"You're quite serious, aren't you?" she asked, returning her attention to the much cleaner, still sloppy floor.

"Yes."

"Do you ever smile?"

At his silence, Theodosia picked her head up.

"No," he said coolly and then returned to picking up the pieces of the Devil's brandy decanter.

"Hmm." It really wasn't her business whether the stranger sent by Herbie was smiling or serious or seriously smiling. It mattered that she'd secured the sword, made quite the mess in her wake, and now cleaned said mess. That is what mattered, and yet, unbidden, she lifted her gaze to him once more—hopelessly intrigued.

It was the masquerade and the thrill of excitement from being here, on the cusp of discovery that accounted for this unexpected interest in... Herbie's friend. Herbie's friend, who was, as of now, absent a name.

"Do you have a name?"

"Of course I have a name," he gritted out.

Theodosia pointed her eyes to the ceiling. "Of course you do—"

"Then why did you ask?"

Humph. Well, he was the surly sort-indeed. Then, she eyed him contemplatively. Considering he now braved the Devil's displeasure and Newgate to help her, a stranger, retrieve her family's sword spoke volumes of the man. It also occurred to her the anxiety he himself must be feeling. After all, the Theodosia sword was nothing to him, and yet everything to her. "Forgive me, you must fear the Devil, as well."

He stilled and gave her a probing stare.

Theo stole a glance about. “The Devil.” One never knew where demons lurked. One such as the duke likely found little pleasure in inane amusements such as a masquerade and could very well now be seeking out his lair.

His eyes narrowed and she patted him on the hand. “You needn’t fear. Your secret is safe with me. I’d no sooner confess your part in this retrieval to the Duke of Devlin than I would dance with the devil at midnight.”

“My secret, you say?” The first hint of droll humor underscored that question.

She frowned. “Very well. I do see your point. My secret. I merely referred to your service.” Theo returned her attention to the pile of glass and the tiny slivers that remained. Concern turned in her belly. “It is hopeless, isn’t it?” At his questioning look, she slashed her hand at the mess she’d made of the situation. The entire point of her well-thought out mission had been to retrieve the broadsword, replace it with her own, and leave no hint of anything amiss. “A ruthless, self-absorbed man such as the duke would not have likely deigned to pick up his head to note anything amiss.” He arched a single dark brow. “With the sword,” she explained. Really, for the keenness of his ice blue stare, the fellow did seem to be having difficulty following along. “Perhaps one day, years later he might have noted something amiss, but now with this.” Theo looked at the barren sideboard. “Why, he’ll notice this.”

“Undoubtedly,” the stranger said dryly.

She pursed her lips. Theo appreciated his help. She truly did. Yet, he needn’t find such humor in the entire situation. With a resigned sigh, Theo shoved to her feet and dusted her palms together. “We must leave the remainder.” She’d already been gone too long from the festivities. She’d secured the sword and now it was time to make her retreat.

The dark stranger unfurled to his full, towering height and Theo really should be thinking of escape and the victory of having the weapon in hand, and yet...she swallowed hard. She inched her gaze up, up, ever upwards,

from the broad wall of his powerfully muscled chest to the square jaw and the sharp planes of his chiseled cheeks not obscured by that dark mask and then she settled her eyes on his. Hard, unrelenting, and curiously devoid of emotion, his stare penetrated her in a way that quelled all thoughts of flight. With his midnight black attire, black domino, and dark, unfashionably long hair, he cut a terrifying figure and she wondered, not for the first time, at his costume selection. After all, one always feared what they didn't know. At her stare, the gentleman winged another brow upward. "Who are you?" she blurted. At her own audacity, heat slapped her cheeks, and she gestured to his dark attire. "I am Joan of Arc, and you are—"

With long, powerful fingers, he freed the mask concealing his identity and tossed the thin fabric aside. "The Devil Duke."

Even with only half of his face presented her, her breath caught at the glorious perfection of the man. The chiseled perfection of his aquiline cheeks would have inspired envy in one of those marble masterpieces crafted by Michelangelo. She'd never been one to be stricken silent by a handsome gentleman and so she forced words past dry lips. "I daresay if you're to arrive as the Devil, you'd be requiring that nasty, wicked scar he's rumored to possess."

The gentleman shifted, presenting the full of his face. Her heart thumped a wildly erratic rhythm. In full, he was even more glorious...and she blinked, and then went on tiptoe peering up at the wicked scar that ran from the corner of his eye, bisecting his cheek, and ending at the slight cleft above his lips. "Why, you have even applied a false scar." Theodosia frowned. That wasn't well done of the man. She might herself despise the Duke of Devlin and his entire family but she would never be so cruel as to mock a man's disfigurement. Then, with a boldness inspired by secret identities and the cover provided by the masquerade, she touched her fingertips to the mark upon his face.

The gentleman shot a hand about her wrist, firmly encircling her flesh in

a determined grip that was both oddly hard and gentle all at once. Her heart pounded harder as his eyes fell to her lips and for one maddening moment, she wanted this nameless, but no longer faceless, stranger who'd risked discovery to aid her, to place his mouth upon hers. He leaned down, shrinking the space between them and she fluttered her lids wildly as she turned her lips up to receive his kiss. "You misunderstand, Lady Theodosia." A lethal steel underscored those whispered words, causing her to jerk her eyes open. The coolly mocking smile adorning his lips chilled her. "I am not disguised as the Duke of Devlin." The first warning bells blared in her ears. "I am the Devil Duke."

*Blinkblinkblink.*

Oh, dear.

This was a problem, indeed.

## Chapter Four

Damian took in the rapid and powerful range of emotions to cross the lady's face; denial, a dawning truth, horror, and then ultimately, by the pale white of her skin and the rapid rise and fall of her chest, terror. Through it all, he continued to hold her wrist in a firm, unyielding grip. Then, her terror gave way to a flash of annoyance.

Lady Theodosia yanked her hand free of his grip and then with all the bold indignation that legendary Joan of Arc herself had been famed for, planted her arms akimbo and glared. "That was rude of you. Rude and duplicitous and dishonorable."

He blinked and then searched about for the recipient of those rather vitriolic charges. Then he snapped his gaze to hers. By God, the lady spoke of him. In spite of himself, a rusty chuckle shook his chest.

If looks could kill, he'd have been consigned to a blazing death by the fire in the lady's eyes. When all others feared him, she took a step closer. "Are you laughing at me?" She jabbed him in the chest with her finger and he stared down at the long digit planted upon his chest.

Damian claimed her wrist once more and Lady Theodosia's lips parted on a moue of surprise. Fear immediately sparked to life in her eyes and the lady

blinked several times in rapid succession. “Do you have something in your eye?” he snapped.

“No.” She widened her eyes, as though to prevent that rapid one-two-three blink of her lids, and then she quickly schooled her features. For her family’s lineage and her treachery this night, the lady rose in his estimation.

“I do not laugh, madam.” And yet this night, he’d been brought to more rusty grins than any time he recalled. He turned her wrist over and ran his thumb over the spot where her pulse pounded a wild rhythm. “I merely find it the height of irony that you should speak of honor and duplicity when you’ve stolen into a man’s home,” Her lips compressed into a single line. “And wrought havoc upon a room, all to commit the theft of another person’s property.”

Her lips quivered and she alternated her stare between the spot he caressed with his finger and his gaze. Was her response one of desire? A flare of masculine approval roared to life, which was, of course, madness. The lady was a Rayne. “It is not yours.”

He stilled and sought to make sense of her words through his body’s awareness of her.

“The Theodosia sword belongs to my family. We are the rightful holders and I’ve come to reclaim it on behalf of the Rayne family.”

Annoyance sparked at the lax mother and father and, worse, useless brothers who’d allow the lady to sacrifice her reputation, safety, and more her demmed neck to steal back something they’d erroneously considered themselves entitled to. “The sword is in the hands of the rightful owner.” He released her and gestured to the door. “Now, I advise you to take your leave, madam, and I will be generous enough to forget what transpired this evening.” In knowing when she turned on her heel and stole back to her family’s side, they’d never again meet, something akin to disappointment filled him—which was, of course, absurd. He did not know the little thief at all, nor by her family’s connection, would he ever.



By the spirit the lady had demonstrated thus far, he should have reasoned she would not go easily. Lady Theodosia stood rooted to the floor, amidst shards of broken crystal. “I will not.”

By the mutinous set to her mouth, he wagered he’d have to physically carry the lady from his office. He narrowed his eyes. People did not defy him; not lords, ladies, or servants. His position as the Devil Duke inspired fear and brooked obedience. As such, he knew not what to do with a small slip of a lady who so blatantly denied his command.

“I need that sword.” As though there were another in question, she jerked her chin at the Theodosia sword. She paused. Did he imagine the sheen of tears that popped up behind her lids? He scoffed at that feminine wile employed by women of all stations to sway a man. Alas, tears held little effect over him. Then, the lady blinked several times as though shamed by those crystalline tokens of weakness and dropped her gaze to the floor. “My family needs that sword.”

How interesting. He’d anticipated waterworks and pretty pleas. Once more his enemy’s daughter proved herself unlike any of the other women of his acquaintance. “Oh?” he drawled.

She snapped her gaze up, fury in its blue depths. “Your family stole that weapon from mine and as such, you’ve stolen my family’s right to happiness, and instead we’ve been riddled with misfortune after misfortune.”

He’d been labeled cold, unfeeling, and given the moniker the Devil Duke for such reasons, and yet the oddest shift occurred in his chest in thinking of this bold, spirited lady without happiness. Damian angled his head closer, expecting her to draw back. She remained fixed to her spot and merely tossed her head back to stare up at him. Her courage was a heady aphrodisiac and he took in her full, bow-shaped lips. Perhaps it was the madness of the night, but he wanted to lay claim to that mouth.

“What misfortunes do you speak of?”

With her nearness, the fragrant hint of lavender wafted about and filtered

into his senses, and he drew deep. Madness. And yet he inhaled the feminine floral scent of her once more.

“My brother,” she spoke in matter-of-fact tones that indicated she had no idea the effect she now had upon him.

“Your brother?” he repeated.

A dark curl slipped over her eye and he captured that lock.

She slapped at his fingers. “Do pay attention. He is gone missing.” Ah yes, he’d read the papers reporting the spare to the heir with his military commission had gone to fight Boney’s forces. The gentleman, rumored to be lost in battle had never been accounted for and never returned. In spite of himself, pity stirred in his chest.

“Do not look at me like that,” she said sharply. “He is alive.”

He’d never been one to give false words and so he said nothing. The young man was dead and no hope in a fabled sword would ever bring him back. Unfortunately the lady was grounded in hopes and dreams and did not see the world in the cool, practical blacks and whites, which were. Fact: one was born scarred, he was ugly and feared. Fact: one was born to power and was respected for a title alone. There were no fairytale ends for men or women of any station. “And what other misfortunes has your—”

“Your brother stole my brother Richard’s love.” Ahh, yes. Of course. His brother, Charles, recently betrothed to Miss Candace Roberts, once courted by Lady Theodosia’s brother. “She loved him, as he loved her—”

“If she loved him she’d even now be wed to him.”

His bluntly spoken words brought her lips downward in a frown. “It is—”

“Do not tell me, the broadsword?”

“The Theodosia sword,” she bit out. “At the very least you can respect the weapon.”

“I respect people deserving of my respect,” he said, giving her a pointed look. “I do not respect inanimate objects.”

For a moment she balled her hands into tight fists and he’d have wagered

the very sword they now fought over that the lady intended to plant him a facer, but then she uncurled her hands. “Your disdain of the legend is the very reason you are undeserving of the Theodosia sword. You take for granted your family’s joys and successes, not knowing what it is like to be the victim of—”

“Your own circumstances, my lady. We make our own circumstances.” Just as the lady had tried to do this evening by sneaking in uninvited and stealing off with the weapon that had long adorned his walls. “Tales of legend and magic have little bearing on that which is real.”

“If you believe that is so, then give me the Theodosia.” The lady was nothing, if not determined.

“I won’t.”

She let out a huff of annoyance. “Very well.”

Damian really shouldn’t ask, particularly when she gave him that I-really-want-you-to-ask look. “What?” he gritted out, hating this total lack of control where his enemy’s daughter was concerned.

“I shall have to simply take it back at some other time.” She gave a flounce of her head and spun about.

His booming laugh ended her dignified retreat. She teetered sideways and tossed her arms out to keep from falling. With a curse that would have blistered most gentlemen’s ears, the lady spun about. “I do not appreciate being laughed at.”

“Oh, you mistake me,” he replied, drawn to her like one of those fool moths desiring death by flame. He continued advancing, and this time the lady was wise enough to retreat, until her back thumped against the door. Damian framed her within the wall of his arms. “I am not laughing at you.”

“Y-you’re not?” The breathless inquiry carried up to his ears. “B-because it sounded as though you are.” She paused. “W-were.”

“Not at all,” he whispered and, with his gaze, he reveled in her midnight black tresses once more. Yes, the shade leant the perfect element of intrigue

to a lady who went about committing dangerous acts of theft. “I am laughing at your boldness, Theodosia.” He’d long been the practical brother. Not like the roguish, charming younger Renshaw brothers. Rather, Damian had long been the reasonable, logical duke who did not turn himself over to emotion. His affairs were cool, emotionless matters, mere slaking of physical lusts to keep his mind clear for the responsibilities he had as duke.

The muscles of Theodosia’s throat moved up and down with the force of her swallow. “I didn’t give you leave to refer to me by my Christian name.” And yet for the heat pouring from the lady’s frame, and the breathlessness of that charge, she remained resolute and he hated that she continued to defy his expectations of her and the cloying ladies before her.

Damian rubbed his thumb over her lip. “I believe we’ve moved past formalities when you destroyed my sideboard and ruined my floor.” After this night, they would, by sheer circumstances of their families’ loathing for one another, and their dark history, never again meet. They’d long taken care of avoiding the same social functions. If he didn’t at least once know her mouth, he would always wonder as to the taste of her. He lowered his lips to hers.

“What are you doing?” The breathless whisper froze him, their mouths so close, their breath mingled as one.

“I am kissing you,” he said hoarsely. Praying she shoved him away and restored logic to the moment.

“Why?”

And because he had no plausible answer for the lady, he claimed her lips, gently at first. Honey and mint. He slanted his mouth over hers again and again until her lips parted on a small moan, permitting him entry. Damian swept his tongue inside and she met his in a bold thrust and parry, a rhythm to match that sword long fought over by their families. With a groan, he folded her in his arms and he, who’d long maintained control, searched the curves of her body. The cold armor was a mocking deterrent to the efforts. A

shield, real and imagined, that cemented the truth that nothing more than a forbidden exchange could or ever would exist between them.

The intrepid lady leaned up on tiptoe and twined her fingers in his hair, angling his head, availing herself to his offering. The suddenness of the movement sent the metal of her breastplate rattling and the glaring reminder cut across the momentary spell she'd cast upon him. With a curse, he backed away from her, heart beating loudly in his ears.

Theodosia swayed on her feet. Her eyes glazed with passion and her lips were swollen from the imprint left by Damian's kiss. She touched trembling fingertips to her mouth.

"I suggest you leave, Theodosia," he said with a gruffness that seemed to douse the lady's ardor. She blinked several times and then horror filled her vision.

For a brief, infinitesimal moment, he wanted her to boldly contradict his highhanded order. With a jerky nod, the lady fiddled with the lock and then yanked the door open. She fled, leaving nothing but silence and the raggedness of his own breath in her wake. Damian rubbed a hand over his face. What spell had the lady cast upon him?

Footsteps sounded in the hall and his hand fell swiftly to his side.

Theodosia swept into the room, as boldly as though she were the owner. "I forgot my helmet."

His lips twitched and he longed for the exchange to carry on, but the lady with her fiery eyes was clearly of a differing mind frame. She jammed the helmet upon her head and then gave him a pointed look. "And I assure you, this will not be the last time you see me, *Damian*." With that, she took her final leave.

And as Damian stood staring after her, a slow grin pulled his lips upwards at the challenge she'd tossed him, suddenly very eager to confront the remainder of the Season.

## Chapter Five

Two nights later, Theo stood outside the parlor her family was now assembled in. Their words and the periodic chuckles of her older brothers lost to her. She chewed at her lower lip and considered her meeting with the Devil Duke from two nights prior. Never had there been a moniker more apt for a man than his. With the ink black of his thick, slightly curled hair to the sharpness of his features and the jagged scar upon his face, he could very well be the devil himself. And yet, she leaned against the plaster walls and closed her eyes. It would be so very much easier if he were the devil she'd taken him for. The coldhearted duke the papers had purported him to be would have had her pay for the crime of entering his home and destroying his property, and with the long-standing feud between their families, would have reveled in exposing her, and shaming all the Raynes with Theo's actions. Instead, he'd knelt beside her and cleaned the mess she'd made of his office and then there had been the kiss. God help her. There had been the kiss.

She pressed a hand to her chest. Her first kiss. No gentleman had ever dared to kiss her. None had even expressed so much as a fledgling of interest in her, the too rounded, plump Rayne daughter. Short where other ladies were tall and trim, carrying themselves in a manner befitting a regal queen. Theo

had long been the bumbling sort. The one say, who miscalculated the size of a certain broadsword and then with that same weapon destroyed a floor, and shattered a collection of brandy and various other spirits. A rather expensive collection, she'd wager.

"...to marry his Miss Roberts."

From within the room, Mother's words cut into Theodosia's musings. Her ears pricked up. They all knew of Richard's love and subsequent broken heart for his Miss Roberts who'd gone and chosen a Renshaw. It was not, however, a matter they spoke of.

"She'd choose a vile beast," her brother Aidan spat, loyal as the rest of the Raynes.

Ah, they *would*, however, mention Richard's sadness if it were a means to disparage the Duke of Devlin's family. As her family proceeded to attack with their words the enemy family, an unwitting frown formed on Theo's lips. How many years had her family sat about discussing the Renshaw family, reviling them with their words and tones and telling? Since as long as Theo could remember, being a girl of four, seated at her father's knee, listening to the story of the Theodosia sword, her namesake, and that villainous Captain Ormond who'd commandeered the weapon and so destroyed her ancestor's right to happiness. All for a handful of coins. Granted, a rumored small fortune from the Renshaw family.

Now, hovering in the doorway, a coward too afraid to announce herself and her plans for the evening, she acknowledged that her family had become a bitter, angry lot. Or had they always been so?

There was a pause in her family's discourse and Theo took advantage of that silence. She stepped into the doorway. "Hullo."

"Hullo, Theo," her mother greeted, glancing up from her needlepoint.

Her father lowered his paper and took in her formal ball gown. "Where are you off to?"

Tonight was the betrothal ball of Miss Roberts to Lord Charles Renshaw.

As the most distinguished, anticipated event of the Season, her family had wisely decided some time ago to not present themselves at any other inferior event. Not on the night of the ball for their enemy's offspring.

"No words from you?" her brother Aidan teased. "This is usually a sign of—"

"I'll be attending the betrothal ball with Carol and Herbert." Framed in the doorway, attired in her lavender, satin skirts, Theo forced a smile and met the baffled, befuddled, and annoyed glances of the Rayne family. Silence met her pronouncement. With a jaunty wave, she turned to leave.

Her brother's sharp bark of laughter froze her mid-movement. "By God, Theo, you're not usually humorous."

She turned around on a frown. "I am humorous." Though, she supposed if one had to say as much, they weren't truly as amusing as one hoped. She shook her head. Nor was this a matter of amusement. This was a matter of seeing Damian. With a silent curse she gave her head another shake. Nay, not Damian, the Devil Duke. Well, hell, *that* wasn't altogether correct, either. There was the matter of the Theodosia sword. She gave a pleased nod. Yes, that was it.

"Why are you shaking your head in that manner?" Richard, morose and cradling a snifter in his hand, spoke the first words she'd heard since eavesdropping outside the door.

"Er..."

"Nor is that jest at all amusing, Theodosia," her mother chided. She gave a pointed look in Richard's direction.

Theo smoothed her palms along her skirts. "It was not my intention to be humorous." Which of course left the truth of her actions.

Her portly father set aside his newspaper and attended the situation now with a frown. Likely her poor sire recognized years of madcap schemes in his only daughter and knew Theo even now had worked through another of her plans. "Theo?" he spoke in that tone, that no-nonsense tone, that had terrified



her as a child.

If she smiled any more, she feared her cheeks would crack. “I’m going to Lord Charles Renshaw’s betrothal ball to Miss Roberts.” Attempting another hasty retreat, she dipped a curtsy and then turned to leave.

“Stop.” Her parents spoke in unison.

Battling down a sigh, Theo wheeled back around. “Yes?” Perhaps nonchalance was the best manner in which to proceed.

Aidan sprung to his feet and his cheeks turned a mottled red. “Yes, you say?” he barked. Over the years, she’d neatly filed her brothers into respective categories: Lucas, her honorable, protector, lost to war brother, and then Richard, the romantic, hopeful gentleman now bitter and broken since he’d suffered his broken heart, and Aidan, the impulsive, passionate, and irrational one, and still the same as he’d been since she’d been a babe.

Heir to the earldom, Richard tossed back the remaining contents of his glass and sat in morose silence.

Their oft-uneasy mother wrung her hands together and looked to her husband with troubled eyes. And in a sign of how serious he took his daughter’s plans for the evening, he picked up his copy of *The Times* and resumed reading. “Winston,” Mama cried out.

In the tone she used with the skittish cat in the kitchen who’d taken to sneaking to her rooms and hiding under her bed, Theo said with a stoic calm, “It is not how it appears.”

“Oh, and how does it appear?” Aidan thundered.

She winced as his booming voice bounced off the walls. “Well...” Theo allowed her words to trail off, as Damian in all his gruff, masculinity filtered through her thoughts. It was not as though she sought an opportunity to again see the austere duke or again know his kiss and the feel of his hands upon her person.

“Why are you blushing in that way?” Aidan asked. Not allowing her to respond, which was fortunate, as she had no suitable response just then, he

looked to their mother. “Why is she blushing?”

Mama continued wringing her hands. “I do not know.”

“Oh, do hush, Aidan,” Theo said with an exaggerated roll to her eyes. “It is not as though I wish to see the Devil.” Guilt tugged at her for referring to Damian that way. The man who could have seen her destroyed and humiliated, who’d instead given Theo her first kiss. She drew in a breath. “I am attempting to retrieve the Theodosia.”

Silence met her pronouncement.

“What?”

It spoke volumes that even the, of late, laconic Richard was the one to speak, incredulity lacing that terse utterance. She held up her gloved palms. “Surely you see the situation with Richard and his Miss Roberts.” Her throat worked painfully and she forced the words out. “And Lucas...we require that sword.”

Papa slowly lowered his paper and stared at her over the top of the sheet, his expression curiously blank. Long a believer in the legend, he’d touted the wonders of the sword and spoken to his children of the greatness to come to the rightful owner, of which, their family was. In her fanciful beliefs and dreams, she’d inherited her father’s spirit.

Mama looked back and forth between them, but it was Aidan who spoke. “Surely you’ll not agree to this madness,” he bit out. He pressed ahead, not permitting anyone else to speak. “Furthermore, you intend to just saunter into the Devil Duke’s lair, on the evening of his brother’s betrothal ball, as bold as you please, and intrude upon their festivities, not believing that he’ll have you thrown out onto your Rayne arse.”

Their mother’s scandalized gasp slashed into Aidan’s vulgar words.

Theodosia slowly smiled. “Why, yes.” That is precisely what she believed.

“Then you’re a bloody fool,” Richard said, in deadened tones, interrupting his brother’s impending diatribe. He swept the decanter from the

table and poured himself several fingers of liquor and then thought better of it, filling the snifter to the rim. “You fail to realize the Renshaw’s do not give a jot for any member of the Rayne line. He’ll see you destroyed, just as his brother destroyed me.”

With those ominous words echoing in the quiet, Theo turned around, not allowing any further objections to be voiced, and left.

A gentleman who kissed with the heated intensity she’d known in Damian’s arms could likely destroy her, if she allowed it. And she had no intention of allowing him any greater hold than she’d already allowed with that kiss that had left a mark upon her soul.

## Chapter Six

Over the rim of his champagne glass, Damian eyed the crowded ballroom with detached interest. He deliberately skimmed his cold stare past the eager mamas with their even more eager daughters, hoping the rumors of an impending betrothal between Lady Minerva and himself were nothing more than rumors inspired by the two families' close ties.

"You would believe with one wedding to plan, we'd be free of her matchmaking," his brother groused at his side.

He peered out the corner of his eye at Gregory who also scanned the ballroom, as though plotting a well-coordinated escape. Envy pulled at Damian at the knowledge that Gregory, could by the very order of his birth, manage to disappear and shift attention from himself if he so desired. Whereas from the moment of his birth as heir to a dukedom, Damian had been fawned over and sought after for no reason other than that proverbial order. Though, there had been one woman who'd not responded with the fawning and simpering Damian had come to expect. The memory of Lady Theodosia in all her spitting fury and fiery passion flashed to mind. A grin pulled at his lips. No, that lady had not given a jot that he'd been a duke. In fact, she'd like to have sent him to the devil with his familial title as his only

company, if afforded that opportunity. Except for that kiss—that kiss had told an altogether different tale of the lady’s interest.

“Who is she?”

Damian glanced about. What was his brother on about? “I beg your pardon?” he asked searching for the person in question.

Gregory rescued a glass of champagne from a passing servant. “I daresay if it is not the Lady Minerva who has you grinning like a lackwit these past days, you’ll have a none-too-pleased mama that we’ll be forced to deal with. It would, however, prove a diversion from Mother’s unnecessary matchmaking between me and Miss Carol Cresswall.”

“Shove off,” Damian snapped, unnerved by how unerringly accurate his brother’s words were. Damian knew better than to make a fool of himself over a Rayne. And by the long-standing feud between them, there really was no reason to give the lady another thought. The likelihood of them meeting was as great as the Thames freezing. “There is no lady,” he said out of the corner of his mouth, well knowing that one too loud whisper would mean scandal.

“I—” His brother’s words ended abruptly and he widened his eyes. “By God, what in the hell is she doing here?” His shocked question was met with a flurry of whispers that filtered through the ballroom, as all eyes turned to the front of the hall.

Damian followed the stares and his breath stuck in his chest. He should be outraged at the lady’s insolence. He should have her tossed out on her ear for said insolence in showing her face at a Renshaw betrothal ball. Yet, an odd lightness filled his chest as he took in the sight of her. Gone were the lady’s armor and breastplate and helmet. And yet, for her boldness in the face of Society’s focus, she was as brave as that legendary warrior herself. But for the faintest quiver to those full-lips he’d dreamt of for the past two nights, Lady Theodosia gave no indication that she noted the *ton*’s cruel focus, the pointing fingers, the sneering faces.

After all, the esteemed guests who'd received an illustrious invite to the event would never dare insult the host with niceties for the family's enemy.

How could one with her spirit and passion be an enemy? The lady walked side by side a woman with vague familiarity. "It is Mother's Miss Carol Cresswall." Mother's Miss Carol, which was a rather clear statement on Gregory's opinion of taking the woman to wife. His brother gave his head a wry shake. "Though I imagine after this showing by Miss Cresswall and that Rayne woman, our matchmaking mama will not be so very eager to wed me off to the family bold enough to bring the plump enemy within our fold."

At those deliberately cruel words, Damian squeezed the stem of his flute so tightly, the thin crystal snapped. A servant rushed forward to clean the remnants of shattered crystal left. An unholy rage blackened his vision and he blinked it back, and when he still wanted to bury his fist in his brother's face for that insult, he curled his hands into tight balls at his side.

"Contain your fury," Gregory admonished, misinterpreting the reason for Damian's rage.

"She's hardly plump." She was rounded perfection, soft in all the places a woman should be soft, curved in all the places a wise man longed for his woman to be curved.

Gregory opened and closed his mouth several times. Before his damned irritating and oft too astute brother established there had been a connection between Damian and Theodosia, he looked about for sight of their mother who, even now, was likely aware of the interloper to their family's affair.

Theodosia made her way down the staircase, head held high, her gaze fixed just above the heads of the gaping lords and ladies. Then, as though she felt his stare upon her, the lady scanned the crowd. Their gazes collided and, even with the length of the ballroom between them, he detected the spark in her eyes. Was it desire? Passion? Fury? Then, a pink blush stained her cheeks and a primal masculine satisfaction unfurled within his chest.

Desire.

“Toss her out.”

He stiffened as Gregory’s words jerked his attention away from Theodosia. With an easy grin and possessed of a charm since he’d been coaxing sweet pies from Cook in the kitchen, Gregory had long been the affable member of the Renshaw lot. This unrelenting, ruthlessness fixed on Theodosia was not one Damian recognized nor cared for.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said stiffly, and then without allowing his brother another word, he started through the crowd. The probing stares of the milling lords and ladies trained on him, Damian directed his attention forward to a single person, more than a foot shorter than himself, and yet how effortlessly his eyes found the top of her midnight tresses.

The woman at her side, a slender Miss Carol Cresswall, with her golden tresses and pale white skin, may as well have been any other English lady present. The viscount’s sister troubled the flesh of her lower lip, her waxen skin speaking to a greater unease than the brave Theodosia. Only the young lady’s flighty mother, with her cheeks wreathed in a forever smile, seemed hopelessly oblivious to the thick tension radiating about the ballroom.

The crowd parted, allowing him access to Lady Theodosia Rayne, the merciless lot no doubt cutting their teeth on the prospect of the young woman being publicly shamed. His brother’s urging, coupled with the expectation of his mother and the entire guests assembled warred with this inexplicable desire to see Lady Theodosia once more. Damian stopped before the young woman who’d exercised a spot within his mind for the past few days. Theodosia and the three members of the Cresswall family stared at him with varying reactions. He cared about just one of those reactions.

Viscountess Fennimore beamed. “Your Grace,” she dropped a deep curtsy. “Thank you ever so much for the gracious invitation. May I present my daughter,” Miss Cresswall dipped a curtsy. “And as you well-know my Herbie.” Damian shifted his attention reluctantly away from Theodosia who’d schooled her features with an ability that would have impressed

players at any faro table, to the portly viscount. Damian narrowed his eyes. This was the man Herbie, of whom Theodosia had referred. “Ah, yes, I believe you were so good as to coordinate an introduction between myself and one of our now mutual acquaintances.”

The viscount yanked at his cravat and darted his gaze about. “U-uh yes. I b-believe that is correct. It is a pleasure, Y-your Grace.” The viscount’s cheeks turned red. Damian shifted his attention to Theodosia and waited.

A faint, becoming blush bloomed on her cheeks. Ah, for the lady’s unrepentant boldness there was some hesitancy, and yet she should tilt her chin up at that prideful angle.

“And may I introduce Lady Theodosia Rayne.” The viscountess scratched at her brow. “I do believe your families are acquainted?”

Not unlike her other child, the lady’s daughter moved a panicked stare about.

“We are, indeed, Lady Fennimore. Quite well. Lady Theodosia,” he murmured.

“Your Grace.” The lady hesitated and then sank into a deep curtsy. By the lady’s expression and the collective breath held throughout the ballroom, Theodosia expected him to turn her out, and for her insolence and disregard for the long-standing feud between their respective families, he should very well do just that. Instead, he held forth his elbow. “Will you join me in this next set, my lady?”



As Theodosia placed her fingertips upon Damian's sleeve, she didn't know precisely what she'd expected in appearing, sans invite, at the Duke of Devlin's home once more, this time sans costume. The collective gazes of the leading lords and ladies of Polite Society stared on with an almost gleeful anticipation of her being unceremoniously tossed upon her derriere. Regret replaced that excitement as Damian led her onto the dance floor and positioned them at the center of the ballroom. She swallowed hard. If he'd intended to expose her to Society's shame, he could not pick a more central place in which to do so.

Theodosia jumped as the orchestra plucked the opening strands of the waltz. The ghost of an ice hard smile played about Damian's lips. "I am disappointed, Theodosia."

She swallowed back the protestation that sprung to her lips at his familiarity of address. "Your Grace?"

"A Rayne who steals into my home," he lowered his lips close to her ear, and Theodosia's breath caught as she recalled his hard, sure touch and the taste of him. "With such brazenness and courage will not now direct your attention to my cravat?"

Yes, yes she would.

"Tsk, ts," he said when she remained stonily silent. "I daresay you've

made another misstep, Theodosia.” And a large one at that. Perhaps if she met his deliberate baiting with silence, he’d let the matter rest. “You suspected you might arrive at my brother’s betrothal ball, while I’m otherwise occupied, and find your way to my office. I’d expected more ingenuity, say,” he dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “donning a disguise in the midst of a masquerade and fashioning yourself as a modern Joan of Arc—”

“Oh, do hush,” she chided. She’d not be toyed with the way a cat might paw a poor mouse. Theodosia glanced about at the dance partners twirling past them in a whirl of skirts. “I would have attracted far too much notice arriving in costume than as myself.” Though considering the guests’ reaction to a Raynes presence, that might not prove altogether correct.

“I was jesting, Theodosia.”

She blinked. “Oh.” In all the darkest tales told of the Devil Duke none had spoken of a man who teased.

“I don’t.”

Theodosia cocked her head.

“Jest.” A muscle jumped at the corner of his eye.

Unease stirred within her. This, a man she’d been conditioned to believe was the enemy, possessed an innate ability to know her unspoken thoughts. “You prefer to be thought of as the Devil Duke, do you?” Her gaze unwittingly went to the jagged, white, puckered flesh that marred an otherwise flawless face and she wondered at who’d done this to him. She’d long heard the tales of his scarred face at the knee of her father. Now, pain sluiced through her heart at how shamefully insensitive her family had been to the pain of another. Even if he was a Renshaw.

“Have you looked your fill?” he growled. And by the sneer upon his lips, it occurred to her that he wanted to inspire fear, and this was merely a protective attempt to prevent himself from being hurt. What a very sad way to go through life.

“What happened?” It was not morbid curiosity that gave birth to that shamefully improper question, but a genuine desire to know.

He said nothing for a long while and she believed he intended to ignore that question. Then the harsh planes of his face settled into an indecipherable mask. “Come, Theodosia, surely you’ve heard tales.”

She caught the inner flesh of her cheek between her teeth, shamed once more by her family’s stories of Damian. They’d spoken of him as though he was a monster and yet he was a wounded gentleman who’d protect himself from hurts. “I don’t want the tales, Damian,” she said and his eyes narrowed at her use of his Christian name. “I’d ask for the truth.”

“The truth? I was born disfigured, my lady. There is no mythical story of the devil marking me as his own or a disappointed mother who set fire to half of my face.” She winced at that telling her brother Aidan had favored. “I was simply born the devil your family likely spoke of.”

When she’d made her Come Out three Seasons earlier, she’d been mocked by the sea of Incomparables; flawless English beauties with their golden perfection and trim figures. They’d been everything that plump, round-cheeked Theodosia never had been. How odd to have believed herself so very different than the Duke of Devlin only to find, in many ways, they were more alike. “The mark upon your face does not define you, Damian. It is the person you are inside.” And for all the reports she’d read of him and his family, she’d also read the reports that spoke of his devotion to his family and unfailing commitment to their happiness. Unlike Theodosia, who, but for her lost and very likely dead brother Lucas, had siblings so wholly focused on their own happiness.

The muscles of his forearm tensed under her grip, tautening the fabric of his midnight black evening coat. “So you’ve come to steal my sword,” he murmured, in which she believed was a bid to shift the conversation to matters he felt more comfortable with. Or perhaps, more in control of.

She shook her head. “No.” Theodosia winked at him. “I’ve come to

retrieve my family's broadsword."

"What can be so very important that you'd risk your neck and reputation by attending my brother's betrothal ball with no invite, all for that scrap of metal?"

Had he not felt the weight of that ancient weapon? The Theodosia broadsword was no more a scrap than the Queen's Crown was a pasty bauble.

"If you have to ask, Damian, then you are undeserving of its ownership."

The waltz drew to a close and she tamped down her disappointment, which was an almost physical force. He sketched a stiff bow. "Theodosia."

"Your Grace," she responded, and sketched a curtsy.

Damian settled his gaze on a point beyond her shoulder and she followed his hard, cold stare to the cluster of Renshaws, who stood side by side by side by side, all three of them and Richard's Miss Roberts. Her skin pricked with heated embarrassment at the varying degrees of vitriol dripping from their gazes.

"I am not going to acquire the weapon tonight." It wasn't a question, more a statement of fact she was just bringing herself around to.

"No, you are not," Damian said. He held an arm out and she allowed him to lead her from the dance floor.

All of a sudden, she became aware of the continued stares and whispers circulating about the ballroom. No doubt, about the brazen, plump Lady Theodosia, who had about as much hope of sneaking into any ballroom as one of the Cook's livestock beating a path through the very space. Guilt and shame pricked her conscience in an unexpected blend, as she became aware of her scandalous presence and how very wrong it had been to ruin Lord Charles Renshaw's betrothal ball—even if he was the miserable blighter who'd stolen her own brother's true love.

"You are quiet." Damian made that observation as he guided her back to Herbie and Carol, who, with each step taken by the duke, turned a shade paler.

Yes, well, it wasn't every day that she was so humbled by her singular focus on her own family's happiness, so very much that she'd sacrifice another family's.

"Are you even now plotting your theft?" There was a faint trace of amusement that belied all the rumors she'd believed true about this man.

"I am plotting my escape," she said under her breath, feigning nonchalance. Only, with each half-smile and teasing word he shattered the previous misconceptions she'd carried of him as the merciless, ruthless beast with a face marred by the devil's flame. And she didn't like it. For if she'd been so very wrong about Damian thus far, what else had she been wrong about?

They drew to a stop before Carol and Herbie. Poor Herbie, always hopelessly fearful when presented with the towering, menacing form of the Duke of Devlin, backed up a step.

Damian sketched a deep bow. As he made to take his leave, panic set her heart pounding. "Your Grace." Her thoughts should be upon her escape this night. For if she left without the relic now, all hope would be lost for the Theodosia Sword until next year's masquerade. And yet, he was all she could think of. For after these two stolen moments, she'd never again see the duke. Why did her heart tug with regret?

He gave her a long, lingering look.

She was a Rayne and he, well, he would forever be a Renshaw. "I am sorry for having caused a disruption this night."

At the very least, he should be so gentlemanly as to contradict her words. Alas, he inclined his head and beat a hasty retreat. "Herbie," she said quietly to the trembling viscount. "Will you permit me the use of your carriage so I can return home?" Without the ancient weapon and without again knowing the pleasure of being in Damian's arms. Herbie inclined his head. "O-of course." Did he have to sound so very relieved that she would be taking her leave? Did no one desire her company? She stared after him as he lumbered

off, letting out a startled gasp as someone gripped her wrist.

“What did he say to you?” Carol whispered. “Did he order you from his property?”

“No. He...” Was perfectly gentlemanly and teasing and more, he’d shared that very intimate piece about himself and only left her aching to know some of the other pieces about the purported dark lord.

“He, what?” Carol prodded.

“He...” She slid her gaze out onto the ballroom floor, unable to expose her tumultuous emotions before the still staring guests, even if it was to her only friend in the world. Then she found him with her stare.

“What is it?” she dimly registered Carol’s concerned question.

Unable to formulate a proper response, Theodosia instead blatantly stared at Damian comfortably ensconced within the fold of his perfectly happy, not at all broken family, alongside the gloriously golden Lady Minerva. The Incomparable, purported to be the future Duchess of Devlin, shot a stare over her shoulder. The trim and not at all embarrassingly curved young woman peered down the length of her regal nose at Theodosia and then turned back and said something to Damian. He stiffened and then as one, he and his Incomparable stared back at Theodosia and there was just so much blasted staring, by Damian, his future betrothed, the guests, Carol, that a suffocating panic began to overwhelm Theodosia’s senses. “It is nothing.” She managed to squeeze out a smile for her friend’s benefit.

Nor could there or would there ever be anything.

Herbie returned, his florid cheeks glistened with perspiration from his exertions. And he yanked forth a stark, white kerchief and dabbed at his sweating brow.

With that practical realization, Theodosia fled for Herbie’s carriage. It would do to remember the only reasons she’d entered this bloody lair in the first place.

She'd intended to leave. After all, she'd sent Herbie to call for the carriage.

"Absolutely not," he moaned, the words coming out more an entreaty than a command to Theodosia's stated intentions of staying.

"Oh, do hush," his sister said from the side of her mouth as they made their way back to the duke's townhouse.

Somewhere between the cold and calculated Renshaw gathering at the edge of the ballroom and the long trek to the carriage, Theodosia had recognized the sheer madness in abandoning her plans for the ancient weapon still hanging in Damian's office. She tightened her mouth. She may now see him as Damian and not the Devil Duke, and she may know the origins of that mark upon his face, and she may very well know (and forever remember) the feel of his lips on hers, but by God she'd not forsake her family's happiness for any of those reasons.

"I will not tarry," she pledged. There was still the matter of the huge task of wresting that item from its place upon Damian's office wall, but now she'd be prepared for the sheer weight of the item. "I know where I am off to, this time." And though she could not verify the safety of his floor this evening, she could, at the very least, clear off his sideboard in anticipation of the mishap two evenings prior. "Please, Herbie."

The beleaguered viscount swiped a hand over his face. She beamed at

him and then gave her friend a look.

On cue, Carol took her brother by the arm. “Come along, Herbie” she said and steered him down the corridor, toward the boisterous din of the ballroom. Theodosia waited a moment and then, heart pounding wildly, raced along the darkened halls. A single, lit sconce cast shadows upon the white, plaster walls, darkly ominous, rousing tales of the dark legend around the very item she now fought to reclaim. Theodosia turned left at the end of the corridor and easily found her way to Damian’s office. With one fluid movement, she pressed the handle and slipped inside the darkened room belonging to the Duke of Devlin.

She pulled the door closed behind her and this time turned the lock.

The man who’d kissed her.

The man who’d occupied every corner of her thoughts since their first meeting.

The man who—

“Theodosia Rayne. We meet once more.”

She shrieked and peered into the darkened shadows and struggled to bring the black clad figure in the corner of the room into focus. Theodosia swallowed hard. The man who was here. Now. Damian stood in the corner, the broadsword held effortlessly within his hands and with his command of the weapon, he may as well have been one of their legendary ancestors plucked from time and cast into this moment. *Blinkblinkblink.*

Well, of all the rotted luck.

HE’D KNOWN the lady but a handful of days and yet had become so attuned to those subtle nuances of her body’s movement. Even with the shroud of darkness, he detected the rapid one-two-three blink of her hopelessly wide eyes.

Weapon in hand, Damian strode forward. Theodosia’s gaze lingered on



the sword and he paused. There was such a desperate hungering within those soulful, blue irises. She eyed the metal relic the way she might a favored lover and, bloody hell, if he did not envy the damned, cold piece of metal just then. She held almost reverent fingers out and then drew them back. “I did not truly have time to appreciate it the last time I...”

“The last time you stole into my home and attempted to steal it?”

She either failed to hear or note the wry humor in his words. Instead, she remained fixed on the Theodosia sword. All these years, the ancient war weapon had hung upon his father’s office wall and with that duke’s passing, Damian’s. Never before had he truly noted the weapon or reflected on the history of the artifact. Rather, it had represented a piece the Rayne line had for centuries scrabbled for. Now, taking in the awe etched in the heart-shaped planes of Theodosia’s face, he viewed the sword with new eyes.

“Here,” he said gruffly.

“What—?”

Damian positioned himself behind her, drawing her close to his chest. The audible inhalation of her breath exploded into the quiet of the room. Or was that his own? He positioned the weapon within her fingers and placed his over hers and together with their fingers interlocked upon the piece that had come to represent a lifetime of loathing between their families, he guided their hands up.

“You would romanticize a weapon that has killed?”

“I will see in it the wonder it has brought to those fortunate to possess it.”

Damian drew their arms in slow, arcing strokes and, while they together played out the feudal dance practiced with this very weapon, he reflected on this woman who’d stolen into his home.

Had her life been so full of strife that she should hang her very hopes upon this ancient metal? His stomach tightened and just then, it mattered naught that she was a Rayne or he a Renshaw. He wanted her to know happiness. Which was nonsensical. Damian had long put the interests and

happiness of his own family before all else, and yet this woman who'd boldly asked questions as to his marred face, who'd not stared on him with horror while feigning interest for the title he possessed, her happiness mattered.

“They say the rightful owner of the Theodosia will know great fortune,” she said, her voice faintly breathless from their exertions.

“What fortunes do you crave?” he whispered against her ear, bringing their arms back in another slashing stroke. “Wealth, great power—”

She angled her head back around. “Happiness.”

His chest rose and fell with his efforts. With this maddening desire he held for this woman? Damian pulled the sword free of her grasp and tossed it to the floor where it clattered, the metal striking hard wood deafening in the quiet. She eyed the forgotten sword a moment and then looked to him with his own passion reflected in her eyes.

Damian cupped his hand about her neck and drew her close. “You didn't come here for the sword this evening,” he whispered against her lips. “Did you?”

Her silence stood as confirmation to his suspicions. The moment he'd seen her fleeing the ballroom, he'd known as much. “And I didn't come here to stop your attempts at theft, Theodosia.”

“Then why—?”

“I came for you.” She opened her mouth and before she could ask questions for which he did not have answers to, he took her lips under his, their mouths melded in a fiery explosion of two persons, sworn enemies by nothing more than birthright alone. He ran his hands down the curves of her body, caressing her flared hips and rounded waist, and moving higher to mold his hand to the generous flesh of her breast. As glorious as she'd been in her metal armor, the feel of her with just the slip of satin between them was the type of temptation a man would trade his soul for.

Theodosia dropped her head back on a panting moan and he continued to plunder her mouth, meeting her passion for passion. He drew back and she

cried out, as though agonized at that parting, but he shifted his attentions lower, trailing his lips down her cheek, and pausing at the delicate shell of her ear. Damian drew the flesh between his teeth and sucked until soft, gasping sighs escaped her lips.

“Damian,” she whispered, stroking her fingers along his jaw.

He stiffened as she caressed the heinous mark of his birth and then she leaned up on tiptoe and brushed her lips against the scarring. His eyes slid closed of their own volition as her gentle worshiping tossed his well-ordered world into tumult.

“Damian?” His mother’s quiet question cut into the quiet.

The door handle *jiggled*.

The haze of passion lifted and he silently cursed, looking to the door and then down at Theodosia’s wide, blinking eyes as she tried to sort through the sudden interruption. “Dam—” He covered her mouth with his once more, effectively silencing her.

The door handle rattled once more. “Damian, are you in there?”

“Yes, I am attending to matters of business,” which was not altogether untrue. It had been very pleasant and quite enjoyable business with the lady in his arms. The now waxen, horrified lady in his arms. He searched the room, recalling back to his youth. The lessons of propriety and cool rigidity had been drilled into him so long that he only faintly recalled games of hiding and seeking.

Fortunately, Theodosia appeared to have retained more of a youthful spirit, or had become adept at subterfuge, for she sprinted over to his desk and sank to the floor. The rustle of skirts as she crawled on hands and knees both deafening and damning.

“Damian?” his mother called once more, impatience underscoring that one word question.

He feigned a loud cough to disguise Theodosia’s gown as she disappeared under the protective sanctuary. Yanking on the lapels of his coat, he strode

across the room, turned the lock, and then opened the door just as his mother raised her hand to rap once more.

“Mother,” he greeted, motioning her inside.

She eyed him with a dubious stare and then entered with a regal bearing to rival the Queen. His mother paused and passed an astute, assessing stare over the room. “Where did you disappear to?”

He closed the door and as he didn’t believe “my office” would be met with a favorable response, he merely perpetrated the earlier lie he’d called out. “I had business to attend.”

“Now,” she said, incredulity dripped from her tone. “During your brother’s betrothal ball.” Her gaze lingered upon the sword.

He followed her stare. “Ducal responsibilities do not stop because of balls and soirees.” It was the safe, proper response meant to deter his mother from any further questioning.

She folded her arms across her chest. “How very interesting it is to hear you speak of ducal responsibilities, Damian, when there is still the matter of your unwed state—”

“Ah, yes but Charles will be wed.”

His mother arched an eyebrow. “But he is not the duke.” In a whirl of skirts, she marched over to the broadsword and toed the ancient piece with the tip of her slipper.

He cast a glance over at his desk, grateful for the wood barrier that prevented Theodosia from witnessing this affront. If she could see that disrespect at his mother’s gesture, she’d likely fly across the room and do battle with said sword.

“And you, Damian,” He snapped his attention back to his mother. “Were dancing with a Rayne.”

Oh, bloody hell. This was certainly not a conversation to be had with a Rayne hidden from sight, within these very walls. And so there was no question there, he remained stoically silent.

“Which begs the question, why were you dancing with that woman?” She began to pace and launched into a diatribe, effectively saving Damian from responding. “The audacity of that shameful creature, entering this home with no invitation. Though it is no wonder, with her family’s reprehensible lineage.” While also significantly complicating the matter.

A sound, a cross between a growl and hiss came from somewhere in the vicinity of his desk. He coughed into his hand. “There was no harm in her attending—”

“No harm!” His mother froze mid-step and jabbed a finger in his direction. “I expected you to have her escorted from the room and unceremoniously tossed out.”

“I would never do that.”

“Yes,” his mother nodded. “Yes, you would. You’ve proven yourself to be ruthless and commanding,” she spoke those words as though she approved of a son who was reviled and feared by all.

There was merit to her charge. He’d long welcomed the distance he’d placed between himself and other members of Society. He’d accustomed himself to the subservient fear. Until Theodosia. She’d forced him to confront the reality that there really was nothing honorable or admirable in a coolly aloof person who prevented himself from feelings and emotions. It was safer. But it was also a good deal lonelier. “What benefit would there have been in publicly shaming the lady and having her removed?” Other than removing the one happiness he’d found this night. Any night, since their first meeting two nights past.

His mother planted her arms akimbo. “Society noted your interest. Whispering to her. Staring at her so. Why, if I didn’t know you detested her for her connection to the Rayne line, I’d believe you were enamored of the young woman.”

Oh, Christ. He resisted the urge to tug at his cravat as a dull flush climbed up his neck.

A rustle of skirts met his mother's pronouncement.

"What was that?" his mother asked whipping her head about.

"What was what?"

"I thought I heard," she gave a flounce of her curls. "No matter. I am here to remind you of your obligations to Lady Minerva. Did you at all consider how your betrothed should feel about your stalking off and partnering that Rayne chit?"

A loud knock punctuated her words. The sound of flesh meeting wood and he'd wager what remained of his sanity that Theodosia had hit her head in the hiding space she'd made for herself. His mother's erroneous words regarding Lady Minerva cast aspersions upon every kiss and exchange to have occurred with Theodosia and he abhorred the idea that she should believe he'd merely dallied with her while being pledged to another.

He folded his arms across his chest. "There is no betrothal," he said coolly, the words for Theodosia.

"Of course there is nothing official," his mother said with a frown. "But —"

"There is no betrothal," he cut in, freezing whatever words she'd utter with a stare. He'd considered his obligations to every other member of his family, before his own, and not once did he regret those sacrifices. Then there had been no person who'd opened his eyes to the possibility of more. "Now, I have matters of business to attend before I return to the ballroom."

She opened and closed her mouth several times as though she wished to protest, but then said, "Very well." With that she spun on her heel, strode to the door and then pulled open the wood panel. "Damian?" she asked, turning back once more.

By God. Would she not leave? "Yes," he said, keeping his tone deliberately flat.

"Why is the sword on the floor?"

"Broadsword."

She furrowed her brow.

“It is the Theodosia broadsword.”

When it became apparent he intended to say nothing else on the matter, a frown marred her lips. With that, she left.

## Chapter Nine

The door had closed several moments ago. Several very long moments ago. The lock had turned, indicating privacy once more from Damian's horrid mother with her unkind words and cruel expectations for her son. Yet, Theodosia remained frozen.

He was betrothed. From her spot, crouched under Damian's desk, she rubbed the top of her head, a poor, wounded head she'd quite solidly thwacked upon hearing those shocking words voiced by his mother. Oh, she'd heard mention that the powerful, evil Renshaw line inevitably bound their members to other powerful, evil families. But that was before she'd known Damian and now, knowing there was another... She touched the knot on her head and winced. It mattered not. Not at all. Well, the knot on her head did but who Damian wed and when he wed or why he wed was as insignificant as what food she'd break her fast with.

Liar.

Two gleaming black boots appeared in her line of vision and she jumped, knocking her head once more. "Bloody hell," she complained. Must he be so blasted silent? With his impressive size and power, he should, at the very least, be noisy with his footsteps.



Damian fell to a knee beside the desk. He peered into the darkened space, a faint smile on his lips. She was very glad that at least one of them found the entire circumstance amusing. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she bit out, sitting back on her heels. “You are free to attend whatever important business you have to see to.” As he’d pointed out several times to his mama.

“You are my business.”

Her lips parted with surprise.

He held a hand out and she eyed his fingers a moment and then reluctantly placed her fingertips in his. Damian drew her out and up, and they stood there beside his desk, their bodies a hairsbreadth apart. “You are betrothed.” She winced as the almost accusatory charge tumbled from her lips. “Not that you are not entitled to be betrothed.” *Be betrothed?* Surely there was some rule about two be starting words being paired? *Silence your mouth, Theodosia.* “But you really shouldn’t go about kissing ladies while you are betrothed to another.” Especially another who was trim and blonde and all things lovely where Theodosia was not. “It isn’t done,” she finished lamely when he still said nothing.

He brushed his knuckles along her jaw and forced her gaze up to his. “I am not betrothed.”

“But you will be.” His mother had been very clear on that particular point.

“Yes, I daresay one day I shall be betrothed. But it will not be to the Lady Minerva.”

“It won’t?” She hated the almost hopeful note to her question.

“It won’t. My mother certainly expects as much, but it will not be her.”

The fact that it was not Lady Minerva and was, in fact, another did little to ease the agonized tightening in her chest, sentiments that felt a good deal like jealousy. She groaned. She’d come to care for Damian, enemy to her family, feared Duke of Devlin.

“Are you all right?” he questioned, ceasing mid-stroke.

“It is my head,” she lied. “I hit it twice.” A lie that she’d add a bit of plausibility to. “What—”

“Shh,” he whispered, drawing her against him. With his long, powerful fingers, he withdrew the jewel-encrusted combs woven in her hair. Her breath caught at the intimacy of the act. No one but nursemaids and lady’s maids had dared touch her hair, and never in this manner. He loosened the gold combs and pulled them free one at a time. She detected his intent focus upon the amethyst. “They are thistles,” she said softly. “The legend holds that Eryx uncovered the sword at the mile marker between England and Scotland.” He turned the combs over in his hands. “To woo his love he came to her bearing the sword and a bouquet of thistles. And...” Her words trailed off as he gently set the combs down upon his desk and drew her close once more. With deft fingers, he probed for that knot. Her lids fluttered wildly as he gently massaged her scalp in a soothing rhythm.

“What became of your Eryx and his love?”

There was a cynical twist to his question that contradicted the tenderness of his touch.

“They were happy and in love. I cannot imagine a better end to any story than that.”

“And you would wed for love?”

She leaned into his touch. Wed for love? After two Seasons, and a rapidly concluding third, she’d rather despaired of wedding at all. There had been little interest shown her, nor would she have a gentleman court her for reasons that had to do with wealth and status and familial connections.

Which only served to remind her of the chasm between them.

And the status and familial connections that would inevitably bind Damian to his Lady Minerva.

“I haven’t given much thought to the person I’ll wed,” she gave him that truth.

*That it were you...* Theodosia stiffened as that traitorous thought slid into her consciousness. She stepped backwards and her buttocks bumped the surface of his mahogany desk, but she ignored the pain that radiated up along her spine, as panic set her heart into a too fast rhythm. “I must leave,” she managed to squeeze those words past dry lips. “It would be ruinous for us to be discovered.” He’d be forced into a union with her and she didn’t doubt the honorable, respectable duke would do that which was honorable.

Or that she’d want him to. Oh, God.

“Yes, it would.” Yet, he made no move to leave.

Knowing with each passing moment she spent in his company that he slowly and surely overrode her defenses and robbed her of reason, Theodosia spun about and sprinted to the door.

Perhaps it was a sign that Damian recognized the folly in these stolen interludes with a Rayne, for he allowed her to flee.

DAMIAN STARED at the open door Theodosia had stolen through and with this flight there was an air of finality. Just as there had been no reason for their meetings to this point, now there was even less so—and more, an impossibility of any such meetings. There would be no more masquerades and no more betrothal balls until, at the very earliest, next Season, and so he and Theodosia would continue moving along their own separate paths, belonging to different parts of the same world.

Pressure squeezed hard about his chest and, with a curse, he stomped over and retrieved the item that had brought Theodosia into his life rattling his defenses. A bitter laugh escaped him as he fixed his gaze on the hard to make out etchings upon the sword. How very ironic that the object to bring them together shared the name of the lady herself.

Faint footsteps sounded in the hall and he glanced up. “Theo—”

His youngest brother, James, stood framed in the entrance. At nineteen,

he was just out of university and still bore traces of a young man who delighted in causing havoc for their mother which invariably meant havoc for Damian.

“James,” he greeted. At the suspicious glint in his brother’s eyes, a guilty flush burned his neck.

“Were you expecting another?”

Hoping for. “What do you want?”

“I saw a certain woman fleeing down the corridors.”

Bloody hell. “Oh?” Sword in hand, he carried it to the sideboard and rested it upon the all but barren surface. He reached for one of the decanters not destroyed by Theodosia’s efforts two nights earlier and poured himself a snifter. “Was there?”

As tenacious as a bur stuck in a heel, James closed the door behind him. “Yes, there was. But for her hair tumbling down her back,” Christ. “She bore a striking resemblance to the Rayne chit who interrupted Charles’ betrothal ball.”

“As I did not see this woman, I could not comment either way,” he said in clipped tones. He downed half the contents of his glass in one, slow swallow. His lips pulled back in a grimace at the burn of the liquid. At his brother’s droll grin, he took another sip.

James motioned to his desk. “Oh? Perhaps those hair combs belong to an altogether different woman than the er...woman who looks a good deal like the Rayne chit who is, in fact, a different woman.”

Damian choked on his swallow, following his brother’s hand to the damning amethyst pieces Theodosia had left behind in her wake. “That is likely the case,” he managed to say with even features.

“Of course. I was merely sent by Mother to see that you return for the toasting portion of the evening’s business.”

Finishing his brandy, Damian set the glass down. He took a step forward when James spoke. “I understand that the mystery woman fleeing through the

corridors was not, in fact, a Rayne, but if she were a Rayne, and she did make you happy, then I daresay braving Mother's disappointment and all the nonsense history between the families would indeed be worth it." His grin widened. "That is, if it were, in fact, a Rayne who made you happy. Which it isn't? Correct?"

"That is correct." His voice emerged garbled to his own ears.

Then, his young brother, who'd seen nothing of the world, gave a knowing wink.

As he fell into step beside James and made his return to the ballroom, Damian thought to those hair combs, even now out upon his desk.

By Theodosia's love of lore and legend, those delicate pieces that had adorned her midnight tresses meant a good deal to the lady. She'd require those pieces back.

Yes, he needed to see her. For no other reason than to return the lady's rightful possessions to her person. It had nothing to do with a desire to see her.

Nothing at all.

She'd forgotten her thistle hair combs. At Theodosia's birth, the precious gold and amethyst pieces had been commissioned by her father, a gift to a newborn daughter to symbolize the importance of their story and the power of that legend—and she'd gone and left the two and twenty year old pieces in the Duke of Devlin's office.

Seated in the corner of the carriage, Theodosia tried to make herself as small as possible. Perhaps they wouldn't notice. Her mama and papa were not the most astute of parents. Her brothers were self-absorbed, of which self-absorbed siblings, only one accompanied them this evening. Why, there was no need at all for anyone to note the substituted combs tucked in her dark hair.

“Where are your thistles?”

She jumped and shifted her attention to her father who stared at her head as perplexed as though she'd sprouted a second one.

“My thistles?” At the very least she should have had a suitable reply other than “my thistles”.

Mama leaned forward in her seat and peered closely at Theodosia. “Yes. Where are your hair combs?”

They are with Damian. As in the Duke of Devlin. How would they respond to that admission? “I believed the butterfly combs were appropriate.”

She held her breath praying no further explanation was required on just how they were appropriate or why or any other question for which she had no answer. Theodosia sent a prayer skyward when the carriage rocked to a halt before their destination.

A servant pulled open the carriage door and reached a hand inside. She accepted the offer, bypassing her mother and father and drew in a deep breath of the spring air.

“Lost them did you?”

She jumped and turned to face her brother. “You startled me.”

Aidan grinned. “And you didn’t answer my question.” Would he still be smiling if he knew where those precious, gold pieces had been left? Likely not. He’d long been the hotheaded Rayne with an explosive temper.

“Yes, I lost them,” she conceded for that admission was far safer than any further prevarication. Yet Aidan could never learn the whole truth. Their father had always said all the Raynes believed in the legend and lore behind the Theodosia sword, but only Aidan lived, breathed, and bled the legend and had since he’d been a bloodthirsty boy playing with his toy soldiers in fabled fields of battle. He held out his arm and she slipped her fingers onto his sleeve.

They followed along behind their parents. “Did you find it?”

“If I had them, I would be wearing them,” she muttered.

“The Theodosia.” He shot her a sideways glance.

*Blinkblinkblink.* Of course. She’d quite boldly and honestly admitted her plans for last evening. No one had inquired and she’d been so preoccupied with thoughts of Damian and his kiss and the imagined battle they’d been locked in while they handled the sword. “I did,” she finally said.

He sucked in a gasping breath and stopped, until she was forced to either stop as well or be dragged down. “You saw it.”

His was an awed proclamation and yet she nodded anyway. “What does it look like?”

“It is...heavy.” But not when you’re wrapped in the arms of another and together you wield that massive weapon. Her body still burned with the feel of his skin flush against her.

She gasped as Aidan took her by the shoulders. “You held it.” Awe laced those three words.

“Twice,” she confessed. She’d not mention the bit about the masquerade. By his volatile reaction yesterday evening following her announced plans to attend Lord Renshaw’s betrothal ball, he’d be less than pleased to know she’d been a guest at the sought after event of the Season—the Duke of Devlin’s masquerade.

Their parents tossed a questioning look back at them, which propelled brother and sister into motion. “Is it as magnificent to behold as is purported?” he asked with the same enthusiasm he’d demonstrated as boy asking that very question at their father’s knee.

She chewed her lip contemplatively. Odd, for the desperation that had driven her to brave the Duke of Devlin’s home, not once but twice all for the legendary sword, she’d not given thought to anything more than Damian. The gentleman with a hauntingly beautiful face, who she’d been taught to fear.

“Theo?”

“Magnificent.” For the mark upon the left side of his face added depth and resilience to the man.

Further questions ended as they stepped inside the townhouse and were ushered to the ballroom. They took their place in the receiving line and Theodosia sighed. Of all aspects of soirees and balls, the receiving line was by far the most painfully awkward moment of the evening. After all, a wallflower could seek out her place alongside the wall and escape notice... but not before said wallflower was presented on display and whispered about and laughed at for being so very different than the graceful, beautiful Lady Minervas of the world.

The crush of guests present cast unnatural warmth upon the crowded



ballroom.

She stared over the tops of the heads of the lords and ladies milling and dancing. A whisper went up. A whisper not at all like the “there-is-plump-Theodosia-and-her-sad-family”, and more like the whispers of some great, juicy morsel of gossip that had captured their attention. Her shoulders sagged as she gave thanks for whatever diversion now occupied—

“Bloody hell, what is he doing here,” Aidan hissed.

And Theodosia knew. Knew in the way her skin pricked with awareness and the warmth spiraling out from her belly that he was there. She found him instantly, across the ballroom. *Blinkblinkblink*. He stood alongside one of the towering, white columns, wholly elegant and unaffected by the whispers. Theodosia swallowed.

“Theo!” Her brother’s sharp tone snapped her from her reverie.

“Hmm? Oh, er, yes.” Her cheeks warmed as she stepped forward to be presented.

Which, of course, only resulted in the staring business from the bored members of Polite Society. Yet this time, the stares were not reserved for her alone. Now they involved the Duke of Devlin, present at a ball attended by the Rayne family. When all members of the peerage knew the longstanding rivals pointedly avoided accepting invites to the same functions. Until now.

“Whatever is he doing here?” her mother whispered, wringing her hands together as their family made their way to the opposite corner of the ballroom—far, far away from Damian.

Not for the first time in her life, Theodosia damned her height that prevented her from seeing, she went up on tiptoes...well, anything.

“Stop gaping,” her brother ordered.

“I’m not gaping.” She’d need to be able to actually see the man to gape. If he were visible, however, she’d certainly be gaping. After having known his kiss and the power of his arms and the smile on his lips, it really was quite impossible to not gape at the commanding duke.

Apparently her mother lamented her own height as well. “Dear, I asked you what he is doing?” she said once more to her husband.

Bushy grey brows knitted into a single line and then her father’s eyes widened slowly until those bushy grey eyebrows met his hairline. “By God, the Devil is coming this way.”

Theodosia’s heart leapt. Oh, dear.

DAMIAN ACCEPTED the invite to Lady McNamara’s ball simply for the reason to coordinate a meeting with the Rayne lady and see her amethyst thistle combs restored to the lady’s care.

Except, the woman who’d long been nothing more than a Rayne lady had shifted and morphed into this new, captivating, and spirited woman—Theodosia. A woman who didn’t glance away from his marred face or gawk in fascinated horror. So as the crowd parted, in eager anticipation of this public exchange, he acknowledged her thistle combs had not brought him here.

It had been her.

He came to a stop before them. His gaze fixed on Theodosia. The heightened color on her cheeks and the smile hovering on her lips did not foretell a young woman who wished him to the devil. He slid his stare over to the lady’s stunned, silent kin.

The Earl of Lavery opened and closed his mouth, like a trout tossed ashore. “What—”

“I’ve come to request the next set, my lady.” Damian directed his request to Theodosia.

Her lips parted on a moue of surprise.

“What in hell are you thinking?” the gentleman with dark hair and brown eyes who bore the faintest resemblance to Theodosia, asked. By his total lack of control, he ventured this was, in fact, the youngest Rayne son. “You dare

present yourself...”

Theodosia placed a hand on her brother’s forearm and murmured something. He merely shrugged free of her touch. “With the devil’s mark stamped upon your—oomph.” He glowered at Theodosia who’d effectively ended those words with a sharp jab of her elbow.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. Forgive him.”

That apology made on behalf of her brother brought shocked gasps from the trio of Raynes.

No one had ever defended Damian before. Largely because, as the heir and then holder of a dukedom, he really needn’t require defending. Some strange, indefinable emotion squeezed at his chest that this slip of a young woman should brave her family’s wrath to protect him.

“You can go to the devil,” the earl barked, bringing shocked gasps from nearby lords and ladies.

Damian ignored the mottled, portly gentleman and instead fixed his gaze upon Theodosia, as he became painfully aware of his hand held out to the lady, while Polite Society looked on. The stretched moment of indecision, punctuated by the strums of the orchestra’s waltz. Then, with a small smile, she slipped her hand in his and the tension eased from his chest.

Ignoring the black curse spat by Theodosia’s brother, Damian guided her onto the dance floor and positioned his hand about her waist.

“You are here,” she blurted, as they launched into the one-two-three step of the haunting waltz.

“Do you believe I’m merely an apparition sent from the bowels of hell, my lady?” he asked in clipped tones.

She pointed her eyes to the ceiling. “Do not be silly, Damian.” Had the lady just called him silly? No one in the course of his nine and twenty years had dared disparage him. “Do you take me as one who is afraid of you?” No, when most quaked in his presence or reviled him in the manner her family did, she smiled and boldly challenged him. “Because I’m not,” she

confirmed. “For the rule long followed by our families—”

“The rule?”

“Come, Damian,” she scoffed. “A Rayne does not attend the same event as a Renshaw. We know that and the lesson was likely ingrained into you since you were a mere boy being schooled as future duke.”

Yes, the lady was unerringly correct in her supposition. He trained his gaze on the crown of her dark tresses. Butterfly combs adorned her hair, the sapphire and ruby gems glittered under the glow of the chandelier, beautiful and yet, incomplete. Lavender thistle. The reason he’d come. Or was it....?

“Damian?” she prodded, pulling him to the moment.

“In the wake of your,” flight, “departure, my lady, you left behind your hair combs.” Hair combs he’d gently disentangled from her hair. His fingers twitched in remembrance of the luxuriant silkiness of her curled tresses.

Some of the light dimmed in her eyes. “Oh.” His stomach tightened at the disappointment reflected on the precious planes of her face. Oh God, he could not lie to her. He tightened his grip about her waist, angling her body closer to his, ignoring that her family, Society, honed in on each subtle move they made. “And I wanted to see you.”

Her lips parted. *Blinkblinkblink*. His heart tugged at the endearing little shocked gesture that was only hers. “Why?”

That question proved far more dangerous. Or, at the very least, the possible answers did. The truth was because she’d captivated him. Inspired him with her resolve and strength, and more, the romance of her spirit that saw an old weapon and saw old tales of legend and love.

Instead of responding, he turned his own question on her. “Why do you not fear me?”

“You’re just a man, Damian.”

For the entire nine and twenty years of his life, his identity and name had been nothing more than a title to his parents, siblings, servants, and Polite Society. Until now. There was something gripping, potent and powerful in

being seen as simply a man.

A commotion sounded in the hall and he glanced over her shoulder through the figure cutting an angry path through the assembled dancers. Whirling couples strove to circle away from Aidan Rayne. Damian bit back a curse and applied a gentle pressure to her waist, bringing her gaze up. “Will you meet me at Hyde Park, just on the edge of Kensington Gardens, before the sun rises? I will return your hair combs.”

She nodded once, just as Aidan settled a hand upon his shoulder.

A collective gasp went up and the dancing lords and ladies strained to see the impending confrontation. Damian stiffened but remained with his hold upon Theodosia.

“Aidan,” she whispered, an unexpected steel underlined the admonition.

“Release my sister,” he bit out, ignoring his sister.

An urge to knock the insolent gentleman upon his arse filled Damian, all the while knowing that was the very reaction the man likely sought. With a deliberate slowness, Damian hesitated, appreciating the curve of her waist. Then his gaze connected with Theodosia’s. The anxiety that bled through the blue irises of her eyes ended any effort to bait her brother. He relinquished her. “My lady,” he said and dropped a bow.

The waltz drew to a close. There was none of the polite applause. Instead, Society stared on, blatant in their rudeness.

“Your Grace,” she said softly.

Without a backward glance for her brother, Damian marched through the crowd that parted for him like that fabled sea. He tightened his jaw. Nothing more than returning the lady’s hair combs had brought him here this night. Nothing, at all.

He paused at the top of the staircase and looked back at Theodosia once more. She stared boldly at him. Damian turned and left, knowing he lied to himself.

After a night of braving her family's fury, which had entailed a blend of Aidan's furious shouts and Richard's glares and her father's chiding words and her mama's disappointed shakes of the head, sleep had proven elusive. Apparently, her family found attempting theft of Damian's sword one matter, dancing with the enemy an altogether different one.

As she strode through the quiet, empty grounds of Hyde Park, a lone kestrel in flight called an eerie morning song overhead. Theodosia stopped and peered up at the russet bird with his black spotted breast. The bird long a symbol of power and vitality not unlike the gentleman she now planned to meet.

Merely to obtain the cherished items she'd left behind.

She turned back to her maid who trailed along at a slower pace. The young woman yawned into her fingers. "Susan, I just plan to walk along the walking trail," to the copse of trees just outside Kensington Gardens. "No harm is likely to befall me on a mere walk." The lone bird circling overhead called out a protest and a chill stole through her. She thrust aside the nonsensical fears and adopted a nonchalant smile.

"Are you certain, my lady? Your parents would never forgive me if I were to abandon you."

She scoffed. "You are hardly abandoning me. You are allowing me," and

Damian, “a moment of solitude.”

The maid eyed the bench alongside the Serpentine and then exhaustion must have won out over her responsibilities as lady’s maid, for she walked over to the bench at the foot of the river. Before Susan thought through the years of scrapes she’d witnessed her mistress falling into, Theodosia spun around and then hurried off, back toward the copse of trees.

Another eerie cry shattered the quiet and she glared up at the noisy bird. “I’ll not allow you to frighten me,” she mumbled. For the lies and stories told about Damian and his family through the years, she knew in the gentleness of their meetings that he’d not harm her. She slipped past the meticulously tended boxwoods, expertly pruned, and stopped at the entrance, hands upon her hips, as she scanned the area. “If he wanted to harm me, he’d have tossed me into Newgate.”

“Have there been other crimes you’ve been committing that merit you being tossed into Newgate?” a deep, mellifluous baritone drawled from within the gardens and she gasped.

“Y-you startled me.” Her heart thudded wildly as Damian strode forward, attired in his familiar black garments. With his midnight black hair and ice blue eyes, he had the look of darkness and, having come to know him these days, she knew it was an affected effort on the gentleman’s part. And there was something heady in knowing that this man so feared by all, she knew in this special, intimate way.

He continued to study her in that silent, inscrutable manner of his.

She cleared her throat. “I assure you, however, that I do not make it a habit of committing acts of crime.”

Damian lifted a single black eyebrow. “Beyond the theft of the Theodosia?”

Her heart started. The Theodosia. Until this very moment, he’d referred to that revered item in cool, distant terms; a weapon, a sword, but never the Theodosia.

“Beyond that,” she said softly. “You called it the Theodosia.” The words floated as a whisper on the air between them.

With his naked fingers, he stroked her cheek. Oh, God. She’d never really given thought to the necessity of gloves. It was a matter of propriety and properness, but now with his skin against her own, the delicious wickedness that set off a fluttering within her belly that made her forget years of feuding and hunger for years of knowing him and no other. “Isn’t that what it is? Proud, noble, and strong. It is not merely,” he passed a penetrating stare over her face, “a sword. It is so much more.” Her breath caught and she knew by the heated intensity in the blues of his eyes, that he’d ceased to speak of a sword.

Her lashes fluttered and she leaned into his caress. Then he lowered his brow to hers. The rapidness of their breaths blended in an intimate meeting. “I came to return that which belongs to you, and then after that, there will be no more reasons that require us to meet.” There was a hoarse quality to his tone that belied the evenness of his words.

Her heart tugged. “No, there will not be.” She paused, recalling that which had brought them together before now. “The sword.”

“The Theodosia,” he amended, those two words a husky whisper against her lips.

“Y-yes. There is the Theodosia.” As long as that remained in his possession, there would be a need for a meeting. What a hollow, shallow lie.

He brushed his lips against hers in an all too brief meeting and that simple touch burned, until she ached from the inside with a desire for more and pulled away.

Damian fished around the front of his jacket and withdrew the cherished, thistle hair combs. The deep purple amethyst shimmered even in the dim light of dusk.

“Here,” he murmured and placed first one thistle in her hair, and then the other.



And with that, their meeting here was at an end. He took a step back. “Don’t,” her words emerged as a desperate entreaty. He stopped and stared at her. She didn’t want him to leave. Now. Or ever. And it was madness and all things foolhardy, but God help her, she’d gone and fallen in love with him.

Panic climbed up her throat and threatened to choke her. She hardly knew him, but for a handful of meetings. But she knew if he left now and wed his Lady Minerva or any other young lady that a sliver of her soul would die as effectively as if he’d used the Theodosia sword itself and slashed it through her heart.

Thick, dark lashes hooded his eyes. “Do you know what I believe, Theodosia?”

And because she was incapable of words, she gave her head a helpless shake. “I believe you came to me this day for reasons more than these hair combs.” He touched them. “Beautiful though they may be. You don’t want me to leave.”

Yes, God, he was correct. She drew in a breath, forgetting years of feuding over matters that now didn’t truly matter. “I don’t want you to leave.” She met his eyes. “I need you to stay.”

MANY PEOPLE NEEDED something of Damian; his family, the tenants who relied on his estate’s thriving, the servants whose livelihood depended on him. After years of being needed for reasons that had nothing truly to do with him—Theodosia needed him.

*I love her.*

Damian braced for a swell of panic that should come in having learned that he not only possessed a heart, but that it belonged to the Rayne daughter—but the panic did not come. He, the practical, immobile, Devil Duke had at last discovered a weakness—Theodosia.

Only it didn’t feel like a weakness. The absolute rightness in her, nay, in

them, filled him.

“Will you not say anything?” she demanded in the same tone she’d adopted when she’d ordered him to pick the shattered remnants of crystal decanters from his office floor.

In response, he lowered his lips to hers and claimed her mouth, communicating to her with his mouth and the hands he put to the sweet curves of her flesh, that he needed her in ways he’d never needed another.

Their mouths met in a fiery explosion and he caught her to him as she layered herself against his body. Through the thin fabric of her cloak and his coat, she seared him with her heat. He groaned and deepened the kiss, roving his hands over her body. “I have wanted you since the moment you stormed my home, Joan of Arc, in your armor.” He rasped against her cheek and trailing his lips lower, lower, and then he parted her cloak to expose her gown. Desire coursed through him as he took in the swell of her generous décolletage and then he put his lips to her soft skin.

Her head fell back on a moan. “I am fat,” she whispered.

“You are perfect.” That raspy utterance ripped from his throat as he worshiped the cream of her skin. In all the thought he’d put into who would be his duchess, there had always been a faceless woman who fit with all the standard molds of a proper, English wife. She’d be blonde and obedient and the perfect hostess. How had he failed to see he wanted a spirited, passionate woman who’d brave scandal and ruin to restore what she perceived as an injustice committed to rights?

He dipped his tongue between the mounds of her breast and a shuddery cry escaped her lips. Damian caught her to him and lowered her to the ground. “I want you,” he rasped. “I want you in spite of your damned name and that damned sword.”

“Yes,” she moaned. Her fingers brushed his scar and he stiffened. After years of being scorned for that very mark, he pulled back reflexively, but she shot her hands around his neck and pulled him toward her. “You are

beautiful, Damian.”

The visage that reflected back at him each morning proved it a lie but he groaned and captured her lips once more, but when she uttered it with that breathy, honest whisper, he could believe her anything.

His fingers found the hem of her gown and tugged it higher. He needed to explore all of her, learn the feel of her, the—

“By God, I will see you dead.”

Christ.

Damian rolled off Theodosia and shielded her with his body, just as her brother crashed into the clearing. An unholy rage lit the other man’s eyes as he took in Theodosia’s inelegantly sprawled frame, her skirts stained in grass and wrinkled. He shoved himself to his feet. “I am certain we can settle this matter with—”

Aidan Rayne shot a hand out, catching Damian in the chin with an impressive right cuff. He grunted and went down. Theodosia cried out and shoved to her feet. Her brother came at him again. Damian rolled out of the way and Rayne’s jab landed ineffectually in the air, and threw him off balance. The gentleman tumbled to the ground. His cheeks blazed red, heightening the rage in his stare. He jabbed a finger in his sister’s direction. “Get to the carriage.”

Theodosia took a step toward Damian and Rayne gnashed his teeth like a fabled dragon of their legends and lore. Damian gave his head a slight shake. He’d not have her witness this exchange with her brother. She hesitated and then hurried from the gardens, shooting one lingering glance over her shoulder.

Damian stared after her.

Which proved the height of folly. He grunted as Rayne charged forward, head bent and barreled into his shoulder, knocking him to the ground. “You bastard,” he hissed. The gentleman landed an ineffectual blow. Rage made him lax. “I would challenge you to a duel and laugh over your dead body if

the damned world wouldn't discover what you've done here."

Years of training alongside Gentleman Jackson himself had prepared Damian for far stronger, more worthy opponents than this barely twenty-something year old man. He cuffed him in the chin once and Rayne toppled to the ground with a grunt. Damian schooled his features and took a step away from Theodosia's brother. He didn't begrudge the other man his deserved rage. If he'd had a sister and that sister had been on the ground with her skirts drawn up and her shapely legs exposed to the spring air, he'd have taken that fiend apart with his bare hands.

Damian came to his feet and stood over him and spoke in the cool, ducal tones he'd practiced as a youth. "You are deserved of your outrage. However, I intend to wed her." If she'd have him.

*I don't want you to leave. I need you to stay...* She would say yes. Her kiss, her caress, her words all said as much.

Silence met his pronouncement. Then a sharp bark of laughter escaped the other man. He laughed so hard tears trailed down his cheeks. "Oh, this is rich. You've gone and fallen in love with her."

A mottled flush climbed his neck and he fisted his hands at his side at an overwhelming urge to knock the mocking Rayne upon his arse once more.

"You did not realize?"

He told himself not to ask, to turn on his heel, and ignore that baiting question. "Realize, what?" he bit out.

Theodosia's brother wiped tears of mirth from his cheeks. "Why, this was all part of her plan to obtain the Theodosia." He flicked a condescending gaze over Damian. "I must admit I'm proud of my sister's resourcefulness. I never thought she could so flawlessly pull off such a scheme. She assured me with your hideous face, you'd be so starved for any woman's attentions that you'd cede anything to that creature—your heart, and in my sister's case, the Theodosia."

Damian sucked in a breath. The sound drowned out by the other man's

amused chuckle. In a move practiced since he'd been old enough to take his first steps, he angled his body away and shielded the mark upon his skin. "Lies." Did that ragged whisper belong to him?

Rayne's lips turned up in a slow, merciless smile. "I think you know the truth. How could anyone ever love you?"

With that, Rayne left, and in his wake all that remained was the cracking of Damian's useless heart.

“Where have you been?”

Damian strode through the doors of his townhouse and marched past his waiting mother.

“Mother,” he said coolly, wanting the privacy of his office, a bottle of brandy and his own humbled, broken-hearted self for company.

Apparently, his mother had altogether different plans for him. She fell into step beside him. “I have not seen you since last evening.” Which had been deliberate on his part. “And I am forced to learn in the scandal pages,” she brandished said page and waved it about, “that you danced with that, that Rayne.”

He gritted his teeth at the mention of the Rayne and the reminder of Theodosia and their meeting and her bloody brother’s words. A growl climbed up his throat and he lengthened his stride.

His mother rushed to keep pace. “Must you walk this quickly, Damian?”

“Yes.” Damian didn’t break stride but sailed into his office. His mother followed behind. He kicked the door closed with the heel of his boot.

Eyes wide, his mother said, “Damian, what is this undignified behavior?”

To demonstrate just how undignified he was, he crossed to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of brandy.

“Brandy at *this* hour?”

He held the glass up in salute and then took a long, slow swallow.

Red splotches of color slapped her cheeks. “I’d know about this fascination with Lady Theodosia Rayne.”

“I am not fascinated with her,” he said coolly. *I love her.* Altogether different. With a black curse that sent his mother’s brow up, he took another long swallow of his drink. For surely with her very duchess-like logic she’d have an apoplexy at the idea of her son, the emotionless beast driven by honor and obligations to the Devlin line, admitting to having fallen victim to that weakening emotion. And with a Rayne, no less.

“That is good.” His mother pursed her lips and ran a stare over his face. “However, surely you see how Lady Minerva and the *ton* will view your dancing with the lady, not once, but twice. We do not attend the same functions as those people.”

“Why?”

She blinked at him and shook her head slowly as though he spoke a foreign language.

“Why do we not attend the same functions?” He’d merely honored the history of their feuding families. He’d not fully thought through the truth that he and Theodosia and her angry, bitter brothers were a product of another man’s doing.

“There is a history, between us,” she sputtered. “Surely you are not forgetting hundreds of years of feuding.”

It was hard to forget something you’d never been witness to. He swirled the contents of his glass and carried it over to the window. His mother launched into a familiar lesson on the dangers presented by the Raynes. Through it, he stared at the Theodosia sword reflected in the crystal pane. That ancient weapon revered by the young lady, so much so that she’d risk ruin and the threat of Newgate. Would she also sacrifice her honor and lure him, as her brother had professed? A vise squeezed about his heart. From the moment Rayne had stormed off and left Damian staring blankly after him, all

he'd known was his own shattered heart, a heart he'd not even known he'd possessed. That organ had merely served the obligatory role of sustaining life so he might see to his responsibilities and the care of his family. Until Theodosia. He shifted his gaze to the streets below.

"...They have told horrible rumors through the years, accusing us of theft and treachery..." his mother's words periodically filtered through his thoughts, but he shoved them aside, fixed on Theodosia.

With the rapid one-two-three blink of her lids and the raw honesty in her eyes, she was not a woman capable of duplicity. He knocked his head against the windowpane. Surely he'd not been so very wrong. For if he was, it would destroy him.

"...And the matter of your brother and his Miss Roberts...and..." Those thoughts on Miss Roberts and Charles trailed off as Damian strode across the room, back to the sideboard. An unbidden smile tugged his lips in a grin as he recalled the other decanters shattered upon his floor. In one smooth movement, he pulled himself onto the mahogany surface and sidestepped the crystal decanters.

A shocked gasp rang from his mother's lips. "Have you gone mad?"

"Yes," he replied and reached up to wrest the powerful weapon from the wall. A spark of heat shot along his hand and radiated up his arm as his flesh connected with the ancient steel. He leapt from the sideboard and, with weapon in hand, made his way for the door.

"What are you doing, Damian?" his mother cried. The rustle of satin skirts indicated she'd moved. Then with an unladylike decorum he'd never before observed, she sprinted over to the door and blocked his retreat.

"I am returning the Theodosia sword."

"The what?" she eyed him as though prepared to have the cart called for Bedlam.

Damian held the weapon up for her inspection.

"The Theodosia? To call it such diminishes our family's rightful claim. It



is a gladius. An ancient gladius, and..."

"And it belongs to her." If that is what had brought her into his life, and everything to come after their meeting were lies constructed on pretense, that fealty should be rewarded with the piece that had earned that loyalty.

She flung her hands up. "Belongs to—" A choked gasp burst from her lips and she clasped her neck. "You are returning it to the Rayne woman?"

Yet the seeds of doubt planted by Rayne had since withered under all Damian had come to know about Theodosia. Theodosia would have her sword and Damian would have the truth.

His mother's wishes and the feud be damned.

"WHAT MADNESS POSSESSED YOU?"

*Blinkblinkblink.* Theodosia sat perched on the ivory upholstered sofa in the Ivory Parlor, blinking up at her mother. And father. And each of her brothers.

That particular "what madness possessed you" belonged to her mother—this time. With four sets of very displeased stares trained on her, she wet her lips. Lips Damian had kissed and explored with his own.

"She is blushing again," Aidan spat. He glowered. "And after her shameful display with the Devil this morn, I know precisely why she is blushing."

"Hush," their mother scolded. She shot a concerned glance over at the door. "If someone hears you she will be ruined." A mournful cry escaped her and she buried her face into her hands. "By a Renshaw."

"It looked a good deal worse than it was," she offered with false cheer and a blatant lie.

"Where is your loyalty," Aidan spat and came to a stop, towering over her.

She folded her hands and placed them on her lap. Studying the

interlocked digits, she remained resolute in her silence.

“What of Richard?” Aidan continued, relentless in his rage.

“Damian did not bring Richard’s sadness to him.”

Silence met her quietly spoken words. The tick tock of the ormolu clock resonated in the parlor.

Then Aidan let out a thunderous bellow and she flinched. Through their eldest brother’s stoic silence, Richard gave no outward reaction to her words. The ensuing situation may as well have belonged to another family than his own. “He is a monster.”

Her patience snapped and she shot to her feet. “On what basis do you judge him?” she cried. “All of you,” she passed a condemning stare about the room, allowing it to linger on each of her family members. Not even a week ago, she was just as resolute in her loathing for all members of the Renshaw family. She gave her head a sad, slow shake, despising herself for being so very blinded to the truth. “Do you not see, the history between our families, it is not Da—the Duke’s doings,” she amended at the narrowing of her father’s eyes. “He is not the monster you...” Shame clogged her throat, making words difficult. “He is not the monster we have taken him for.” He is a man who’d been hurt and shamed for the mark of his birth and through that had established his strength and courage to face that scorn. In doing so, he’d masked his hurts...but Theodosia, he’d let in... And God help her, she didn’t want to get out. “Richard,” she said, turning to her once sensible, now brokenhearted brother. “Damian is not to blame for your Miss Roberts. Nor is his brother.” A muscle jumped at the corner of his eye. “Miss Roberts is to blame.” She held her palms up in supplication. “Surely you’d not have her as her heart belongs to another?”

“It matters not what you say here. You’ll not sway us to that bastard’s favor. He’ll not have you anyway.”

Theodosia swung her gaze to Aidan. Her heart pounded as a sudden unease traversed a path along her spine. “What are you on about?”

A cruel, ugly laugh filled the room. “I merely enlightened the Devil as to your true motives.”

Aidan’s words came as though down a long hall and she struggled to muddle through the dirtied water of his words. “What did you do?” she asked, her voice hoarse. A harsh, ugly grin turned his lips and she flew across the room, her hands outstretched, and took him by the lapels of his jacket. “What did you tell him?” she cried, giving him a hard shake.

“I told him the truth.”

What was the truth? She didn’t think Aidan had ever known a truth in his life, so mired as he’d been in fables and legends. *Just as you were.* Oh God. Nausea roiled in her belly and she shook him again. “What truth?” she implored.

“That you’d never wed a scarred beast and merely sought the return of the —”

Theodosia shot her palm out and cracked it across Aidan’s cheek. The sickening sound of flesh meeting flesh filled the room. Only the stark, white imprint of her hand upon his face gave her little discomfort. She staggered away from him and folded her arms across her chest. “What has happened to you?” she whispered. Her pale mother glanced down as though shamed. Good. They should all be ashamed. Theodosia included. “What has happened to all of you?” she asked, her voice rising in volume. For years they’d hung the circumstances of their family upon that cool, inanimate object fought over and about through time. Silence was her only reply. The history they’d found pride in had destroyed them all. How very close she’d been to being destroyed and eaten by those dark, cold emotions. “I am ashamed to call myself a Rayne.”

“That is enough,” her father said, the quiet of his tone more powerful than had he boomed with fury. “Leave us,” he commanded his son. “You are to stay, Theo,” he said not taking his eyes from her.

She fisted the fabric of her skirts. She’d rather walk the muddied, cobbled

stones through London's Seven Dials than have this discussion with her father. Alone. Her brother's fury she could well handle. She'd braved Aidan's explosive fits of tempers since he'd been a boy. Her father's somber disapproval, she could do without.

After a long moment, Richard came to his feet and looked to Aidan. He glared at Theodosia and then all that remained of her living siblings started for the door.

Footsteps sounded in the hall and a quiet rap on the door froze the members of the room. Another knock sounded.

"Enter," her father called out at last.

The butler, Watson, who'd been with their family since Theodosia had been in leading strings opened the door. "The Duke of Devlin," he announced and stepped aside to allow Damian entry.

Hope sprung to life in her chest.

*Damian.*

He stepped into the room with long, slow strides better reserved for a predator hunting his prey.

Then she registered the weapon carried in his hands and her heart started at her family's silence to his unexpected arrival at last made sense. The legendary Theodosia Gladius only spoken of amongst their family had never before been viewed or touched, but had instead existed as the stories told them as children. Until now. Now it became real.

"Your daughter attempted to steal my sword." Damian's gaze lingered on her, his ice blue eyes, conveying nothing. "She entered my home, not once, but twice with the express purpose of stealing it."

A spasm of pain wracked her heart and, coward that she was, she wanted to look away. But for every ill word that could be uttered about her, coward was not one of them. What a fool she'd been. How had she ever believed this cold piece of metal mattered so very much?

Her father opened and closed his mouth several times, but said nothing.

“Do you know what I realized, Lavery?” Damian asked, not sparing so much as a glance for her brothers as he strolled past and then stopped before her father.

“We don’t give a damn what you realized,” Aidan exclaimed.

Their father gave his son a quelling look and the younger man looked away shamefaced. “What was it you realized, Devlin?” he barked, in a clear attempt to try and regain some mastery over this meeting.

“I came to find that I don’t give a damn about this weapon. I’m not the rightful owner.” He may as well have declared a treasonous plan to overthrow the king for as shocked as her gape-mouthed family was. “But neither are you the rightful owner, Lavery.”

Color splotched her father’s cheeks and he opened his mouth to speak.

Damian presented him his shoulder in a deliberate attempt to silence her father and turned to her. “I realized the gladius belongs to you.”

She cast a glance about for this rightful owner he spoke of and jumped at the cool, smooth metal pressed against her hand. Theodosia and Damian stood, their hands united upon the gladius. “You see, Theodosia, you would sacrifice all for it, when men such as me disrespect it by hanging it upon the wall and not considering the ancient story surrounding it. Your brothers and family,” he shifted his gaze about the room to her family members. “They will see an item and long for its return merely to wrest control back, but you, your hope was not for wealth, power, and control, but for happiness. Just as the original owner found hope and love at the edge of this blade.” His mellifluous baritone washed over her, seducing her with the beauty in his words.

“I thought you did not believe in the history of the sword.” She tightened her grip upon the hilt and he shifted his hand over hers.

Damian held her gaze. “In spite of the ancestors who came before who believed the weapon cursed, unless it was in the rightful owner’s true hands, you knew different. It can open the heart to love.” Her throat worked.

Damian shifted his attention to her still silent father. “The true fortune that comes to the rightful owner is love and hope. Theodosia believes in the power of the sword and *that* reason is more honorable than the aspirations of wealth and power dreamed up by both of our families.”

Tears flooded her vision and his beloved visage blurred before her. “I don’t want the sword.”

A collective cry went up about the room at this latest betrayal. The list was growing with a remarkable speed.

“The Theodosia,” Damian corrected, stroking his thumb over her hand. “It is yours.”

*I don’t want this cold, hard metal. I want you.* She captured her lower lip between her teeth and bit down hard. “What my brother said,” her voice caught on a shuddery sob at those hateful, hurtful words Aidan had leveled at him. “They weren’t true. I—”

Damian touched a finger to her lips. “I know that.” A tear slid down her cheek and he caught it with the pad of his thumb. “If your daughter will have me, I intend to marry her,” he spoke with the firm, unyielding tone of a man accustomed to being obeyed.

Her mother wrung her hands together and looked from her husband and sons to Damian. She shook her head once, in an almost pleading manner, a woman afraid this union would tear her family asunder.

“No.”

“Yes,” Theodosia spoke over Aidan. “Yes, I will marry you.” Even if it means she was cast out of her family, even if she earned their displeasure and scorn. “I love you,” she said softly.

Her father let out a curse. “I don’t like you, Devlin.” The earl had made no secret of the truth all these years—he hated Damian, even as he didn’t know him. All because he’d been trained to detest the Renshaws for having attained that weapon that once belonged to them. Yet there was an easing of the tension in his bulky frame.

“Surely you are not considering allowing her to wed him?” Aidan cried out.

“Leave us,” their father ordered. Mother and sons lingered a moment with mutinous sets to their mouths and then together strode angrily from the room. They closed the door hard in their wake.

Through it, Damian continued to work his hand over Theodosia’s and then carefully, he held the sword out toward her father. Damian may as well have handed over the kingdom for his care. With almost reverent hands, her father took it silently and then he gave a nod.

Her lips twitched. Of course, a man who’d revered that gladius since his own early days should un-hesitantly turn his daughter over to the care of a man who’d given over that precious item. Damian fished around the front pocket of his jacket. “I love you.” He withdrew a small bouquet of ruffled thistles.

Her heart warmed and she touched her fingers to her lips. This same man who’d first sneered at the legend behind the Theodosia now paid honor to the tales with each word, each offering. “The moment you entered my office, you failed to steal your legendary sword.” He paused. “Instead you stole my heart. Marry me.”

Emotion squeezed at her heart and another tear slid down her cheek. He was the other half of her soul she’d not known had been missing. Theodosia managed a jerky nod.

“My love for thee.” That gruff whisper that had first terrified her in his office less than a week ago now warmed her.

She leaned up on tiptoe and with their lips but a hairsbreadth apart, whispered, “For eternity it will bind us.”

## EPILOGUE

SUMMER 1810, THE MANOR OF ELSTREE,  
HERTFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND

Standing in the White Parlor, bathed in the sun's rays, Theodosia peeled back the curtains and stared outside her family's Hertfordshire properties, desperately searching.

Joy, nervousness, and fear warred in her breast. "Where is he?" she whispered to herself. What if Damian had been proven wrong? What if—?

Her husband settled his hands on her shoulders and gave a slight squeeze. "He will be here, Theo," he promised, his breath fanned against her ear. She leaned into his caress, the commanding strength he exuded drove back the fear that had been with her since the day they'd learned her brother Lucas, was, in fact, living.

Fear that the sources her husband had hired to search for Lucas' whereabouts had proven incorrect. Fear, that they'd found an altogether different man languishing in Spain.

"He will be here," Damian pledged, pressing a lingering kiss against her temple.

In the six months that she had been wed to Damian, she'd oft feared that nothing would bring all her family together with her husband.

While the Earl and Countess of Lavery had come to see Damian as part of them, Richard and Aidan had looked upon Theodosia's husband, first, with a cool disdain, and then that tangible animosity had receded...to an icy



politeness.

In the crystal windowpane, with the collection of guests present, the day proved how wrong those fears had been. Her parents sat perched, side by side on the sofa, their hands clasped tight. Hovering behind Theodosia, their tall frames erect and unbending, Aidan and Richard stood shoulder to shoulder.

Her throat worked. Yes, she'd despaired of her husband ever knowing peace with her brothers.

The floorboards groaned and she turned. Damian's arms fell to his sides, just as Richard came over.

"Thank you," Richard said hoarsely, for the tenth time since Theodosia and Damian had stepped inside the room. He clasped his brother-in-law's hand and gave a firm shake.

Her husband returned that gesture. "Please, there is no need—"

"There is every need," Richard interrupted hoarsely. "You found my brother and, for that, I can never repay you."

"I do not expect, nor want any payment," Damian said, in his gravelly tones. "You are family."

A sheen of tears blurred her vision as Richard grabbed Damian in a quick hug, slapping him on the back. Mayhap there would forever exist resentment within some of the Raynes and Renshaws...but there was a new peace and love. With each day that passed, the bond joining their families grew. As though embarrassed by his show of emotion, Richard immediately released his brother-in-law.

The rumble of carriage wheels filtered up to the parlor window and, with a gasp, Theodosia pressed her forehead to the window. "He is here," she breathed. With her husband at her side, Theodosia bolted from the room. Her family's cries and footsteps echoed behind them as they raced down the corridors.

Heart pounding loudly in her ears, she rushed into the soaring foyer just as the butler drew the door open. The smooth soles of her slippers skidded

along the marble floor and she shot her arms out to steady herself. Damian immediately caught her around the waist, keeping her upright.

“He is here,” she whispered, making for the door. Her beloved brother. Her one time protector. The friend she’d despaired of ever again seeing had returned. Because of her husband.

Abandoning her place in the foyer, she squeezed past Aidan and Richard, and stumbled outside. Theodosia suddenly stopped.

Several footmen rushed forward reached inside the carriage, and helped her brother out.

Rail thin, his hair long, and his face covered with a beard, Lucas bore little trace of the smiling man who’d gone off to fight Boney’s forces. He eyed the collection of assembled guests with bloodshot eyes. Those eyes had aged in the time since he’d been gone.

A tear slid down her cheek.

But he was home.

Grabbing her husband’s hand, she rushed forward to greet her brother.

The curse had, at last, been broken.

The End

Coming October 25, 2016 by Montlake Publishing: “The Rogue’s Wager”,

Book One in Christi Caldwell’s brand new Sinful Brides series!

The Sinful Brides features ravishing tales of London’s gaming hell rogues—  
and the women who love them.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## Biography

Christi Caldwell is the bestselling author of historical romance novels set in the Regency era. Christi blames Judith McNaught's "Whitney, My Love," for luring her into the world of historical romance. While sitting in her graduate school apartment at the University of Connecticut, Christi decided to set aside her notes and try her hand at writing romance. She believes the most perfect heroes and heroines have imperfections and rather enjoys tormenting them before crafting a well-deserved happily ever after!

When Christi isn't writing the stories of flawed heroes and heroines, she can be found in her Southern Connecticut home chasing around her eight-year-old son, and caring for twin princesses-in-training!

Visit [www.christicaldwellauthor.com](http://www.christicaldwellauthor.com) to learn more about what Christi is working on, or join her on Facebook at [Christi Caldwell Author](#), and Twitter [@ChristiCaldwell](#)

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**A PERFECTLY SCANDALOUS  
PROPOSAL**

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**TANYA ANNE CROSBY**

## PROLOGUE

ENGLAND SUMMER, 1849

Everyone called her Princess.  
E Gabe called her brat.

Of course, she weren't no princess, only a duke's daughter; still his Da said she was a "poor li'l thing" cause they kept her locked away in a schoolroom, where she learned to tally and read as though she were some bookkeeper.

That's what his Da said.

Gabe kept his gob shut, because no one knew Maggie Willingham stole away from her studies every day to come play with him. How would they know? No one ever came searching for her, and Gabe supposed they were keeping her locked away in that schoolroom because her Da didn't care to see her.

That's what Gabe believed.

Her Da was a slimy toad, who croaked more'n he breathed, and Gabe didn't like him anymore than he liked church or tight shoes.

Sprawled, belly down over his brand-new pasteboard at the crest of their favorite hill, he peered through the tall, swaying grass at the girl seated below. His heart racing, he shimmied closer, parting weeds and windflowers to get a better look.

Every day they met right here, same time, same place—ever since that

day they'd met in the garden his father tended. He was eight, Maggie was seven, and they'd become fast friends, racing through the maze of her family's garden and rolling beneath those prickly hedges, giggling as they escaped mythical beasts—mostly her bellowin' da, with his puffed-out cheeks and bright-red nose. Only now that Gabe was thirteen... his heart was doing peculiar things when he saw her. It pounded so furiously he thought it might grow legs, explode from his chest, and bound away. And his lungs—*hell's bells*—he could never seem to catch a breath anymore. It was happening again.

*Right now.*

He knit his brows as he watched Maggie, and drew in a breath, inhaling a tickling weed, only to sneeze it out again, and then he peered down the hill to see if she'd heard. He didn't know why he was hiding here, like he was afraid to face her. She was his best friend in the entire world. But she was a silly little girl. And if his fellows ever discovered he still met with her daily, he'd never hear the end.

In fact, he thought about leaving now—picking up his pasteboard and skulking away—until she slumped forward, and her heaving sobs reached his ears.

Driven by concern over the thought of her distress, he drew himself up, slapped at his clothes to relieve them of dirt, and then abandoned his pasteboard, marching down the hill fast as his booted feet would carry him.

She was fine, he reassured himself. Likely, she'd tripped over that stupid dress *she* was wearing. He missed the clothes she used to wear.... and even more so the way they used to play together, scuffling around in the dirt.

She didn't seem to notice him even once he was standing behind her, so preoccupied was she with her caterwauling and Gabe stood behind her, waiting for her to look up.

*Was it rude to interrupt a girl while she was crying?*

His mother and sisters did so little of that caterwauling; he didn't know.

Used to be he would have rapped Maggie on the head and run away. She might have chased him screaming. But now, he couldn't even bring himself to touch her.

Her hair was too pretty, her curls arranged in such a manner that even her earnest wailing couldn't properly muss them.

He stood, mesmerized by the way the sunlight glistened over her lustrous chestnut curls, and his heart did a few more annoying flippity-flops as he waited for her to notice he was standing behind her. All the while, he had the most disconcerting urge to sit down and hug her... stroke her beautiful hair... comfort her.

It weren't like her to cry.

In fact, he couldn't remember ever seeing her shed so many tears.

One time, she'd scolded *him* for wailing after he'd turned and run into that naked statue in her father's maze—the one with the leaf over his man parts. Afterward, he'd grown a knot on his forehead the size of an apple, but Maggie told him to grow up and boxed his ears for good measure.

Devil take her. If she'd been a boy, he might have boxed her back. But, of course, she wasn't a boy, and that fact was becoming more and more apparent by the day.

Even now, his heart thumped faster, and his face grew warm as he stood waiting, wondering if he should speak up... or perhaps maybe tap her on the head to get her attention. For the first time in all the years he had known her, Gabe felt like running away before she noticed him.

Longingly, he turned to gauge the distance to the crest of the hill and considered dashing back up and diving for cover behind the tall grass. But... he didn't move; he stood, feet rooted to the ground, until she glanced up, and Gabe felt a disconcerting leap in his breast.

Watery green eyes met his blue.

Maggie gave a shriek, and he leapt back in surprise, responding with a yelp of his own. But then she didn't move, and he thought it might be

because she couldn't get herself up in that stupid dress.

"You scared me!" she complained.

She didn't look one bit grateful for his presence.

"I... er..."

Gabe glanced away, up the hill where his pasteboard lay hidden, waiting....

He felt timid, as though she had caught him at something he wasn't supposed to be doing—only that made no sense, because he wasn't doing anything at all. He'd only wanted to show her his new pasteboard... and... he wanted to take her sliding, and maybe hear her giggle. Only now... the thought of snuggling so close to her, putting his arms around her middle... made his chest ache.

"I saw you blubbering," he said lamely.

"Well..." Her brows drew together. Her hands went to her hips. It almost soothed him to see the spark of fury in her eyes—almost, but not quite, because there was something different about the way she was looking at him today.

"Well, what?" he snapped, annoyed she was staring at him as though he had a wart-covered face.

"You could have said something," she said, then added plaintively, "I've been waiting for you all morning!"

Precisely as she had without fail for the past four years, so why did that thought make Gabe feel so light-headed?

*Hells bloody bells.*

"Well," he countered, trying to sound more collected than he was. "I'm here now, aren't I?" He swiped a damp palm across his trousers and frowned at the catch in his voice. "Did you... um... fall? Is that why you're crying like a baby?"

"No." Her voice sounded odd.

Gabe scratched his head. "Are you hot?"



She screwed her face, looking bemused. “Hot?”

He knelt beside her in the grass. “You look overheated to me.”

“No.” Tears pooled in her eyes.

“Then why’s your face so red, and why are you crying?”

Maggie shrugged, looking not at all like herself.

“What’s the matter, brat?” he taunted, and then, once again, fat tears slid from her lucid green eyes and Gabe sobered. “Maggie? What’s wrong?”

She wept earnestly now, casting her head into her hands, and Gabe, without another thought, sat and scooted close, placing an arm around her shoulders. He lowered his forehead to her wet cheek and whispered against her face. “What is it, Mags? It can’t be so awful as that?”

“Oh, but it is!” Maggie cried, and then she cast herself down on the ground and buried her head into crossed arms.

Gabe laid down beside her, heat rising into his face as he did so. She shrugged away, elbowing his cheek, and his face burned hotter as he realized how close he’d come. He winced but didn’t shy away. He wouldn’t leave her now—not when she needed him.

Hell’s bells. She smelled so nice, like her father’s roses after a summer rain.

Gabe tried to concentrate on her words, but somehow couldn’t.

“Don’t you understand?” she was saying, and Gabriel blinked, confused. God knew he didn’t. He hadn’t heard a word she’d said.

What was more, he didn’t recognize his own body—nor his voice—or even the girl he’d known for so long. He rubbed at his cheek to ease the sting from her blow.

“I can *never* see you again,” she exclaimed. “Never! Don’t you understand?”

Good grief, she was beginning to act like a dumb girl. “Hells bells, Maggie,” he said, reasoning with her. “You see me every day.”

“Not anymore,” she said brokenly, and she shook her head sadly, sobbing

as she lifted her gaze.

Gabe frowned. He understood she was telling him something important, but he couldn't concentrate on her words with those sweet green eyes focused on him so intently.

"My father says never again—oh, Gabe!" she cried woefully. "He says I must never, ever see you again, and he's going to make your papa send you away."

Her words registered at last.

She was not overreacting to his spending more time with the boys.

Gabriel blinked. "Send me away?" She nodded, her cheeks rosy and streaked with tears. He felt the blow of her words like a fist to his gut. "Why?"

"Because he says 'tis unseemly to play with you—a boy—and if your papa wants to remain employed at Blackwood, he must send you far, far away."

Gabe felt numb. His gut roiled. "But... where will I go?"

She shrugged. "Away... to school, I think." Her brows slanted sadly. "He says your papa will do it because he knows what is best."

Gabe sank from his knees to his bottom and said, "My da would not send me away." But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true. His Da had seven mouths to feed, including his own, and he would do whatever it took to be certain the entire family was secure. If the duke of Blackwood demanded he send Gabriel away... away, Gabe would go. He stared for the longest while at the windflowers dancing with a gentle breeze. "When?" he asked quietly.

"I... I don't know," she said, and then she threw her arms about Gabriel, embracing him ardently. "Oh, my dearest, Gabe!"

"Hell's bloody bells," he breathed, and sat, confused by a barrage of emotions he couldn't untangle. He thought perhaps he hated her father, but he wasn't about to say that. He put his arms about Maggie, returning her embrace, uncertain whether the tears that pricked at his eyes were for the

family he knew he would leave so soon... or for the best friend he didn't think he could live without.

Together, they sat for a long, long while, embracing, and Gabe didn't feel the least bit ashamed for the small kiss he bestowed on her cheek.

She peered up at him, green eyes glistening with tears, and Gabe looked down into that familiar face he knew so well and stared, memorizing the contour of her face, the curve of her lips, every freckle on her nose.

Maggie had been his best friend for more than five years, his confidant, his playmate. And now he realized with a terrible jolt that he was losing her... and in his heart, he'd begun to think of her as... something more.

"Promise you will never forget me," she implored as tears spilled from his face onto his shoulders and sleeves.

"I promise," he said dumbly. And regardless, he meant it with every fiber of his being. He plucked a windflower, pressing it into Maggie's hand. "Promise you won't forget me, Maggie."

She hugged him tight. "I Promise," she said.

His senses reeled. The scent of her teased him. The feel of her hair sticking to his face with her tears, the softness of her cheek against his own... it dizzied him. "I... I... I love you," he said, with a bewildered sense of self-discovery.

"I...I... love you, too," she said in return.

And together they sat, embracing when words were too difficult to speak.

Someday, he would come back for her.

Someday, he would be good enough—not simply a gardener's son.

Someday...

*June 1, 1862*

*Dearest Mr. Smith,*

*I realize it has been some time since our previous  
correspondence...*

Lady Margaret Willingham tapped her quill on a drying pad. Blotting the tip, she stared at the ink stain that remained.

But, of course, if she'd had her druthers, she would be done with men. Moneyed or not, she didn't especially enjoy being told what to do, when to do it, or how and why to do it. She saw enough "romance" between her father, mother and grandparents. Not a one of them had been enamored of their partners, and men could be despotic—her father being the worst offender.

Thinking about the course of action she'd set in motion, and wondering what the devil was taking her agent so long, she rapped the tip of the quill on the old desk, uncertain why she was writing this silly letter. That poor man rarely responded. He didn't know how to read. Dear George would often hold her letters until the parson came to visit, because the few times he'd replied, his parson had composed them. It was simply that, even after all these years,

she felt a stronger connection with that silly old gardener than she ever had to anyone else.

How sad was that? How utterly and despicably miserable.

Frowning, she studied the room—her office now. It once was her father's. All the somber colors—the deep-blue hues and dark golds—along with the heavy drapery had always given her a strange sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, they were familiar and comforting, on the other... they made her feel like marching across the room and ripping them down, if only to let in a bit of sunlight. At the moment, she had them open as far as they would go—not far at all—revealing the vivid green lawns and the sunlit rose beds, far less glorious now than they once were.

She sighed wistfully. Once upon a time she would have braved that thorny weald, ripping her yellow taffeta gown on ravaging bushes, knowing good and well that, once she was situated behind them, despite all the pricks and scrapes, she and Gabe would be safe, and no one would come looking. They'd talked for hours and hours behind those prize roses, laughing behind their hands when his father came peeking through the garden searching for them—usually at the behest of her father. And, of course, that never boded well.

She shook off her reverie, then set the pen down with a huff.

Devil take that man. Why should she now have to wed only to keep what was already hers? All of this was unbearable. How could her father have put her in such an untenable position? How could he have cared so little? Lord knew, all Maggie had ever wished to do was please him—her mother, too, though neither of them were ever particularly satisfied.

Or rather, to put it delicately, her mother had been a delicate woman, striving so hard to win her father's affection, but never quite succeeding in the endeavor. Her greatest sin had been to bear the man a daughter, and then cock up her toes before she could bear him a son. Her father never forgave her for it—Margaret either. Until the day he'd breathed his last, he'd

lamented his lack of a male heir to carry on the family name. With his dying breath, he'd wept for that nonexistent son. All the while Margaret had remained by his side, brushing the damp wisps of hair from his florid face. And regardless... not for an instant had she suspected he would turn against her so completely.

Her father had never spoken an ill word to her, though he'd never been a doting father. He was a man who'd abhorred weakness of spirit and had determined that if he couldn't have his male heir, he would, at least, force his only child to rise above abhorrent female failings—and, truly, Margaret tried so hard to rise to his expectations. She'd studied her letters and exercised her numbers until her eyes crossed and her head ached. Under her father's tutelage, she'd even managed the household accounts—and managed them well. Her reward had been a handful of pats upon the head, and an occasional, “Good show, Margaret.” And much to her shame, every precious ounce of her self-worth had depended upon those rare pats of approval. On the day they read his will, she'd realized the utter folly of her pride. All his *good shows* had amounted to flapdoodle, and in the end, he'd preferred to entrust his estates—all of them—to a brother he abhorred, or some unworthy stranger, rather than to a daughter who'd labored all her life to be all that he'd wished of her. Quite simply, if Margaret should fail to wed before midnight on her twenty-fifth birthday, she would surrender every farthing to her uncle. *Everything*. Not only the inheritable estates—which had already been forfeit—but *everything*.

But that wasn't the worst of it; it was the fact that one way or the other, she would lose her freedom as well. So, then, her choice, it seemed, was to lose some of it now to a husband she no more wanted than she wanted chin hairs, or later, to an uncle who would take nearly as much joy in caging her as her own father had.

Given such a straight comer, there was no choice to be made... none at all. At the stroke of midnight, precisely two weeks hence, for better or worse,

Margaret would, indeed, be wed—but under her own conditions.

And still...

She worried her lip as she reconsidered, for she was far from finding a suitable candidate. She shouldn't have put off the search so long. She had done so, knowing there were plenty of greedy souls out there, but time was growing short, and it simply didn't seem fair that if a man chose to, he could live his life as he saw fit, answering to no one but himself, while a woman had few respectable options.

Her brow furrowed as she lifted the quill, once again setting it to paper, not daring to consider the true reason she was writing. And nevertheless resolved, she finished drafting the letter to the old gardener, hoping that in detailing her abominable position to her sweet old friend, it might bring answers to light.

*... forgive me, dearest sir. It is not my intention to burden you. At times like this, like a mathematical equation, it helps me to see a problem drawn out upon paper. The solution should present itself shortly, no doubt. And I've an agent working on the matter as well. Never fear.*

Delicately tapping out a period at the end of her sentence, Margaret reached up to dip the quill again, and some movement caught her gaze on the lawn.

Behind a distant oak, she spied two figures embracing. *Lovers*. Modesty should have compelled her to turn away, but curiosity held her fast. It was difficult to say at such a distance, but she thought it might be Robbie, the new stable boy, and perhaps Bethany, the cook's daughter.

Bethany ducked beneath and away from Robbie's embrace, hiding herself behind a tree. The two of them circled that tree as Margaret watched, lovers

at play, and her heart squeezed. She'd never been one to woolgather all that much, and she prided herself on her pragmatism, but at this very moment, she couldn't help but feel wistful over all that could have been and now would never be—doubtless a result of her circumstances, because it had been a long, long time since she'd daydreamed of stolen kisses... or hiding behind rose bushes with devilish little boys.

Glancing down at the pen in her hand, she chastised herself for a fool. Such things were better not even considered at this late hour. It was much, much too late for girlish fancies, and she wouldn't be marrying for love, at any rate.

Silly chit, she chided herself—Did she know anyone who'd married for love? Certainly not her mother or father.

*No, no, no...* such musings were best left for giggling young schoolgirls—something she was no longer.

*Alas, but once...*

Her memories drifted to an age when she might have leapt from her bed every single morning, eager to be away and discover all the mysteries the day should hold... eager to share each jewel of discovery with a sweet boy with whom she'd fancied herself in love. *Gabe. Gabe Smith.* The gardener's son—a black-haired boy with an adorably wicked face and eyes that twinkled with life and mirth.

What a silly little twit she had been.

Waving the memory away, she peered down at her meticulous script. Dare she ask after Gabe? Even considering such a thing, something like butterfly wings fluttered within her breast. But it wouldn't be the first time, and such inquiries had never served her. Every time she'd ever asked about Gabe, George's response was always the same: "He is well, thank you for asking." And Gabe himself never sent regards.

Margaret sighed heavily, her gaze returning to the window, to the sprawling lawns beyond the leaded glass. The faint, but distant ring of



laughter reached her ears... laughter that brought a sting to her eyes.

*So much for promises.*

Blinking away the threat of tears, she forced her gaze away from the window, blaming the glare for her watery eyes, and then, shaking herself free of such pointless reverie, she penned a brief closing to her letter, signed her name, and finally sprinkled a bit of sand to set the ink, then set the letter aside. There was no time to waste with frivolity when she still needed to pen the letter to her agent.

She trusted Mr. Goodman well enough to manage the inquiries and initial interviews. He was already aware of what she expected of a suitor; she needed only draw out a list of her requirements—foremost, he must be a commoner. If her father had imagined for one instant that Margaret would marry some distinguished bore, he'd been mistaken. After all her years of dealing with pompous men of every age—popinjays who wanted nothing more from her than quick, sweet smiles and dutiful silence, Margaret intended to marry whomever she damned well pleased. Call it revenge if you like, call it defiance, but there it was. Her father's will *hadn't* specified *who* she must wed, only that she must, and she intended to have the final say in this matter.

Never again would any man manipulate her life. Not if Margaret could help it. She only hoped her father would turn in his grave over what she was about to do, and the thought of *that* made her giggle beneath her breath.

Resolved, she opened a drawer and drew out another sheet of paper. Arranging it before her on the desk, precisely so, then she dipped the quill into the inkwell, and began a very explicit letter of instruction to her agent, after which listed her requirements...

*• He mustn't be too attractive—only marginally so.*

*She didn't wish to be tempted, nor distracted.*

*• He mustn't have gambling addictions.*

- *He mustn't expect to share her private quarters.*
- *He mustn't expect children.*
- *He mustn't expect more than £4,000 per year.*
- *He could, indeed, keep a mistress after a proper period, if he must, but only if he promised to be discreet.*

In the end, her list was quite extensive, but fair, with more than one hundred and fifty “concerns.”

Yes, that was a better word than “requirements.” The last thing she wished to do was to trap a man in misery. But, then again, the last thing Margaret *ever* meant to do was fall in love. Love was the invention of innocents—not a reality of this world.

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LONDON, JUNE 15

One could take the man from the country, but one could never take the country out of the man.

The London apartment was modestly furnished, with rugged pieces that emphasized Gabriel's meager beginnings. He made no apologies for his provinciality. It was part of who he was. No matter the formality of his education, he was still a wee boy in ragged breeches, and he would go to his grave with imagined holes in the soles of his shoes. It annoyed him to no end to consider the betrothal prospects available to a man of means—most of them pea-brained twits, who were far more concerned with putting their breasts on display than they were about revealing just a wee bit of sexy wit.

Sighing, he struck a match, sinking back into his favorite chair as it flared. He lit the cheroot, then sucked the smoke into the back of his throat as he surveyed the familiar room—terrible habit he'd picked up. He ought to put it aside as swiftly as the Earl of Aberdeen seemed to put aside his lovers. But then, as had already been established; Gabriel couldn't blame the fool man, as there was only one girl in all his life who hadn't fantastically bored him, and she was long gone from his life—and no doubt he'd embellished that memory as well.

As for the decor of his office... his father had taken up woodworking after retiring from his position with the Duke of Blackwood, as London

hardly offered any occasion to “get the dirt under one’s nails.” A simple wooden rocker sat beside his hearth, evidence of his father’s labors. Draped over that chair was a plush quilt his mother had stitched for him years ago, “for those wintry nights at school.”

It was only the two of them now—he and his Da—as his mother had passed away some years ago. His siblings were scattered to the winds—a sister in Boston, another in New York; a brother in India and another in Scotland. None were flush enough to care for their father, so the task fell to Gabriel, and it suited him well.

However, he’d thought a move from the country would prove beneficial. Damned if his old man wasn’t behaving strangely of late. All day long, at intervals, he’d been coming into the room as though he had something to say, and then departing again, shaking his head like an absent-minded fool—something his wily old pop was not. At sixty-eight, his Da was shrewd as they came, and Gabriel supposed he must have something to say, although his father had never had much difficulty in speaking his mind. It wasn’t long before he peeped into the room again, and this time he entered, carrying a small box. “Busy, son?”

Gabriel eyed his father curiously. It didn’t take a mastermind to deduce he was not. “No,” he answered anyway.

“Good. Very good.” His father approached the desk with his strange little box, and as Gabriel watched him, he thought for the first time that his father appeared old. His mother’s death had aged him, truly, but somehow, in the space of these past few days, he seemed... wizened. He didn’t speak, nor did Gabriel, as he watched his father place the small carton on the desk beside him. But concern for his father’s health kept Gabriel’s attention from the box for the moment.

He sat up, withdrawing the cheroot from between his teeth. And it was only then that he noticed the folded parchment clutched in his father’s fist. His gaze settled on that and somehow, intuitively, he understood the box’s

contents must be the source of his father's agitation.

After a moment, his father pushed the parchment across Gabriel's desk, then sat in a facing chair.

"What is it?"

"Open it."

Setting the cheroot down in the ashtray, Gabriel did as his father requested, lifting it and unfolding the parchment carefully. The date marked was only five days past, the scribble unfamiliar. He meant to turn the paper over to locate a signature, but his father shot up from his chair and prevented him with a hand. "Read it, Gabriel," he said sternly.

Gabriel's brows drew together as he turned the paper back over to begin.

"Dearest Mr. Smith," he began aloud. "I realize it has been some time since our previous correspondence..."

He lapsed into silence as he continued, the tone of the letter becoming painfully familiar.

*I am certain I don't know why I am writing to you with this dilemma, dear sir, but you have ever been so inclined to listen to my ravings. Do you remember all those hours I rambled on whilst you tended my father's roses? I must have worn your patience quite thin, and yet you listened so mindfully, imparting now and again such wonderful jewels of wisdom. Did I ever thank you properly?*

Brows furrowed, Gabriel peered up from the letter, eyeing his father with some bewilderment. He wasn't certain he wished to continue, but curiosity got the better of him and he continued reading, his heartbeat quickening.

*It seems, once again, I must find myself babbling, albeit on paper—though I do hope you'll bear with me. Dear me, how to begin... From the beginning, I must suppose. By the time you read this I will most likely be wed—not that I wish to, but it seems I've no choice. Already, I've written my agent with the terms, and he is conducting a rather unconventional search on my behalf—for a husband, you see...*

The letter expounded, explaining rather candidly the terms of her father's preposterous will. She expressed with some vehemence, her distaste for the proviso, and her reluctance to comply. And yet, her tone was, in fact, resigned.

Gabriel peered up once more, uncertain how it was he was supposed to react to the letter's disclosure—or to his father's apparently well-kept secret. "You've corresponded with her before?"

His father nodded, nodding at the carton at his side. Half-heartedly, Gabriel peered into the box, finding the answer to his question. It was filled to the brim with crusty old letters. And though his brain went suddenly numb, his hand automatically reached into the carton, withdrawing a letter... addressed to his father... from Lady Margaret Willingham—and then another. And another.

He cast an unsettled glance at his father as he removed a fistful of papers from the storage container.

Through all these years, he'd never once dared seek Maggie out—not even for a fleeting glimpse—not since the day he'd left Blackwood at her father's command. He'd been handsomely compensated for his departure—his father, too. In fact, it had afforded Gabriel an education the likes of which

no lad of his station might ever have acquired. And for his part, they had given his father a substantial enough pension so that he, too, might enjoy the last of his days without working his fingers to nubs. And for all this, Gabriel might have been grateful, but he'd chosen anger as his balm and he'd wallowed in it day by day, year after year.

All this while... his father had been corresponding with her.

In Gabriel's youthful pride, he'd vowed to eradicate Maggie from his memory, and to vindicate himself to the world. And so, he'd committed his years to furthering his assets and his influence, resolved to show Blackwood he could make money enough to provide for any man's daughter. But somewhere along the way, he'd forgotten his *raison d'être*. Growing his business and his money had become objectives unto themselves, and he'd stepped on backs aplenty to gain what he'd desired. And even so, he'd never truly forgotten her—nor his anger. That much was achingly clear to him as he stared at the elegant scribble of her pen.

"She spent a great deal of time after you left reading in the rose arbor," his father explained. "I got to know her well."

Gabriel couldn't be certain what he was feeling. But there was no denying the churning in his gut, or the anger he suddenly felt toward his father for keeping Margaret's letters from him. "You never said." His tone was clipped, cool, restrained.

It was a long, long moment before his father seemed able to find his own voice. "I thought it best, son. He gave us *so much* money to leave her be. He didn't even want me near her, and, as you know, he asked me to leave, as well. Your ma and I decided it was best to hide the letters."

Gabriel pursed his lips. What good would it do him to be angry now? What was done was done. The time to make things right with Margaret had long since passed. Even so, he felt a sense of emptiness as he reached into the box, his eyes scanning the addresses. *So many letters*.

"You did nothing wrong, Da. These letters are all addressed to you, not to

me. What concern are they to me?”

Once again, his father shrugged. “Before you come to any conclusions, I think you should read them, son,” he said. “All of them.”

Gabriel longed to pick the carton up and push it across the desk, but he needed to read them. Some part of him regretted all this time, never knowing how she’d fared, never having asked, never daring to insinuate himself upon her life. He’d gone through his years shoving Margaret’s image from his memory, trying not to think of her—mostly because every time he did so, he saw her face as it was the day he’d left her at the foot of their favorite hill—and felt anger anew that he’d been judged and found unfit for the *princess of Blackwood*. They were only children... but Gabriel had fancied himself in love with the lass, and none of the proper lovers he’d known since—even in their maturity—had ever come close to filling the void Margaret left. And yet... so much time had passed...

She likely couldn’t pick him out of a crowd, and he wasn’t too certain he would recognize her either... except he could... he’d kept track of her comings and goings... from a distance.

Oblivious to his father’s presence, he began to read, commencing with the letter he held in his hand, and found that, in the most recent, written within the past two years, there was no mention of Gabriel at all.

But he pulled out a few more and found one that was written soon after his departure. The entire letter was an inquiry of him: How did he fare at school? Did he ever ask about her? Did he like his new friends? Had anyone thought to send him a blanket? Because in winter one could never have enough blankets.

He glanced up, his gaze drawn toward the rocker, to the blanket his mother had sent him that first winter after he’d gone to school and his eyes stung.

His father seemed to understand what he was thinking. “Your mother wept for weeks after you left. When Margaret suggested sending a blanket,



she commenced to stitching it at once, and she and your sisters worked night and day to complete it. It was a good idea.”

Gabriel turned to look into his father’s eyes. They were red-rimmed over the memory he’d shared, but full of affection. “I’ve never said this to you, Gabe. Perhaps I’ll never have the chance to say it again... I love you, son. Anything we did, we did because we thought it was the right thing to do.”

“I know, Da,” Gabriel said, as he reached into the box again, eager to learn more. He searched for and found a few more written about the same time: more of the same page-long inquiries, only vaguely aware that his father rose from the chair. “I realize it’s been a long time, but read them all, and I think you’ll know what to do. In the end, a man must do what he must, son. Ken?”

Gabriel nodded, and his father left him to peruse the letters in privacy. The majority had been written during the first three years after his departure for Eton. And then, very slowly, they’d dwindled. By the final few years, her letters had grown sparse, nor had she asked after him any longer. A tinge of melancholy passed over him.

If he closed his eyes... he could almost remember the way she’d looked that day when she’d told him she could no longer see him... the anguished expression on her lovely face... her beautiful hair shining beneath the noonday sun, her green eyes sparkling with diamond-like tears.

He could not forget the way it made him feel.

Somehow, through all their childhood together, he’d managed to overlook the disparaging differences in the sizes of their homes. He’d forgotten... every time she’d smiled at him... that he’d had holes in his breeches, and sleeves that were much too short. She, on the other hand, had worn silks with fragile white lace. He’d failed to comprehend what it had meant that whilst she’d had servants to tend her, his family did the serving. And then, for the first time in Gabriel’s life, he’d been made painfully aware of the differences between them... that day, in his innocence, he’d promised never to forget her.

God knows he'd tried, despite his vow. She'd promised never to forget him, too...

He stared at the letters scattered over his desk now—so *many* letters. She'd kept her promise for so long, and Gabriel realized that he'd failed her. But he could still make amends. It wasn't too late.

His father was right, he did know what to do. Margaret Willingham needed someone who would set her free once wed; he could be that man.

First thing tomorrow morning, he'd speak to Philip Goodman. She didn't seem to understand that whatever contract her agent might draw up for her, no matter how solidly worded, it would be much too easily breached. Any man with suitable connections could render her prenuptial bootless with so little industry it would make her head spin. As an attorney, Gabriel understood how effortless that undertaking could be. Even after the Hardwicke Marriage Act, which effectively tightened some of the conditions for marriage, once a husband and wife exchanged vows, the wife lost, for all intents and purposes, all rights over any property she possessed. All she owned came into the control and disposal of her husband—everything, even so far as herself—prenuptial be damned.

Gabriel was suddenly determined to ensure that Margaret was well and duly protected. He refused to allow her to lose everything when she'd labored so long and hard to earn what little her father had bequeathed her.

Neither did he need her money. Thanks to her father's *generosity* and the success of his firm, he was more than comfortable.

But, knowing Margaret, she was proud and wise and barefaced, and he determined it would take nothing short of cunning to coax her into accepting his help.

Well, Goodman owed him, and with his help, Gabriel intended to present Margaret Willingham with a proposal she couldn't refuse.

Oh, he had no illusions. After all these years, he realized he wasn't the man she would have chosen to wed were her circumstances different. But he

wasn't above employing whatever Machiavellian tactics were needed to bring about the one thing he hoped would redeem him. Whatever it took, before these nine days were through, he planned to be married to her, and, in fact, he decided it couldn't wait until morning. He left the scattered letters where they lay, and found his coat, shrugging into it as he hurried out the door, with the express purpose of paying Philip Goodman's London residence a midnight visit.

Margaret tried not to pace but couldn't stop.

The clock struck five, and they'd yet to arrive—Philip Goodman and her “spouse to be”—whoever he should be.

Her stomach fluttered over the import of what she was about to do: wed a stranger. But it couldn't be helped. There was no use fretting over it now. She only wished Mr. Goodman hadn't waited until the eleventh hour to introduce this man; so much could go wrong!

Goodman was supposed to have conducted the initial interviews, and then allowed Margaret to interview thereafter. And it had gone precisely so with the first three candidates, and then suddenly, Mr. Goodman had come into her house with an exclamation of glee, and he'd informed her that her search was over. *Wonderful*, she'd thought. *Wonderful!*

But, of course, she was supposed to have interviewed him thereafter. Then, one mishap after another ensued—most notably, a delay in his arrival from London—and now she didn't even know what he looked like.

Pacing the hand-tufted fine-wool Persian carpet, she tried to recall everything Mr. Goodman had said of him—considering the circumstances, not much. Perhaps if she knew more, she wouldn't be so ill at ease, but as it was, she only knew his name—Gabriel S. Morgan—and that he and Goodman were personal friends, acquaintances since their days at Eton. She

also knew he was an attorney. That he was kind, if not precisely warm. He did not aspire to having children—one of her prerequisites—and neither did he spend time at White's. He wasn't old. He'd made himself a small fortune and would be quite satisfied with the sum she had offered. More than anything, he craved the distinction of her name.

But she didn't know much else about him.

Evidently, Mr. Goodman went to Mr. Morgan for some counsel and left his office with the perfect spousal candidate—Mr. Morgan himself. In fact, Mr. Morgan had helped to draw up the necessary papers to ensure Margaret's position in this conjugal union, and he had given her every concession and more. Margaret was not unfamiliar with legalese and there was nothing in the contract that gave her pause. Still, she might have doubted the arrangement, only because of who it was, except that she trusted Mr. Goodman's judgement to the utmost degree and, well... she had a nose for such things. Moreover, she would never be so witless as to take a man's word in this matter; she'd also had the papers looked over by an objective party, and despite that they'd been found to be in perfect order, she'd attached her own addendum. If he misrepresented himself in any way he would forfeit all monies.

Therefore, once everything was settled, there had been no need to continue the search. Gabriel S. Morgan came highly recommended.

Even so, Margaret would feel so much better had she at least been able to interview the candidate herself. And now here they were, and she had yet to set her eyes upon her “betrothed.”

Perhaps the man was a horrid little troll? Short, squat, with a florid face and a bulbous nose?

Indeed, perhaps he was afraid that, if she saw him, the prospect of marrying him would repel Margaret? Well, she would have set his mind at ease; she didn't have any intentions of carrying on with him as though they were man and wife. She was wedding him for one reason, and one reason

only: to save her inheritance. Once she was gone, she couldn't care less what happened to her father's money, and it would serve him right to have no legitimate heirs to inherit—wasn't that his plan, anyway?

Glancing up at the clock—one quarter after the hour—Margaret's sense of unease intensified.

*Famous!*

For expediency, she had purposely arranged for him to arrive at Blackwood. But even as close as they were to the border, they wouldn't be arriving at Gretna Green until near midnight. And that wouldn't do. They *must* be wed *before* the midnight hour.

At long last, there was a knock at the door, and the sound gave Margaret no small measure of relief. Praying it was Mr. Goodman with her unspeakably wonderful troll, she rushed toward the foyer, swinging the doors open to find that her manservant had already answered, and was even now allowing entry to her long overdue guests. Philip Goodman was the first to enter, brushing the night's fine mist from his black wool coat. Her *fiancé* came next, and Margaret, much to her dismay, found she could but gape, slack-jawed, from the doorway of her father's office.

*Oh, dear. He was no troll.*

In fact, whatever Gabriel S. Morgan lacked in breeding, he made up for in good looks. Much to her dismay, he was a fine, fine specimen of a man, with his shining head of black hair. Also, in total defiance of convention—something that rather appealed to her, truth be known—he wore his hair unfashionably long. But—and this was important—his physicality strictly violated the terms of their agreement. In no uncertain terms, she had specified that he must *not* be overly attractive, only marginally so. But she might have guessed a man might not be so fine a judge over another man's looks.

Or it was also possible that Goodman knew this violated her terms, and he had openly defied her. Now, what else should she worry over?

Recovering herself from the shock, Margaret drew in a breath, unaware

that she did so. Still oblivious to her presence, the two men bade Godfrey to announce them while Margaret attempted to find her voice—to reassure them it wasn't necessary. She was already painfully aware of their presence. But, discombobulated as she was, words wouldn't seem to form.

Bronzed and quite well hewn, Gabriel Morgan's face was a stunning contrast to the pristine white stock he wore. Dressed in a somber black evening coat and trousers, he cut a dashing figure. And, yes, good Lord, his eyes—he glanced her way—uncanny blue, they hinted at the most devilish of thoughts.

Damnation, their sudden scrutiny left Margaret, once again, breathless.

He smiled then, making Margaret feel just a wee bit disoriented—*and warm!*

Indeed, with no more than a glance and a slight curve to his lips, he'd stolen her thoughts, made her head reel and her heart leap. She had the very sudden and disconcerting sensation of having walked straight into a brick wall. She, who'd sworn men were all little different, had somehow, in the space of only seconds, found herself abashed over how very *different* this man seemed to make her feel.

*Too warm.*

*And heady.*

*Dizzy.*

*Oh, yes, undoubtedly dizzy.*

Goodness. She was going to have to work at remedying such things—perhaps build him a small house elsewhere on the property, where she wouldn't have to see him each morning for breakfast. Because then, how would she eat?

Even now, her stomach was in a roil.

Resisting the urge to fan herself, Margaret pushed away from the door frame, focusing her gaze on Philip Goodman, giving him a scolding glance. "At last!" she said, admonishing both.

“Do you gamble?” she asked her fiancé, without bothering to look at him. She snatched her gloves from the table and determined to wrest some measure of control.

“No, I do not.”

“Good.” She tugged on her white gloves. “Do you have *any* concerns at all over *any* of my provisions?”

He gave her a single, exaggerated shake of his head as she finally addressed him. “Not unless you’ve added something I’m not aware of.”

His voice was entirely too silky, and none of her questions had the least bit of effect to rattle him. His composure made her feel all the more hot and bothered. She longed to tug off her gloves and slap him with them, Mr. Goodman as well.

“Well... do you now have *one*, or have you ever considered acquiring a mistress?”

“Acquiring?”

“Well, yes, isn’t that what you men do—acquire things?”

He arched a brow. “No. No mistress for me,” he said.

“Well,” Margaret countered. “You’d best be considering it, Mr. Morgan. I am not in the market for a lover and this arrangement does not include the marriage bed.”

Both brows shot up at her plain-speaking, but Margaret didn’t give him time to respond. She turned to address her butler, keeping her gaze deliberately averted from Mr. Morgan’s face. “Please have the carriage brought about,” she directed him. “We’ve no time to waste.”

“Yes, mum,” Godfrey said, and he bowed as he took his leave, completely unaccustomed to her temper and looking bemused.

She turned again to address Mr. Goodman, all the while avoiding Mr. Morgan’s gaze, as she had already determined it to be most detrimental to her composure.

It would have been far easier to deal with him had he been a toad.



As for Mr. Goodman, she would cross words with him *later*.

“Come now. We must take our leave at once,” she apprised both, trying to maintain some measure of aplomb, despite feeling scattered.

“Lady Margaret, please forgive our tardiness,” Mr. Goodman appealed. He removed his hat, shaking it off, and clutching it before him as he said, “I’m afraid we managed to run into a bit of bedlam.” He peered up uneasily at his companion.

Although she had the urge to, Margaret didn’t follow his gaze. “Bedlam?”

Mr. Goodman’s brows lifted. “Well, yes, but no worries, Lady Margaret... ‘tis nothing for you to be concerned over. ‘Tis bedlam of a personal nature, I assure you. Quite personal—and tedious—and—”

“Never mind,” Margaret said. “I understand.”

“Thank you, mum,” Mr. Goodman said. “And now I should be pleased to have you make the belated acquaintance of Mr. Gabriel Ssss...” He received a very sudden, but discreet and rude elbow to the ribs. “Morgan!” he finished.

Margaret furrowed her brow. “Sssss Morgan?”

“No, just S,” Mr. Morgan interjected, and Margaret barely had the nerve to peer at him out of the corner of one eye. “Gabriel S. Morgan.”

Mr. Goodman’s face was flushed. He looked chagrined, as well he ought to be. “At any rate, I am so sorry for the delay!”

“We’re all here now, aren’t we?” She smiled sweetly, turning to her husband to be.

Mr. Gabriel Ssss Morgan smiled. “I’m afraid I cannot allow my good friend to take all the responsibility. I know you requested an earlier meeting, but it has been quite a chaotic week for me. But, as you say, we’re all here now...”

Margaret dutifully proffered her hand, and Mr. Morgan clasped it within his own. His gentle touch sent a delicious shiver down her spine, and Margaret withdrew it quickly, for fear that he might actually dare to kiss it. Clearing her throat, she said, “Yes... thank you.” And then, she forgot what

else she was going to say...

Mr. Morgan's lips curved into a singularly beautiful smile, and Margaret was flustered to find that her gaze focused unnecessarily on his mouth.

*Good Lord, what was the matter with her?*

She forced her gaze to lift to his eyes, feeling quarrelsome, though it wasn't like her.

"You are... as lovely as they say," Mr. Morgan said too pleasantly.

"Who... says?"

"I did," Mr. Goodman confessed a little nervously.

"Thank you," she said, uncomfortably, and her fiancé's eyes twinkled with barely suppressed mirth. Margaret refused to allow herself the discomfiture of embarrassment. His eyes, up close, so vivid a blue, remained focused on her, and she had the strangest sensation of having looked into them before—a trick of the imagination, no doubt, as she would have remembered Mr. Gabriel Ssss. Morgan.

"You are quite welcome," he said pleasantly, and a shiver raced down Margaret's spine at the timbre of his voice. Rich and low, it seemed to whisper straight to her heart, because the beat of it quickened unexpectedly.

*Calm down*, she commanded herself. *Calm down. None of this is anyone's fault.* If she was angry, who should be the recipient? How could she have ever expected Mr. Goodman to know who she might find appealing? "I—yes, well... it is my pleasure to *finally* make your acquaintance. However, now that we have made introductions, perhaps we should make haste?"

Mr. Goodman cleared his throat. "As to that, Lady Margaret... I am afraid I won't be going along," he announced.

Margaret tore her gaze away from Mr. Morgan. "Why not?"

Philip Goodman fidgeted nervously. "Something has..." He peered up at Mr. Morgan uneasily. "Pardon me, Lady Margaret, but something's come up—bedlam as I said."

"Something?" Panic gripped Margaret at the prospect of sharing a

carriage with Mr. Morgan. *Alone*. All the way to Gretna Green. “Something like what?”

“Lady Margaret, I promise to remain a perfect gentleman,” Mr. Morgan interjected, reassuring her. “And I *always* keep my word. But we’ll soon be husband and wife, and therefore, we should have no need of a chaperone, don’t you agree?”

Margaret’s brows twitched. “Yes, well... of course,” she allowed, but she swallowed with difficulty. Certainly, if she could trust him enough to wed him, she should trust him enough to ride in a carriage with him. *Alone*. But that wasn’t really what concerned her. No, it was the prospect of being alone with those confounding blue eyes. It wasn’t until he winked at her she realized she was staring. Again.

“Unless, of course, *you* feel we require a chaperon?” he suggested with a devastating smile.

Margaret’s cheeks warmed. “No! Of course not.” She waved a hand dismissively, turning to Mr. Goodman. “We should manage fine without you, of course.”

“Jolly good,” said Mr. Goodman. “I believe I hear the carriage coming about as we speak.” He extended a hand to Mr. Morgan. “Gabriel,” he said. “Be well, my friend.” And then he turned to Margaret. “The next time we meet, Lady Margaret, I expect you shall be Mrs. Gabriel Sssss...” With a slight brush of Mr. Morgan’s shoulder, Mr. Goodman’s eyes rolled back into his head, and he shook his head, looking annoyed with himself, as he finished, “Morgan! Demme!” he said as he popped his hat back upon his head. “Felicitations to the both of you,” he offered, turning away. “If you’ll excuse me, I will be out of your way.”

He hastened to take his leave, and Margaret blinked as she watched him go, afraid that he was developing a stutter. *Poor man*. He was working too hard, and that was partly her fault. “Well, now,” she said to her intended. “Shall we go?”

He smiled again—that devastating smile, and said, “Ready when you are, my lady.” And for some reason, his agreement sounded too suggestive. However, before she could say anything at all, her heretofore unseen fiancé moved to open the door for her. “After you,” he insisted, and Margaret had the sudden, most goatish thought that if she must stare perforce at another face across the breakfast table, it might as well be one so pleasing to the eye.

She refused to feel guilty for entertaining such shallow-minded thoughts. Men were quite salacious and superficial all the time.

Even so, her nerve nearly failed her. Resisting the urge to run screaming up the stairwell—to lock herself away for the rest of her natural life—she smiled as she retrieved her shawl from the banister and took a deep, fortifying breath, preceding her new fiancé out the door. Only belatedly, she wondered why he had agreed to her proposal, and she decided that, perhaps, he was a spendthrift, anticipating an endless source of funds. And if that were true, he would be sorely disappointed, as Margaret was quite frugal with her finances, and she wasn’t about to hand him an open bank draft to spend on his vices. £4,000. That was all he was getting from her, once each year.

Or perhaps he was a womanizer who’d found a commitment-free marriage desirable. *Fine, then.* She couldn’t expect any man to remain faithful when she never intended to share his bed—her face burned over the very prospect. And, no matter, it was too late to turn back now. Marrying Gabriel S. Morgan was all there was left to do.

She didn't recognize him.

Gabriel hadn't truly expected her to after so long. After all, it had been thirteen long years, during which they'd both gone through a metamorphosis from child to adult. Margaret hadn't seen him even once since the day they'd parted, and the fact that man and boy shared the same given name shouldn't be enough to give him away. Gabriel was a common enough appellation, and he'd made certain to use his mother's surname.

At any rate, the notion of true love for a twelve- and thirteen-year-old was ludicrous. They had but experienced a whisper of what might have been.

Nor was love a matter of sexual satisfaction. If that were true, he'd had enough *satisfaction* throughout his lifetime to know that sort of gratification was just that: gratification. Not once since reaching his sexual maturation had he longed to sit about conversing afterward. Not once since leaving Margaret Willingham had he longed for hours upon hours hidden away behind an unpleasant nest of thorns, with earth-damp bottoms, and a plethora of scuffs and scrapes. Indeed, not once had he wished for a sunny day to drag his lover onto the slopes, only to hear her giggle. And now, simply because she still wrote his father occasionally, was no proof of her continuing affection. She had known his father longer than she'd known him, and for all Gabriel knew, she had by now forgotten him entirely. Even so, he'd anticipated some

glimmer of recognition in her eyes when they met again.

Admonishing himself that it was preposterous to be disappointed over something so utterly absurd, he closed the door behind them, realizing that in a short time he would return as master of this house. Now that was even more absurd.

Lamentably, it was quite evident by the deepening crease in Margaret's brow that she wasn't particularly thrilled over the prospect of spending even five minutes alone with him, much less an entire carriage ride to Gretna Green, much less a lifetime under the same roof. And devil take the woman; she couldn't have chosen a more effective way to get her point across than to wear a mourning dress to her own wedding. It had been all Gabriel could do not to howl with laughter as he'd spied her standing in the doorway of her father's study.

Not that it wasn't a perfectly lovely gown, mind you. Black as coal, the cut of her décolletage sent his pulses skittering like a green boy over his first kiss.

And nevertheless, if the truth be known, he was quite pleased to see shades of the mischievous girl she had been—if nothing else, in the fact that she'd chosen such a flippant manner in which to wed. Blackwood's title and patrimony were not Margaret's to give, nor to keep, but the unentitled estates alone amounted to a goodly fortune. She knew full well that with her father's name and money, she could choose any husband at will, and she was doing so with glorious abandon. Flouting in the face of convention, she'd chosen a lowly commoner to marry. She'd chosen Gabriel—only after he'd offered her a contract she couldn't refuse. In short, for a girl in her position, he was a dream come true. He would take her bribe so long as she would have him. He'd use that money for some altruistic affaire and stay out of her way. After all, why shouldn't he give her this gift? He had no desire to wed or start a family—at least not under his present circumstances. And she had no qualms at all over sharing him with a mistress. Her good name would genuinely help

him, and in return, he would give her absolute freedom—something he knew she'd coveted from the day she'd learned to run.

And yet, there was a flaw with that plan. Having seen her up close—so close he could have brushed his lips against hers—he wasn't any longer quite so certain he could agree to remove himself from her day-to-day routines, or to allow himself to consider the lady with her own stable of lovers, discreet, or otherwise. Lady Margaret Willingham—the woman she'd become—wasn't merely lovely, she was positively delicious. Unfortunately, she didn't appear to return the admiration. She led the way to the carriage, back straight, chin high, and he wondered what, specifically, was the source of her annoyance. Was it because he hadn't allowed for a meeting beforehand? Or could it be because she was disappointed with the candidate she'd unwittingly chosen?

The first possibility bothered him not at all.

The second sat like a thorn in the sole of his foot.

After helping her aboard the carriage, Gabriel mounted behind her, seating himself in the facing seat.

With much aplomb, she cast him a haughty glance and knocked on the rooftop, signaling the driver to move along. Only for an instant beforehand, he had the feeling she was this close to calling it off—to bloody hell with her inheritance. He rested easier once they were on the way.

Fortunately, they hadn't all that long to travel. From London it would have been a tedious, four-day journey, but from Blackwood, it was only a six-hour trek. He withdrew the timepiece from his pocket, glanced at the hour and felt reassured there was time to spare.

Silvery moonlight sluiced into the carriage as it turned onto the north road, illuminating Margaret's face along with the blush of her cheeks. Even by the dim light in the carriage, it was more than apparent that her color was high, and he smiled, wishing he were privy to her thoughts.

There was a time in their lives when he might have had to put a hand over

her mouth to keep her from regurgitating *all* her thoughts, but even then, he'd longed to know more.

He shifted in the seat, turning to stare out the window. But it wasn't too long before his gaze returned to the woman occupying the facing seat—her features set firmly, no smile to be found. Gabriel could see in the stern lines of her face that she'd forgotten how to laugh. Perhaps the entire charade was something of a caprice. But, after all, what harm could there be in this? Margaret intended to marry, one way or the other, and he could more easily protect her this way.

After a time, she dared to look his way, and Gabriel once again averted his gaze, worried that she would see the truth in his eyes.

Of course, he fully intended she should learn his true identity, but he daren't reveal it until *after* they were duly wed... just in case. Pride be damned, her father be damned. He wasn't about to sabotage the evening—for her sake.

Certainly, it wasn't for his.

But how was it possible he could feel such joy over this happenstance?

*Love?*

Good lord. What was *love*, anyway? He hadn't spoken those words... but once... and it so happened they were spoken to Margaret, though, in truth, whatever they must have felt as younglings could be no more than innocent affection.

Romantic love, he mused, was the stuff of faerie's tales. Love was far staid and more practical.

Love was an old man, sending his child off to Eton to provide him a better life.

Love was a mother who labored over a blanket for hours on end, to send it to her exiled son.

Love was... a young woman who wrote endless letters, year after year, without any promise of answer.



Love was... a willing sacrifice without promise of thanks or recompense. And, well, if that were love, in truth, he supposed he still loved her.

She was worried, he thought. She still had that telltale habit of picking her fingernails. The clipping sound filled the carriage, its cadence falling in time with the beat of his heart.

How dearly he'd love to ease the stress from her brow.

He'd love to be wedding her, in truth, not merely for the sake of convenience. The realization struck him as boldly as did the manner of her proposal.

But why shouldn't he aspire to something more?

It had been years since they'd known each other, true, but he'd never once been tempted to marry before now, and that simple truth must account for something.

Maggie needed someone to love her; He wanted to be the one to soften those creases about her lips.

Tonight, lovely though she was, her hair was pulled back too severely, with every curl put properly into place, but, somewhere, deep in her heart, Margaret Willingham was still that carefree child, struggling to be free of her father's constraints. And lord, what Gabriel wouldn't give to hear the Elfin lilt of laughter and run his hands through her glorious hair.

A familiar longing embraced him as he sat in the darkness of that carriage, studying the woman who was soon to be his wife, and as the journey progressed, he marveled that this... feeling... had remained so strong, so long—for his part.

Once more, he shifted in the carriage seat, stretching his legs, pretending a languor he didn't feel, and when their eyes met again, he forced a lazy smile, although the effect of her gaze, even under heavy shadow, sucked the breath from his lungs.

Finally, after a long while, she deigned to speak. "Do you believe in being frank, Mr. Morgan?"

“Over duplicity, and ambiguity?” he asked with a quick smile, wondering over such a pointed question. “Yes, of course.”

“Then please forgive my plain-spokenness... but I was wondering...” Her hand fluttered to her breast. “Well, you see... I know what it is *I* hope to gain from this union. And I know what it is Mr. Goodman claims you hope to attain, but I should like to hear it from your own two lips.”

The abruptness of her question took him aback.

“You must know, I was quite disappointed with the delay in our meeting because I fully intended to conduct my own interview *prior* to this engagement. However, Mr. Goodman seemed so reluctant to allow me to meet you, and now I must consider why.”

Of course, Gabriel knew *why*. Philip had put off their meeting—at Gabe’s request. He had been sorely afraid that Margaret would recognize him, but he wasn’t about to confess as much.

“I thought, perhaps, it might be because you were a bit of a toad,” she announced, and Gabriel nearly choked over the disclosure, though, evidently, she mistook the reason for his coughing fit, because she asked, “Mightn’t you have believed the same had I been so disinclined to show my face?”

Gabriel hid his grin with a hand, leaning back into the shadows of the coach. “I see,” he said soberly, and gave the impression he was thinking about her question while he recovered his composure. “Yes. Perhaps, I might have,” he said, narrowing his eyes as he dared to ask, “And did you find me a toad, after all?”

She lifted both brows. “Well, sir, I won’t be ill over my breakfast, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Once again, Gabriel nearly choked on his laughter. *Still bold enough to speak her mind*. He hoped she would never temper her sarcasm or lose that brilliant sass.

“And nevertheless, you did not answer my question,” she snapped, and her tone remained sober, despite his mirth. “What do *you* want, Mr.

Morgan?”

“What do *I* want?”

“Yes, sir.”

“‘Tis simple enough,” Gabriel said. “You need my name. I need yours.”

The look on her face remained skeptical. “And you require nothing more?”

Gabriel shrugged, certain she didn’t wish to hear the truth. It was becoming clear to him that what he truly hoped for had little to do with influence or money. And it was only now, forced to acknowledge her question, if only to himself, that he realized as much. In fact, what he *hoped* for went even beyond his growing desire for her. What he hoped for, in truth, was to put an end to this everlasting numbness that had settled itself into his very soul. Desire. Titillation. He wanted to feel.

He couldn’t be trite enough to suppose that their parting thirteen years ago had, all by its lonesome, put the ague into his soul, but it certainly would have been a catalyst. He had become a cynic and a bit of a Cassandra, searching for the dark underbelly of every circumstance. His chosen profession didn’t help. He witnessed the very dregs of society, and it brought him low every day. Did he think perhaps that rekindling an innocent affection could lift him from the doldrums?

“Mr. Morgan?”

Gabriel shook himself free of his reverie. “Isn’t it enough?” he asked, and when she still didn’t seem appeased, he said, “Indeed, I stand to benefit greatly from your family’s reputation.”

Finally, satisfied with his answer, she settled back into her seat, then peered out the carriage window. But, of course, that was a lie, and with every mile they traveled, it became less and less the truth.

At his leisure, Gabriel studied the grown-up Maggie in profile. She had become such a stunning beauty, with her high cheeks and too kissable lips. And that wit—sharp as ever. Her hair was deceptively dark in the confines of

the dimly lit coach, but Gabriel knew only too well the way it looked when the sun played on its unbound length. He could spy her face at intervals by flashes of moonlight. And, after a while, she laid her head back against the bouncing coach and studied him under cover of shadow.

She stared. At his mouth, he believed, and God save him. It was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and kiss her sweet, pouting lips as he'd longed to do from the first. Only one thing now kept him from reaching out, cupping her face into his hands, and tasting the depths of her mouth. It was the simple fact that it wasn't her body he wished to win, but her heart. He'd been prepared to follow her dictates to the letter, but he was no longer convinced that was propitious. Not for him, and not for her. Although perhaps he should, he wouldn't feel the least bit of compunction over what he now resolved to do...

A passionless marriage would only drive Maggie deeper behind that cold facade she wore all-too easily, and watching her now, he was blindsided by the undeniable truth: He loved her—as inconceivable as it might be. And he would employ every advantage to win her, beginning with the complexities of a wedding kiss.

“You know... I believe I've changed my mind,” he said gently.

Margaret blinked over the pronouncement and Gabriel had the almost irrepressible urge to reach out and lift her chin, and then to lean forward across the short expanse between them and offer his lips. He longed to slide his tongue across the seam of her mouth, slip inside to trace her satiny white teeth. He needed to drink so deeply of the sweet elixir of her mouth, and never, ever to stop...

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, *changed your mind*?”

Margaret's heart thumped as she awaited an explanation. And while she waited, she noticed Gabriel didn't bother to arise from his reclined position—

so rude!

His manners were atrocious, and it didn't matter that half the men she'd encountered were equally self-involved and dismissive. For some reason, his rudeness grated on her all the more—perhaps because she was about to bind herself to him inextricably. His gaze was unreadable through the shadows.

“I do have *one* requirement of my own.”

She lifted her chin, repeating the word. “Requirement?”

“A perfectly harmless one,” he reassured. “But a requirement, even so.”

*Capital!* Margaret thought, her hackles rising. She'd taken such care not to call her own such demands *requirements*, rather concerns, and perhaps it was all a matter of mincing words, but he clearly felt no such obligation to finesse his own.

He likely wanted more money. That's what they all wanted—money. And, of course, the cad would wait until they had scant-few hours remaining—so was that his plan all along? Wait until he had her boxed into a corner and then make unreasonable demands?

But then another thought occurred to her: Was this why Philip was in such a tizzy? Did he realize what this man intended?

Her sarcasm couldn't have been more evident. “What requirement?”

His teeth flashed white. “Well, you see, it occurred to me... just now... as you were ogling my mouth—”

Margaret gasped. “Sirrah! I was *not* ogling your mouth!”

“—That I should very much like to kiss you... and yes... I do believe you were ogling, Lady Margaret. To ogle is to gawp, and you were most certainly gawping.”

Horrified, Margaret inhaled sharply. She had, in fact, been staring, but she couldn't very well admit such a thing. She withdrew trembling fingers from her lips, forcing her gaze to meet his, only to discover that they were twinkling with an unsettlingly familiar light. “How dare you make such a rude demand!”

One brow lifted. “Rude? Because I long to kiss my bride?”

Margaret’s heart began to hammer in earnest. *Bride?* Was she blushing? Her face felt mortifyingly hot. Sweet lord—he *wished* to kiss her? The thought left her reeling. “You take this too far, sir. And no.” she said, shaking her head. “The answer is no. You are in no position to make demands.”

“But, of course, I am,” he answered easily. “You need me.”

Margaret glared at the other occupant of her coach, his posture entirely disrespectful, and his request even more so, but, yes, it was true; she did need him. And yet, she was far too angry right now, and much too offended by his impertinence to concede that fact.

For just one infuriating moment, she had the inclination to pound on the roof of the carriage and demand the driver take her home and cast this man off on the side of the road. But, really, there wasn’t time enough for theatrics. One way or the other, she was on her way to Gretna Green with this... miscreant... whose arrogance she couldn’t abide. Margaret continued to glower at him, unsettled by their scandalous exchange.

“Mr. Morgan. You should have spoken up long before now to voice your unreasonable demand—as any gentleman might have done.”

“Oh?” He cocked his head at her. “I’m sorry. Did Mr. Goodman mislead you? I thought you required a commoner? Everyone knows we commoners have no couth.”

“Yes, but—”

“Regardless, I don’t find it unreasonable in the least to wish to kiss my bride.”

“But sir... I am *not* your bride.”

“Of course, you are—or will be—as soon as we reach Gretna Green.”

Flustered now, Margaret straightened in her seat. She didn’t know any other way to address this issue than to speak candidly. “We are both quite aware that this is a marriage of convenience, sirrah. A kiss is only reasonable between lovers, and we are not lovers—nor shall we *ever* be.”

“I see,” he said, and managed to appear a scant injured by her vehemence—how dare he make her feel like a shrew for having to point out the facts. He exhaled deeply. “Apologies, madam. Your beauty blinded me, and I somehow forgot.”

He straightened in his seat, stretching out his long legs before him, his tone hardly matching the nature of his words. “Thank you for reminding me,” he said. “But, in any case, I see now that the prospect distresses you, so, please forgive my *rudeness*.”

He thought her beauty blinding?

She didn’t want his inappropriate compliment to distract her from her anger, but it did. “It does not *distress* me,” she countered, her cheeks burning with chagrin. “I merely find your approach distasteful, Mr. Morgan.”

“Do you?”

“I do,” she replied fiercely.

“I only wonder what you’re afraid of?”

It was a gauntlet cast at her feet. One Margaret couldn’t ignore. Truth be told, she had never considered herself so fetching that any man should long to kiss her. The simple fact that he did, appealed to her, despite her mortification. And, really, he wasn’t any sort of toad. She smiled, though her composure had not returned, and said with more aplomb than she felt, “Mr. Morgan...”

“Gabriel.”

“Mr. Morgan,” she persisted. “I am most assuredly not afraid of a kiss.”

“Of course not,” he said. “But, please, do call me Gabriel,” he suggested. “After all, we are soon to be wed. What will the parson think if he should hear you speak to me so formally? After all, if we are not wedding for love—as must be the only case for a midnight wedding—mightn’t he wonder if you come to him compromised?”

Margaret furrowed her brow. “Compromised?”

“In other words, with child,” he explained more crudely.

Margaret frowned. Why did she feel he was baiting her? There was no mistaking the glitter of amusement in his bright blue eyes, and her flush crept higher with that realization. She was doubly unsettled to find her gaze returning to his lips...

*Just a kiss, he'd claimed.*

As it was, it would seem they were eloping—and why would anyone do so, unless they were... well, as he'd said, compromised? So often these weddings in Gretna Green were just the opposite case as hers. They were oft times compromised, as he'd so brashly claimed, and more often than not, they flew into such a union at the detriment of their good fortunes. However, Mr. Morgan himself had tightened the language in their contract to be sure that she was insulated from gossip, although she really did not care what anyone thought. If she did, she might never have issued such a contract in the first place, and it was perhaps the talk of the ton already. But after all was said and done, she couldn't seem to help herself; why should she say no? Indeed, what was she afraid of? He was going to be her husband, as he'd said—what harm could come from a simple kiss?

At any rate, it wasn't as though she needed to be *in love* with a man simply to kiss him, she reasoned. And she wasn't. Of course, she wasn't. How could she be? In fact, Maggie wasn't even sure she believed in love. If one couldn't touch it, or smell it, or see it, then one couldn't be sure it even existed. "Very well," Margaret relented. "One kiss... no more... after we're wed—for the sake of the parson."

"For the sake of the parson," he said.

"Indeed," Margaret agreed, and his lips curved into a slow grin, looking too much like the little boy who'd coaxed the mouse from the cat's jaws, and she suddenly wanted to take it all back.

She wouldn't, however.

For better, or worse, she owed the cad a kiss, and with their business concluded, she lapsed into silence for the rest of the journey, wondering how



it was that he'd managed to make her agree to such a scandalous proposal.

As far as Margaret could tell, Gretna Green was overrated. The municipality was dingy and small. The first township over the border, you had to cross a little bridge over the Sark River, and thereafter, they were instructed to see the resident toll-keeper in the First House in order to arrange their marriage.

She was well over twenty-one, but that didn't mean she was free to wed at will. English law required that marriages take place in a church and that their bans be posted. Scottish law was different. You could marry on the spot, in a marriage by declaration, with two witnesses and assurances from the couple that they were free to wed.

Margaret should have been elated to have the deal done, but she couldn't stop thinking about their recent bargain, and by the time they arrived, her mood was pettish, her bottom numb from travel, and her companion too high-spirited for her liking.

As for Gretna Green, tales would have had the village be some great sanctuary for lovers, with parades to greet runaway sweethearts and loud huzzahs for their mad, courageous dash over the border. As it was, the sleepy little village was no more than a handful of clay houses with carefully thatched roofs. The streets were abandoned, except for a single barking dog, one stray mule wandering about, and a drunkard swilling his whiskey outside

the town's only hall.

It did not impress Margaret.

Then again, neither was she some starry-eyed bride. She was here to do business, and if a kiss was all her groom wished of her, she should count herself fortunate.

They arrived with little time to spare. Mr. Morgan—Gabriel—she wrinkled her nose at the awkwardness of using his given name, even in her thoughts—descended before her. Her legs numb from the jouncing ride, Margaret stumbled out from the carriage, into his arms.

“Oh!” she said in surprise and was helpless to do anything but allow him to steady her on her feet. He grasped her at her waist, his fingers strong, lean and firm. Margaret tried not to construe anything into the way they slid upward along the sides of her ribs... and lingered an instant too long. There was nothing truly improper about his assistance, merely a fancy of her overwrought imagination, because she half expected that he would lift her into his arms, pull her close, and take that promised kiss right now. But she refused to be caught up in the fantasy of this elopement, refused to consider it could be a lover's clasp. It was no more than a friendly assist, and the look in his eyes as she peered up to acknowledge his help was nothing more than a trick of her mind.

*No. No. No.* He wasn't staring at her as though he were waiting for her to confess her undying gratitude and love.

Nor was he considering the prospect of that shocking kiss he'd finagled from her. It was her own wicked mind that imagined he'd restrained himself from lowering his head to hers... only but a fraction... to brush his lips ever so gently against her own. A frisson raced down her spine over the thought.

*What is wrong with you?* Margaret admonished herself. It wasn't at all like her to be so fanciful. It was simply that kiss she'd been contemplating for most of their journey. But also, it *was* her wedding night—business arrangement though it was—so perhaps it was only natural she suffer a few

soppy notions? She was fatigued from the journey and ready to rest—but not in the same bed.

“We’ll have done with this soon enough,” he promised, as though he’d read her mind. “And then we’ll procure a room at the inn.”

A room at the inn? Why did *that* sound so scandalous?

The images that came to mind made her chasten herself for a fool. And still her heartbeat quickened over the vision of the two of them ensconced in some private chamber, embracing for a kiss. Heaven help her. He *was* an exquisite specimen of a man. Would she dare to enjoy it? After all this time, he’d yet to release her, and Margaret could scarcely find her voice to ask him to do so. “But, of course, we’ll have to have separate rooms,” she felt inclined to point out.

He made a noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

“Of course,” he agreed amiably, and finally released her, then proceeded to give the driver further instruction, seemingly at ease with his new role as lord and master. Once he was through, he placed his hand on her elbow and guided Margaret toward the single street occupant whom, Margaret presumed, might direct them to the marrying house.

“What if they refuse to perform a ceremony so late?” she worried, her legs feeling unsubstantial. “We should have departed Blackwood long before we did.” She wavered a little on her feet, feeling as though she might swoon.

It must be a consequence of the tedious journey, no more.

“He won’t refuse,” he said, and his easy manner reassured her.

“How can you be certain?”

Her husband to be peered down at her, his blue eyes veiled by the darkness, and yet the intensity there was more than apparent. “My lady, I dare say, no one could refuse you anything,” he said with certainty, and the declaration left Margaret feeling heady.

But then she perseverated. Was he suggesting that she held some sway over him? Margaret furrowed her brow, trying to read his expression.

Perchance he meant because she was too bold? But if he thought as much, she didn't care. It was the only way Margaret knew to accomplish anything at all in this man's world. And, nevertheless, his gaze didn't seem so reproachful. He was, in fact, peering down at her strangely—even fondly...

"Money talks," he pointed out, and her emotions dove into the pit of her stomach.

But why? Why did his answer make her feel so disheartened? He couldn't possibly have intended the remark to be doting. "Perhaps," Margaret agreed. "But what if we cannot get the laggards to stir from their beds?"

"They'll smell your gold in their dreams," he said, and gave her a sidelong glance and a disarming grin. "If not, you have my word: I will drag them from their beds. Have no fear."

The wind tugged gently at her bonnet, and Margaret reached up to tuck the hat more securely upon her head, telling herself that it was the chill Scots wind that made her tremble. It certainly wasn't the prospect of having this man's guardianship. She didn't need anyone to speak for her, and she had every intention of taking charge here herself. Even as they approached the building, the man seated by the stoop didn't stir from his seat beside the door, rather he watched them, looking mystified by their presence. Margaret felt a surge of irritation, eager as she was to be done with this task. It wasn't fair that she should be forced to give her life into the hands of a man simply because she was a woman, but such was the case, and she was prepared to make the most of it.

"I will speak to him," Gabriel suggested.

"No, I will do it," Margaret said at once, her expression mutinous.

GABRIEL KNEW BETTER than to laugh at her ready defiance, endearing though it might be. "As you wish," he said, but he couldn't quite wipe the smirk from his face as she spun to address the drunkard.

“How do you do, sir?” she asked the man.

“Fine as a fiddle,” he said, lifting his flask of whiskey for her perusal. “Hoozyersel’ hinnie?”

“Well enough,” Margaret said, shaking her head. “Better yet if you could help me. Perhaps you would be so kind as to direct us to the marrying house?” she said, dispensing with idle chatter.

“The marryin’ h-house?” the man hiccupped.

“Yes, sir, the marrying house.”

The drunk took another swig of his sour-smelling whiskey before bothering to reply. “I dinna ken why everyone’s lookin’ for that damned m-marrying house. Ye’re better off keeping to yourself.”

“Well... I’m quite certain I don’t know why either, sir. Alas, we’re in a terrible rush. Do you know where it is?”

The man frowned. “Everyone ish in a hurry,” the man admonished, slurring his words. “Do y’ no’ see what rushin’ tae the altar did tae me? I’m a drinkin’ me whiskey in the cauld whilst the wife is snug in our bed.”

“I am terribly sorry, sir,” she relented. “Perhaps you might wish to join her... after you direct us to the parsonage?”

The man waved a hand, dismissing the notion. “Och, nay,” he said. “Even if that lady’s tongue wadna lash me back out the door, I canna well walk through walls. She’s locked me out.” He took another hearty swig from his flask, mumbling something to the effect that women were all born with tempers, and Gabriel sensed Margaret’s hackles rising over the disparaging remark. He wanted to remind her she was conversing with a drunkard, but decided, instead, to keep his gob shut.

“I see,” she said. “So she’s locked you out?”

“Thass what I said, lass.” The drunk took another swig of his whiskey, and said, “Stubborn fashious wench!”

“Of course, I would never presume to know *why* she would do such a thing, but—”

“Margaret,” Gabriel interjected, placing a hand upon her shoulder, “perhaps I should handle this?”

Clearly frustrated, Margaret shrugged free of him, as though he were a pesky bug. “I believe I am perfectly capable, sirrah.” She turned again toward the drunkard. “The marrying house, sir... we are in need of directions, if you please... and then we’ll leave you to your... er...”

The drunkard waved his flask, shutting one eye as he settled his gaze on Gabriel. “Now, laddie,” he said, having watched the exchange between them with keen interest. He waved a finger at Gabriel, dismissing Margaret’s presence as he presumed to lecture him. “Are ye certain ye wish to wed this la-dy?” He gave another hiccup. “Seems tae me ye go’ yersel’ a pawky one, son. ‘Tis no’ too late to change your mind?”

“He’s already had quite enough of changing his mind,” said Margaret, and Gabriel realized it was time to step in. She would get nowhere with this man, and it piqued her temper.

Gabriel placed a hand on her shoulder, drawing her back. “I’m certain, old man,” he said, “I can handle this lassie just fine.” He winked at the drunkard.

“I beg pardon!” Margaret exclaimed, her hands going to her hips in indignation.

Still ignoring her, the drunkard crooked a finger at Gabriel. “Aye, well... thass what I thought, too,” he said, and sighed loudly. “So, ye’re lookin’ for the parson, are ye?”

“Yes.” Margaret said, casting a warning glance up at Gabriel. “And we’re in a—”

“Rush,” the drunk finished for her. “Yes, yes, o’ course,” he said, and he cocked his head up at Gabriel. “And ye’re certain ye dinna wish tae be waitin’ for the morrow, son? Mebbe gi’ yersel’ time to think it over?”

“No,” Margaret answered for him, sounding quite furious now.

Once again, Gabriel squeezed her shoulder very gently. Once again, she

shrugged away. “No,” Gabriel said, and Margaret peered up at him, still frowning, her eyes casting daggers. He shrugged, then smiled down at her, lifting his brows. “I said no,” he pointed out.

“Verra well,” the drunk relented, at long last lifting himself out of his seat. He began to pound on the door beside him.

“Open up, Constance,” he said. “We got customers.” He hiccupped. “Open this door.” He banged on the wooden door, shaking it, never budging it.

After the longest interval, a pink-faced woman finally answered. She pushed open the door, glaring at the drunk as though she might murder him where he stood. In her hand, she held, of all things, a horsewhip. “We got customers,” the man told her again matter-of-factly, unfazed by the strap she wielded.

Gabriel, for his part, couldn’t help but wince. The woman said nothing. She cast the door wider, glaring at the three of them, each in turn. “They’re wantin’ tae be wed *t’night*,” the drunk told his wife.

“Now?”

“O’ course, now!” her husband said. “Why d’ ye think we’re standing here, woman?”

“Verra well,” the woman relented, but she snatched the flask out of the man’s hand. “For now, ye’d best be putting this away.”

Margaret sounded nonplussed. “*Are you...* the parson?”

“Aye,” said the wife with disgust. “He’s the bluidy parson when he’s no’ otherwise occupied with this jug.” She lifted the flask, then turned to address her husband. “I thought I tol’ ye tae sleep wi’ yer fellows at the tavern,” she railed. “If ye wadna done so, we’d be fast asleep in our bed, and no pompous city lady and her stupid gent would be on our doorstep.”

All the while she yelled at him, she left the door wide for Margaret and Gabriel to follow. If they dared...

Margaret peered up at Gabriel with chagrin, lifting her brows. Gabriel offered a shrug. “Marital bliss,” he said with a smile.



She made no move to enter the house, and Gabriel had the sudden urge to shove her inside. Surely, she must realize it was too late to change her mind; he had his heart set on this arrangement and not even a woman with a horsewhip could think to dissuade him. He lifted his brows. “It warms the cockles,” he said with a grin.

Margaret blinked up at him, bemused, her green eyes wide and her expression aching familiar. He felt like that thirteen-year-old boy with sweaty palms, hoping to show her the pasteboard he’d left at the crest of the hill.

“He’s the pastor,” Margaret said, once more, evidently in shock.

Gabriel nodded, then shrugged, leaning closer to capture the elusive scent of her—a subtle mingling of jasmine and woman. The brisk air and encounter had put a bloom in her cheeks as well as the tip of her nose, and he longed to kiss the bridge of it... work his way down to her lips. God, but he craved a kiss with a desperation he could taste.

“Capital.” she said, narrowing her eyes. “You don’t share the pastor’s proclivity to imbibe, do you, Mr. Morgan? I forgot to put *that* on my list.”

Of course, she wouldn’t think of it. One thing her father was not was a drunkard. In so many ways, she was an innocent to the world, and Gabriel counted it his good fortune that the stars had aligned to allow him to protect her. He forced a light-hearted smile and winked down at her. “Will you toss me out of bed if I do?”

She whispered fiercely. “No, sir, since we won’t be sharing a bed.”

Gabriel’s brows collided. Had he realized that?

He was no longer quite certain that he had. Perhaps his brain had read that particular “concern,” though his heart had wished to believe it could be otherwise. Perhaps not tonight, or tomorrow... but someday he would share sweet Maggie’s bed.

“A kiss does not a lover make,” she assured.

Gabriel begged to differ. He’d kissed no woman he hadn’t meant to bed,

and while he was never so confident in Margaret's presence, he had never had cause to doubt his mastery in such matters as law, or discussion, or seduction ... or kissing...

A slow smile turned his lips as he heard his father's voice: *A man must do what he must do, son.* Perhaps he'd not entered this bargain intending to seduce Margaret—or perhaps he had—but he resolved to precisely do that. He couldn't have justified it had he tried, but he felt unreasonably giddy over the prospect, and more than a bit reckless as he smiled down at her with promise. “True enough, Margaret,” he said with a wink. “A kiss does not a lover make.”

She seemed to cower over the silent promise in his eyes, and he swept a hand in a friendly gesture, urging her to enter. He arched a brow when she still didn't stir and offered a challenge. “Unless you're afraid of a kiss?”

“Bosh! What have I to fear?” she said, and brushed past him, marching after the pastor and his wife. Gabriel smiled as he followed, pleased that she'd reacted so defiantly to his challenge. It would make his seduction go all the easier. And God save his rotten soul, he meant to seduce his lovely bride, and he was going to relish every moment.

“Lady Margaret Willingham...”

The pastor stressed her title before her name as though it were a blasphemy. “Did you come here today of your own accord?”

“Of course.” Margaret said. It was, after all, the only course of action that would ensure her future to any degree. But despite that, it didn’t alter the fact that within moments she would be entered into holy wedlock with the stranger by her side, and she couldn’t help but be terrified out of her wits.

“And you, Mr. Gabriel... I canna read your scribble here,” he complained, pointing to the document in his hand. “What’s this?”

“Morgan,” Margaret offered, impatiently.

The pastor regarded her evenly. “Yes, well... *Mr. Morgan*, did you also arrive here of your own accord?”

“Of course he did!” Margaret said, anxious for the ceremony to be over, and wholly terrified that Gabriel would change his mind at the last moment. “Do you see shackles on this man’s wrists?” The pastor did not answer Margaret, and she chafed. “Really, sirrah!” She brandished an upturned palm. “You don’t believe I could drag this man all this way per force?”

The pastor narrowed his gaze. “A woman’s tongue makes a frightful lash,” he said, and then he turned to look at his wife, muttering, “They dinna need horsewhips.”

Margaret peered up at Gabriel, trying to gauge his expression. There was little she could read, not the tiniest suggestion of his thoughts, and she wondered if he might suffer regrets—wondered, too, if he thought her tongue as wicked as the pastor did.

More than anything, she found herself wondering, in particular, if he could be thinking about their impending kiss, and her face heated over the thought.

“Shut your gob, Duncan,” the wife proclaimed. “Dinna y’ see the laddie is not unhappy? Gae on with the ceremony sae we can go tae bed. Leave the poor lass alone!” Margaret stared at the whip in the woman’s hand, wondering if she truly would use it on her husband. No wonder the pastor was so discontented. Still, she appreciated the woman’s defense.

“Yes,” Gabriel replied. “I come of my own accord.”

The pastor shook his head, as though lamenting Gabriel’s decision. “Ach well, my son... if you’re dead set about it, and if ye must, d’ye take this *lady* tae be your lawful wedded wife, forsaking *all* others, and keeping only to her so long as ye both shall live?”

“I do,” Gabriel said, without hesitation. And Margaret wondered how anyone could say it if he didn’t mean it. Examining him, not for the first time, he seemed to be a perfectly healthy male, and she was prepared to allow him some leeway in this area. After all, it wasn’t as though they were eloping, madly in love. This was a marriage of convenience. So why did the truth make her jaw tight?

“And you, Lady Margaret...”

“I do,” Margaret said quickly, searching for and handing the man a symbolic ring from her purse. The pastor peered up from his volume, raising his brows. In disapproval? But why? Why shouldn’t a woman provide her own rings? Naturally, she shouldn’t have expected Gabriel to provide them. And neither had she bothered to procure a new one; her mother’s ring would do just fine. And if she hadn’t brought one for Gabriel to wear, it was a

simple matter of consideration on her part. Under the present conditions, she would not expect him to go about shackled by a wedding ring. “Go on now... tis late,” she reminded the man. “We simply must make haste.”

The pastor shook his head, casting another dubious glance at Gabriel as though he wished to be certain he should continue. Margaret resisted the urge to stomp the man’s foot as he reached out to receive her ring. He handed it to Gabriel. “‘Tis no’ too late,” he said ominously.

“It is too late.” Margaret argued, sounding more like a fishwife than she cared to. She cast an uncertain glance at Gabriel, hoping his opinion hadn’t been skewed.

The pastor sighed again, shaking his head. “Gae on, then, place it on her finger,” he directed.

“Hurry,” Margaret urged. But she worried for naught, because Gabriel peered down at her, his demeanor composed, and he had the audacity to wink at her as he slid the ring over her fourth finger, sending the most delicious shiver down her spine, so that, for a disconcerting moment, she forgot where they stood. His touch lingered, and then, when he withdrew his hand, Margaret shuddered in total awareness of the man standing by her side. In mere moments, he would be her husband... and she knew him not at all. Her hand trembled as Gabriel held it.

“Now, Lady Margaret,” the pastor was saying, “repeat these words after me... with this ring I thee wed.”

“With this ring I thee wed.”

“With all my worldly possessions I thee endow.”

Margaret’s brows collided. She shook her head. “Not *all*,” she argued. “Only *some*.” Else wise, why, indeed, would she be wedding anyone at all?

Gabriel smiled, but the pastor’s gaze snapped back up at him, looking as though he thought them both quite mad. “Go on,” Gabriel urged the man.”

The pastor grumbled, peering back at Margaret. And then he sighed once more, quite loudly this time. “With my body I thee worship,” he said

cantankerously.

Margaret blinked, and for all her previous interjections, she suddenly couldn't speak. She couldn't promise Gabriel her body, and yet the mere consideration affected her, sending her pulses skittering. She peered up at Gabriel and saw a stranger—a stranger she knew no better than she did this confounded scotch-drinking preacher. But then she blinked again and saw the warmth nestled in his oddly familiar eyes. And then she blinked a third time, and his face blurred out of focus. She swallowed convulsively because there was no choice to be made here. She was no child to go flying away in fright. She had, in fact, contemplated this option thoroughly, and it had been her most sensible choice.

So then... what was she waiting for?

“I thought you were in a hurry?” the pastor inquired, sounding perturbed.

Margaret frowned. Of course she was. But she couldn't get the words to squeeze past the constriction of her throat, despite that this was provided for in her list of concerns. But, even if he was prepared to disregard her vows, the very act of speaking those very words threatened her carefully laid plans. She could not promise to worship him with her body.

Gabriel withdrew a timepiece from his vest pocket. He flipped it open, glanced at it, frowned, and then closed it, replacing it into his vest. He gave her a nod, urging her to continue, and Margaret inhaled a breath, and blurted, “With this ring I thee wed. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The pastor slapped his book shut, outraged. “Ye canna change the wedding words, Lady Margaret!”

“I can and have,” Margaret informed him baldly, with far greater conviction than she felt. “Please, do go on, sirrah!”

“Yes, please,” Gabriel insisted, coming to her defense. Margaret smiled gratefully at him to find he was staring again... this time, specifically at her mouth... reminding her of their private arrangement just as surely as though

he'd spoken it aloud. She lapped at her lips, averting her gaze.

The pastor glowered at Gabriel as though he were a goose gone mad. "Are ye daff, mon?" he said. "What are ye wantin' with a wife if ye canna have the best o' what comes wi' her?"

"Leave it, Duncan." the pastor's wife said.

Again, the cranky pastor muttered something beneath his breath, and thrust his book into the wife's hands. "Forasmuch as this man and this woman have consented to be together by giving and receiving a ring, I therefore declare them to be man and wife before God and these... witnesses"—he waved a hand, indicating his wife and a sleeping child—"in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen. Gae on tae bed," he commanded his brood, shooing them off. "And dinna bar the door, Constance." he said sternly, and with no small measure of disgust, he added, "You may now kiss your bride!"

Margaret let out a gasp, overwhelmed by the knowledge that they were now lawfully wed—she and this stranger who was staring so expectantly at her lips, with that smile that seemed so disconcertingly familiar.

Suddenly, she felt too hot, and she couldn't breathe. But a promise was a promise, she reminded herself. Drawing in a fortifying breath, she puckered her lips, tilted her face up, squeezed her eyes closed, and waited, anticipating the warm brush of his lips...

"I believe I've changed my mind," her husband said.

Margaret's eyes flew wide. "Again?" Her brows collided. "What do you mean, you've changed your mind? You cannot change your mind! It's too late!"

"You don't wish to marry her?" the pastor asked, sounding bemused, though perhaps hopeful.

Margaret cast the man a withering glance.

"Of course I wish to marry her," Gabriel said evenly. And more to Margaret, he said, "I simply don't wish to kiss you, is all."

Margaret's face bloomed.

The pastor mumbled something uncharitable beneath his breath. "That'll be half a guinea," he demanded of Gabriel. "In all me bluidy days, I ha'e never seen the likes of this. Good luck, son! Ye're gaein' tae need it."

Gabriel withdrew the appropriate payment from his pockets, offered an extra coin for the pastor's troubles, thanked the man, gathered the necessary papers, looked them over, and then led Margaret out of the marrying house, leaving the pastor to complain quite bitterly, and the wife, having forgotten her whip for the time being, to soothe his riled temper.



Margaret was brooding.

It was all Gabriel could do not to chuckle with pleasure over that fact. Unconscionable though it might seem, he was quite satisfied with the reaction he'd wrought from her. She sat before him now, looking entirely perplexed, with her thoughts whirling behind those delightfully bewitching eyes. At the moment, he felt as giddy as he had that day before she'd said her goodbyes. He was once again that boy, dashing toward the hill, pasteboard in hand.

He realized only then how bloody disappointed he'd been that he'd never even shown her his silly pasteboard. More than anything, he'd craved the sound of her laughter—as he did right now.

But, of course, as it was on that fateful day, not all would go as he'd hoped. They'd gone directly to the inn and, hoping to procure a single room as husband and wife, Gabriel bribed the clerk to deny them two. Unscrupulous though it might be, he couldn't muster any remorse. It wasn't as though he intended to force her, but he'd hoped that a certain proximity would soften her mood—so, yes, perhaps he had meant to seduce her. But Margaret refused the arrangement out of hand, opting to make the return journey to Blackwood, forcing them to ride another four bloody hours back to Blackwood.

No matter. Gabriel could wait.

He'd waited a lifetime already, and the rewards to be reaped were worth his patience.

Unfortunately, the return journey was far more tedious than anyone anticipated, every bump and bend in the road a bother. All the while, Margaret maintained her silence, barely deigning to look at him, and Gabriel realized she was dealing with confusing emotions. He granted her the quietude she needed, and just at the point when he began to fear she was regretting their bargain, she breached the silence.

"That man was dyspeptic!"

She didn't bother to look at him.

"You think so?" he asked conversationally.

"Quite," she said, plainly annoyed. "He was ill-tempered, bigoted, and rude, to say the least!"

"He was also smashed."

She turned to look at him, at last, and Gabriel sucked in a breath at the incredible loveliness of her face. "Smashed?" Illumined by the bloodless moon, her cheeks appeared overly pale, her eyes incandescent green. The never-ending journey was beginning to take a toll on her.

"Soused," he explained. "Drunk."

"Yes, well, I don't believe there was any need to reward him for it. Do you? How much did you give him?"

He wisely refrained from pointing out that she, in truth, had needled the man, and disclosed, "Double what he required."

"I thought so. I hope you're not so quick to spend the stipend I'll provide, because there won't be any more once it's gone."

"I don't need your money, Margaret."

"Don't you?"

I do not," he reassured. "Money was never my primary concern."

She tilted him a dubious glance, narrowing her eyes. "So then... tell me

again... what was your primary concern?"

Gabriel smiled, diverting the subject. "My timepiece revealed one quarter past the midnight hour as we exchanged vows. I thought it prudent to leave the man appeased, as he's the only one who can gainsay us."

Her brows collided. "Oh," she said, deflated, and her color seemed to pale all the more. "You don't think he'll do that, do you?" Her sea-green eyes were full of worry. "Did he put the correct hour on our certificate?"

"Indeed, he did." And nevertheless, Gabriel withdrew the papers from his vest and offered them to Margaret, hoping she wouldn't note his full signature—not that she could make it out in the coach's darkness. Regardless, she would eventually see it and realize, so now was as good a time as any to take the chance. "Examine them for yourself."

"Thank you," she said, and took the folded papers from his grasp, never averting her gaze. "I never even thought to ask. He made me so angry. I-I didn't...."

She seemed to lose her train of thought as she peered back at him—as he lost his own every time she met his gaze. For a moment, he thought the jig was up, but it was satisfying to see that he wasn't alone in his distraction.

After all these years, she was like a feast to his starving senses. The whispering black silk of her gown made him yearn to reach out, to draw the sleek garment into his greedy fingers. The soft scent of jasmine filled the carriage, making him long to bury his face into her hair, against the soft curve of her neck... taste her flesh... place his tongue over the pulse at her throat, feel it beating beneath his lips. The even fainter scent of peppermint... exhaled in his direction by her soft, tantalizing sighs, made him thirst all the more to kiss those lips. All in all, he was in a dangerous state... for a man who'd only just vowed to give his wife due time.

"Well... they do seem to be in order," she said, without ever even having glanced at the papers in question. Gabriel could scarce help note that she was once again staring at his mouth, and he smiled, his lips curving with a fierce

satisfaction. He couldn't, of course, note what women saw in him, but he knew how they behaved in his presence, and yet, he'd never desired a one of them the way he desired Lady Margaret Willingham. His gaze lowered to the papers she held... flicking only briefly toward the décolletage of her gown, groaning inwardly. He closed his eyes, his senses reeling. She was now his wife... duly wed... and he wanted nothing more than to bury his face against those sweet breasts, taste the pebbled nipples and lift his head to whisper sweet nothings in her ear...

He opened his eyes, and the hazy moonlight toyed with his vision... darkening his mood... conspiring against his better nature. Lord help him, he was no saint, and he was dizzy with desire, and his mouth felt dry.

Margaret didn't know him anymore, he reminded himself. She didn't even recognize him. She needed time, and he must allow her that time.

*It was the right thing to do.*

He laid his head back again, repeating the litany until he was certain he must believe it, but his body remained as tense as a caged lion's.

Her gaze was still focused upon him when he reopened his eyes, and he swallowed and held still... because if he moved... if he so much as stirred... he was going to reach out and draw her into his arms, seduce her right here in this carriage...

MARGARET RETURNED THE PAPERS, hands trembling, her thoughts in chaos. Of course, she hadn't even bothered to look at them, she realized—but, then again, why should she have bothered? She couldn't see the print in the carriage's darkness, anyway.

And Lord, it shouldn't matter, but somehow it did... After making such a tremendous fuss about it all, why had he so rudely refused to kiss her?

Had he judged her and found her lacking?

Did he regret binding himself to her, after all?

Though why should it matter what he felt for her? Or what he must think of her? She'd chosen him because he'd offered her this union without the usual trappings—without duty, and without attachment. Margaret *desired* a loveless marriage. She didn't mean for them to fall madly in love at first sight, and then long to fall into each other's arms. She certainly didn't wish to consider a married life, with tots running about the house.

And yet, never in her life had any man ever looked at her with such intensity of expression. Never had she experienced such a fluttering in her belly, such a tightness in her breasts—as she was feeling this moment.

Her heart beat a staccato as she stared at Gabriel's lips, her gaze lifting to his blue eyes and those brows tilted so devilishly.

Her brow furrowed. Why hadn't he kissed her? And why, oh why, must she care?

The questions plagued her, though she told herself it was absurd. *Preposterous. Outrageous. Completely without merit.* So what if he didn't want to kiss her? Perhaps he had judged her and found her wanting, but why should that matter?

Still, the possibility weighed like stones in her belly—niggled her as well if, the truth be known. He sat there, looking far too unrepentant, and she had the most disconcerting desire to box his ears.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had such a notion—but yes, yes, she did, and she couldn't suppress a sudden huff of laughter over the memory of a sweet, young boy who'd once vexed her so thoroughly that she had cursed the encumbrances of her femininity.

“Laughter suits you,” her husband declared.

Margaret shook herself free of her reverie, taken aback by the compliment.

“What are you thinking about?”

Margaret refused to be soothed by flattery—or mollified into sharing her private thoughts. How dare he rebuff her in front of that ill-tempered man,

then expect her warmth. She shrugged. “A childhood memory—nothing of importance.”

And then, compelled to, she lifted her chin as she sat forward. “Not that I’m particularly upset over your *change of heart*, mind you... or your reasons, for that matter, but I hardly appreciated the humiliation of your declination, sirrah.”

He leveled his gaze upon her. “Pardon?”

Margaret inhaled a breath. “It was certainly your prerogative to change your mind—again, might I point out—but you could have advised me well in advance, before I managed to make myself appear the ninny.”

The man knit his brows, feigning obtuseness, but obtuse was something Margaret was quite certain he was not. “Advised you? That I cared to do... what, precisely?”

Margaret rolled her eyes. “Kiss me.”

He lifted his brows and turned up those sinfully beautiful lips. Of course, in her anger, it probably sounded like a demand, and Margaret was at once chagrined over the path in which their conversation had veered. “I mean to say. You might have said... before—never mind!”

He lifted his head to peer at her through the shadows, looking too composed, while she, on the other hand, in the space of an instant, had managed to feel even more a fool for her outburst. She groaned, discomfited.

“I thought you would be relieved.”

The mere slant of his brows sent her heartbeat to bedlam. She shrugged, mentally attempting to compose herself. “Of course I am,” she lied.

His lips curved a fraction more, and she cursed him to perdition for it. “Truly?”

“Of course,” she said. “I only—”

“We could remedy it easily, if you so desire?”

Margaret froze. “Remedy?” Her voice sounded strangled, even to her own ears. She stared at Gabriel’s face through the shadows, trying

desperately to read his expression. He sat straighter.

“I mean to say, if you should desire a kiss, after all...” His expression was perfectly sober, and more than a trifle compelling. “I am quite willing.”

Margaret waved him away. “How absurd,” she said, though her heart pounded like thunder at her temples. If, in truth, he couldn’t hear it, he must be deaf. “Why ever should you think I *wished* to kiss you?”

He leaned forward, and Margaret sucked in a startled breath over his advance. And yet... she didn’t withdraw into her seat. She swallowed convulsively.

“Perhaps,” he said, “because of the way you are once again ogling my mouth.’

“I am not!” Margaret argued, though she knew it must be a lie. She was decidedly aware of those lips, and not much else. In fact, scarce could she seem to remember even to breathe. She had to remind herself to exhale.

Her imagination? Or did it seem as though he leaned a fraction closer?

Margaret swallowed any words of protest as his hand reached out to touch her face... so gently she might have thought his fingers formed of mist—a brush of warm flesh that made her breast swell with pent up emotion. She shivered as the tip of his finger tapped her chin, before sliding down beneath, and ever so tenderly, cupping it and lifting her face to gaze evenly into his.

Margaret lowered her lashes, afraid to look into his eyes.

“No?” he asked, his voice no more than a whisper.

“N-No,” she croaked, but then she betrayed herself, closing her eyes. And she couldn’t seem to move away as he leaned close. Sweet, sweet love, what was it about this man that drew her so inexorably? What was it that made her yearn to be so bold? To be held by him? Why now did she longed to be kissed by those wickedly beautiful lips?

He sighed. “Perhaps ‘tis only me.”

“Only you?”

“Because I must confess... I cannot seem to stop myself from staring at

your disconcertingly beautiful mouth.”

Margaret dared not breathe after his confession. “You cannot?”

“No,” he murmured. “I cannot.” And then he asked softly, his voice a caress in itself, “Would you deny me now if I begged you, pretty please?”

“Pretty please?”

Margaret’s thoughts simply would not coalesce; her brain seemed suddenly as mushy as the puddles she used to trample through as a girl...

Some glimmer of memory tickled her subconscious, but fled as quickly as it reared, leaving Margaret to feel an overwhelming desperation to chase it.

Gabriel moved closer, until their breaths were mingled like a warm, gossamer veil between them, and she thought perhaps he must be about to kiss her. And more, she had a perplexing feeling she wasn’t going to refuse him...

Her breasts tingled with anticipation, tiny prickles that titillated her and stirred liquid heat in her belly.

“Would you like me to kiss you, Maggie?”

Her body slumped forward, and she sighed, no longer able to think at all. His voice mesmerized her, delighted her, sent shivers racing up and down her spine...

“I believe so,” she said, lapping at lips gone dry. “Perhaps only once.” And then... and then... she could stop thinking about it once and for all...

GABRIEL CHUCKLED at her artless response.

Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted. The sweet dew of her mouth shone on her lips, and his own mouth went dry as dust.

*So much for good intentions.*

*So much for waiting.*

*So much for contracts.*

Alas, but how could any man refuse lips as luscious as hers?



How could he be expected to turn away from this temptation when she sat so near, smelling so sweet?

How in God's name could he refuse her, when the gentle rise and fall of her breast, and her quickened breath, were but tantalizing glimpses of the passion he knew full well lay tempered within? He knew the fiery girl she had been, and suspected he would delight in the fire she hid. After all, what chance had he of convincing himself that this could be wrong when it felt... so... right?

And she was his wife.

No matter that it was for convenience's sake, his body wasn't aware of that distinction. His logical brain must have quit working some time ago, and besides, he'd craved this moment too long...

She couldn't know how much he yearned to take, how much he needed to give—and yes, how much he craved this simple kiss...

Reaching out slowly for fear that he would startle her, he slid the tip of a finger across the velvety softness of her neck and felt her shudder. His heart hammered as he curled his hand around her nape and pulled her close, anticipating the taste of her with a hunger that belied the gentleness of his touch.

She made some strangled sound at the back of her throat, and then a soft, whimpering sigh that heated his blood to a boil. His nostrils flared, reveling in the scent of her... an impossibly familiar scent. How was it possible that he could remember her scent so perfectly?

More than anything, he longed to taste her soft, luscious body... every inch... inhale the scent of her into his long-deprived lungs. He growled—a fierce sound of unrepentant triumph—as she allowed his lips to descend at long last to the mouth he'd only dreamt about much too long—and Lord help him, he was lost the moment he tasted her essence on his tongue. In all his days, he couldn't have expected how sweet she'd taste... how supple her lips would feel beneath the play of his own. In fact, nothing could have prepared

him for the silky warmth of her mouth, and the glorious mysteries held within.

And he didn't think he could stop with a single kiss...

No more could he do so than he'd been able to forget those bewitching eyes, or her brilliant smile, or her laughter, or the impertinent tilt of her head, and the stubborn lift of her chin.

But even more than her kisses, he craved her sweet, sweet laughter...

*ONE KISS... just one.*

So easily Margaret was undone.

She moaned softly as his lips coaxed hers—velvet steel against her pliant mouth, insistent and sleek, tempting her to open for him, like the petals of a flower to a hungry bee.

Instinctively, she slid her hands about his neck, entwining her arms there, and he groaned savagely, sending another delicious shiver down her spine.

That seemed to be all the encouragement he needed. He swept Margaret into his arms, lifting her as though she weighed no more than a child.

No time for protests, no time to think. She found herself seated quite scandalously perched upon his lap, his arms bracing her for the onslaught of his mouth.

After a moment, he lifted his head and said, “You cannot know how much I have longed for this, Maggie. From the moment I laid eyes upon you.”

He bent again, closing his mouth over hers, and Margaret whimpered.

“Open for me,” he said, as he slid his tongue across her lips, persuading her with the soft caresses. Margaret swallowed and did as he bade her, her body thrilling to his declaration... to the intimate way he said her name. She thrilled as his tongue slid into her mouth, liquid fire between her lips, exploring...

Moaning, she tilted her head while his hands held her face in an intimate embrace that made her heart cry out for more—and more, and more, and more!

Never in her life had she been held so tenderly. Never had she perceived a mere touch could be so exhilarating. Never had she been kissed. Nor, in truth, had she ever imagined she would yearn to give her soul to the first man who dared to hold her.

“Give me your tongue, Margaret,” he whispered, and Margaret could do nothing but obey, offering it tentatively at first, then more boldly. But he might have asked her for anything in that instant, and she would have given it to him willingly.

He made some sound, part groan, part chuckle, when she thrust her tongue at him, and then ever-so-gently, he suckled... until Margaret thought she might die with the soul-stirring pleasure that spiraled through her body.

“That’s it,” he coaxed, abandoning her tongue to suckle at her lips. Shiver upon shiver rippled down her spine as he nibbled at her lips, nipping and tugging with his teeth, and then suckling again to soothe the erotic sting. A poppet in his arms, Margaret clung to him, afraid she might tumble backward into the undiscovered abyss of her own desire.

WRAPPING his arms about Margaret’s waist and folding his hands at the small of her back, Gabriel attempted to reign in his lust... for her sake.

His heart pounded like cannon fire against his ribs. She was making this too easy... not that he wouldn’t normally appreciate such enthusiasm, he acknowledged to himself, but he wanted her with no regrets.

He should stop now, he realized.

He should drag her away and set her neatly upon her own seat, well out of his reach, but he couldn’t seem to make himself obey. The fingers curled about his nape clutched at him too desperately... those combing through his

hair teased a bit too unmercifully.

Bloody hell, he didn't want to stop.

Reason began to fade. His vision blurred. His mouth grew parched, and he sipped urgently from her mouth to quench his ungodly thirst. Try as he might to disengage, his hands took on a will of their own, unclenching at her back, and sliding to her waist... such a deliciously small waist. He tested the circumference with his hands, then danced his fingers back up along her ribs, discovering each one by turn, stopping only when his thumbs reached the curve of her breasts. For a long, torturous moment, he envisioned himself bending low, ripping her bodice with his teeth, tasting her passion on her skin... and then lowering to her belly... ripping at her clothes, until she lay naked... and purely by those thoughts, he was nearly undone. Burying his face against her soft throat, he groaned aloud, commanding himself to stop.

Margaret sighed, oblivious to his torment, and curled up like a wee-kitten in his lap, saved by the many, many layers of her skirts from discovering his lascivious intent.

After all, she trusted him to keep his word—to kiss her and do no more. He held her for a long while, stroking her cheek with a thumb, and finally, he cleared his throat. “Are you sleepy?”

“A little,” she confessed, sounding sated, though he was anything but.

He needed something to take his mind off his baser thoughts, and he couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking. Giving himself a mental shake, he asked, “How about we play a game to pass the time?”

Perhaps he could jog her memory.

She didn't stir. “Game?” she asked with a breathy sigh. “What sort of game?” She yawned and started to rise, but he held her fast.

“Stay,” he begged. “Rest a while. It's been a long night. We've a long way to travel. I was thinking we'd play a game to better know each other. I will say a word. You tell me the first thing that comes to your mind.”

She settled back, peering at him between thick, dark lashes, scrutinizing

him. "I always liked that game," she confessed.

He had to resist the urge to answer, "*Yes, I know.*"

"Good," he said. "We'll play awhile and then be home before you know it. Laughter," he began.

"Laughter?"

"That's my word."

"Children," she said at once. "That was easy." He smiled when she cozied herself into his lap, making herself more comfortable.

"My turn." He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Blue," she said.

"Sky," he answered. "Play," he countered.

"Work."

Gabriel frowned at her response.

"Books," she said.

"Boring," he answered, and chuckled.

She laughed as well. "Not so boring," she demurred.

"I rather suppose it depends on what you might be reading. The books I read are quite tedious," he maintained. "Kisses," he offered.

"Nice," she said, without pause.

Gabriel smiled. "Regrets?"

"None." She sighed, too, and cuddled deeper into his embrace.

"What about you?"

"What do you think?" he asked, then dared to tickle her ribs with a finger as he used to do.

She giggled. "Stop. Stop! You're not playing right. You cannot answer my question with another question! Nor was that one word, it was four. You must answer properly."

"No."

She lifted a single brow. "Was that no, you will not answer properly? Or no, you have no regrets?"

"No regrets."

She laughed again, this time unrestrained. “Did you see that look on the parson’s face when you refused to kiss me? I dare say, he didn’t know what to make of us.”

“I’m quite sure,” Gabriel said, smiling.

She giggled, and quieted. For a long while, the two of them sat together in silence, lulled into a sweet languor by the rocking coach and the soothing darkness.

Inexplicably, they sat together with the comfort of two lovers accustomed to sharing the same breath. But Gabriel wanted more than to be her lover, he wanted her heart as well. “Friend,” he said, after a long moment.

Her brows knit but she remained silent.

“Friend?” he said again.

She didn’t respond.

“Margaret?”

Still, she didn’t respond, and Gabriel glanced down to see that her eyes were closed. Neither did she move, nor did she seem to be breathing.

Had she fallen asleep?

*Damn*, but he was enjoying her answers nearly as much as he relished the feel of her in his arms... after so, so bloody long—too long.

“Brat,” he said, and then settled back against the carriage seat with his delicious burden cradled in his lap. Gad, she was his wife—after all this time. He grinned over that fact, and leaned back against the carriage, closing his eyes to enjoy the feel of the woman in his arms.

The following morning Margaret awoke in her own bed, with only vague memories of how she'd arrived there. She'd fallen asleep in her husband's arms whilst playing that silly game. But she hadn't really fallen asleep *during* the game, only pretended to be asleep, unable to respond to the word *friend*.

She'd had a sudden epiphany while she'd sat there. She'd had only one true friend in all of her life, and it so happened that he shared the same name as her husband. Of course, her response, at once, had been *Gabriel*, but she'd caught herself before speaking it aloud, breathing in deeply of his all-too-familiar scent, and found herself lost in memories...

After a while, she'd drifted off to sleep and her dreams had been a mélange of old memories and new—sweet child's play, and lusty, heart-stirring kisses.

Lord, but she'd been a wanton, throwing herself into Gabriel's arms after fairly begging him to kiss her. And, furthermore, she had shamelessly reveled in every moment of his embrace, every sweet caress of his lips.

Now, patting the bed beside her, she realized it was all a sham. They had both been playing at charades, and she wanted more than what she'd bargained for.

She wanted it with Gabriel.

Sighing as she glanced over at the closed door between their suites, she

couldn't help but wonder if her husband had found his way there last night. She'd had him ensconced in her father's chamber—why not? Despite that their marriage was supposed to have been one of convenience, it wouldn't serve either of them if the servants talked. So, then, was he there now?

Or perchance in the dining room breaking his fast?

Gabriel S. Morgan made her good sense scatter to the winds, and with no more than a glance from his compelling blue eyes, he'd filled her head with wicked thoughts.

After all was said and done, it was a good thing he'd had the good sense to stop before she'd had the opportunity to do something foolish.

And, having determined as much, she descended to breakfast, moderately prepared to face him. And, if her cheeks were pink with chagrin, she admonished herself, it was well and good. It would serve as a reminder for the next time not to abandon herself so shamelessly to temptation. But she prepared herself for naught.

Dressed for the day in a lemon-yellow chiffon dress, she entered the dining room only to find herself alone. She exhaled a breath she'd not realized she'd held and her arms dropped by her sides, as a terrible heaviness settled in her breast. Certainly, it was not disappointment, was it?

The table was set, a steaming breakfast arranged on the buffet, the servants all waiting to serve. But no Gabriel. And still she lingered in the doorway, frowning over the depressing emptiness of the room—and yet, it was just as it was supposed to be, so why was she crushed? A certificate of marriage did not a family make. Nor were kisses promises. She, not Gabriel, had insisted upon the formality of this arrangement. Why then, had she expected to find anything different this morning? Had she hoped to discover a husband who would greet her with a “jolly *good morning, darling*” and a peck on the lips?

Perhaps yesterday she had not, but after last night...

Lingering a moment longer, she contemplated the answer to her



questions, then suddenly didn't feel like breakfast at all. Oblivious to the confounded looks the servants gave one another, Margaret turned to make her way out to the rose arbor. That was the one place she felt most at ease, and she needed to figure out how to handle this new dilemma: The man she had married was not at all who he claimed to be...

IT HAD TAKEN Gabriel the better part of the morning to locate a pasteboard. Finally, with the child's toy in hand, he was ready to face Margaret.

He didn't know why he needed to relive this moment, but somehow, it seemed to promise closure—whatever that meant, he didn't know, but, once upon a time, he'd had such high hopes for the two of them.

It took some searching, but he found Maggie in the garden, kneeling over an exceptionally unsightly rose bush, her back to him. The sight of her on her knees, with the pruning shears in hand, took him slightly aback.

So, too, did the appearance of the rose garden. Gad, but it wasn't at all the way he remembered it, and his brow furrowed as he surveyed the garden in which he and Margaret had spent so many hours as children.

It was the most pitiful excuse for a rose arbor that Gabriel had ever had the misfortune of laying eyes upon in all his life. In his father's day, the bushes had been lush and vivid, every color of flower peeping out from behind leaves so green they hurt one's eyes. How many times had he forgotten the thorns behind their shining facades and leapt into the midst of them to hide from Maggie, only to leap back out, howling in pain?

The memory alone made him grin, for then as now, he suspected Margaret had more to do with his embarrassing lack of judgement than did those bloody bushes. She'd always had a way of turning his thoughts inside out.

Armed with props, and with a singleness of purpose, he made his way toward his wife, sidestepping overgrown, leafless, thorn-filled vines that

sprawled across his path like writhing garden snakes. He sensed she was close to a revelation last night, and, for some reason she'd tucked her memories away so deep, ignoring the truth that was staring her straight in the face. But Gabriel couldn't play this game any longer, and it surprised him that he ever thought he could.

The truth would set them free.

FOR AS LONG AS Margaret could recall, the rose garden had been a haven. As a child, any time she'd felt herself a bit unhinged, this was the place she'd come.

With over fifty species of roses in bloom, it was the loveliest early summer. The most delightful fragrances filled the air, soothing her troubled soul.

Today, she surveyed the garden with a critical eye.

Of course, it wasn't what it was meant to be, but she had tended it the best she knew how to. She could get the roses to bloom, but she couldn't keep leaves on the stems. Just now, she glowered down at the bush she was pruning. *Drat thing.* No matter that she gave it so much time and love, it didn't seem to wish to thrive. Not merely for the sake of the garden, she wished George were here, and if he were, what would she say?

*Your son is a fool. What in heaven could he have been thinking?*

Alas, no one had been able to keep these roses flourishing the way Gabriel's father had. He was a master with them, and he could coax them into blooming even against all odds.

Her shoulders slumped as she inspected the naked, thorny limbs surrounding her, trying to remember them when they'd worn more verdant attire. They'd never been the same since George abandoned them. It was, she thought, as though they were grieving, as well.

After George retired, they'd gone through a procession of gardeners, and

not one of them had resurrected her fine roses. Finally, about four years ago—thinking, how hard could it be?—Margaret had taken them into hand, after dismissing the last gardener her father had hired.

She wondered if George had gotten her letter—wondered, too, if he would consider returning if she were to beg. After all, Gabriel was back now as well...

“Margaret?”

Startled from her musings, Margaret turned to see her husband standing behind her, but she gasped in surprise at the sight of him.

At least she *thought* it was her husband.

Her brows drew together in dismay. The man standing before her didn't look like the man she remembered from last night. Were it not for those singular blue eyes, she might not have recognized him. He had mud streaked all over his face—as though he'd fallen flat on his face or washed his cheeks in a puddle. And those trousers! They were shredded at the knees and too short besides. She looked closely and saw that the hems had been rent and she wrinkled her nose, lifting her gaze to his shirt to find the sleeves too short as well. Grass and dirt stains adorned the material, and those gentle hands that had roamed her body so wickedly were now caked with dirt.

“Gracious,” she said in horror over his appearance. “What happened to you?” She thought he must surely have been assaulted by brigands. “Gabriel?”

He grinned, looking so like the boy she recalled.

“You look ghastly!”

He shrugged his wide shoulders. “Then I should make a perfect addition to this garden,” he told her. “Tis a nasty piece of work.” He drew his muddy brows together into a frown, and it was all Margaret could do not to giggle as muddy flakes sprinkled from the pair. “What happened here?”

Margaret tipped her chin in indignation. “Tis a fabulous garden, I'll have you know. I've been tending it myself.”

“You?” The single word was filled with as much incredulity as awe.  
“Yes, of course. Why should that surprise you?”

PERPLEXED, Gabriel scratched his head.

Most of the garden was naught more than rambling vines, overgrown and fragile in appearance... as though no hand had bothered to tend them in years. His father would weep blood tears to see these roses looking so sad. Somehow, Margaret seemed not to realize—much the way she seemed not to recognize him. Still, humoring her, he looked about and grimaced in disgust.

“This garden is my pride and joy,” she assured him. “Look. Over there,” she said pointing to the hardiest rose of all, and then shading her eyes. “This is an interesting specimen. It is *Rosa Gallica Officinalis*.”

The Apothecary Rose. Gabriel knew it only too well. The damned bush had only a single puny flower and very little foliage. It was one of the hardiest roses on God’s Earth, ancient as the devil, and, somehow, Margaret had managed to strangle the old bugger.

“Interesting story it bears,” Margaret said, snipping the only bloom and lifting it to her nose to sniff. “Reputedly, it was brought to France from Damascus by a weary crusader for his long-neglected lover. “’Tis used medicinally,” she told him. “Skin affections, in cordials. They used to give it to my mother before she died to relieve her throat inflammations. Alas, she died when I was young, so I barely remember. You could use a bit on your hands. If you crush the petals and rub them after washing, they’ll purify your skin. Also, I use it as an infusion for tea—quite a lovely taste.”

“Really,” Gabriel said, distracted by her mouth. Damn the Rose petal tea! He could scarce seem to forget the way her lips had tasted last night. It was all he could do to carry her to her bed, and then walk away. He’d craved more than anything to lie down beside her and hadn’t dared. The simple fact that she had given him the room beside her, both relieved and aggrieved him

at once. If last night was any indication, he would sleep with an unattended erection for the rest of his days—particularly since she didn't seem to be taking his hint. Aside from looking at him as though he were mad, she hadn't an inkling what he was trying to say.

“And that one,” she said obliviously, pointing to a singularly unattractive bush. “It is *Rosa Mundi*. Legend has it that she was named for King Henry the Second's mistress, the Fair Rosamund Clifford.” Her gaze returned to him, and her cheeks began to bloom a far healthier color than the rose. “I'm afraid I cannot seem to make it produce much—but then, again, neither did Rosamund, I suppose.”

He smiled wanly. *Much* was an incredible understatement. More like not at all. He could scarce believe his eyes.

“And then, of course, there is this one,” she said, indicating an ambling vine that seemed to have the meandering will of a garden snake and the viciousness of a viper. Somehow, during the short time he had been standing there, listening to her carry on about flora, it had managed to wrap itself about his shorn pant leg, and when he tried to shake it off, it sank its thorny teeth into his flesh. “Bloody damn!” he exclaimed.

“Here, let me get that for you,” she said, and before he could think to stop her, she was kneeling at his feet.

Gabriel stood stock still, trying not to allow his mind to wander. Against his better intentions, visions of her loving him from her knees assailed him, heating his blood and making him shudder anew with desire. He stared down at the pate of her head and lapped at lips gone suddenly dry.

“This one is a favorite,” she confessed sheepishly, leaving off with his pant leg and attending the wayward rose in her hand. She lifted the frail limb and clipped it. “It is *La Seduisante*. Also known as *Incamata*, *La Virginale*, *Cuisse de Nymphe*, or—”

“The Great Maiden's Blush,” Gabriel supplied.

Her head popped up, and she tilted him a glance. “Oh? You know roses?”

she asked, peering up at him, sounding surprised, although something about her demeanor made him think otherwise.

“Not much,” Gabriel admitted. “I know a little. I know this one.”

She turned her attention to the rose again. “I’m not certain what’s wrong with it,” she confessed. “No matter what I do, it does not wish to bloom. I thought perhaps a little pruning would do it good.” She snipped a poorly looking blossom and studied it closer, furrowing her lovely brow.

Gabriel thought perhaps it needed to be put out of its misery, yanked up by its roots and tossed into the dung heap.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, smiling down at her. His gaze focused on the pruning shears. “So... you’ve been tending this garden all by yourself?” he asked, with no small measure of surprise.

She sighed. “Alas. I’m afraid I have. I cannot seem to find anyone able to tend it well enough.”

His brows collided. God only knew, she hardly could find anyone who could tend it worse. But he refrained from saying so and came to his haunches beside her as she examined the rambling rose.

“This garden is special,” she said, and plucked the rose’s petals one by one, discarding the petals on the lawn at his feet...

A fluttering like doves wings launched in Gabriel’s belly as a memory surfaced... of the two of them seated before this very bush, plucking petals from its blossoms. His heart kicked against his ribs. “Why special?”

She seemed to lose herself in reverie for an instant, and he wondered... hoped... she might be remembering...

*“She loathes me, loathes me not, loathes me, loathes me not...”*

*“That’s not the way it goes!”*

*“Love is stupid, so are roses. She loathes me, loathes me not, loathes me, loathes me not...”*

*“I do not loathe you, Gabriel.”* she’d said, frowning, as he’d tossed his plucked petals into her lap. *“I simply do not relish slimy toads on my head.”*

“Sorry,” he’d said easily enough. “*I’ll won’t do it again, Maggie.*”

“*Good.*” she’d said. “*Because if you do...*” She’d held her skirt between her hands, lifting the hem so slightly, so that all the petals gathered into a small pile in the center. “*I shall have to put snakes down your pants.*” And she’d leapt up, snapping her skirts as she’d surged to her feet, tossing the fragrant petals straight into his face. He’d spat one out of his mouth as she ran away, giving Gabriel his first tantalizing peek of lean stockinged legs... perfect ankles that vanished within the blink of an eye, leaving him to stare in open-mouthed wonder over his first glimpse at the glorious differences between boys and girls.

She’d already put a snake into his trousers. Didn’t she know? It sprang to life as he watched her go.

The vision set his heart to pounding and turned his brain to something close to mush...

Even now, all these years later, his reaction to her was much the same. As jaded as he’d become, he still found himself titillated over the sight of her stockinged legs peeking out from beneath her gown, and the adder in his trousers was equally enthralled.

Her hair was swept up today into an artful arrangement that displayed the back of her neck to particular advantage. God help him. It was all he could do not to bend and nibble at her neck. Gabriel sucked in a breath and recalled to mind his purpose in seeking her out this morn—not to seduce her here on the lawn, though visions of doing just that were creeping into his thoughts.

She continued to pluck petals, blissfully unaware that his eyes were crossing with lust, and he murmured softly, “*She loathes me so, loathes me not...*”

Her head popped up again, and she said, “What did you say?”

He smiled at her. “You’re plucking petals... it’s something I used to say as a child.”

She stared at him for the longest moment, and then returned her attention

to the blossom in her hand. "I spent some of my happiest days in this garden," she confessed, sounding wistful. But so had he... spent his finest hours right here... with her...

His gaze moved to the pruning shears she'd placed by her knee. She discarded the flower and lifted the frail vine between her fingers, inspecting it, petting it with a gentle finger, thorns and all, as though it were a cherished little pet. And he realized: She was tending this garden in memory of him, and he was moved beyond words.

"Margaret," he said, standing again.

She peered up at him. "Yes?"

He offered her a hand. "Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"I have something to show you," he said, and he reached out to pull her up, willy-nilly, then dragged her after him, giving her no time to protest.



It was all Margaret could do not to trip over her own feet in her attempt to keep up with him. Over the morning, she'd come to realize who he was.

Of course, she'd suspected last night, when he'd called her brat while playing that game, and she was now hoping to prompt him into a confession. Only he seemed so intent upon continuing this farce. What did he want from her?

"Just a bit further," he urged.

"*Where* are we going?"

"You'll see," he said, tormenting her with his evasiveness.

"I must be mad," Margaret said. It had been years since she'd ventured this far into their parklands—not since she'd been a child—with Gabriel.

He brought her to the crest of a hill, then laid down the pasteboard he carried in his hand.

"Now sit," he demanded.

"Sit?"

He pointed at the pasteboard. "On it."

Margaret stared at him in disbelief. "I mean to say, I think *you* must be mad. Why should I wish to sit on *that*?"

Gabriel winked at her, grinning. "Only humor me," he suggested. And then persisted, "Sit down, please?"

Margaret frowned. She could scarce refuse him when he looked at her so... so... longingly. The sun glinted off his hair, and the scent of wildflowers filled her senses.

“Very well,” she relented, if grudgingly, tiring of this ruse. She sat down on the pasteboard, feeling like a silly goose. “Now what?”

He began to laugh.

Margaret peered up at him in sheer exasperation, her hands going to her hips in outrage. “Did you drag me all this way to force me sit upon your piece of cardboard, only to snicker at me like an ungracious oaf?”

To her dismay, he continued to cackle, and Margaret decided she’d had enough. She made to rise. “I thought I heard you say you wished to show me something,” she said. “Apparently, I was mistaken.”

“No.” he said, thrusting out a hand, urging her to remain seated. “Ah, but Maggie. Tis that you look...” He shook his head. “So....” He laughed again. “You have no idea what good it does my heart to see you.”

“You mean to say I look a merry-Andrew,” Margaret countered, wholly vexed with his amusement at her expense. “Look at you,” she said, waving a hand at him. “I did not laugh at you, sirrah, when you came to me looking like... *that*.” She waved a hand in disgust and made again to rise. But, for the first time, she noticed his feet. “You’re not wearing shoes,” she said. “Why aren’t you wearing shoes?”

He knelt down beside her, chortling, as he placed a hand on her shoulder to soothe her. “Hold still,” he said, and groped about her, feeling for the pasteboard at her back.

He moved his hand to her sides, and Margaret slapped his hand in scandalized horror. “I beg pardon,” she said, pinning his hand under her own and glaring defiantly. “What is it you think you are doing?”

His grin was infectious, but Margaret had no intention of allowing it to disarm her. “I simply need to see how much room is left on the pasteboard.”

“Why?”

His eyes twinkled with a devilish light. “You’ll see.” He tilted his head, once again giving her that little-boy glance and smile that melted her will. “Trust me,” he said.

He wasn’t playing fair, Margaret decided. How could she refuse him when he begged so sweetly? She lifted her hand, freeing him, but gave him a warning glare. “Very well,” she relented. “Do what you will.”

Like a boy, his grin returned, brighter than before, and the sight of it melted Maggie’s heart.

“Now scoot forward,” he demanded.

“Scoot?”

“Yes, Margaret, *scoot*.” He placed a hand behind her, and quite boldly, shoved her bottom forward on the cardboard when she didn’t respond quickly enough.

“Oh!” Margaret exclaimed.

He sat behind her, and before Margaret could think to protest, he wrapped his legs around her, trapping her between them.

“Now,” he commanded, “close your eyes!”

“This is preposterous,” Margaret protested. “What in the Queen’s name are we doing?”

“You’ll see,” he said. And then again, “Trust me, Maggie.” And he took her hands into his own, and said, “Hold tight.”

Margaret didn’t even have time to ask why. Within an instant, Gabriel had shoved them forward, down the hill. She squealed as they went flying, and for a moment, she was horrified, but Gabriel wrapped his arms about her and held her close. And then they were racing down the steep hill on his pasteboard, the wind sweeping her face. Margaret couldn’t contain a peal of laughter. Glorious! *Freedom!* She opened her eyes and watched the horizon fly by, and giggled.

They ended at the bottom of the hill in a scattered heap, laughing breathlessly.

Neither could seem to stop for the longest interval, and Margaret lay with her head on his chest, oblivious to propriety, laughing like a girl. “Oh, my! That was unspeakably delightful,” she confessed.

He hugged her, a smile in his voice, and his chuckles subsided. “You do not know how long I’ve wanted to do that with you, Maggie.”

She peered back at him, tears shining in her eyes. “Your name isn’t truly Morgan, is it?”

He shook his head with a smirk. “Neither is yours.” And then, once again, both together, they laughed, and couldn’t stop for the longest while.

Finally, Maggie opened her mouth to speak, and Gabriel put a finger to her lips. “Shhhh,” he said, and sat up, turning her about to face him, looking her straight in the eyes. “I still love you, Brat. I never stopped. I told you I’d not forget, and I never have.”

Margaret’s brows slanted as bittersweet memories accosted her. She peered about at the familiar landscape... the bright blue skyline... the circle of trees... the hill they’d come racing down... the windflowers swaying with the breeze... and her heart hammered fiercely, because this was the very spot where they’d said their goodbyes.

“It’s true,” he said, and time slipped away.

She choked on a sob, casting herself into his arms. “Oh, Gabe!” she said, clutching at his dirty shirt, and Gabriel reached out to do what he hadn’t had the nerve to do all those years past. He took a wayward lock of Margaret’s hair between his fingers and brushed it away from her beautiful face, and then he said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she cried.

“I know, sweet Maggie. I know.” And he bent to seal their avowals with a sweet, if slightly muddy kiss.

“Maggie, Maggie, Maggie,” he murmured, reaching out to trace the curve of her breasts with a finger. He reveled in the feel of her supple flesh beneath his greedy hands. “I would like to discuss a renegotiation...”

“Renegotiation?”

“Yes, dear.”

Maggie grinned. “I stand firm on the matter of gambling,” she revealed.

“Not a problem.” After all these years, he couldn’t believe she was truly his—at *last*—with her glorious hair all mussed from their play. He reached out to thread his fingers through the shining mass and sucked in an awe-filled breath.

“No separate quarters,” he whispered as he kissed her mouth. She closed her eyes, but her desire was more than apparent on her face, and Gabriel rejoiced in it. He wanted to please her for the rest of his days. He wanted to shower her with affection, make up for lost time...

And more than anything else in the world, he wanted to make her laugh.

“If you insist.”

He did insist—indeed, he did.

Everything he now had, he wanted to give his sweet lady—and this moment, he wanted to give her his body and his soul. He rolled, atop her, looking down into her face, and whispered, “Margaret... do you understand what it is we are about to do, my love?”

It took her a long moment to respond, and then she said, “I rather think I do... we are consummating our marriage,” she said with a whisper, and Gabriel grinned.

“Yes, we are,” he said. “Indeed, we are.”

And there, at the foot of their favorite hill, they did precisely that.

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JUNE 15, 1868

“Papa George! What’s dis one?”

Arm in arm, Gabriel and Maggie watched their children cavort with Grandpa George. At four and eleven months, respectively, Victoria and Scott Thomas were sweet little cherubs, every parent's dream. While Scott Thomas sat atop his Papa’s lap, trying to wrest a white rose from his grasp, precocious little Victoria listened to his tales, much as Maggie had once done, even after Gabe was gone.

“This one...” He studied it a moment. “It is Rosa Alba,” he declared. “Made famous by the War of Roses.”

“What?” shrieked Victoria. “Roses can go to war?” I don’t believe it!” she said with a sing-song voice, a trilling laugh, and an exaggerated flutter of her hand.

“No, dear. It was the sigil of the House of York. And see that red rose over there—see it? That was the sigil of the House of Lancaster. Eventually, both families lost to a Tudor, and therefore, we now have Queen Victoria.” He pointed an old finger at her. “Your namesake.”

She grinned broadly. “Me?” And she pranced about the garden, lifting her skirt, sashaying across the lawn, her red-gold curls bouncing as she flounced. “I am queen!” she crooned, laughing. “I am queen!”

“Yes!” Papa George was saying to Victoria. “You are a queen!” And he

noded enthusiastically as their child paraded by lush, blooming roses of every color.

“Papa!” Scott Thomas squealed again, snatching at the white rose that swept too close, and clutching the captured petals in an iron grip, then pulling out a handful, fascinated as a few escaped and fluttered to the ground. Even before the last one fell to the lawn, he was shoving his hard-won handful into his mouth. The nanny rushed over to help, brushing the fine-scented detritus from their son’s mouth.

They had been married now for more than six years. Gabriel hardly believed his good fortune. He’d never seen his father so content as he was with two tots at his heels. It certainly made it easier to slip away. Tugging his sweet Maggie by the hand, he lured her away from the arbor, craving a little solitude.

“Da,” he said. “You good with the wee ones?”

The old man raised a hand, scarcely listening. “Where’s your crown?” he asked Victoria. She slapped at her head and shrieked with laughter. “Make me another one,” she demanded, and Maggie laughed as she turned away.

“She reminds me of you,” said Gabriel with a lopsided grin.

Maggie gave him an exaggerated, wide-eyed glance. “Me?” She pressed a hand to her breast, precisely as their four-year-old daughter had done.

Gabriel laughed.

It was a fine, fine summer day, with the scent of fresh blooms wafting in the air. The gardens had never appeared lovelier, despite that George was no longer tending them. He oversaw their care, but managed several attendants, each with particular skills. At the end of the day, he could look upon his accomplishments with glee—not the least of which was his matchmaking attempts. Anyone who doubted for one moment that there was genuine affection, between the lord and lady of Blackwood, would be hard-pressed to defend their position, especially when Maggie’s belly was once again as round as a ball. Five months into her pregnancy, she was as fresh and

beautiful as she'd been the day he first spied her. And if she was sassy as well, it wasn't a slip of her mood.

"You are incorrigible!" she said, giving him a sidelong glance. "And greedy."

"Why? Because I love my wife and covet her for myself." Despite the exaggeration, she laughed, and he guided her around the house, pressing her up against the ivy-covered brick around the corner from the rose garden. At the moment, not even her rounded belly could dissuade him.

"If you do not cease and desist, at once, we will never again have time to ourselves."

"Alas, I am greedy," he lamented. "Guilty as charged. But I assure you I feel no remorse."

Once again, Maggie laughed. Six sweet years they'd been married, six years of laughter, six years of joy and few regrets.

Maggie drew him by his lapels, lifting her face for a kiss... puckering her lips... remembering the first kiss they ever shared, in a bumpy carriage en route from Gretna Green. She'd asked him then for but one, and if he ever denied her now, she'd weep on her knees. "Happy anniversary, my love," she said.

"Happy anniversary, Brat."

Even after all these years, Margaret reveled in the endearment. "Brat?" she said, reaching down to caress the front of his trousers. "I will show you a brat, my dear." And her lips turned mischievously at the corners, her eyes alight with the tint of a bright blue flame. "Kiss me," she demanded, and he fell to his knees.

"Gabriel!"

He ducked his head beneath her skirt, ensconcing himself beneath—not something any gentleman would ever do—and no true lady would ever allow it.

"Gabriel! Someone will see us!"



In answer, Gabriel lifted his tongue into the cleft between her thighs, kissing her in his very favorite place—hers as well, it mortified her to say. With a contented sigh, Maggie sank against the ivy-covered wall, allowing her husband to explore. And, perhaps, indeed, kisses weren't contracts, but in this case, they were certainly promises, and she knew he would always keep them.

“Shall I stop?” she heard him ask.

Margaret shuddered as his tongue played, and she shook her head with absolute delight. “Nay, my love... I'll gladly enjoy... just... one more... kiss...”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tanya Anne Crosby is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of thirty novels. She has been featured in magazines, such as People, Romantic Times and Publisher's Weekly, and her books have been translated into eight languages. Her first novel was published in 1992 by Avon Books, where Tanya was hailed as "one of Avon's fastest rising stars." Her fourth book was chosen to launch the company's Avon Romantic Treasure imprint.

Known for stories charged with emotion and humor and filled with flawed characters Tanya is an award-winning author, journalist, and editor, and her novels have garnered reader praise and glowing critical reviews.

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# **DUKES, ACTUALLY**

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**ERICA RIDLEY**

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Thank you so much!



## DUKES, ACTUALLY

The Duke of Azureford isn't the arrogant, aloof lord his peers perceive him to be. Yes, he's awkward, but he has a plan to fix it. In order to woo a respectable lady, he must learn how to flirt. The completely inappropriate girl next door would make a perfect instructor, but a *terrible* duchess. So why can't he walk away?

Incorrigible hoyden Miss Carole Quincy likes billiards, fast carriages, and the beautiful, buttoned-up Duke of Azureford. She'd be delighted to help him out of his shell and into her arms. Who cares if they're just pretending to flirt? The heady, breath-taking, soul-consuming feeling inside her runaway heart surely can't be *love*...

**The 12 Dukes of Christmas is a laugh-out-loud historical romance series of heartwarming Regency romps nestled in a picturesque snow-covered village. After all, nothing heats up a winter night quite like finding oneself in the arms of a duke!**



# **CRESSMOUTH GAZETTE**

## **Welcome to Christmas!**

Our picturesque village is nestled around Marlowe Castle, high atop the gorgeous mountain we call home. Cressmouth is best known for our year-round Yuletide cheer. Here, we're family.

The legend of our twelve dukes? Absolutely true! But perhaps not always in the way one might expect...



*Cressmouth, England*  
*Down the lane from Marlowe Castle*

Could it truly be considered *theft*, if the object Miss Carole Quincy intended to filch from the Duke of Azureford's summer cottage had belonged to her all along?

Carole sat on the edge of her fourposter bed to tug off her worn leather slippers. It was a brisk, late spring day with no clouds in sight, but in a mountaintop village nicknamed Christmas, 'twas best not to venture out-of-doors without sturdy boots.

Not that she was going far. Last summer, the Duke of Azureford had purchased the adjoining property. He'd be her next-door neighbor... if he were here. She was glad he wasn't. Dark tousled hair and deep brown eyes were all well and good on most occasions, but she needed to be in and out without anybody paying too much attention. She reached for a boot and yanked on the laces.

She would have retrieved her sketchbook by now, but until recently, the duke's normally vacant cottage had been housing a recovering soldier. The

soldier was gone, the house was empty, the neighbors were all indoors enjoying afternoon tea... There wouldn't be a better time, but she had to act quickly.

No one knew about the sketchbook. It was the most private thing she owned. It wasn't a collection of bad poetry or "Carole + His Grace" curlicue doodles, but something even closer to her heart:

Architecture.

Painstakingly precise recreations of her house, her street, the castle upon the hill... reimagined to reflect the world she *really* wished she lived in. Happy families gathered about a supper table. The assembly rooms decorated not for lackluster "marriage mart" dances, but as a place where Carole and her friends could drink brandy and play billiards and wager their future trousseau on the turn of a card.

How she wished she could draw herself into a place where she could be herself without judgment! As talented as Carole was with architectural sketches, she was positively dreadful at capturing realistic likenesses. Instead, she copied figures from fashion plates as best she could, and outfitted each elegant lady with additional props, like flying rapiers or frothy tankards of ale.

Men enjoyed their gentlemen's clubs. Why shouldn't women enjoy equally hedonistic ladies' clubs?

"Yes, yes, because of the scandal," Carole muttered as she finished tying her second boot.

Drawing such forbidden activities was not the same as actually *performing* them, but try telling that to the gleefully shocked gossips if a single page of that sketchbook ever came to light. The moment Carole had it back in her possession, that sketchbook was never leaving her bedchamber again.

Boots on, she hopped off the edge of her bed and strode to her dressing table for the final touch.

Now where were those earrings? She shoved aside a tin of pencils and a stack of tomes on geometry and mathematics until she found the little pouch she'd been saving for just this occasion.

Two delicate gold-and-citrine earrings. She hadn't worn them in months—not since the day of the party. How could she, when she planned to say she'd lost one of the pair in the Duke of Azureford's cottage? When his butler let her in to search, she would slip her missing sketchbook back into her reticule, secure the blasted thing with a dozen sturdy knots, “find” her lost earring, and be on her way.

All she had to do was get inside.

After dropping one earring into her empty reticule, Carole fastened the other to her left ear for effect. She smiled when she glimpsed her reflection in the looking-glass. She looked positively piratical. The next sketch she'd draw would be the Duke of Azureford's cottage, brimming with fashionable ladies decked in eyepatches and—

*No.* This was the time for action, not imagination. Once she retrieved her sketchbook, she could daydream all she pleased. Only perhaps a month remained before His Grace would return to make use of his summer cottage. First things first.

She flung open her bedchamber door and stepped into the corridor.

Rhoda, the kitchen maid, nearly jumped out of her skin.

Carole rescued the tea tray before its contents could slide to the floor. “Is this for my father?”

Rhoda nodded. “I'm happy to take it.”

“I'll do it.”

Carole always took her father his afternoon tea. He rarely noticed, but that wasn't why she did it.

All right, yes. That was *exactly* why she did it. She missed her father. Missed the days when he used to take meals with her, have long fireside chats with her, do anything with her at all besides their weekly standard billiards

game, which was over as soon as one of them scored twenty-one points. Of course she was as good as he was. Father was the one who had taught her to play. The game was over in the blink of an eye.

Rhoda followed Carole to her father's study and pushed open the door.

There was no point in knocking. He wouldn't notice a rhinoceros stampede through the room, much less a daughter bearing tea and biscuits. She set the tray on a table in the rear of the office as she always did and turned to face the back of her father's head.

As always, Rhoda had left as soon as Carole entered the study. Either the maid intended to give Carole and her father privacy, or she wished to politely avoid witnessing the humiliation of being no more noticeable to one's father than the motes of dust dancing before his window.

"Your tea is here, Father. Please try to eat some sandwiches."

A small grunt of acknowledgment.

Not that Carole had expected more than a swift nod. She even understood.

When her father wanted to escape life, he lost himself in his work. When the world frustrated Carole, she'd duck into a private corner and jot a quick sketch of how she would rather life be.

If she had her sketchbook at this moment, she'd draw a family taking tea together in their sitting room, just like Carole's family used to do before her mother died.

She *had* to get that sketchbook back before the wrong person found it. Not just because she mourned the loss of that particular volume, but because she didn't want the reason her father finally glanced up to be because she'd become a laughingstock. The last thing she wanted was to embarrass her father. Her goal was to make his life easier, not harder. He'd never remarried. They were each other's only relative. She wouldn't let him down.

Even if he never noticed.

Carole exited her father's study and eased the door closed behind her.

Mrs. MacDonald, the housekeeper, stood in the corridor.

“How is your sister?” Carole asked.

Mrs. MacDonald’s shoulders relaxed in visible relief. “Much better, miss. Gave us a scare, she did, with those chills and all that coughing. Thank you for letting me spend the week with her.”

“It was no problem,” Carole said with a smile. Without much else at home to entertain her, taking over the housekeeper’s duties had been a welcome way to fill the void.

Now that Mrs. MacDonald was back, however, Carole really needed to slip out of her house and over to the Duke of Azureford’s cottage.

“Did you need me?” she asked.

“Tonight’s menu does.” Mrs. MacDonald winced. “The butcher was out of mutton, so we can’t prepare the pies. What would you like instead?”

*Blast.* Mutton pie was Father’s favorite. “Do we have fowl?”

Mrs. MacDonald nodded. “Several chickens.”

“Then those will do. Thank you.”

Crisis resolved, Carole made her way down the corridor and almost to the front door before her elderly lady’s maid inserted herself between Carole and the door.

“Where are you going? Would you like me to plait your hair?”

Judith had been Carole’s companion since birth. For as long as Carole could remember, the grandmotherly woman’s favorite activity had always been braiding hair. Her own silver curls were fashioned into a crown of looping plaits.

“No need,” Carole assured her. “It’s not a social call. I’m just going to pop over to the Duke of Azureford’s cottage for a quick moment in order to —”

“*Azureford,*” Judith breathed, with the sort of giddy sigh some women used to say *Beau Brummel*. “I’m coming with you.”

“He’s not *there*. I don’t need a chaperone.”

More importantly, why was her sixty-year-old maid suddenly breathless over a duke half her age? Judith hadn't shown any interest in Azureford when he had first purchased the cottage. She hadn't even asked to come along as companion when His Grace had hosted his first and only soirée.

"Please?" Judith batted her bright blue eyes.

Something was clearly afoot, but Carole did not have time to waste ferreting out answers to mysteries. She had a sketchbook to recover.

"Fine." She shooed Judith out of the way in order to open the door. "We won't be gone five minutes. It's just a quick errand."

Carole let out a breath when she finally stepped out of her doorway and into the afternoon sun. The welcome warmth on her face perfectly complemented the scent of springtime as a cool breeze rustled the trees. It was a gorgeous day. No wonder the neighborhood children were out in the streets kicking balls and trundling hoops.

She waved at the children, but hurried down her walk without stopping to chat or play. Once her sketchbook was safely under lock and key, *then* she could take advantage of the fine weather. As soon as she reached the street, she quickly turned toward the duke's cottage.

"Carole!" a familiar voice called out warmly.

Her good friend Gloria Pringle strolled toward her, arm-in-arm with her new husband. They looked adorable together, and deliriously happy. Carole was thrilled for them.

"How is married life?" she asked, and wished she hadn't.

For years, Carole had ignored the hollow little thump in her chest every time another of her friends fell in love and started a new life. She was perfectly satisfied with her existing role as her father's caretaker. He wouldn't eat if it weren't for her. That was fulfillment enough.

"Married life is perfect." Gloria and her husband Christopher Pringle gazed at each other as if they'd been presented with a king's treasure. "We're going to go to London this year for the Season."



“You *are*?” Carole asked in disbelief. Gloria was the only other person who never went anywhere. Married life must be magical indeed if it had extracted Gloria from her shell. “That’s wonderful!”

“I’m nervous,” Gloria admitted, “but I can’t wait to see the—are you wearing just one earring?”

Judith slid Carole a betrayed look. As lady’s maid, she was responsible for the upkeep of Carole’s outward perfection.

“I usually can’t coax her to wear earrings at all.” Judith lowered her voice. “I imagine she thinks this is some sort of compromise.”

“I think it’s piratical,” Carole informed them. “Also, I expect to find its mate in Azureford’s cottage.”

Gloria blinked. “When were you in Azureford’s cottage? Is he here?”

“He is not.” Carole gripped her empty reticule. “And I was there for his dinner party, same as you.”

“You’re just now coming to fetch an earring you lost six months ago?” Gloria asked doubtfully.

This was why Carole had wanted to undertake this mission alone. Friends asked questions. The butler would not ask questions. She would just grab her sketchbook and be gone.

“She probably didn’t notice it was lost until today.” Judith held up a liver-marked hand to stage whisper, “She *hates* earrings. You should see the fights I must put up if I’m to get a curling tong anywhere near her—”

“It was a dinner party, not a bride auction at Almack’s.”

“No less a marriage mart,” Judith said primly. “His Grace is single, and perhaps he wouldn’t be if you would have let me accentuate your heart-shaped face with a few ringlets.”

Gloria shook her head. “He’s a confirmed bachelor.”

“A confirmed bachelor in want of an heir and a spare,” Judith pointed out. “Carole is perfectly suitable to become—”

“A broodmare?” she finished archly. “No, thank you. Tell everyone you

know that I am a confirmed spinster.”

Whenever she became melancholy about not having children of her own, why, there was an entire neighborhood of lads and lasses all around her. She wasn't missing a thing.

“He *is* handsome.” Gloria giggled at her husband's cross expression. “Not as handsome as you, of course.”

Carole was forced to disagree. Before he'd come to town, she'd heard the same rumors as everyone else: His Grace was cold, aloof, judgmental—and handsome as sin.

She hadn't paid much attention to the gossips, but when she happened to spy the duke alighting from his stately coach... good heavens, had she paid attention! Dark hair, dark eyes, dark lashes, strong jaw, broad shoulders, impeccable everything. The entire village had skipped a collective heartbeat.

Not that Carole would indulge such twaddle. Whatever her lady's maid might dream, Carole was no future duchess. In large part because she did not plan to marry... and in equally large part because the Duke of Azureford was patently uninterested. He had thrown precisely one party and didn't speak to Carole the entire time.

“Come by later,” she told her friends. “We're having pies for supper.”

“We're already promised to Nick and Penelope... mayhap next week?”

“Next week,” Carole echoed. “That will be lovely.”

“Good luck with Azureford,” Gloria called as they strode away.

“He's not here,” Carole said again. Not that it would have made much difference.

His obliviousness to her presence hadn't stopped her from surreptitiously gazing at him. From her window, from their adjoining gardens, from across his mahogany supper table. Carole sighed. Dreaming about how different her life might have been was the whole reason she'd snuck off to sketch in her book in the first place. She *hated* feeling invisible.

As she was returning from the retiring room, someone bumped into her

and she dropped her reticule. Carole had been the only one who saw her sketchbook fly out to skid across the ridiculously polished floor and into Azureford's library.

Before she could recover it, Swinton the helpful butler "returned" the fallen volume to the appropriately color-coded section of the duke's library shelves. Carole clenched her teeth as she turned up the duke's front path. Why had his butler even been away from his post? She should've known right then that retrieving her book wouldn't be easy.

At first it had seemed like a little luck was on her side. Azureford was leaving the next morning, thereby making it unlikely for him to stumble across her sketches. Particularly the brand new one of his front drawing room.

She couldn't dart into the library and retrieve her book in front of so many witnesses without making it look like she was nicking one of the duke's books in the middle of a party. Nor could she explain page after page of town landmarks populated by ale-swilling, cheroot-smoking ladies with snuffboxes and fashionable bonnets.

The only choice was to come back for it later. Thanks to the library's helpful color-coding, she knew exactly which shelf housed her sketchbook. She could have it tucked in her reticule in sixty seconds.

If only she could get inside.

Carole motioned for Judith to stand behind her, then gave a sharp rap with the pristine brass knocker.

The door immediately opened to reveal an older gentleman with crafty blue eyes and a tuft of white hair. Azureford's butler, Swinton.

"Good afternoon," she began brightly. "I've come to—"

Judith elbowed her way up onto the front step with almost enough force to send Carole flying into the hedges.

Swinton didn't blink.

Carole sent her lady's maid a stern glare.

Judith made no response. Her attention was completely focused on the butler.

Carole rolled back her shoulders and tried again. “I may have lost an earring in the duke’s library during his soiree. Might I take a quick peek to see if I can find it?”

Swinton’s blue gaze slid from Judith to Carole. “His Grace’s party did not take place in the library.”

True. Carole swallowed hard. *Blast it.*

“Perhaps it wasn’t the library,” she said quickly. “Perhaps it was *near* the library. Perhaps—”

“Perhaps you believe His Grace’s household staff to be so incompetent in their posts that a lost earring would remain untouched upon the floor month after month?” Swinton inquired politely.

Carole swallowed. “I...”

*...could not retrieve my sketchbook while the duke or his friend were occupying the cottage because I cannot risk witnesses.*

“Miss Quincy abhors jewelry,” Judith giggled. Actually *giggled*. “Such a bear when it comes to dressing up at all. I cannot let her gad about town with one earring, can I? Surely a man like you wouldn’t wish such mortification on a girl like me.”

What in the completely-frozen-over hell was that about? Carole turned to her lady’s maid in disbelief. Judith could not possibly expect a breathy little voice and schoolgirl giggles would make the duke’s intractable butler—

“Very well,” Swinton said briskly. “Miss Quincy has five minutes.”

Carole’s jaw fell open. She could practically hear her teeth click together when she forced her gaping mouth shut.

“Come on,” she murmured to Judith as she took a tentative step across the threshold.

Her lady’s maid let out another giggle.

Carole hooked her arm about Judith’s elbow and hauled her past the

butler and into the cottage.

“Are you absolutely positive you need my help?” Judith whispered between appallingly non-subtle glances over her shoulder toward the butler.

“You know what?” Carole stopped walking and dropped Judith’s arm. “I have to get into that library without Swinton noticing. Do you think you can find some way to keep him near the door until I get back?”

Judith’s eyes sparkled. “Absolutely.”

Without a backward glance—Carole did *not* want to bear witness to whatever distraction her maid had in store for the butler—she hurried down the corridor toward the library before some other member of Azureford’s staff could stop her for questioning.

She jerked to a stop just inside the library. A horrified gasp strangled in her throat as she stared at the shelves in shock.

The duke’s aesthetically organized books weren’t sorted by color anymore. Blue spines were not with blue spines. Red was not with red. Green was not with green. Rather than a neatly delineated rainbow, the library was a cornucopia of color, every spine contrasting wildly with its neighbor.

How was she supposed to find her sketchbook *now*?

“No, no, no,” she groaned as she dashed forward to scan the shelves in search of a familiar spine.

The problem was, her sketchbook’s spine didn’t stand out at all. It had actually started its life as one of her father’s journals. The same sort of blank journal any number of gentlemen ordered to keep their diaries or balance their ledgers. Azureford himself owned countless volumes of the same style.

The difference was, the journals that belonged to Carole’s father had fancy Q embossed on the front cover. The same recognizable Q that was emblazoned on half their other possessions. If she didn’t get that journal out of here during her one chance to do so, whoever stumbled across it would either immediately realize Carole had penned the sketches—or they’d think her father did. Neither was acceptable.

She hurried from shelf to shelf, yanking dark blue spines free only to shove them back moments later when their covers failed to display the family Q.

“Five minutes!” Judith called, rather... breathlessly? “Here we come! Did you find your earring?”

Carole tugged the gold-and-citrine hoop from her reticule and shoved it behind a row of books. Perhaps it wasn't a likely place for an earring to have fallen, but she needed to keep her story plausible. It could take days to find a needle in a haystack. *Weeks.*

Swinton strode into the library, his cheeks oddly flushed. “I must ask you to leave. His Grace arrives within the week, and we must ensure the house is in proper order.”

“But this is his *summer* cottage,” Carole stammered inately. “It's not... summer.”

This time, it was Judith who hooked her arm through Carole's and hauled her toward the door. “Thank you, Swinton. You are everything that is sweet and kind. A veritable gentleman.”

“We'll be back,” Carole called over her shoulder as Judith dragged her outside.

“Not without my master's invitation,” Swinton replied, and closed the door in their face.

“Almost there, Your Grace.”

Adam Farland, the sixth Duke of Azureford, set his well-worn sheaf of notes from the last Parliament session on the squab beside him, and directed his gaze out the window.

John, his driver, was right. A bright red sign beckoned from the rolling green grass:

*Welcome to Christmas!*

MOST VISITORS FLOCKED to England’s northernmost village for the winter entertainment it usually offered. A glittering castle atop a soaring mountain, fields of gorgeous evergreens, carolers beneath softly falling snow almost all year round. According to the latest almanac, there would be no chance of a frost fair for at least ten weeks.

A self-deprecating smile curved Adam’s lips. He would not be surprised to learn he was the only resident who had timed his visit to correspond with the *least* Christmassy time of year. The already small village would hold a

fraction of its seasonal population.

That was why he was here.

“Thank you, John.”

Adam had purchased his picturesque cottage last year after hearing nothing but complimentary tales about this village in the House of Lords. He’d even had a few favorite pieces of furniture as well as his late father’s beloved library sent up, painstakingly reassembled in the exact same manner as in the grand residence where Adam had grown up.

Neither house felt much like a home. Part of which—or, perhaps, most of which—was Adam’s own fault. He loved to be around people, but hadn’t the least idea what to say to them in a social atmosphere. So he said nothing at all.

Not a strategy that tended to lead to lifelong friends.

Last summer, a rumor had gone through Cressmouth that their aloof new resident would rather closet himself like a hermit than deign to speak to his neighbors. The opposite was true. To prove them wrong, Adam had thrown his first dinner party and invited everyone in adjacent houses... and then spent the entire evening glowering at his guests tongue-tied because he hadn’t the least idea what to say.

This year would be different. *He* would be different.

He hoped.

“Straight home, Your Grace?”

“No. To the castle.”

John glanced over his shoulder in obvious surprise. “The castle, Your Grace?”

“Please.”

“As you wish.”

The bustling Great Hall at the front of Marlowe Castle boasted an extensive buffet of seasonal treats, bowls of punch and ratafia, and any number of lively, cheerful locals happy to greet new guests.



That was not why Adam was going. He was replacing the comforting old library at his cottage with a brand new billiard room. The switch would force him to mingle with others rather than pass the days away by himself. If he wanted to visit his books, well, he'd have to march on over to the castle to do so, because he was donating every last one of them to the town circulating library. Well, except for a small shelf of favorites he couldn't bear to part with.

When they stopped at the castle to share the good news, Adam would have to borrow an instructional tome on how to *play* billiards because he hadn't the least idea how it was done. What mattered was that it was fashionable. If he possessed the best billiard room in northern England, gentlemen would flock to his door to play. Adam might lose every game, but he'd win friends. This would prove once and for all that "duke" did not mean "arrogant" and "shy" was not the same as "aloof."

How he'd get the word out that he possessed a shiny new billiard room in want of friendly players... well, he'd cross that bridge when he got there.

The first step was to inform the castle of his incoming donation. The second step was to pack up his father's faithfully organized books. The third step was a bit murky, but the fourth step involved basking in his newfound popularity without the slightest hint of his old social awkwardness. If he could address the entire House of Lords without tripping over his tongue, surely he could manage to make a *friend*.

"Castle coming up, Your Grace."

Spirits rising, Adam returned his gaze to the view outside his window. There went the smithy, which meant at any moment, they'd be passing Adam's cottage... Aha! There it was. Warm red brick, wide windows, a welcoming stone path to the front door.

Although there was just one road up the mountain to the castle, shops and cottages lined a half dozen narrow off-shoots. In no time at all, the cozy little homes vanished as the coach rolled to a stop before Marlowe Castle's

imposing front doors.

“Shall I accompany you, Your Grace?”

“Stay with the coach, please.” Adam leapt to the ground. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Inside was an immediate assault to the senses—in the pleasantest way possible. Crackling fires, smiling faces, rows of biscuits, the low roar of conversation spiked with laughter, the sweet scent of cinnamon and nutmeg in the air. He could do this. He just needed to find someone to explain his donation to.

The only other time he’d walked through these doors had been on his first visit, just before he purchased his cottage. The welcome in the great hall was as he remembered it, but the castle was enormous. Adam knew how to find the circulating library, and that was about it.

As he glanced around, he noticed a woman just as alone as he was. She sat at a small table in the far corner beneath a sign simply reading:

## *FORTUNES*

NO ONE QUEUED UP, or even looked in the fortune-teller’s direction. Adam’s stomach twisted in empathy. He didn’t believe in psychic nonsense, but he knew what it felt like to be alone in a crowd, unable to fit in.

Striking up a conversation with a turbaned fortune teller would be the perfect way to ease into being New Adam. Nothing hinged on the outcome. She would move on and he would never see her again. The meaningless exchange would be a forgettable, but important, first attempt at practicing his social skills.

Besides, how hard could it be? He’d give her a shilling, she’d give him

some twaddle about luck crossing his path, and that would be that.

“No half-measures,” he reminded himself. He was New Adam. This would be easy. He rolled back his shoulders and strode straight to her table.

Her turban slipped sideways as she glanced up from her glass ball.

“Sit.” One long fingernail pointed at a bronze basin. “One bob for fortune.”

He sat.

She stared at him without comment.

He dropped a shilling in the bronze basin.

The wrinkled, gray-haired woman continued to stare without blinking.

He shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair. “Er... aren’t you supposed to say something like ‘love and luck will find me, thanks to the moon?’”

“Dukes, actually. Thank them.”

She tapped a fingernail on the glass ball. It didn’t change.

Adam refrained from informing her that she was talking to a duke at this very moment. There was no point. She likely gave the same nonsensical fortune to everyone foolish enough to hand over a shilling.

She placed both hands on the glass ball and widened her eyes dramatically. “Follow the five golden rings. They lead to your heart.”

His brow furrowed. “What does that even mean?”

She covered the glass ball with a square of black silk. “It is up to you to find out.”

He couldn’t believe it. “I thought a fortune teller’s job was to tell fortunes.”

“Your job is to listen, which you are not doing,” she scolded.

“Five golden rings. My heart. Dukes, actually,” he parroted politely. “None of that makes sense.”

“Does anything make sense? You surround yourself with fictional companions because you are afraid to make real friends.”

He reeled back. "I'm not afraid! I—"

"You are comfortable before a podium because it is easier to speak to hundreds of your peers than to converse alone with just one person."

"That's not a 'fortune,'" he spluttered. "That's my *current* life. I didn't give you a shilling to tell me things I already know."

"Didn't you?" She inspected her fingernails. "Tell me, why did you invite your pretty neighbor to your party and then do nothing but stare, because your tongue is useless as wet towel?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "Do I *know* you?"

She straightened her turban. "Have you been to the old country?"

"What country are you from?"

"This one. I was born in Essex." Her accent disappeared. "If you were in search of science, you should have attended the Royal Society of Gentlemen Geologists' symposium."

He blinked. "Is there a Royal Society of Gentlemen Geologists symposium?"

"You want another fortune?" She pointed at the brass basin. "Two bob."

"What happened to one bob?"

"Economic instability." She tapped the basin. "Take that up with your committee when Parliament reconvenes."

"How did you know I—"

"Madame Edna knows all." She rubbed her palms over the glass sphere. "You don't wish to be seen as aloof. You are lonely. You seek the missing piece."

He dropped coins into the basin. "Two bob more. Now, how do I do it?"

Madame Edna leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Share your balls."

"Share my *what*?"

"And your table." She placed the glass sphere inside a wooden box and removed her turban. "The rest will become clear."

"Where are you going?" He placed his hands on the table. "I thought you

were going to tell my fortune.”

“I did.” She tugged down her sign. “The rest is up to you.”

With a muffled groan, Adam pushed away from her table to almost crash directly into the castle’s resident solicitor, Mr. Thompson, who had aided Adam’s man of business with the purchase of the cottage.

“Thank God.” Adam’s shoulders relaxed. “Someone sane.”

“Your Grace!” Mr. Thompson said warmly. “May I help you?”

“I’d like to donate several hundred volumes to the castle library. Is there a process for such contributions?”

“There is, indeed. If the day after tomorrow is amenable, I can have several footmen and coaches available to fetch the books from your door. You needn’t lift a finger.”

Except for separating a dozen cherished titles Adam was unwilling to part with. “Two o’clock?”

“It’s as good as done, Your Grace.”

“Splendid.” Adam hurried from the castle to his waiting coach before he was forced into any more awkward conversations.

“To the cottage?” his driver asked.

“*Please*,” Adam replied with feeling.

The encounter with Madame Edna had proven he was not yet ready to converse with strangers. His head still hurt from the effort. He could not wait to settle into the library and relax with a favorite book. At least it was a short drive.

When his coach stopped in front of his silent, cozy summer cottage, Adam’s tense shoulders relaxed. Without waiting for the driver, he opened the carriage door and stepped out onto springy green grass. Ten decorative stones up the neat front walk, and he’d finally be where he was most comfortable: alone.

As his shiny black Hessian touched the first gray stone, the wild sound of an out-of-control carriage rumbled down the hill toward him. Adam spun to

face the narrow road, heart pounding in alarm.

It was not a runaway carriage. It was a high-flyer racing phaeton with a madman at the reins and three equally insane passengers crammed into the two-person seat. They caught sight of Adam at the same moment.

“It’s the Duke of Azureford!” shouted a voice. “Let me out!”

The phaeton slowed to a stop, and the top of a young woman’s head poked up over the side. Did the driver not intend to help her down?

Adam hurried in her direction.

Before he could offer assistance, the young woman’s delicate kid half-boots landed on the colorful leaves below.

Time seemed to slow. Adam could swear his spellbound eyes registered each bounce of her golden tendrils, each magnetic sway of her hips, each crinkle at the edges of her sparkling hazel eyes.

This wasn’t *any* young woman. This was Miss Carole Quincy, Adam’s next-door neighbor.

His heartbeat was so loud in his ears, he barely registered the phaeton rolling merrily away, its occupants apparently confident that their recently ejected passenger could fend for herself. Nor did Adam have any doubts.

Miss Quincy was a beautiful hoyden, an unpredictable tempest disguised as springtime. Adam’s opposite in every way. She was gregarious and popular, wild and joyful, her easy manner and infectious laugh winning the hearts of every soul who crossed her path.

Adam found such disregard for decorum and proper behavior both appalling and irresistible. Open unconventionality might be considered an insurmountable flaw in the beau mode, but up here in the middle of nowhere, she didn’t *need* to be a perfect lady. Villagers loved her because she was funny and fun, relaxed and friendly.

And now she was standing at the edge of Adam’s meticulously manicured front garden.

“Lovely to see you again, Your Grace.” Miss Quincy dropped a polite

curtsey. "I was hoping to find you."

"You were?" Adam growled dubiously.

The growl, because he'd long ago learned it was the best way to keep from stammering or making himself otherwise appear uncomfortable with the current situation.

The dubiousness, because the last time he'd had the pleasure of Miss Quincy's company, Adam hadn't managed to speak a single word to her. Not even a growl. Why would anyone hope to go through that again?

The one and only time he'd hosted a gathering, Adam had been so tongue-tied that his guests had mostly talked with each other. Not that there had been many of them. Adam didn't know enough of his neighbors to muster up a proper *crush*. The primary reason he knew of Miss Carole Quincy was because their properties shared a border. From the wooden-latticed belvedere in his rear garden, Adam could watch her entertaining in hers. Near as he could tell, she was bosom friends with the entire village.

Except for him.

She joined him on the stone path as if they made a habit of strolling up to his front door side by side. "Marvelous day, is it not?"

"Depends if you like sun," Adam growled, then heroically refrained from slapping a palm across his overheated face.

It depended if she liked the *sun*? Who hated the sun? Even his well-practiced growl couldn't make a comment that stupid sound intelligent.

He shifted his weight and tried to ignore his accelerated heartbeat. Everyone else could do this. Small talk about the weather was something children mastered before they left the nursery. Well, almost everyone. He was working on becoming New Adam, but he wasn't New Adam yet. He was still awkward and shy and desperately wishing she'd waited to speak to him until he finally figured out what to say.

She grinned up at him. "My apologies if my arrival startled you."

He shook his head. Admitting being startled was like admitting he was

completely out of his element. “Family of yours?”

She laughed. “Le Duc, actually.”

Adam did not laugh. *Le Duc, actually* was a mere extra syllable away from Madame Edna’s prediction of *Dukes, actually*.

Was he the victim of some elaborate hoax? Embarrass the awkward duke whilst the popular set had their laugh? He’d hoped he’d left such games behind him at Oxford.

Then again, how could anyone have orchestrated the fortune teller’s ruse and the coincidental timing of his arrival? Adam himself hadn’t known he would be at the castle, much less at what hour. He’d made the decision to donate his books in the coach on the way up. Even his driver hadn’t known until after they’d passed the *Welcome to Christmas* sign.

None of that prevented him from putting on his imperious face as they reached his front door. Haughtiness was the one mask that never failed him.

Miss Quincy bit her plump, rosebud lip. “Please excuse my forwardness, but do you mind if I come inside?”

Adam stared at her in stupefaction.

“I won’t bother you,” she continued in a rush. “It’s just, your library—”

His *library*? The place he planned to lose himself inside, in order to escape the embarrassment of not knowing what to say to others?

“It wouldn’t be a good idea,” he interrupted coldly. No, that frigid tone was part of his problem. Adam started again. “I cannot invite you in. I’ve just arrived, and I don’t know in what state of readiness—”

The front door swung open.

“Welcome home, Your Grace.” Swinton, Adam’s beloved but maddening butler, guarded the entrance with his usual brisk efficiency. “We’ve been waiting for you. Everything is in order.”

There went that excuse. Adam barely hid his sigh.

“Ah, Miss Quincy.” Swinton took in her presence next to Adam as if he always arrived home with an attractive young lady at his side. “I presume



you're here because of the golden ring?"

"The golden *what*?" Adam exploded in disbelief.

Not Swinton, too! First Madame Edna blathering on about five golden rings, and now his no-nonsense butler saying things like—

"Gold earring," Swinton repeated, touching a finger to his generous earlobe as if this new explanation made any more sense than the one Adam had imagined.

Miss Quincy's lips parted in sudden realization. "Mr. Swinton, you've had a new haircut! Subtle, but handsome. This is a splendid look for you."

It was? Swinton did? How would Miss Quincy know?

Before Adam could ask any of his questions, they were already inside the entranceway and Swinton was closing the front door.

"I'll just be a moment," Miss Quincy assured him. "I lost my earring in your library during your party—"

"Six months ago?" Adam said doubtfully.

"That's what I said," Swinton murmured.

Miss Quincy lifted her chin. "This was my first chance to come and look for it."

"Second chance," came his butler's bored voice. "You were here three days ago."

"Second chance," Miss Quincy agreed. "If you don't mind..."

But he did mind. Rather than stalk after her as she turned toward the corridor, he loped past her to block the library entrance with his own body if necessary. The library was his private domain. The rest of the world might be random and overwhelming, but his library was the one place where every single book—

Was completely out of order?

A strangled sound burst from Adam's throat as he forgot about Miss Quincy completely. His books! Who had touched them? Were they all still here? This was not how it was supposed to be at all! Adam had specifically

ordered the contents transferred from his London residence to be presented in the same manner his father had kept them: displayed by size and color, making the library a veritable rainbow of literature no matter what the weather might be doing outside. It had been that way for generations. Adam would never have changed that. His servants would never have ruined the careful order. Miss Quincy...

He whirled to face her.

“Did you do this?” he demanded, his growl this time very real indeed.

“*You* didn’t do it?” she countered with obvious surprise.

Of course she hadn’t snuck in and rearranged his books. Swinton would have tossed her out by her ear, missing jewelry or no.

At this point, Adam didn’t give a fig about Miss Quincy and her earrings. What mattered was ensuring the dozen volumes he had planned to keep for the rest of his life were still here.

If not, heads would roll.

Carole leaned into a shaft of sunlight shining over the freshly ironed billiard table and carefully missed her shot.

“That was a near miss,” said her father in surprise and admiration. “You almost made it.”

“Thank you,” she murmured in reply.

Although the le Duc family often joined the Quincys for their weekly billiards game, this afternoon Carole and her father were enjoying a rare moment together. She was taking extra care to ensure neither one of them gained too many points, in order to ensure the too-brief game lasted as long as possible. In her family, a foul shot cost two points—which erased most of her three-point lead.

“How are your sketches coming?” Father asked.

“Very well,” she prevaricated.

As far as Carole knew, her best sketchbook was making the rounds with the neighbors or bobbing at the bottom of a well. The Duke of Azureford had sent her away without giving her a chance to look for it. Her chest tightened.

Father sent her a fond smile. “You’ll have to let me see your drawings one day.”

“One day,” she agreed vaguely.

As far as Father knew, her sketchbook was full of ladylike images: still-

lives of fruit at the breakfast table, watercolors of the bright yellow rapeseed flowers in their rear garden. He considered himself progressive to allow his daughter to play billiards with a proper cue rather than a ladies' rack. If he found out she'd sketched the elegant castle ballroom as a billiard pub for whisky-swilling ladies, he'd never let Carole near a billiard ball again.

"Corner pocket." Father positioned his cue and sent his ivory ball flying toward hers, which knocked it into the bright red object ball. "Cannon. Watch out, daughter. Now we're tied."

"Twelve to twelve."

Carole bit her lip as her father took his next shot. She longed to fill the final pages of her sketchbook. If she had it, she would not draw him eager to win, but rather a scoreboard showing fantastical numbers high in the hundreds. After all, before each match, players agreed on how many points each type of shot was worth, and how many were necessary to win. If Carole ruled the world, games wouldn't end at twenty-one, but last for as long as the players pleased.

As she watched, her father scored two more cannons and a hazard, before losing his turn with a foul.

He grinned at her. "Seventeen to twelve. Can you catch me?"

Of course she could catch him. Carole could have won this game on her first turn.

She stalled by taking a long moment to chalk her cue's leather tip. It wasn't necessary. She'd already chalked it after every turn. But it gave her a few more moments with her father. This morning, she'd even let Judith smarten her up for the occasion. A French twist in her hair, a braided gold bracelet on her wrist, the fancy day gown she hated because the puffed sleeves' lacy trim scratched.

Father's gaze was toward the table. "What's your play?"

With a sigh, Carole eyed the green baize. Her ivory cue ball was marked with a black dot. From this angle, she could shoot... pretty much anything.

So could Father, to be honest. Part of her yearned to believe he was stretching the game out as long as possible, too. He'd never allowed her to play until after her mother died. Then he'd stopped inviting friends over. Stopped smiling altogether.

Teaching her to play had been their common ground. A way to escape the crushing loneliness of a too-quiet, too-empty house. At first, eight-year-old Carole had agreed to play because she worshipped her father—which was the same reason she borrowed his tomes on accounting and mathematics, determined to learn everything he knew.

Before long, however, the game itself was in her blood. She'd played every spare moment she could. Geometry, as it turned out, was a competitive advantage. The ability to calculate spin and angles at a glance let her make shot after shot, time after time. Billiards and mathematics had given her life purpose.

Billiards had rules the players *agreed* upon. There were no sudden surprises. No permanent disappearances. If one's ball fell into a pocket, one simply returned it into play on one's next turn.

Mathematics was just as lovely. Physics made sense. Geometry made sense. They had logic. They didn't change. They could be counted upon to always be there to help her no matter what day of the week it might be.

"Eighteen to seventeen," she said after she made a cannon and two winning hazards—and a foul to temper her lead.

"Let's see if I can fix that."

But Father missed his next shot. Carole frowned. His hands were steady as ever, but he'd squinted oddly before taking his turn.

She made a mental note to have his vision tested. Perhaps he spent all day in his study not because work overwhelmed him, but because his eyes weren't sharp enough to see it properly. Maybe all he needed was a pair of spectacles, and things would return to how they used to be.

Well, almost like old times. It had been her mother's time to go, and

Carole's time to grow up and do her part. She had thrown herself into being the best caretaker for her father with the same zeal she'd given billiards and geometry.

Carole knew what that meant. She had performed the calculations. Life was like mathematics: there was a single true, perfect solution to every problem. She'd analyzed their situation a dozen ways and the answer was always to stay home. Stay a spinster. Take care of her father for as long as she still had him.

He was the only family she had left.

"Twenty to seventeen," she said after two cannons and a foul.

Father scored a cannon and a hazard before losing his turn. "Twenty to twenty. You're getting pretty good at this, love."

"Thanks for noticing," she murmured.

Before she could take her shot, a footman strode into the billiard room with a folded missive on a tray.

Carole stepped out of the way so that her father could accept his letter.

The footman held the tray to her instead.

"Whose seal is that?" Father squinted. "Wait, I know... Is that Azureford?"

It was, indeed. She lifted the square of paper from the tray with a slight tremble.

Yesterday, the duke had sent her away as soon as he saw the condition of his library, which meant he had not been the one to order the books rearranged. This was good news: He hadn't found her sketchbook. It was also bad news: Perhaps someone else had.

Carole *had* to get back in there.

Father furrowed his brow. "What does His Grace want with my daughter?"

She opened the letter to find out.

MISS QUINCY,

*Please excuse my rudeness yesterday. If you are free this afternoon, you are welcome to search for your earring.*

*Azureford*

“I LEFT something behind the night of his party.” Carole refolded the paper. Her father did not ask *when* or *what party*. He paid even less attention to the goings-on outside of his house than he did inside of it. “I’ll drop by to get it when we’re finished with this game.”

“After I win, you mean,” Father teased. He surveyed the table. “Sorry, love. You haven’t got a shot. This game is mine.”

Irritation flashed. She was tired of being overlooked by the one person she cared about most. If Father bothered to come out of his study for more than an hour a week, perhaps he wouldn’t underestimate his daughter.

Without stopping to chalk the leather tip, she yanked her cue into position. Her bracelet jangled against the wood and a carefully curled ringlet fell into her eyes, but none of that mattered. She could hit this shot with the cue behind her back.

So she did.

Her father’s mouth fell open. “Have you been letting *me* win? How long has this been going on?”

She kissed his cheek. “Better luck next week.”

With that, Carole lay her cue across the green baize and walked out of the billiard room. She almost even made it to the front door before the housekeeper flagged her down.

“What is it, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“I’m afraid there were no apples today at the market.” Mrs. MacDonald wrung her hands. “I’ll have to make pear tarts instead. Will that do?”

“Of course it will do. Pear tarts are lovely. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“But apple tarts are Mr. Quincy’s favorite. He eats them every evening after your billiards match.”

Father ate his favorite tarts after every billiard match because Carole had arranged it that way. A delicious, cinnamon-spiced treat to thank him for not forgetting her altogether.

“Pear tarts are *my* favorite,” she said to Mrs. MacDonald.

“They are?” The housekeeper frowned. “But the kitchen hasn’t made pear tarts since...”

“Add a little cheese, if you would, please.” Carole’s stomach rumbled in anticipation. “And some walnuts, if we have them.”

The housekeeper’s gaze softened. “Just like your mother used to do.”

Carole cleared her throat to hide the impact of those words. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Mrs. MacDonald hurried back to the kitchen.

Carole opened the door and strode out into the sunlight before anyone else could stop her.

She made it almost to the main road when her eyes caught sight of a happy couple strolling arm-in-arm. Penelope, and her new husband Nicholas.

Carole immediately dropped to one knee as though she were retying her boot. If she held this position long enough, they wouldn’t spot her behind the hedgerow and would keep on walking toward the castle.

It wasn’t jealousy, she assured herself. The pang she felt every time she saw a married couple wildly in love with each other was just... heartburn. That was it. Too much coffee with breakfast. Not a twist of longing for something she did not need and would never have. This afternoon’s uncharacteristic display of temper aside, she knew her place. It was at home. With her father. He couldn’t lose her, too.

After counting to one hundred, she eased to her feet... and came face-to-face with the Skeffington twins, Annie and Frederick.

“Can we make crowns of flowers, Miss Quincy?” Annie asked.



“Bor-ing,” her brother singsonged. “Hoops are better.”

“All hoops look the same,” his sister scoffed. “Every flower is different.”

Frederick tugged at Carole’s skirts. “Do you want to trundle hoops with me?”

Any other day, the answer would have been yes. Yes to flowers, yes to hoops, yes to anything. She loved children, but more importantly: when one was in want of a distraction, a pair of indefatigable ten-year-olds could be just as entertaining as a circus.

But Azureford’s letter had clearly specified “afternoon.” If she dallied any longer, Carole wouldn’t make it before night fell. She had to hurry before Azureford stumbled across the sketchbook himself.

“Tomorrow,” she promised. “Hoops and flowers, first thing after breakfast.”

Before they could argue, Carole all but sprinted up the duke’s stone path toward his front door.

Just as her fingers closed about the brass knocker, Judith materialized breathlessly at her side.

“How... dare you,” she panted, shoving a silver ringlet from her damp forehead. “I’m your... chaperone.”

Silver ringlets? Judith had stopped to curl her hair before chasing after Carole?

“You’re my lady’s maid,” she said firmly, although they both knew she really meant surrogate mother.

Carole hadn’t been older than Annie and Frederick when the fever stole her mother away. As her father retreated more and more into himself, Judith quickly became the only constant Carole could count on.

“I was letting you rest,” she added. “You said your knee was hurting because it was about to rain, and—”

“Shh!” Judith swatted a hand at her in horror. “Never mention arthritis where someone might *hear* you.”

Carole rolled her gaze skyward. “Who would even care whether or not you—”

The door swung open, revealing Swinton, the Duke of Azureford’s authoritative, unflappable, recently coiffed butler.

Her heart sank. He was never going to let them in.

“Why, Mr. Swinton,” Judith cooed, twisting a silver ringlet about her finger. “Every time I see you, you look more handsome than the last.”

Carole tensed. That was it. Swinton was going to toss them both into the street. Or the closest madhouse.

Instead, he preened—and immediately tried to hide it with a cough. “I felt it time for a new coiffure.”

He felt it time for a new coiffure? What in the world?

Carole looked from her blushing lady’s maid to the stoic white-haired man blocking the doorway and back again.

Oh, for the love of geometry. The Duke of Azureford’s butler was flirting—or rather, carefully not flirting—with the maid Carole had known since childhood. Or thought she knew. Apparently, there was a cure for seasonal arthritis after all: The next-door neighbor’s butler.

Carole flashed the letter she’d received from Azureford. “May we come inside?”

“Of course.” Swinton stood to one side to allow them passage.

Carole stepped past him quickly, eager to be on her way to the duke’s library.

Judith oozed into the entranceway, accidentally-on-purpose brushing her every ample curve against the increasingly flustered butler.

“You are everything that is kind and thoughtful,” she fawned with a flutter of silver eyelashes.

“I was *summoned*,” Carole hissed behind her hand. “He *had* to let us in.”

But the truth was, Judith’s not-exactly-unrequited infatuation was fortuitous indeed. Rather than hover like a mistrustful chaperone, Swinton would be too distracted by Judith’s attentions to bother trailing after Carole.

In fact... A smile tugged at her lips as she inched away from them toward the library. Just because Carole had determined to live the life of a spinster, didn’t mean Judith was destined to share that fate. The man had visited a *barber* on the off chance the neighboring housemaid might drop by. It wasn’t exactly posies and roses, but it was as good a first step as any. If this was love, Carole wouldn’t stand in the way. She—

A wall of tall, solid man blocked her path.

Carole narrowly avoided smashing face-first into his snowy white cravat. Perhaps that was why her nose hovered next to his broad chest for an extra second, breathing in the warm scent of sandalwood and spice, before she jerked backward to properly greet her host.

“Your Grace.” Was that a curtsy? It might’ve been a curtsy. Right now, her legs felt too much like a wooden marionette to register whether she’d bent her knees or not.

“Miss Quincy.” His voice was aloof and cold, just like the impression he’d always given her... until today.

After being that close to his chest, today it seemed like inside all that ice was a core of molten heat.

“Sorry about the curtsy.” There. Whether she’d made a terrible one or none at all, he deserved an apology either way. “Shall we remove to the library?”

“After you.” He stepped out of her way.

Carole expected to be able to breathe again, but the added arm’s length of distance only meant she could see him even more clearly.

Azureford had not procured a new coiffure. His dark locks curled over his forehead with careless abandon. He was a duke, she reminded herself. He did not have to *try* to be handsome. When he rolled out of bed each morn, his black waves did their careless thing, his soulful brown eyes did their... *soulful* thing, and those gorgeous cheekbones—

“Or we can stand here in the corridor all afternoon,” came Azureford’s dry voice.

The library. She had forgotten.

Shoving past him to hide a fiery blush, Carole hurried down the corridor to the library. She was not Judith. She’d never been one to fawn or coo or giggle. And she wasn’t interested in *Azureford*, for heaven’s sake. She just happened to be awake, and conscious people found the duke’s randomly inherited features handsome. Flowers were pretty, too, and she’d never flirted with *them*. This was going to be fine.

She headed straight to the first shelf and scanned the volumes in search of her sketchbook.

Azureford leaned one of his wide shoulders against the closest wall. “Are you afraid your earring somehow lodged onto the spine of a book?”

“You don’t know my methods,” she snapped. “Are you going to loom over my shoulder as I look?”

“Long-distance looming,” he mused, his voice droll. “I had no idea that was one of my talents.”

All right, fine. He was at least six feet away. Not far enough.

Carole scanned the rest of the tomes before her as quickly as she could, then turned to a different set of shelves so Azureford was no longer visible in the corner of her eye.

Too light a blue... Too dark a hue... The right blue, but not her sketchbook...

She heard scuffing from somewhere behind her. Then a thud. And another thud. Carole whirled around.

Azureford was piling books into a wooden crate.

“What are you doing?” She dashed to his side, heart pounding.

“Putting those books—” He pointed. “—in here.” He pointed again.

That much was obvious. How could she stop him before he accidentally stumbled across her sketchbook?

“Can’t you assign a servant to the task later?” she stammered.

“I can assign a half-dozen footmen to the task right now.” He reached for the bell pull. “Will that make you happy?”

No, it would not. Carole’s hand shot out to cover Azureford’s hand before he could signal his staff.

Both snatched their fingers away as if scalded.

She swallowed hard. “What’s the hurry?”

“I’m donating these books to the castle library tomorrow.” He arched a brow. “What’s your interest?”

He was giving all his books to a public circulating library? *Tomorrow?* Her stomach bottomed in panic. If she didn’t find her sketchbook in time, someone else would. Not only was the telltale Q embossed on the front cover, each illustration had been captioned in Carole’s distinctive handwriting. Her curly script would give her away to any who had ever received an invitation or quick note from her—which was essentially everyone in the entire village.

The only thing worse than His Grace stumbling across her irreverent illustrations would be him donating it to a public place where anyone and everyone in Carole’s village could find the sketches.

She pointed a trembling finger. “May I see those volumes?”

“I assure you, none of them are earrings.” He turned to the closest shelf and withdrew another armful of books. “Carry on with your search. I’ll do mine. I need to set aside my favorites before the castle footmen arrive.”

Carole’s heart pounded and her chest tightened alarmingly, but there was nothing to do but take his advice. Continuing to argue would only cast more doubt on her story, and she could not afford to be tossed out. Even if it meant

limiting her search to a partial set of books whilst being silently judged by the Duke of Azureford.

Maybe this was a good thing, she told herself. Azureford would be so distracted by finding the books *he* cared about that he wouldn't notice her sketchbook if it bit him on the nose.

Then again, Azureford wouldn't know which books in his collection were the ones to keep unless he was familiar with all of them. Which meant her strange little volume would stand out at first glance.

He spun toward her just as she whirled toward him.

"Let me help you find your earring," he commanded at the same time she begged, "Let me help you with your books."

They stared at each other without moving.

Carole blinked first.

"We need to document the inventory," she babbled. "Surely you cannot mean to donate so many volumes without a master list to aid the castle librarians." Did the castle have librarians? "At the very least, an index of titles and descriptions would do. I'll help. I'm an expert on cataloguing books."

Carole was not an expert on books. She owned thirty of them, half of which were tomes on mathematics and logic, and the other half of which were filled with drawings of her own creation. She was not even an *apprentice* at cataloguing books. But she was desperate. And desperate people would clutch at every straw they could find.

"Like a ship's cargo list in the captain's log?" he asked dryly.

She nodded. Certainly. A cargo list. At this point, she'd agree to anything if it increased her chances of intercepting the sketchbook before someone else did.

To her surprise, Azureford shrugged.

"All right, Captain." He handed her a brick-red volume. "See if this works."

She opened it to the first page. It was blank. So was the second, the third, the fourth. It was a blank journal. He was saying *yes*. She hugged it to her chest.

His eyes narrowed. “That’s an unusual bracelet.”

Who cared about the bracelet? She glanced down at the slender gold bands encircling her wrist. “It’s several twisted together.”

“Several, as in... *five*?” His voice dripped with suspicion. “Are those *five golden rings*?”

“I don’t know.” Why was he making a fuss? She frowned at the twisting bracelet. One two three four— “Yes, five. How did you know?”

“Because it’s obvious!” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her. “Why are you conspiring with Madame Edna of Essex?”

“With... who?” she asked faintly.

“The fortuneteller,” he said with obvious exasperation. “The one who met me at the castle and gave some fiddle-faddle about ‘dukes, actually’ and following the five golden rings.”

“You went to a *fortuneteller*?” she repeated in disbelief.

Nothing could have proven how wrong they were for each other more clearly. Carole believed in logic and rationality. She only trusted what she could verify with maths or confirm with her own senses. And the aloof, powerful Duke of Azureford...

She stepped backward in horror. “Please don’t tell me Parliament relies on *magic*.”

Azureford’s fierce expression went from accusing to embarrassed to droll.

“Essex magic,” he assured her. “The very best. Only fools trust magic from ‘the old country.’”

She burst out laughing. “What other insights did this extremely reputable clairvoyant share with you?”

“That I take myself too seriously,” he said with a sigh. “And probably



her, too. She was my first fortuneteller.”

“Will you try again?”

“Never.” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “I’ve been a madman for two days, seeing signs where there aren’t any.”

“Magic isn’t real.”

“I know that.” He wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. “Now I can go back to normal.”

*Normally, you don’t talk to me*, was on the tip of Carole’s tongue. She welcomed this burst of abnormality. Or was it? Which version was the real Azureford?

She tilted her head to consider him. Logic dictated that things were often exactly as they seemed, *if* one knew how and where to look. It was a matter of simplifying the extraneous and following the pattern to its core.

Fact: At his party, the host hadn’t spoken a single word to her.

Fact: At his party, Azureford hadn’t spoken to anyone.

Fact: When she’d burst back into his life unexpectedly, he’d been flustered—but he’d spoken to her.

Fact: They’d teased each other about magic. Teased, as in jokes. Like friends.

Fact: Despite her flimsy story and even feebler claim of masterful library cataloguing skills, Azureford had handed her a blank journal and welcomed her to stay.

Conclusion: The Duke of Azureford wasn’t an arrogant, disdainful prig.

He was *shy*.

“You hate small talk,” she said in wonder.

“I like small talk,” he protested despite the immediate flash of panic in his brown eyes.

She couldn’t believe one of the most powerful men in England was intimidated by something as innocuous as conversation. His party must have been hell on earth to him.

“Did the fortuneteller advise you to give away your library for some reason?”

He shook his head. “I’m putting in a billiard room.”

Her mouth fell open. She had not seen *that* explanation coming. “You’re swapping books for billiards?”

“Books are something you read by yourself.” His gaze seemed far away. “Billiards are something that must be played with others.”

*Ought* to be played with others, she mentally corrected. She’d long ago perfected the art of the one-person billiard tournament.

“Who are you hoping to play with?” she asked with interest.

“Everyone,” he said shyly. “It’s a game men and women can play. Since the game is so fast and there’s only two players at a time, everyone will have to pay attention and rotate turns and...”

“...and speak to each other?” she finished. It wasn’t a bad plan.

He nodded.

She could not help but like him for it. “Your goal is to make friends with... villagers?”

“My goal is... London.” He set his jaw. “If I can do this here, then I can do it there.”

“At the House of Lords?” she asked.

He didn’t answer.

“In the *marriage mart*,” she said in realization. “Of course. A man in possession of a fine billiard room is undoubtedly in want of a wife.”

He didn’t argue.

That settled it.

“I can help,” she told him. “I know everyone in a ten mile radius. I can help you throw the best billiard party the Marriage Mart has ever seen. I even know someone who writes for the local gazette. She can pen a column that will make your party sound like the biggest crush in Christmas history.”

Azureford hesitated. “In exchange for what?”

Carole blinked. She never offered to help someone in exchange for anything at all, and was a little offended he thought her so mercenary. Then again, they scarcely knew each other. And... every encounter they'd had this year had been staged on false pretenses.

Fine. His instincts were excellent. And if he was in a mood to barter, she wouldn't let this golden opportunity get away.

"Let me help," she begged impulsively.

His brow wrinkled. "You want to help in exchange for helping?"

"Not just with the party," she said in a rush. "I'm good at that, but I'd be great at designing your new billiard room."

It would be as though her sketchbooks came to life. An actual project, combining her two best talents: architecture and billiards. A match made in heaven. The first step would be—

Azureford's tone was final. "No."

All the other Chippendale chairs around his long table were empty, but Adam was not alone. He was surrounded by half a dozen stacks of detailed notes, saved correspondence, and parliamentary reports. The golden hour after breaking his fast but before the bustle of the day properly began were his most productive moments.

Usually.

Try as he might to concentrate solely on the House of Lords projects before him, part of his mind could not stop thinking about Miss Quincy. He couldn't claim not to feel at sixes and sevens in her company, but he'd had longer conversations with her than he'd had with anyone outside of the government. He had always looked forward to *seeing* her, but now he'd begun to look forward to *speaking* with her.

Not that there would be many more such encounters. They had packed up more than half the books yesterday afternoon, updating the inventory journal as they went along. This afternoon they would finish the rest, and that would be that. It wouldn't even have taken this long, had Miss Quincy not insisted on penning a cargo list for the library. Perhaps she hadn't wished for the afternoon to end, either. Perhaps that was why she had offered to design his new billiard room.

If the party hadn't been so important, Adam might even have let her

explain her ideas. He knew nothing about billiards and even less about architecture or interior aesthetics. How much worse could Miss Quincy be? But he hadn't purchased this summer cottage in order to practice conversing with *one* woman. He needed this party to be perfect. The exact opposite of last year. He wanted to make friends with every gentleman, flirt—or at least, exchange pleasantries with—every lady. Which meant he needed to *practice*, so that this time when he returned to London, he'd be ready.

“Practice reading these reports,” he muttered to himself. The Marriage Mart wasn't the only thing awaiting him next Season.

Adam had volunteered for the import and export committees, the Exchequer committee, and the highways and hackneys committees. He was also fighting for strict oversight of workhouses, full abolishment of slavery in all territories, and more humane treatment of the governing and custody of insane persons in or outside of asylums. Oh, and postage. Parliament couldn't seem to go more than a year or two without another Postage Act.

Most of his fellows in the House of Lords used their six months off as a welcome break. They'd think Adam peculiar for bringing his work with him on holiday. But he didn't feel like a true representative of the people if he didn't do his best to represent them all year round.

That, and being a member of every possible committee gave him something productive to do. A way to be valuable to others, even if he never quite knew how to talk to them directly.

“That's my hoop!”

“No, it's *my* hoop!”

Adam grinned to himself at the sound of children playing outside, but did not turn around to look out of the open window. He was using the natural light to reread and organize his old notes in order to create a plan for next season, and he needed to make haste. Once he finished, he had to duck back into the library to find his last few cherished volumes before the castle footman came to take all the books away.

He might have finished last night, if he hadn't got lost in an old favorite he'd already read at least four times.

A peal of infectious laughter floated in with the rays of sun. It didn't sound like a child. Adam twisted in his seat. It sounded like—

Miss Quincy.

Of course it was. Her kissable lips and ubiquitous presence meant nothing. Yet he could not look away.

She was trundling a large iron hoop up the steep road with impressive ease. A little boy and a little girl chased after her with shining eyes, like comets caught in the orbit of a star. He knew how they felt. Miss Quincy had a way of lighting up a room with her mere presence. She was fearless and fascinating, game for anything at any moment. Be that spontaneous romps with children, or breakneck phaeton rides courtesy of "le Duc, actually."

He rolled his eyes at the thought of the fortuneteller. What balderdash! Miss Quincy didn't believe in signs and neither did Adam. He shouldn't have allowed "five golden rings" to spook him. An earring wasn't a message from beyond. Neither was a bracelet, no matter how many gold bands it contained. Those were coincidences and nothing more.

His lips twisted wryly. It was a good thing she was trundling hoops made of iron, or thanks to Madame Edna, Adam's overactive imagination would think those were "rings," too.

The only reason that poppycock had got under his skin was because he *was* looking for a wife. As a duke, Adam had the responsibility to secure a respected and competent duchess, with whom he was to produce an heir and a spare to inherit the duchy. Only a very specific sort of young lady would bring honor to the title, aid his political career, and provide the right social opportunities for his future heirs.

That demure paragon certainly would not be whooping delightedly as her iron hoop flew down a mountainside at nine o'clock in the morning.

And yet.

Adam flipped to the final page of his planning journal and added a new heading to the top:

*Required Qualities for my Future Wife*

HE DIPPED his quill in fresh ink and added:

*Friendly*  
*Fearless*  
*Good with children*

THERE. He would know he'd found the right bride when she not only possessed the proper decorum and feminine accomplishments expected by the ton, but also displayed the sort of personality Adam hoped to share the rest of his life with.

Swinton strode into the dining room bearing a silver tray.

Adam quickly shut his journal.

"Crown secrets my lord?" Swinton eased down into the chair opposite. "Or penning a love note to a future duchess?"

"Neither," Adam bit out. The heat flushing his cheeks probably wasn't helping. "Where were *you* when Miss Quincy and I spent the afternoon alone in the library?"

Swinton held out the tray of correspondence with wide-eyed innocence. "Guarding the door with my life, Your Grace. 'Tis my sworn duty never to

abandon my post.”

Adam arched a brow. “Even if a certain next-door maid happened to also be inside that closed door for the entirety of the afternoon?”

Swinton leaped up from the chair and fled the room without a backward glance.

Adam shook his head. When he’d purchased this cottage and installed his lifelong butler as master whilst Adam was away, it had occurred to him to wonder what Swinton was doing in Adam’s absence. If there had been only one social call during the entire summer a duke was in residence, there would have been even less for a butler to attend to without him.

Adam had allowed his friend Theo the use of the cottage for a few months while the soldier recuperated from war wounds. Again, not exactly the hustle and bustle of a typical Mayfair town house, but at least there had been someone new to welcome.

The rest of the time... Perhaps Swinton hadn’t been as lonely as Adam had feared.

He placed his papers and the journal in neat piles out of the way, then reached for the new correspondence. As usual, every one of the senders served with him in the House of Lords. This time every year, Adam received a flurry of letters begging him to join this committee or head that investigation.

Usually, he said yes. He was proud of being a good leader, and pleased that his attention to detail and command of each subject were useful to the cause. Whatever the cause. Today, he found himself wishing that just once, a letter would appear in which the only thing the sender wanted from Adam was his friendship, not his labor.

To be fair, they had tried. *Adam* had tried. He’d trailed along on pheasant hunts, shown up in his best outfit at Almack’s. He’d managed to mumble something-or-other when the gentlemen gathered to boast after deer stalking, and a time or two had even participated in a minuet with some lord’s



daughter or sister.

Adam was fairly certain he was the only one who recalled his presence on those occasions.

The past didn't matter. He was New Adam now. Or would be soon. This billiards scheme was going to work. Whatever Miss Quincy's true motivation was for helping him with his library and his party, Adam appreciated it more than she would ever know. Soon, he would be well practiced and socially competent. Instead of just pontificating at parliament meetings, he'd develop a circle of friends and the capacity to win the hearts of ladies.

"Your Grace?"

Adam glanced up and smirked to see a footman, rather than Swinton, bearing a letter on a tray. The crafty old codger would shackle himself to the front door before returning to the dining room and allowing further questions about his interest in the maid next door.

"Thank you." Adam had been waiting for this report. It had not been part of the morning post because it had come from his man of business, who was lodged up at the castle with a hundred other travelers.

Adam despised taking meals in posting inns because he hated feeling out of place in large public dining rooms. However, according to his man of business Paterson, Marlowe Castle's enormous dining hall could not be improved upon. The kitchen and staff were second to none, but more importantly, dining services were open to the entire village.

Paterson claimed he amassed more contacts and useful information over a simple bowl of soup than he could otherwise acquire in a week's worth of hard labor.

Adam opened the report. It contained a list of commissions and the expected times to be taken for construction proposed by master craftsmen in the area capable of creating a professional-grade, visually beautiful, physically perfect billiard table. Money was no object, although he appreciated being able to compare offers.

Time was of the essence. Adam had not explained the entirety of his plan to Miss Quincy because so much of it hinged on the billiards party. If it was a success, Adam would host another and another. After all, no matter how much he practiced being bold and conversational into a single evening, one night would not be enough. He wanted to build more than just a billiard table. He wanted to support the foundation for his future matrimony.

He pulled a stack of books toward himself and opened the topmost to the first page. A handwritten dedication slanted up from the bottom:

*For Azureford,  
The greatest lord, statesman, and fox-hunter England has ever known.*

THE INSCRIPTION WAS MEANT for Adam's father. All the books he'd rescued from the crates going to the castle bore dedications similar to this one. Signed by the author, by dignitaries, by friends. Adam's father had been a legend among men. It was Adam's duty to live up to the family name.

The first step to being a proper duke was choosing the proper bride. But Adam didn't want to select some debutante willy-nilly because she happened to possess physical beauty and unimpeachable connections. That prevailing wisdom was how his parents had ended up at the altar. It had lasted only in the sense that divorce was not an option.

Neither Mother nor Father had ever been interested in the other—just what they could gain from the marriage. Her land. His title. Who cared about the rest? Once they'd produced Adam, they never spoke again. One roof; two lives. Adam refused to accept such a fate for himself *or* his future wife.

He opened his diary to the final page and added:

*Must like each other!!*

TO THE LIST OF PREREQUISITES. There. He had a plan. All he had to do was completely change his personality, return to London amid wild popularity, and select a perfectly pedigreed young lady in Almack's who also possessed every trait on this list.

Given all Adam was demanding of himself, four little items weren't too much to ask of his future bride, were they?

"Stop glooming," he muttered to himself. This would work. It had to. But first, he had some parliamentary notes to tidy up.

"Good morning, Your Grace," called a sunny voice. "I didn't see you there at first!"

Good God, Miss Quincy was *yelling* to him from the *side of the road*. Did she even grasp the meaning of proper behavior?

"A lady doesn't shout," he called back. "Or peek inside her neighbor's windows."

She grinned at him unrepentantly. "What are you doing? Should we finish clearing up the library?"

No. He was busy. Doing important ducal things. Taking care of Parliament and the like. His morning was rigidly scheduled, and he wouldn't have time for library antics until after noon at the earliest.

As he leaned his tailored elbow on the windowsill, he heard himself shout, "Come on over!"

“No, there is *not* time to curl our hair.” Carole tried to tug her lady’s maid away from the dressing table.

Judith looked longingly at the tongs. “What if I just curl *my* hair?”

“You’re lucky I came back for you at all,” Carole reminded her. “We both know how well you intend to chaperone.”

“A chaperone in name only is better than none at all.” Judith added with a wicked grin, “A bad chaperone is leagues better than a good chaperone if you’re spending your time right.”

Carole rolled her eyes heavenward. “I have no intention of physical impropriety with the Duke of Azureford.”

“Then why did you fetch your chaperone?” Judith asked archly and swept out of the bedroom door.

Carole groaned and gave chase. “I told you. The castle footmen come today to pick up the crates. I *have* to find my sketchbook before they arrive.”

“Assuming it’s still there,” Judith added darkly. “Maybe it’s already being copied into the next quarterly gazette.”

Carole slanted her a flat look. “You’re not helping.”

“But I will,” Judith promised. “I’ll keep Mr. Swinton far away from the library.”

“Thank you.” Carole pushed open the door and exited their cottage with

her maid hot on her heels.

“If you’re not interested in ‘improper behavior’—which, if you’ve never *tried* it, is a great oversight on your part—then is His Grace the reason you walked out of the library so miffed yesterday afternoon?” Judith’s eyes narrowed. “Because if he took liberties you didn’t wish to give, I’m happy to stab him with a—”

“*No*,” Carole said quickly before some passer-by overheard and the entire town began speculating. “I was vexed because he rejected an offer without listening to me, but I can’t blame him. He’s a duke and I’m a nobody. He probably has a team of architects and craftsmen locked in his guest room for whenever the urge to renovate strikes his fancy. He doesn’t need *me*.”

Judith’s concern melted into a knowing smile. “So you *do* like him. Mmm, all that rugged, ducal power.”

“He’s nice,” Carole replied primly. “He’s more complicated than I first imagined. And funnier.”

“The Duke of Azureford has a sense of humor?” Judith said with obvious skepticism.

“You’d already know the answer to that if you were ever in the same room as him,” Carole pointed out. “Now hush. We’re here.”

Before she could reach for the brass knocker, Swinton opened the front door.

Judith immediately simpered, “Why, Mr. Swinton, surely it’s a crime to be more handsome every day than the last.”

Carole marched past them into the corridor before her tender ears overheard whatever the butler planned to murmur in reply.

Azureford was still seated at his dining room table, his back to the open window. When he caught sight of her, he glanced up and smiled.

She felt that smile all the way to her toes. It wasn’t just a curve of those wide, firm lips, but a full-body smile that relaxed his posture and lit up his handsome face as if he’d spent all morning hoping she would walk through

his door.

The silly smile spreading over Carole's face no doubt mirrored his reaction.

She cleared her throat. "What are you working on?"

"I can put it away." He started to stack a pile of journals.

"I don't mind." She stepped into the room. "Are you redoing the inventory list?"

"And risk dismemberment? That's your domain." He lifted a sheaf of documents. "These are House of Lords projects."

"All of this?" She moved to take the seat opposite him, but he motioned to the empty chair at his side. Soon, their elbows were touching. "I thought you were finished for the summer."

"Parliament closed in July and the new session won't reopen until November, yes. But there is always work to be done. These two journals chronicle the changes in imports and exports, this pile of correspondence has to do with choosing leadership for a few committees, and this stack of reports—but of course I'm boring you."

She shook her head. "You're not. Really. The first book I ever read twice was a tome on descriptive geometry, so if you'd like to make a wager on which one of us is more likely to out-bore the other..."

"Ooh, descriptive geometry," he echoed with wide eyes. "Is that one by Radcliffe or Walpole?"

She swatted his arm. "Gaspard Monge, actually. Perhaps more people would read those gothic novels if they applied more logic than swooning virgins and dark fantasies."

"No they wouldn't." Azureford affected a dramatic pose. "I must flee the Castle of Otranto with its ninety degree angle flying buttresses."

"Well, that explains why the castles are always so frightening," she replied with a straight face. "Buttresses cannot properly support their weight unless they're installed at forty-five degree angles. A good, solid swoon is

completely understandable when there's a castle falling down about one's shoulders."

He laughed and opened the journal marked *Imports*. "Remind me never to buy you a romantic novel."

Carole stuck out her tongue and listened to his explanation about the intricacies and differences between the Importation Act of 1812 and the Import Act of 1813.

In no time, she began to realize that Azureford was not only surprisingly humble and droll, but also very, very clever. He scarcely needed to glance at the journal entries to quote them exactly. How many times had he gone over this material? Could he just look at things and remember them? No wonder everyone in the House of Lords seemed to want him on their committee.

Luckily for them, Azureford seemed passionate about every one of the worthy causes blanketing his dining table. If he hadn't been a lord, Carole rather suspected he'd have served in the House of Commons. Being born a duke was essentially *carte blanche* to do or have anything His Grace desired, but he wasn't resting on inherited laurels. He was probably the single most competent representative in all of Parliament.

She shifted in her seat. This new facet made him all the more attractive.

Not that she dared develop a *tendre* for him, of course. He was shooting for the stars and she was staying put. No matter how magnetic she found his passion, her loyalty was to her family and the vow she'd made never to abandon her father.

Well, that was putting the cream before the scone, wasn't it? Her cheeks heated. She was here as his library inventory consultant, not to compete as a future bride.

He paused. "I've lost you. What are you thinking about?"

"Parliament," she hedged. *You being wrong for me in every way.*

"I don't mind. Most people see it as an excuse to come to Town for the Season." He winced as he belatedly realized most residents of this village

might not share that privilege. “Oh. Have you ever had a... Have you been to London?”

“No and no,” she answered, for the first time wondering how different her life might have been, had she made different choices. “I have a great-aunt who would have been willing to sponsor me for a proper come-out, but my place is here.”

“You could be part of Society,” he said with astonishment, “but you said *no*?”

“It’s... I couldn’t leave my father. You didn’t see him after the fever took my mother. I mean, you don’t see him now, but back then it was even worse. He was too melancholy to rise from bed, to dress, to eat. If it hadn’t been for me, I think he would have died of a broken heart. I couldn’t leave him and risk the melancholy returning. Not when there would be no one to save him this time.”

“I am sorry,” Azureford said softly. “I do not know what it was like to be in your situation, but I do know how it feels to lose one’s parents. I would not wish it on anyone.”

She pushed up from the table with a forced smile. “Weren’t we meant to finish packing up the library?”

“Of course.” He rose to his feet, but his dark gaze stayed locked on her. “After you.”

For the next hour, the only words spoken between them related to the titles she was adding to the master list, or the books Azureford swiped from the crates and carried over to his stack of rescues.

Carole was just about to tease him about keeping Edward Gibbon’s *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid*, when she finally caught sight of a familiar blue journal with a distinctive Q embossed on the front cover. She wrenched it from the stack and pressed it to her pounding chest with a disbelieving gasp. It was here. She’d found it!

She resisted the temptation to flip through its pages at once, raking her



eyes over her reimagined renditions of local landmarks and private parlors. It was as if a part of her heart had finally been returned. The part that believed escaping into a false reality was just as good as living in the real world. She started to tuck the sketchbook inside her reticule before Azureford noticed anything amiss, only to realize he was staring right at her. Her stomach sank as she slowly turned to face him.

He raised his brows. "What did you find?"

"M-my missing earring?"

"It looks surprisingly like one of my books."

"Not your book." She took a deep breath. "My book."

He crossed his arms, one eyebrow cocked expectantly.

There was no good way to do this, so... out with it all at once. She held the sketchbook flat and upended her reticule. The "missing" gold-and-citrine hoop tumbled out, winking accusingly from atop the dyed leather.

"You lost your earring," Azureford said slowly, "inside your reticule?"

"I lied," she admitted, although it was obvious he'd worked that much out for himself. She put her earring back into her reticule and lifted up the sketchbook. "I lost this on the night of your party."

His eyes were unsmiling. "A diary of your innermost thoughts?"

"Pictures of them," she admitted. "It's a sketchbook. I wasn't going to show you, but I thought you might like—"

"—to know the real reason you've been visiting?" A muscle worked at his jaw. "Yes. Thank you for telling me. You can go now."

"No, it wasn't like that at... All right, yes. That was the reason I visited *this* year. But I came to your party last year because I wanted to get to know you better, and I still do. You're not at all what you first seemed, and I like you so much more than I imagined I would."

"This apology of yours," he said dryly. "It needs work."

"I want to help," she burst out. "That's what I'm really saying. Judith is the only other person who knows this sketchbook exists, but no one but me

has ever seen the drawings. I love buildings. I love imagining how I would remodel them even more. I drew your parlor—”

“You drew my *parlor*?”

“—when I dashed off to the retiring room for a few minutes. On my way back, someone bumped into me and my sketchbook skidded into your library. I didn’t want to look like I was stealing one of your books, or call attention to its contents...”

“You drew my parlor in ‘a few *minutes*?’”

There was only one way to prove to him that she possessed the skills he needed most. Carole took a deep breath. She was going to have to trust him. A little. And hope that the duke’s infamous hauteur and reticence meant he was much too proper to gossip—not that he had close friends in town to share scandalbroth with anyway.

“Here.” She ignored the shaking of her hands. “I’ll show you. It’s the last one. It’s unfinished.” She flipped to the right page and shoved the sketchbook in his direction.

After an agonizing moment, he stepped forward and accepted the small volume. He studied the illustration in extended silence before finally looking up. “Why is my parlor filled with drunken, cheroot-smoking women?”

“They’re not drunk,” she protested.

“They’re carrying tankards of ale and flintlock pistols. At any moment, one of them is going to slur, ‘I wager I can shoot that bonnet right off of your head’ and the next thing you know, there’ll be a bullet hole in my favorite framed kilt.”

“You have a favorite kilt?” she stammered.

“Apparently. You’ve drawn one on my wall.” He held up the sketch, eyebrows raised.

“I was going through a Scottish phase.” She waved a hand. “But if you take away the pistols and the cheroots and the extraneous kilt, this is exactly your parlor. Not how it *does* look, but how it *could* look.”

“If I were insane,” he agreed. “What’s your point?”

“My point is, I can do this. I can turn your library into a billiard room.”

“Anyone can turn a library into a billiard room. Step one: Get rid of the books. Step two: Install billiards. I’ve already received estimates from the best craftsmen in the area.”

“Anyone can purchase a table,” she parroted. Good God, he needed her far more than he knew. “Not everyone can create an *experience*. The best table your money can buy might be the centerpiece, but that doesn’t mean just tossing it in the middle of the room.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No! Have you even played billiards? Lighting is fundamental. Daytime play is best with natural illumination. Evening play requires a custom-crafted framework of three to six oil lamps positioned at the proper angle.”

He nodded. “I remember. Ninety degrees.”

“That was buttresses, not billiards. Receptacles will catch the oil so that it doesn’t fall onto your freshly ironed baize, and the cabinetry to house your cues, maces, and ball box need to—”

“May I?” Azureford’s finger hovered just beneath the prior page.

Carole sighed. She could recognize a *no*. “Please do.”

Her skin crawled with invisible ants as he slowly paged back through each drawing. Occasionally his lips would quirk or a brow would raise, but he otherwise kept his silence.

“You want to do this the right way, don’t you?” she burst out when she couldn’t stand the anticipation any longer. “You said I could help you with your party. Let me *help*.”

He glanced up from her sketchbook. “How?”

“Look.” She flipped the inventory journal to a blank page and started to draw. “These walls have a fixed height and length, don’t they? The fireplace is *here*, and the windows are *here* and *here*. We’d rip out the shelves. Presuming cabinetry like... *that*, and a billiard table like... *that*, then this is a

rough approximation of how I would alter this room to maximize its attributes.”

The duke exchanged her sketchbook for the inventory journal.

She tried to make him see. “You dream of making the best possible impression on your future duchess, and I dream of being allowed to do a project like this just once in my life. To design and decorate as I see fit. This isn’t only our best attempt at making your billiard room be all that it can be, but each of us, too. We’ll grant two wishes at once. Not bad, is it?”

Her heart twisted. He was going to say no. He was still angry about her deception. She had one chance to resolve this. No matter what it took.

“Help me help you...” She took a shaky breath. “...to marry someone else.”

Adam sat in the dappled sunlight of the wooden-latticed belvedere in his rear garden and tried to escape into the book in his hand. It was no use. He moved a ribbon to mark his page and glared at the pretty flowers blooming in the Quincys' garden.

He could be disappointed that Miss Quincy's sudden interest was due to ulterior motives, but he couldn't be angry at her. He'd had ulterior motives of his own, did he not? Realizing he'd wished to "practice" with the entire village before removing to the Town he *really* cared about could not have been any more complimentary than learning the only reason Miss Quincy kept coming over was to retrieve her sketchbook.

Truly, what if anything, had changed? Earring, sketchbook, billiard room... She still wanted something, and so did he. If she could help him reach his goal rather than flail at it awkwardly, what sort of fool would refuse the offer?

He removed his House of Lords diary from the basket by his feet and flipped to the final page. With a pencil, he added:

*Honest  
Reciprocates feelings*

TO THE LIST of required qualifications for his future bride. He didn't have feelings yet, but he was annoyed enough with himself and Miss Quincy to imagine how badly he would have felt if he fell in love only to discover the woman he hoped to make his wife was only waltzing with him because it cured her indigestion or some such.

He tossed the pencil and journal back into the basket along with his book. Reading was no good. What he really wished he had his hands on was that sketchbook. He'd only recognized a handful of places—his parlor, the castle entrance hall and the circulating library—but he suspected most of the village had found its way into her little book. With different dressing, of course. Every single scene seemed to involve riotous women making any number of dramatic choices.

For someone as outgoing as Miss Quincy, she'd certainly managed to hide an intense inner world.

“There you are, Your Grace.” Swinton swept into view with a large silver tray, which he placed upon a small wooden table inside the belvedere. “Biscuits, lemonade, and a note from Mr. Paterson.”

Adam's man of business. He reached for that letter first before the lemonade.

*YOUR GRACE,*

*I've shown the sketch to architects and builders as you requested. Other than enlarging the windows as seen in the illustration, most of the changes are cosmetic, and as such, not structural engineers' particular strength. They all seemed to find it as fine a suggestion as any.*

*I took the liberty of sharing the drawing with the same craftsmen who provided proposals for the billiard table. They exclaimed over the use of*

*light, the recessed cabinetry where the library shelves once were, and the intricate lighting system. The design is brilliant. One workman even claimed the billiard table in the drawing almost perfectly matches the design and dimensions of the table in his proposal, making it a perfect match.*

*I enclose the sketch. Please advise.*

*Paterson*

ADAM FISHED in the basket for the report containing the craftsmen's proposals, and flipped through them until he found the one his man of business had referenced. It had been provided by John Thurston of Catherine Street in London. Not a local laborer at all, but England's most renowned maker of billiard equipment, according to Paterson.

According to Miss Quincy, too, by the look of it.

He didn't have to check his notes to know that choosing London's most celebrated expert would exponentially increase both the cost and time required.

But as Miss Quincy had said—he wanted to do this the right way. To make the *best* impression. The last thing he needed was to have his guests standing about talking about how stingy he'd been with the materials or how much foresight he'd failed to give the question of lighting. Which he hadn't even *known* was an important question to ask until their argument.

Whatever flaws she might possess, one thing Adam couldn't help but admire was her willingness to *try*, no matter how unlikely the chances seemed for success. What would happen if he set her up to win? He was Project Billiards committee *leader*, not the entirety of the committee. With his resources and her expertise, Adam's billiard room would not simply be a nice touch, but possibly the talk of the town. In a *good* way.

He drew out the journal one more time.

*Knows what she wants  
Does everything she can to achieve it*

“I JUST NEED ONE MORE!”

“Hold on, I’m getting it.”

Adam shut the book and stared through the lattice at his neighbors’ garden.

Miss Quincy stood near a waist-high row of blooming rapeseed with a pair of shears, talking to one of the little girls that lived nearby. Both wore crowns of bright yellow flowers atop their heads and matching yellow necklaces at their throats. In the little girl’s outstretched hand was a fifth loop of braided flowers.

“Five golden rings,” he growled in disgust. “You’re bamming me.”

As if she’d heard him mutter, Miss Quincy glanced up and met his eyes. Rather than shouting to him as she might once have done, she gave a tentative little wave.

“When you’re done dusting yourself with pollen,” he called out, “meet me in the library.”

Although he was too far away to discern the sparkle returning to her eyes, Adam swore he could *feel* them twinkling at him.

“Five minutes,” she yelled back. “This band is for Annie’s father.”

Annie held it aloft as though the ring of yellow flowers was the Crown Jewels for a king.

“The finest rapeseed headwear I’ve ever seen,” he assured the little girl as he exited the belvedere with the basket on one arm.

She gave him a gap-toothed grin.

Adam entered the library and began organizing the basket’s contents back into their neat piles. General correspondence, House of Lords, Billiards



Committee. He had barely finished when Miss Quincy burst through the door.

He spun toward her. “What happened to five minutes?”

“It’s been ten.” She glanced over his shoulder, not at the table but at the lone stack of books on his otherwise empty shelves. “Those are your can’t-live-withouts?”

He lifted a palm in acquiescence.

She ran over to the books to inspect the titles. “If these are your favorites, why are they in such terrible condition? If you bent the page-corners of one of *my* books, I would smite you with a plague of locusts. Or spiders. Whichever you hate the most.”

“They aren’t my books,” he admitted. When she spun to face him with a question in her eyes, he explained, “They belonged to my father. They’re his favorites. We used to argue about cracking spines and bending corners, but now those flaws are the things I love most about those books. It’s proof he lived, he loved, he was happy. When I touch them, it feels like he’s still here.”

She touched a hand to her chest and gave a tight nod. “I know what you mean.”

He leaned against the table. “That’s not why I summoned you.”

“Is it because you’re in the market for a rapeseed crown?” she guessed. “I know a girl. We can arrange it.”

“I know a girl, too.” He corrected himself, “A woman. Some might say, an expert in designing the perfect billiard room.”

Her hazel eyes widened. “Who says that besides me?”

“Me.” He lifted the most recent letter. “And Paterson, my man of business.” He brandished the winning proposal. “And some fellow called John... the Worst? John Thirsty? John—”

“John Thurston said *I* know how to design the perfect billiard room?”

“I watched you make that sketch in less than fifteen minutes, and you

managed to include a billiard table that was recognizably one of his. He won the proposal. Of course he thinks you're brilliant."

"John Thurston is going to build you a custom billiard table?" Her expression went from shocked to overjoyed. "*Here?* In Christmas?"

"Right there where you're standing. I don't know if you're still interested in helping me remodel this dusty old room—"

"*Yes!*" She grabbed his hands and danced around him in an excited circle. "I could kiss you for this! It's a dream come—"

His heart thumped.

Her cheeks went scarlet, as if just realizing what she'd said. "I didn't mean..."

He wished she *had* meant it. There was suddenly nothing he wanted more than to pull her forward into his arms and lose himself in the taste of her lips.

"Well, then." He forced himself to let go of her soft hands. "Let's get to work. I'll only be here for another month."

"A *month?*" Her voice cracked "To tear out your old library, put in a billiard room, search for, interview, and employ fast, capable construction personnel, turn a haphazard sketch into actual, beautiful cabinetry, commission balls and cues and maces, somehow squeeze into the schedule of the most sought-after billiard table artisan in England... This will take *several* months."

"Nothing to it." Adam had faced far tougher deadlines in the House of Lords. He could succeed. *They* could succeed. "Billiards party in four weeks."

Carole hopped across her bedchamber rug as she tied her final boot. Every person in her household had needed her help this morning, and now she was running late to Azureford's.

True to his word, the indomitable man had summoned draftsmen and journeymen out of the ether. Over the past week, a flurry of artists and experts had paraded in and out of his cottage, and Carole had been right by Azureford's side through all of it. They'd spent long hours deliberating over designs and materials and proposals.

Today was the day the actual renovation was set to begin. Carole didn't want to miss a single moment.

She skidded out her bedchamber into the corridor and nearly crashed into a maid carrying her father's breakfast tray.

"Shall I take this to Mr. Quincy, miss?" Rhoda asked.

Every other morning, Carole's answer to this question had always been, *No, I'll do it*. Even though her father barely glanced up from his desk, at least he would know his daughter never stopped caring about him. The who-takes-the-tray dance was part of the ritual.

"Please do." She curled her fingers about her reticule. "I must hurry."

"You said... yes?" the maid stammered in obvious surprise. "That is, of course, miss. I'm happy to."

Carole was always happy to, too. This uncharacteristic deviation was temporary. Soon enough, Azureford's holiday would end and the Quincy household would resume its predictable patterns.

"Thank you, Rhoda." Carole swept out the door before the maid's shocked eyes could ask any more questions.

When all of this was over, she'd dedicate even more time to Father to make up for her absence. If it weren't for Carole, he'd never come out of his study. Perhaps if she did more for him, he'd have free time... and spend some of it with her.

Before any early morning passersby could stop her, she sprinted from her front door to Azureford's. It was wide open. Men in frequently patched work clothes streamed inside, or wandered around to the rear to squint at the pair of decorative windows Carole intended to replace with large, sunny panes to let in more light.

Inside, the chaos was perfection. The level of noise and the impossibility of walking in a straight line without bumping into someone made her feel like she was in the middle of Marlowe Castle's ballroom at the height of the Christmas season.

"I need a measuring tape," called out one of the men.

She yanked hers from her reticule and slapped the coiled white ribbon into his outstretched hand.

He grunted in response and climbed back up his ladder without a single word of thanks.

Carole's spirits soared. She had never felt so much a part of something in her life. He hadn't said, *Wot, a woman?!* or tried to explain in gentle terms that the very competent men were doing very important things right now, and maybe the little lady would like to retire to a pretty drawing room and mind her embroidery while they did the real work.

"Got a hammer and nails in there, too?" came a low, amused voice.

She spun to face Azureford, her heart pounding in excitement.

His dark brown hair tumbled across his forehead, as though he'd been up for hours. However, his polished black Hessians, tight-fitting buckskins, gorgeous jay-blue coat, and sharp white cravat made him look as if he'd been planning an outing with the *beau monde*, rather than a fortnight of sawdust and upheaval.

“All these big, strong men, and none of you thought to bring a hammer?” she teased.

His dark eyes narrowed as though he hadn't liked the idea of her looking at other men. Her stomach fluttered in response. She could never tell him that the room could be filled with a thousand strapping dukes, and her gaze would still only be drawn to him.

“We're about to find out if your plan will bear fruit.” His serious expression reminded her what they both had at stake. “Ready?”

Voice mute, she gave a jerky nod. She'd taught herself mathematics. Bested her father at billiards. Became head of her own household at nine years of age. She was capable of *this*.

“Good. Tomorrow, the woodworker arrives to take final measurements for the cabinetry you designed.” Azureford gestured behind him. “Today, we destroy perfectly sound shelves in order to make room.”

“No destroying!” She choked in horror. “You don't need those shelves anymore, but the wood can be repurposed. Donate it to the castle if you haven't any use for it yourself, and they'll see it finds a worthy home.”

Without question, the Duke of Azureford turned and barked new orders to the men behind him.

They gestured their understanding and began stacking a pile of serviceable slats where the desk had once stood.

Joy threatened to overtake her. She looked around in wonder and pride. This wasn't just another wistful sketch from her imagination. This was really happening. Azureford's vast wealth and preternatural efficiency had turned her ideas from a sketch to reality in what felt like mere seconds.

Over the past week, she'd witnessed firsthand what it must be like to work alongside him in the House of Lords. No wonder everyone wanted him on their committees. He saw the big picture and the small details. Wrangled paper and people and projects without blinking an eye.

Carole's eyes didn't stop blinking from the dust flying in the air and the intermittent bang of hammers. The furniture was gone from the library, the workers were ripping shelves from the walls, and a team on the outside of the cottage were climbing up ladders next to the windows.

An older man in a battered cap drew up next to Azureford. "Need your approval for the changes to the design, Your Grace. Jimmy says—"

"Not me." Azureford's fingers grazed Carole's arm. "Talk to her."

Her chest thumped.

"Here." The man shoved a sheaf of papers into her hands and jabbed at the topmost one with a dusty finger. "Them cabinets look pretty enough how they be, but Jimmy says if we make 'em a set of three and build back further into the wall..."

Carole nodded her comprehension as they went through each drawing. Her original design had been reworked several times to represent all angles. She'd been considering the cabinets from the perspective of someone standing inside the room, but now that the bookshelves were gone, they had a new understanding of how much extra space had been built between the back of the shelves and the outer wall. Jimmy's idea was a good one.

"He's right," she said eagerly, and fished a pencil from her reticule. Using the closest wall as a writing surface, she sketched new lines on top of the old ones. "If we increase the depth to that, and restructure the doors like this..."

"Aye. Hmm. I see. Jimmy, get your boots over here!"

The next few hours passed in a whirlwind of explanations and activity. Noon had come and gone before Carole realized she'd been on her feet for so long she could no longer remember breakfast. She didn't care. Let her stomach rumble. She was having the time of her life! She'd *live* in this room

if need be until it was perfect.

“Come on.” Azureford looped his arm through hers and all but dragged her out of the library and into the dining room, which had become their makeshift base of operations.

She stumbled when she glanced over her shoulder toward the construction. “I—”

“—have to eat,” he finished firmly, and pulled out a chair for her.

Instead of their usual disarray of documents, the table overflowed with an abundant tea setting.

She sat, suddenly famished. “Thank you.”

Rather than preside from the head of the table, he took the seat beside her, as had become their custom.

“Pear tarts.” He placed two on her plate. “Not another word until you’ve eaten them.”

She grinned and picked up her fork. From the moment Azureford had discovered pear tarts were her favorites, tea hadn’t been served without them. Enjoying two at a time was no hardship at all.

When tea was finished, she turned to Azureford as the footmen cleared the table. “I was thinking...”

He held up a finger as if he’d been expecting precisely those words, and retrieved a small box from a side table. She laughed as he displayed his treasures: three new journals, two freshly cut plumes, and a large bottle of ink.

“I don’t think *that* much,” she teased him.

He arched his brows. “If I don’t keep my eye on you, all three of those journals will be fully illustrated by nightfall.”

“Then I suppose you better keep your eyes on me,” she answered lightly.

His voice turned husky. “I do.”

Her pulse skipped. Suddenly very aware of how close their bodies were to each other, she busied herself with the plumes and journals.

The moment passed, and in no time their heads were bent together over the designs for the billiard room and the timeline they needed to adhere to in order for all the pieces to fall into place on schedule.

Carole was no longer certain which were her favorite moments of the day: standing in the eye of the construction storm, or being elbow-to-elbow with Azureford amid a blanket of plans and sketches.

Despite being a powerful duke, he was neither arrogant nor imperious. He listened to her suggestions as though she were the one with the Oxford degree. Not that he hid his own opinions. Azureford was splendid to debate ideas with. His analytical nature was the perfect complement to her artistic imagination. Rather than argue, their conversations were liberally sprinkled with *what if we* and *oh, I hadn't thought of it that way!*

They weren't just a good team, she realized with wonder. Over a solid week of near-constant togetherness, they'd managed to become *friends*. She was free to be herself. Draw what she pleased, make as bold a suggestion as she liked. And as for him... what more could a woman want?

"This week," he continued, "Thurston's workshop is crafting the pieces for our billiard table. Next week when it arrives, they'll install it directly in the new billiard room—"

"I'll get to meet John Thurston?" she squealed.

"A pox on Thurston," Azureford scolded with mock jealousy. "You'll meet his contracted assembly team and that's all."

She feigned a lovesick swoon. "I'll meet someone who has met John Thurston!"

"If I never hear that name again..." Azureford growled.

"Miss!" Jimmy poked his head inside the dining room. "Campbell wants to know if we can—"

"I'll be right there."

She leaped to her feet to gather their papers. Belatedly, she realized she must have set her teacup atop one of her sketches instead of in its saucer, for



it had left a telltale golden ring around part of her signature.

Azureford was staring at it as though the stain foretold certain doom.

“Sorry.” She shuffled the sheet to the bottom of the pile. “I’ll draw a new one. Let’s go and see what Jimmy wants.”

When they reached the billiard room, she saw they’d finally completed the one modification she hadn’t yet shared with Azureford: a reading nook in the corner near the fireplace, with room for a chaise or sofa and a place of honor for his favorite books.

His jaw dropped. “Is that... Did you...”

She nodded. “The best light is supposed to be for the billiard table, but I know how deeply the old library kept you connected to your father. All his books are there, with room for more. You can hold them and read them anytime.”

His dark gaze swung to her and he stepped close enough to almost touch chest-to-chest. “The only thing I want to hold right now is...”

For one mad, dizzying moment, she almost thought the Duke of Azureford was going to kiss her. Right here. Right now. Amid the clanging of hammers and the tickle of sawdust and in front of a dozen burly witnesses. Carole wouldn’t have stood there and let him kiss her.

She would have kissed him back.

The door to Azureford's summer cottage swung open. With a sweep of his arm, Swinton welcomed them inside.

"Please," Carole begged, keeping her voice low so only Judith would hear. "I know I told you that first day to keep the butler distracted elsewhere, but if you don't physically restrain me from throwing myself at Azureford, God only knows what embarrassing thing I'll... Judith?" Carole glanced over her shoulder in disbelief. "*Judith?*"

Both her maid and the butler had vanished into thin air as though the entranceway secretly concealed a trap door.

"Fair-weather chaperone," Carole muttered under her breath.

She would have to keep her desires in check herself.

It shouldn't be *that* hard. As long as she kept reminding herself that everything she and Azureford did was so that he would have a better chance of landing the diamond-of-the-first-water Society bride of his dreams. A fortnight ago, he'd told her he would only stay another month. He had an agenda to keep. The clock was ticking.

She strode into the billiard room with her heart under lock and key and her head held high.

Azureford was there waiting. He lounged on the satin-trimmed sofa in his reading nook with absolutely no regard to the wrinkles forming on his olive-

green coat or the dent his chin was making in the folds of his cravat. When he saw her, his eyes lit up and he tossed the book he'd been reading aside.

Her heart melted a tiny bit.

He leaped to his feet, palms outstretched at his sides. "What do you think?"

About him? Gorgeous. Brilliant. Temporary. But she knew what he meant. By now, they barely needed to do more than make significant eye contact for the other to understand the meaning.

As of last night, construction was complete. This was the first morning without renovators everywhere. The billiard room contained absolutely everything but the billiard table. She stood in the center where the table would soon be and turned in a slow circle. The windows were large and sunny, the gilded cabinetry was intricately carved and its contents well-stocked.

In addition to the reading nook's plush sofa, comfortable guest chairs dotted the perimeter of the room with small round tables between for spectators to set their canapés or glasses of champagne while they awaited their turn to play.

"It's beautiful," she admitted. "Your party is a foregone success."

"*You're* the secret to my success. I would've purchased the best table local carpenters could cobble together, but I wouldn't have *this*—" He gestured at the cabinets, at the reading nook, at the bright windows illuminating his smile. "—without your help. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she mumbled, suddenly unsure how to take his praise. Was it just a compliment? Or was the subtext that they were finished now, and she should go home?

He pulled a small blue volume from the reading nook. "You left this behind. Don't worry, I wasn't going to keep it."

Her sketchbook. He had placed it on the shelf where he kept his favorite books.

Cheeks warm, she accepted the worn volume. “I wanted to add one more illustration.”

“I know.” His twinkling eyes were unrepentant. “I peeked.”

She’d done it for him. She pretended to be miffed anyway. “A shocking violation of privacy.”

“You wanted me to find it.” He paused. “I’m not sure if you meant for anyone to notice the figures’ similarity.”

She shrugged. “I can’t draw people. Not from life or my imagination. I copied a random lady from a fashion plate over and over again until I had the lines memorized, and now I use her for everything.”

“As a substitution.” His fingers touched one of her stray tendrils. “I can’t help but notice the figure you chose looks remarkably like yourself.”

“What?” She paused in the act of shoving it into her reticule, and opened the book instead.

Was it true? Had she managed to draw herself into fun, outlandish situations that would never happen to someone like her after all?

She flipped through the pages. He wasn’t wrong. The ale-swilling, cheroot-smoking figure copied on every page shared every one of her physical characteristics.

“How did I not notice?”

“You noticed,” he pointed out. “You just didn’t notice that you noticed.”

“And that eloquence is what makes you the greatest orator the House of Lords has ever known,” she muttered.

“I’m not teasing you.” He touched a knuckle to her chin. “I like your sketches. I wished you’d drawn me into the last one.”

It was his new billiard room, looking exactly as it did now, with two exceptions. In the illustration, a magnificent John Thurston billiard table dominated the center of the room. And the lady figure—oh, very well, let’s call her “Carole”—stood to one side with a billiard cue in her hand.

*Alone.*

“I wanted to draw you next to me,” she admitted. “I just didn’t know how.”

“I’ll help.” He plucked the sketchbook from her fingers and took it over to his special shelf. As he drew directly on the page with a pencil, he kept his back to her—then turned around to present his modification with a flourish. “Voila!”

A giggle burst from her throat. Azureford’s illustrative ability was on par with the Skeffington twins’ chalk drawings on the street outside. He’d drawn a circle with a smiling face and a top hat. The boxy torso and equally boxy limbs were completely out of proportion, but a billiard cue protruded from one rectangular hand. Instead of a lonely girl with no one to play with, the room now contained two friends likely to fill their evening with teasing and laughter.

“You can redo it when you figure out how to draw people,” Azureford whispered.

She closed the book and pressed it to her heart. “It’s perfect.”

He grinned back at her impishly, looking perfectly kissable.

Carole fumbled the sketchbook back into her reticule, more to break her gaze from his than out of concern for her drawings.

“Now all we need is a billiard table, and you’ll be on your way to winning hearts all over the land,” she said lightly.

His muscles twitched.

She frowned. “What’s wrong? Isn’t that your plan?”

“It’s the final step of a plan that’s missing all the middle steps.” He held up his fingers to count them out. “Step one, billiard table. Step three, marriage.”

“That’s not true,” she reminded him. “You said this village—and this party—was your practice ground. If you can make friends with the people who don’t matter, you’ll have the confidence to flirt with the ladies who do.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “I sounded like a prig.”

“You sound like a lord,” she corrected. “Not just any lord—a duke. We all know what that means. Your future bride is limited to the upper thousand. The rest of us choose from everybody else. It’s not your fault. It’s how the beau monde *is*.”

“It gets worse.” He sighed. “Both the bachelors and the hopeful brides are meant to accept the most selfish, coldblooded offer available. Who has the best blood? The highest connections? The oldest title? The most land? The biggest dowry? It’s not marriage. It’s expanding one’s empire.”

Each word made her feel emptier inside. “Is that what you’re going to do?”

“It’s what my parents did.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “It’s what is expected of me. My sacred duty. A duke’s responsibility to the title.”

“I’ll assume that means ‘yes.’” She swallowed hard. He was looking for the perfect woman... who was her exact opposite. Her fingers went cold. If she’d been looking for proof that they were wrong for each other in every way, well, there it was. She’d *known* they could never be more than friends. The least she could do was act like one. “I’ll help.”

His gaze jerked up in surprise. “You’ll help? How?”

“We’ll playact until it becomes second nature. You be the Duke of Azureford, and I’ll be... Debbie Debutante.” Carole fanned her face with an invisible fan and affected a nasal voice and bored expression. “Ugh, if I have to dance with one more viscount or earl, when everyone knows my dowry is fit for a duchy... Why, good evening, Your Grace. I’m sure you know your very large estate abuts my even larger one. My mother is cousin to the king. Is that a waltz I hear?”

“Stop it.” He knocked her pretend fan out of her hands. “That’s more or less the conversation that led to my parents’ union.”

“How did that work out?”

“It didn’t.” His dark gaze was distant and angry. “Everything they wanted from each other they got with the wedding contract. Other than the night they

conceived me, I'm not certain they were ever in the same room again." His eyes snapped to hers. "That is not the marriage I want."

She tilted her head. "What do you want?"

"To comply with my ducal duties with a woman I *like*." His expression was beseeching. "Wouldn't you?"

"I have no ducal duties and I'm never getting married," she replied evenly. "But we're not talking about me. Let's get you sorted first. How are you currently searching for a bride?"

"I visit Almack's." He gave a self-deprecating scoff. "And then stand there like a marble column."

She winced. "That might be the problem."

"I'll probably do the same thing at the party." He glared over her shoulder at the empty space in the middle of the room. "No matter how fancy my billiard table might be."

"All right." Carole rolled back her shoulders. She could do this. *They* could do this. "Let's make a plan. Bride-hunting can't be harder than the Excise Officers Allowance Act of 1812."

His eyes widened comically. "You were listening to me?"

She nodded. "Now listen to me. This is what we'll do. When the table arrives, I'll teach you how to play billiards... and in the meantime, I'll show you how to flirt with the ladies."

"In return," he said slowly, his expressive eyes not leaving hers, "I will do the same for you."

She blinked. "I already know how to play billiards."

"But do you have much experience with men?" The expression in his dark eyes was stormy. As though he would fulfill his ducal duties as required, even if part of him desired a woman who could never be a duchess.

A woman like... Carole.

"I'm not looking for a husband," she said carefully.

"Who said anything about marriage?" His brown eyes were serious. "Just

because I must select a Society wife doesn't mean you have to give up your freedom."

"Ha." She pulled a face. If only that was a luxury she possessed. "Freedom to what?"

"To enjoy yourself." He stepped closer. "Like you said, I'm limited to future duchesses. You can do as you please."

Her throat went dry. Perhaps he, too, despised the thought of her promising herself to someone else. Perhaps he, too, wished they could ignore their divergent futures, just for a moment. Even if it could never be more than make-believe.

She licked her lips. "What would you do if you could do anything you wished?"

His gaze fell to her parted lips. "Do you want me to tell you or show you?"

"Show me." Her heart pounded defiantly but she didn't glance away.

Satisfaction glinted in his eyes. "With pleasure."

Then his hands cupped her cheeks and his lips covered hers.

*Marble column?* He was big and hard and strong, but there the comparison ended. His lips were warm on hers, gentle but firm. His thumb stroked her cheek so lightly she doubted he even realized he was doing so. Yet every caress sent flutters of desire through her belly.

When she opened her mouth to tell him so, to confess she was one mere kiss away from throwing all caution to the wind, his tongue swept inside to claim her. An electrifying bolt of desire shot through her. She felt every nudge, every lick, throughout her entire body.

She pressed herself against him to muffle the arousal tickling her skin, but the opposite occurred. With her bosom against his chest and his hands deep in her hair, their kiss was no longer tentative but a tidal wave of emotion that had just been waiting to be released.

All the times she'd glanced over at him beneath her eyelashes and



wondered what it would be like to taste him? She was tasting him now. Gorging herself on his kisses. All the times his hand had brushed hers, all the brief “accidental” touches, all the times he had almost kissed her but held himself back? He wasn’t holding back now. He was taking, demanding, giving, pleading. Two souls caught in a tug-of-war between *we shouldn’t be doing this* and *I never want to stop*.

When she gasped for breath, his thumb stroked her cheek.

“Do you want me to stop?” His lips brushed hers.

She wrapped her hands about his neck. “Aren’t you supposed to disregard what I want, shove me against the closest wall, and have your wicked way?”

He nibbled her lip. “Why would that work? No one wants to slam into a wall.”

“You’re the one who reads gothic novels,” she reminded him between kisses. “Why would exposing my bosom by ripping open my bodice ever work? Stays are lined with whalebone.”

“Are you saying I wouldn’t win a fight against a whale?” He ran his hands down her back and splayed his fingers against her ribs.

She wished his fingers would keep exploring. “I’m saying no one has ever won a fight with a corset.”

“Then you should definitely stop wearing them.” He picked her up and swung her over to the sofa, tumbling backward so that she was the one on top. The one in control of whatever happened next.

She ran the pad of her thumb across the very beginnings of stubble along the edge of his jaw. “Azureford?”

“Adam,” he corrected, and touched her nose with his. “And you are?”

“Carole.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

He kissed her so well and for so long that she almost forgot what she’d been going to say.

“Were you going to ask me something?” he murmured.

“I was going to tell you something.” She pushed up on his chest in order to meet his eyes, and did her best to muster up a good glare. “You led me to believe you were *bad* at this.”

He grinned and kissed her again. “I’m enjoying this, too. It’s different with you. I can be me and you can be you and none of it matters, since no one has to know.”

For another woman, that last bit might have hit like a bucket of water. But the truth was, Carole had been thinking the same things. She had told him the truth. She *wasn’t* going to marry. He had been equally honest. He needed a bride and it couldn’t be her.

In the meantime, whatever happened between them, stayed between them. Resigning herself to the life of a spinster did not mean she had to turn down moments like these. Until he left for good, this room would be their playground.

Just as she was dipping her head for another kiss, she caught sight of the clock out of the corner of her eye. She sprang up as if galvanized.

“Damn and blast.” She shoved a fallen chunk of hair back into her bun and tried to shake the wrinkles from her skirt. At Adam’s startled expression, she explained, “My father exits his study one time a week, and that time is... approximately five minutes ago. I have to go.”

Without waiting for a response, she grabbed her reticule and dashed out the door.

“*Blast blast blast,*” she cursed as she raced toward her cottage.

There was no telling what might happen if Father walked into the billiard room and she wasn’t there. He wasn’t the sort to go looking for her. He might assume she was no longer interested and cease coming down from his study altogether. She would never see him again.

She skidded through the corridor, dodging questions from the housekeeper and the chambermaid and the—devil take it, why did everyone pick *right now* to become inexplicably incompetent at their jobs?

When she burst into the billiard room at last, her father was just chalking his cue.

She nearly collapsed in a puddle in relief.

“Father.” She took a deep breath. “I think you should know—”

“The le Duc’s will be here at any moment,” he interrupted. “The butler forgot to iron the baize. Can you take care of it?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes, Father. Of course.”

So much for having a private father-daughter tete-a-tete. That had been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Now she had work to do. The butler hadn’t ironed the baize because Carole hadn’t been here to tell him to. That was her responsibility. Everything in this household was. She sighed in resignation. This cottage would fall down around them if she wasn’t there to keep it propped up.

She could never leave.

As much as he might have wished to, Adam did not greet Carole at the door with a kiss. He waited the full ten seconds for her maid to disappear with his butler, and *then* swung her into his arms.

She kissed him back not as if they'd just seen each other yesterday, but as though the two weeks that remained should only be spent in each other's arms.

He could not agree more.

When at last their lips parted, her hazel eyes gazed up at him from beneath her lashes. "I'm sorry I had to run off to meet my father."

"Don't be," Adam said, and meant it. Last night, he'd already added

*Thoughtful*  
*Puts family first*

TO HIS LIST of required qualities in a future bride.

"Besides," he added, "it gave me extra time to refine my flirting techniques."

She lifted a brow. "It's been one night, and already your technique is 'refined?'"

He nodded. "I made a chart."

"A chart of what?" she asked suspiciously.

"Opening lines." He affected an innocent expression. "I'll be the Duke of Azureford, you be Deborah Debutante. Ready?" He made an exquisite bow, then lowered his voice dramatically. "Why, Miss Deborah, your hand looks so heavy... Shall I hold it for you?"

Carole burst out laughing. "Do *not* incorporate that into your introductions."

"Brr." He hugged himself and gave an exaggerated shudder. "I must be a Christmas snowflake, because I've fallen for you."

She covered her face with her hands. "No. Absolutely not."

He pulled her hands from her face and gazed down at her soulfully. "May I borrow an atlas? I keep getting lost in your eyes."

"If she has an atlas, she'll hit you with it," Carole said warningly.

He stroked his chin as if in deep thought. "Kiss me if I'm wrong, but... we're betrothed, right?"

She was laughing too hard to kiss him, but she tried to anyway. "You'll never be betrothed. You'll lose your Almack's voucher if the patronesses hear you. You're going to be the first duke spinster."

He pretended to be offended. "If you don't want my kisses, just return them!"

She swatted his shoulder, then stepped past him toward the dining room. "When will Thurston's crew arrive?"

Adam started to follow, then froze in place. Her long blond hair had been plaited to loop about her head in five golden rings. Because naturally it had. At this point, he was surprised she didn't arrive with five gold rings on each finger.

Carole glanced over her shoulder as if she'd sensed him paused to stare.

“Is it the hair? I told Judith it was too much. She loves braiding the way some women love chocolate.”

“Or pear tarts,” he added wisely.

“You’re right.” She tapped the side of her chin. “If a blizzard blew through the village and I could only rescue one thing from this cottage... it would have to be your chef.”

He clutched his chest. “You wound me! I am wounded!”

“Wait until your billiard table arrives,” she said with a wicked smile. “Then you’ll witness true destruction.”

Little did she know the devastation had already begun. Spending the past few weeks with her had cracked a hole in who he thought he was, and what he believed himself capable of. He’d just been *bantering*, for God’s sake. With her, he forgot to be shy.

“Adam!” she squealed as they entered the billiard room. “The table is here!”

He grinned at her. “Merry Christmas.”

She threw herself in his arms. He swung her in a circle as he kissed her. They both knew it wasn’t her table. They both also knew he wouldn’t even be here for most of the year to enjoy it. And yet its shining presence in his cottage made him feel like they’d fought a battle side-by-side and emerged victorious.

He deposited her next to the cabinet and handed her a mace. “Here. Turn me into a genius.”

“First lesson, genius...” She returned the mace to the cabinet and withdrew a cue instead. “Don’t assume all women only play with the mace.”

The back of his neck heated. “Duly noted.”

“Additionally note that if you invite a woman to play and she does choose a mace, you must do the same. Both weapons must match.”

He frowned. “Which is better?”

“That depends on the player. A billiards mace is a blunt object. Easy to

wield, hard to control. Cues afford much greater precision—if one knows how to use them.” Her eyes shone with mischievousness. “A woman might choose the mace as a tactical advantage. The gentleman is unlikely to have practiced with one, making him clumsy and inaccurate. If she has practiced, she’ll win.”

Adam stared at the cues and maces in his cabinet. They hadn’t even started playing yet and already the first decision appeared to be between two items that were simultaneously better and worse than each other.

“Owning a billiard room will be no help if all you’re going to do is stand about glaring at your equipment.” She handed him a cue. “Some men ‘chalk’ the leather tip by smashing it overhead against the plaster. We are not barbarians. We use chalk.”

He accepted a piece and copied her movements.

“Don’t chalk over the baize. Dust will get everywhere. Don’t knock your cue against the table for the same reason.” She ran her fingers lightly over the edge of the billiard table, then grinned up at him. “I can scarcely credit that I’ll be the first person to play on this table. It feels like history being made.”

“It is history,” he assured her. “It’s the first time you’re playing on this table, and the first time I’m playing on *any* table. We should commission a plaque. Or some kind of statue.”

“I drew you a sketch. That’s good enough. We can talk about trophies when you start scoring points.” She arranged the two ivory balls and single red ball on the table. “Watch. It works like this.”

For the next hour, she patiently showed him basic shot after basic shot, repeating the same movements dozens of times and then demanding the same from him.

It might have been easier to concentrate on the instructions if she hadn’t placed her hands just below his waistband to arrange his stance, or settled her hands over his to guide his shot. With Carole’s soft, curvy body brushing against his at every turn, Adam had about as much chance of flying to the

moon as managing to hit the right cue ball.

Between shots, he tried to conceal his fractured concentration by jotting notes in a special journal he'd purchased just for this reason, but capturing a motion in words proved impossible. Once she realized what he was about, she took pity on him—and took control of the journal. After explaining each shot, she'd sketch the table in his book, complete with all three balls, the correct position of the cue, and little arcing arrows with notations as to the proper angles for each shot.

Adam nodded sagely and tried to pretend he could feel the difference between a twenty-degree angle and a thirty-degree angle, but mostly he was doing his best just to hit the ball he was aiming for.

“My cue ball has a black dot,” she explained. “Yours does not. If this was an actual game, we would score ‘cannons’ by knocking our cue ball into the red ball and the other ball, in any order.”

He frowned. “They don't have to go into the pockets?”

“Not for a cannon. You're thinking of hazards.” She demonstrated. “A ‘winning hazard’ means potting the red ball by striking it with your cue ball. That shot is worth slightly more than using your cue ball to pot your opponent's.”

“How much more?”

“That depends.” She shrugged. “There is no official rulebook. Players agree on points and rules before they begin. In my experience, potting the opponent's cue and making a cannon are each worth two points. Potting the red ball is three. Fouls subtract two in my family, but many players add two to the opponent's score instead. And then there are ‘losing hazards.’”

“How many points do ‘losing hazards’ take away?”

“None. Striking your cue into your opponent's so that you pot your own ball is two points. Doing it to the red one is three. You keep going until there are no balls or you make a foul, such as hitting no balls at all or making more than fifteen hazards in a row. Understand?”



He stared at the table in bafflement. “Clear as crystal.”

She burst out laughing. “Don’t worry. I remember what it felt like not to understand how anything worked. Back then, I could barely lift my own cue.” She gave him a crooked grin. “You can do this. Put down the journal. Take a shot.”

“At the House of Lords, I feel invincible and all-knowing,” he grumbled as he lined up what he hoped was a cannon. “Essentially the opposite of how I feel at this moment.”

“Proficiency comes with practice,” she said as she returned the balls to their original position and motioned for him to start again. “I doubt you were the Duke of All Dukes your very first day in Parliament.”

“You weren’t there,” he answered with fake hauteur. “I was legendary.”

“You are *now*,” she agreed, peering up at him sideways from her cue stick. “So am I.”

She proceeded to jump her cue ball over the top of the red ball in order to pocket Adam’s.

“How did you...” He floundered wordlessly. “Shouldn’t witchcraft be a foul?”

“Go and make a law against magic,” she teased, and sashayed around the table to take her next shot.

Carole did her best to keep her posture perfect as Judith fashioned her hair into a series of interlocking twists.

It wasn't that she was impatient—although, yes, sometimes she was that. But today she was keeping extra still because Judith had insisted on a complicated hair arrangement, despite spending the first hour of the morning surreptitiously trying to loosen her gnarled fingers.

An uneasy sensation twisted in Carole's belly. She now suspected that Judith's recent preoccupation with pins and curling tongs wasn't because of some feminine standard for lady billiard instructors, but because Judith feared there would not be many more years in which her arthritic fingers could plait hair at all.

Carole gazed in the looking-glass at her maid's beloved lined face. Hair didn't matter. Who cared if a spinster's locks closely resembled a rat's nest? Judith was irreplaceable. The closest thing to a mother Carole had experienced in fifteen long years. Judith deserved to grow old any deuced way she pleased. Even if that meant curling tongs every morning and stolen moments with the neighbor's butler every afternoon.

When Azureford had returned to London last autumn, Swinton had stayed behind. When the party had passed and Azureford once again left their village behind, Judith at least would not be brokenhearted. Carole would coax

her father to reduce Judith's working hours, so that she had more time to live her life.

As for Carole... what did her heart have to do with anything? She'd be too busy running the household and taking care of her father to have time to even daydream about anyone else.

She hoped.

"Parcel for you, miss." Rhoda popped into the room to set a brown-paper parcel on the dressing table.

"I'd wager that's the geometry tome you've been waiting for." Judith wrinkled her nose and grimaced. "Don't know how anyone can be more excited about dry old numbers and lines than the pretty fashion plates in La Belle Assemblée."

Carole eyed the crisp brown rectangle. She'd wager Judith was right. That was definitely the book she'd been dying to possess all year. Yet its charms paled against the pleasures awaiting her next door. Reading could wait. There would be plenty of time for Pythagoras once Adam was gone.

"There." Judith fluffed Carole's sleeves. "If he hasn't stolen a kiss by now, he will today."

Carole's cheeks flushed bright red.

"Oh?" Judith wiggled her silver eyebrows, blue eyes crinkling with mischief. "Excellent work."

"I suppose you've been 'working' with Swinton?" Carole asked archly.

"Eh? What's that? These ears aren't what they used to be." But a pretty flush covered Judith's face, too. "Come along, come along. Haven't you a billiard lesson to teach?"

Grinning, they raced from the bedchamber to the front door.

Mrs. MacDonald stood there waiting, a scrap of paper in her hand. "Miss Quincy, the menu—"

—was always the same, with only minor variations due to the changing seasons. After her mother died, Carole had taken over the role of approving

each day's course, but she'd never had cause to tell the housekeeper *no*. Whatever was on that paper was perfectly fine. And if it wasn't, Father was unlikely to notice anyway.

"Whatever you suggest, Mrs. MacDonald." Carole gave an encouraging smile. "You know the kitchen as well as I do. I trust your judgment."

*And* she was in a hurry. Judith was right. There was a billiard lesson to teach.

"Thank you, miss," the housekeeper stammered in wonderment, and stepped away from the door.

Carole and Judith flew next door to the Duke of Azureford's summer cottage. Swinton opened the door wide before they were halfway up the front path. Adam stood right beside his butler, neither bothering to hide that they'd been awaiting the ladies' arrival with just as much anticipation.

"I ought to..." Swinton began, and cleared his throat.

"I can help," Judith said quickly.

Carole and Adam were already almost at the billiard room and missed the rest of whatever fictional explanation they were making up on the spot.

He stole a kiss the moment they were out of sight.

Every moment in his arms was like spring after a long winter. A riot of color, of scent, of taste. Everything seemed to bloom at once, filling her with a desire so sharp and so sweet she thought she might swoon from the headiness.

When she regained her breath, Carole shook her finger. "That's the last of the free kisses, Your Grace. If you want more, you'll have to earn them."

"Can I earn them with the extremely clever opening lines I've been practicing?" He asked innocently.

She selected a cue. "You'd better hope you've been practicing billiards. Any other questions?"

His eyes twinkled. "If I were to ask you for one more kiss, would your answer be the same as the answer to this question?"

“Beast.” Laughing, she shoved a cue into his hands. “Show me a cannon.”

“You have no idea how much I’d like to,” he murmured.

Carole arranged the three balls on the baize. “You first. Three in a row earns a kiss.”

“*Three* in a row?” His cockiness turned into dubiousness.

She took pity. “Can you do two in a row?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “Watch.”

He chalked the leather tip of the cue, aligned himself at the far end of the table, then struck his ivory so that it hit Carole’s first, and then the red ball.

She clapped her hands. “Do it again.”

He strutted to the opposite side of the table, carefully arranged his cue, then hit first the red, and then Carole’s ivory.

“Two in a row, as promised.” She lifted her gaze from the table. “Now what?”

He pulled a face. “Now is when it falls apart. The second cannon takes a fair bit of luck, and a third is all but impossible. No one could hit a cannon with the balls all spread out like this.”

“Exactly.” She returned them to their original position and picked up her cue. “This is how you hit both balls and send them only as far as you want them to go.”

Although he was inexperienced with billiards, Adam copied her motions with control and grace. Not only was he physically in fine form, his grace and coordination were impressive. He was more than a quick study. He was talented. It wouldn’t be long at all before he no longer needed her.

Her stomach twisted with dread at the impending loss. She would have to try even harder to maintain emotional distance.

*This flirtation is just a game, she reminded herself sternly. You might not be thinking of anyone but him, but Adam is practicing in order to woo someone else.*

She could play along. She'd been playing games her entire life. It was all she had.

"Afternoon post, Your Grace." A footman entered the billiard room with a silver tray, and headed straight toward Adam.

"Leave it on the table, please," Adam responded without looking up from the shot he was aligning.

The footman started with obvious surprise, then did as requested. He sent one last intrigued look over his shoulder before disappearing back into the corridor.

Carole watched with interest. It was obvious the footman had fully expected Adam to immediately drop whatever he was doing to attend to his correspondence. Either Adam regularly received letters of utmost importance and urgency... or he was breaking a long-held habit simply because he preferred to spend his time with Carole. Although her stomach fluttered, she tried not to read too much into it.

She cleared her throat. "If you need to pause our lesson to review your correspondence..."

He glanced up, brown eyes wide and a little confused, as if he'd already forgotten the footman's interruption.

"I already know what it is." He shrugged a shoulder. "A few different committees want to nominate me as leader, but I barely have enough time to dedicate to them all as it is. They're trying to convince me otherwise."

She arranged the balls in a new configuration. "Are their causes worthy?"

"Very." He frowned at the new lineup. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"When the red ball and your ivory are equidistant from the side, aim to hit here—" She touched a point exactly between them. "—and your cue ball will hit its mark."

"Maybe," he muttered, but did as she suggested.

His ivory barely whiffed the red ball, lacking enough force to properly

pot it, but making the promised contact all the same. Adam's eyes lit with surprise and triumph. "Can you add it to the journal?"

"With pleasure."

While he realigned the balls to try again, she sketched several similar shots into his journal, careful to annotate each with angles and degrees. He might tease her about the geometry, but Adam was as analytical as she was. Just as he did in the House of Lords, Adam would soon be able to look at a billiard table and see the whole picture, as well as how to change it.

Her pencil faltered. Thinking of the House of Lords only reminded her that soon he would be gone. London claimed him more than half of each year. And Parliament wasn't the only thing that called him. There were dinner soirées and cotillions and all the young ladies just waiting to be swept off their feet.

The hour spent painstakingly pinning and curling her hair now seemed trite and silly. She was not competing. She'd lost before she'd begun.

She closed the journal. "You're going to do very well at your party. Well, you won't beat the le Ducs, but nor will you embarrass yourself. That is, unless you use those horrid introductions."

"I hope they'll make me memorable and interesting. Right now, no one knows anything about me." His eyes met hers. "Except you."

"Which gives me the expertise to point out you're already interesting." Heaven knew, *she* could not cease thinking about him. "If you have to become something you're not to attract the right person, then she's not the right person."

"My parents prided themselves on not bending an inch for anyone else, not even each other, and all they gained from selfish stubbornness was misery." His eyes shuttered. "They missed their chance. I vowed I wouldn't miss mine."

She nodded in empathy. Her parents *had* been happy. Blissfully so. The misery hadn't come until afterward. Her chest tightened with resolve. The

best part of spinsterhood was never risking the pain of loss. “What will determine the right one?”

His jaw tightened. “To me, ‘duchess material’ means so much more than social connections and a vast dowry. Our personalities need to match, too. I don’t want a marriage where each one ‘wins’ but ‘loses.’”

Carole understood. She even agreed. So why did it feel like she was the one who would lose?



Adam could not wait to show Carole how he'd mastered her latest challenge.

When she'd first started spouting algebraic formulas such as, "If your ivory is three times as far from the rail as the red ball, aim for a point four-fifths of the distance to the red one," he'd thought she'd lost her mind. It sounded like the sort of mathematics others had always hated: *If two mail coaches leave London with odd numbers of horses, and each horse can travel at a maximum speed of...*

But she was right. It had taken three long hours and two pots of tea to finally master, but he could now pot the red ball whenever its distance from the side was a calculable factor of his ivory's distance to—

Adam chuckled and lined up another shot. Now even his *thoughts* sounded like Carole. It was as though the sight of a billiard table conjured her to mind.

Or, really, the sight of anything. Or nothing. Even when lying in bed with his eyes closed, she was still all he could think about. Which was good, because it meant there was no space left in his brain to think about how it would feel when she was no longer about.

As eager as he was to impress her with his latest billiard trick, she walked through the door looking so frazzled that he set down his cue and

immediately rang for tea.

He lifted her hands in his. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She wrapped her arms about herself and shuddered. “My father.”

Dread encased Adam’s stomach as he reached for her. “Your father has fallen ill?”

“I don’t think so. Not physically. He suffers attacks of melancholy.” She leaned her cheek against Adam’s chest, her voice taut to the point of breaking. “Father spends all day shut away in his study, except when he can’t even do that.”

“Like today.” Adam stroked her hair.

She nodded and burrowed closer. “Father will be himself again in a few days; or, at least, what’s left of himself. But he’s not truly living. He hasn’t since my mother died.”

“It’s not your fault.” Adam tried to think of a solution. “Perhaps... perhaps what he needs is to meet someone new.”

She pushed away from him. “Father *did* meet someone. The love of his life. There’s one special person out there for each of us. He met her; he married her; she died.”

“I know people find the notion of ‘one’ true love romantic, but to me it’s just... sad.”

“It’s not emotion,” she insisted. “It’s maths. Every problem has a perfect solution.”

“Does it?” he said doubtfully. “I rather think the perfect match is two *imperfect* people who happen to be perfect for each other. Since we’re all imperfect, it stands to reason that there are plenty of fish in the sea—”

“My mother was The One.” Her fierce voice cracked, and a glassy sheen coated her eyes.

“Of course she was,” he agreed quickly. “She was absolutely the perfect and only One *then*, but your father lives *now*. Finding happiness a second

time doesn't cancel out the first time." He tried to find words she would understand. "Love is addition, not subtraction."

"It doesn't feel that way." With trembling hands, she slid a finger under her necklace and pulled a slender golden ring up from her bodice. "This was my mother's. I keep it next to my heart. It first belonged to her mother, and her mother's mother, and the grandmother before that."

She dropped the necklace and the ring returned to its hiding spot.

"I'm breaking the chain," she said quietly. "On purpose. That's the only way to be certain I won't lose my daughter and my daughter won't lose me."

There was nothing he could say to take away her pain, so he pulled her into his arms and said nothing.

He understood why she believed life was a formula that could be learned. Why she *needed* to believe every problem had a solution. But by reaching for answers that might not exist, peace would forever evade her. He lay his cheek against her soft hair.

"It's all right to want things you can't have," he murmured. "It's all right not to be perfect; to be sad; to be happy. It makes you human, not incomplete."

She lifted her face from his cravat and gave a wobbly smile. "But is that enough?"

"It's more than enough," he said softly. "*You're* enough. Plenty of the fish in the sea are very bitter that you're not out there swimming with them."

She snorted. "*Do* fish get bitter?"

Adam was starting to think maybe they did.

*He* was a fish. *He* was in the sea. No—she was in the sea and he was in a private aquarium with a view of the water. His glass palace was expensive and protected, up high on a pedestal, boxed in on every side. Her boundaries were as limitless as the ocean. She could swim as far away as she wanted, but she was right here in his arms.

Marrying her would be the opposite of fitting in. Instead of talking to

him, the peers he was trying so hard to fit in with were more likely to talk *about* him. Not to mention his duty to the title. And yet...

He didn't need a fortuneteller to see his future: his bride would be the wealthy daughter of a fellow peer. Well-connected, well dressed, and well bred, with a flawless reputation and a dowry whose property rivaled his own. In all his thirty years, he'd never questioned the strictures he was meant to follow and the ideals he was meant to live up to. Now he was wondering whether that path was the right path.

What if he *didn't* marry a High Society debutante? What if he took an unconventional bride? What was the worst that could happen? And if the worst *did* happen... would it still be worth it?

He cleared his throat. "Carole?"

Her hazel eyes peered up at him from beneath her lashes. "Yes?"

He tucked a tendril of golden hair behind her ear. "We're always here, in my billiard room. Out of the way. Secretive. What do you think of... Would it be all right for me to call on you tomorrow instead?"

Calling wasn't the same as proposing. All sorts of gentlemen paid twenty-minute afternoon visits to all sorts of ladies. Although, perhaps not typically dukes knocking at the cottage of—

He needn't have worried. Carole reared back as though he'd doused her in water.

"Please don't." She pulled an expression that might have been comical, had it not twisted a knife in his chest. "If you come to our door, my father would think it *meant* something."

Which told him everything he needed to know.

"Of course," he murmured. "It's better like this."

Just like billiards, the rules were clear. When the game was over, it was over.

Effectively being rebuffed before he could progress far enough to ask a question ought to have turned him against the idea altogether. Instead, his

respect for her only grew. Carole had never left him unclear as to where things stood. As far as she was concerned, she wasn't missing a man. As far as Adam was concerned, that was absolutely true. Carole was marvelous in her own right.

But it did let him know that he needed to add

*even though she doesn't need me... still wants me.*

TO HIS LIST OF REQUIREMENTS.

Carole hunched over her writing table, filling the last page in her sketchbook with yet another illustration of a fantasy life starring her and Adam. Her skill with portraying real-life people had not improved, but it took little effort to copy Adam's simple, top-hat-wearing rectangle-man into the drawings.

The ridiculous tableau of Fashion Plate Lady and Rectangle Man somehow made her fantastical settings seem all the more real. As though it really was the two of them riding horses through the evergreens, waltzing in the castle ballroom, curled up next to each other before a winter fire.

Truth was, in just a few days, they would be nothing at all. His party was the following night. Whether tomorrow went well or badly did not signify. He had promised to stay for a month and it had already been five weeks. She was taking more than her share. Soon, it would be time to let go.

But not until after tonight.

She shoved the sketchbook back into her reticule and turned to face the looking-glass. Judith had wanted to save the prettiest gown for the night of the party. Carole didn't want to wait to look her best until Adam's gaze was on other women. Tonight was the last night she would have him all to herself.

Judith had draped her in her finest gown: an underdress of deep blue covered with white gauze, complete with matching puffed sleeves and

French-heeled slippers. This was as close as Carole had ever come to matching the elegant illustrations in her fashion plates. Not even a hair was out of place.

With a final pinch of her cheeks to give them color, she swept out of her cottage and over to his.

His eyes widened when she walked through the door.

Not because she had vastly overdressed for an ordinary occasion. But because he'd done the same thing, too.

His snowy white cravat contrasted sharply with the black superfine coat molded to his body. His formal black breeches and emerald green silk waistcoat looked fit for a ballroom. Even his Hessians were probably champagne shined. Her heart gave a little flutter.

He gave a self-deprecating grin at her expression. "One's last night feels like a momentous occasion."

She matched his smile. It wasn't his last night in Cressmouth. It was their last night alone together. Tomorrow night was the party. His opportunity to win the hearts of every other female in town. To practice for when it really mattered. A flash of jealousy stabbed through her. She tried fruitlessly to push it away. Watching him flirt with someone else was going to kill her. Watching him drive away to marry someone else...

*Tomorrow*, she reminded herself. There was still tonight. They could make this evening anything they pleased. Celebrate however they wished. She rose to her toes, laced her hands about his neck, and kissed him.

This was not a kiss of innocence or experimentation. She knew his mouth as well as her own. Loved the firmness of his lips, the heat of his tongue. Not for the first time, she wondered how his kisses would feel against the rest of her body. Desire unfurled at the familiar fantasy. Hours remained before they had to say goodbye.

"One more game?" she suggested. "Winner takes all."

His dark eyes didn't leave hers. "All of what?"

“Anything he wants,” she said softly.

He kissed her again. “I’ll get the cues.”

Instead of following him to the table, she wandered over to his reading nook. When and if Adam returned to Cressmouth, his father’s favorite books would be here waiting. Battered spines, torn pages, and all.

She pulled her sketchbook from her reticule and hesitated. This wasn’t a mere “favorite” possession. This was a piece of her soul. Fitting, she supposed.

Before she could change her mind, she opened the book to the first sketch of Fashion Plate Lady and Rectangle Man smiling and laughing in Adam’s billiard room. Her heart thumped. Quickly, she dogeared the page, bent the spine, and then shoved the volume onto the shelf where it wouldn’t be noticed for a long while.

If Adam never returned to Cressmouth, he would take this collection with him... and whenever he missed what they used to have, all he would have to do was take this book from its shelf, run his finger along the creases her hands had made, and lose himself in the eternal adventures of a world that never was, knowing she had done the very same.

She shoved her empty reticule into a hidden skirt pocket just as he finished arranging the table.

He gestured toward the beautiful table she’d once believed the finest thing on earth. “Ivory ball or black dot, madam? Lady’s choice.”

Carole didn’t give a damn about billiards. She wanted Adam.

Just this once.

“If I surrendered...” She gazed up at him and licked her lips. “What would you take?”

“Everything,” he answered without hesitation. “You made the rules.”

She wrapped her arms about his neck. “Then I surrender.”

His mouth met hers and there was no more conversation.

She gave herself over to sensation. His hands were warm and familiar



against her curves, his tongue an iron to stoke the fire. These were flames that nothing could extinguish.

What would she do to have more than one night? Could she perhaps become his summer mistress? Would a few torrid weeks every year be enough? Or was one goodbye all she would ever be able to bear?

She shoved the thoughts of a bittersweet future away and concentrated on fully experiencing every moment, while she could still revel in his embrace. She loved the familiar hard planes of his muscles, the warmth of his strong arms, the equally breathless passion in every kiss.

“Winner takes all?” he murmured against the base of her throat.

“Absolutely everything,” she confirmed, her raspy voice laden with desire.

He slid his hands to cup her bottom and lifted her hips to straddle his.

It took a second for her to realize he meant to position her on the edge of the rail.

“Watch the table,” she gasped between kisses.

“If we break it, I’ll buy another one,” he growled as he nuzzled the top of her bosom.

She arched her spine to give him better access. “But the baize—”

“Swinton knows how to iron.”

“*John Thurston* made this. If it tears, the billiard gods will curse you.”

He lifted his head. “Are there sofa gods?”

“Sofa gods love wrinkles,” she assured him.

“Hallelujah.” He swung her toward the satin-covered cushions. “Let’s go and create some wrinkles.”

Her arms reached for him as she tumbled backward onto the sofa. She could not withstand even a hairsbreadth of space between them. He was too dangerous to let go. Too ephemeral. He made her question things she’d previously accepted as fact. Like not wanting a partner in life. Like not needing love.

Good God, she was in *love*? Carole's throat went dry in horror.

Her kisses were so urgent because she could not stand the thought of him marrying someone else. And yet she would not beg him to stay. He couldn't do so if he wanted to. The dukedom came first. He was as tied to London as she was to Cressmouth. She had her household. He had the House of Lords. What they couldn't have was each other.

Except for right now. Right here. Tonight.

She kissed him with everything she'd been holding back; every fear, every surreptitious glance, every long night of endless longing, every heartbeat that called his name. She might not have him forever, but she would absolutely have him tonight.

He yanked up the hem of her skirt and slid his hand slowly, deliciously, toward the junction of her thighs. Her inner muscles tightened deliciously in anticipation. She let her legs fall wide to give him greater access. Already her core pulsed with need as if it ached for the stroke of his fingers. He paused inches from where she wanted his touch most.

"Carole." He lifted his lips from hers to meet her eyes. "What exactly are we doing?"

She wriggled her hips to try and get closer to his hand. "I believe it's called love-making?"

"Have you done this before?"

"Does it matter?"

He removed his hand. "I'm not going to ruin you."

"You can't ruin me. *I'm* having my way with *you*." She dug her fingers into a satin pillow in frustration. "I willingly relinquish my virginity. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to marry anyway."

"*You* matter." He brushed the pad of his thumb against her cheek. "I like you too much to want our bodies to make promises they're not going to keep."

"I don't mind," she tried again, but he was already ending their embrace

and pulling her to her feet.

He kissed her long and hard, as though for the final time. Perhaps it was. When he stepped back out of reach, her chest already felt empty inside. It did not help that his eyes looked just as miserable.

“I’ll think of you tonight and every night.” His voice was gruff. He did not reach for her again. “It will have to be enough.”

It wouldn’t be, of course. But they could pretend.

It was an unmitigated crush. Adam could barely shift his weight without brushing shoulders with three different people. For a village with approximately a thousand inhabitants, it felt like most of the population was stuffed inside his summer cottage.

Despite this, Adam had not expected Carole to make an appearance. The previous encounter had ended abruptly, with both of them at odds with the other. She seemed to think sharing one night together would somehow be sufficient. He was already going to have enough trouble forgetting her, without adding *making love on the sofa* to the list of things forever marked with her presence.

A cluster of locals sat at the table that he and Carole had used to plan the renovation. A group of ladies sipped from the china he and Carole had used to take tea. A handful of neighbors crowded the enclave where Carole had created his reading nook. A dozen others surrounded the billiard room where he and Carole had spent the past fortnight, practically inseparable.

Now she was introducing him to so many people, he could barely keep his own name straight.

“Olive, may I present the Duke of Azureford? Your Grace, this is Miss Harper. She’s phenomenal with horses.”

“Nick and Penelope, may I present the Duke of Azureford? Your Grace,

this is Mr. and Mrs. Pringle. She's the best perfumer in England, and he's an incorrigible rogue."

"Angelica, may I present the Duke of Azureford? Your Grace, this is Miss Parker, an extremely talented jeweler."

"Désirée, may I present the Duke of Azureford? Your Grace, this is Mademoiselle le Duc. She taught me how to curse in French."

"Chris and Gloria, may I present the Duke of Azureford? Your Grace, this is Mr. and Mrs. Pringle."

Wait—hadn't there *already* been a Mr. and Mrs. Pringle? Adam's head started to pound. Nonetheless, he smiled and nodded and bowed and murmured what he hoped would pass as charming manners, given the roar of surrounding conversation drowned out his words.

Carole was taking extra care not only to provide him with helpful tidbits to remember each person by, but also ensure every local unwed young lady had her turn to be presented to Adam. Regardless of how the previous evening had deteriorated, Carole was doing an admirable job of upholding her side of what was becoming an increasingly unwanted bargain. The more she nudged nubile young ladies into his path, the more he only wanted to spend all his time with *her*.

He wasn't alone in his feelings. The greatest obstacle to Carole introducing him to every woman in sight was that everyone in the village elbowed and jostled in order to spend as much time as possible with Carole.

Apparently, she'd saved a theatre director from something or other, was on a first-name basis with the castle solicitor and all of her neighbors, had helped the Duke of Nottingvale prepare for his annual Christmastide house party...

Carole wasn't just *from* this village. She was its heartbeat.

"Miss Shelling is a journalist," she was saying now. "Eve, tell His Grace about your work with the Cressmouth Gazette."

Adam tried to listen, truly he did, but it was difficult to pay attention to

anyone else when Carole was standing right in front of him. He adored how friendly she was, how happy she made others feel, how effortless she made it look. How at home she was, right here atop a tiny mountain in the northernmost corner of England.

Despite his title and wealth, Carole seemed on an even higher rung. Unobtainable. Unreachable. Perhaps because she didn't give a damn about his money and his title. The fact that Adam was a duke was actually a strike against him. He was needed elsewhere and she was needed here. That's why he was supposed to be practicing his conversational parries and flirtation methods for his prodigal return as New Adam.

Yet it was getting harder and harder to work up enthusiasm to "graduate" from Cressmouth to London. Now that he knew what it was like to spend five weeks of relaxed, enjoyable, passionate, silly, delightful days with someone, he didn't want to go back to... *not*.

When Carole was pulled away by yet another admirer, Swinton somehow managed to sidle up to Adam. "Enjoying your farewell party, Your Grace?"

Swinton already knew the answer. He'd been part of the household since before Adam was born. Life with his parents had always been complicated, but his relationship with Swinton had always been straightforward. He'd known everything about Adam from his first newborn cry to last night's extra glasses of wine, which Adam had deeply regretted this morning. As Swinton had said he would. He was butler, he was father figure, he was a thorn in Adam's side. And positively irreplaceable.

Adam sent him a sour look. "Shouldn't you be minding the door?"

"We can't fit anyone else." Swinton's expression was pleased. "Everyone is already inside."

"Fair enough."

Swinton glanced over his shoulder. "Miss Quincy is looking lovely tonight."

"She's always lovely," Adam answered automatically. He hadn't been

able to take his eyes off her all night.

Her hazel eyes were especially bright tonight, her lips as kissable as ever. The edges of her sunlight-colored gown were decorated with tiny yellow rosebuds at the arms, hem, neck, and under-bodice, making five golden rings of—

“Ha,” he told Swinton. “Very humorous.”

Swinton looked back at him innocently.

Adam deeply regretted his drunken confession about the fortuneteller and following the signs. “She said I’d see *five* gold rings. Not one hundred and five. I’m far past that amount, which proves her wrong.”

“Or it proves you’re too stubborn to take a hint,” Swinton said smugly, and melted back into the crowd before Adam could respond.

*Was* he missing his best chance at happiness? He hadn’t wanted to reduce Carole to nothing but a temporary lover, but nor had he made her a better offer. *Would* he? *Could* he?

What would New Adam do?

New Adam wasn’t shy and awkward but bold and confident. New Adam wouldn’t waste time wooing the wrong women when the right one was there in his sights. When it came to choosing a wife, the only preferences that mattered would be his own. So what did he truly desire?

He didn’t just want Carole to be happy. He wanted to be the one who made her happy. The one who stood at her side, no matter what. The one she loved, as much as he loved her.

Equal parts fear and panic twisted in his stomach. His chest tightened until his galloping heart threatened to break free. His palms were clammy; his throat too dry to speak.

Being in love wasn’t the end of the world, he promised himself. Neither was being shy. But he’d vowed not to hold back with her. Not after all this. He’d never forgive himself if he didn’t seize the opportunity to be completely honest with her, come what may.

And they had a good thing, did they not? No—a *great* thing. A splendid thing. Spinsterhood was unnecessary. Marriage was a huge step, but worth the leap if they could take it together. Surely she'd see that.

Maybe she'd see that.

He squared his shoulders. Old Adam would not have tried to win the hand of the girl of his dreams because he knew he'd be too shy to succeed. New Adam would probably always be awkward at such things, but he was going to try anyway. There was no one else he'd rather spend the rest of his life with.

It was about time he let her know.



Carole's cheeks ached from the effort of maintaining a happy expression. She hadn't stopped talking and smiling for hours. Introducing her favorite people in the world to Adam should have been a joyful occasion, but instead she felt like an automaton; performing exactly as she was programmed to. And it was her own blasted fault.

Adam hadn't sprung this party on her as a surprise. He'd been candid about his reasons for visiting the village she called home since the beginning. She'd volunteered to *help* him, for the love of crumpets. They both understood the game. *She* had been the one to try and change the rules with an intimate encounter on top of his sofa.

Him gently refusing to complicate something simple had been the right answer. The only answer.

Just look at this party. A roaring success! He wasn't standing in the corner glaring wordlessly at his guests, but mingling. Conversing. He'd even played half of a billiard game with Lucien le Duc before so many people crowded the room as to make wielding a cue impossible.

She'd liked Adam from the first, but now he was even better. More engaging, more magnetic. With or without deep pockets and a fancy title, when he returned to London for the Season, ladies would be lined up at Almack's to waltz with *him*.

At least she wouldn't be there to see it.

Carole turned back to the party. She could cope with this. She'd prepared for this. It was what they both wanted.

When at last the night had stretched so long that dawn was bleeding into the sky, most of the guests returned to their homes and only a few stragglers remained.

"Wait," Adam said softly, his warm lips brushing her ear. "I need to talk to you."

They had spent the past six hours repeating pleasantries and introductions until their voices went hoarse, but there had been no time to *talk*. She wasn't certain she wished to. Or that there were any words left in her throat at all.

Yet her feet stayed planted in the middle of his drawing room as he and his butler masterfully shooed the rest of the flock out the door without them noticing they were being evicted.

Once again, she and Adam were alone.

It didn't feel like before. Perhaps nothing ever would.

"Carole," he began, his expression serious and stern.

She waited.

No further comment seemed forthcoming.

"It was a good party," she assured him, the words tumbling over each other like dead leaves. "You will be the toast of the ton next Season, I swear it. Gentlemen begging for billiard games, ladies swooning over each other left and right, vying for the chance to be your duchess—"

"You." He drew himself up, as tall and imposing as he must appear when he addressed his peers in the House of Lords. "I want to marry you."

She blinked. Apparently two could change the rules.

"No, you don't," she reminded him. They both knew it could not work. "You want a High Society debutante with good blood, advantageous connections, a large dowry, vast properties, and an Almack's voucher. I have none of those things."

“I know.” His expression was tortured. “It doesn’t matter. What we have is better.”

He meant this, she realized in wonder. This was a real proposal. If she said yes, he would do it.

The exquisite crack in her heart made her realize she would do absolutely anything to keep him in her life... except ruin his.

She wasn’t *haut ton*. He’d spent the evening being introduced to all the “connections” she had. There were no family estates in her dowry. The amount wouldn’t even cover what he’d spent on new windows. There was no Almack’s voucher. She’d never even been formally presented to Society.

Marrying her wouldn’t be an advantage. It would be an albatross.

“Adam,” she began, and then stopped. The truth was too hard to say.

The only reason he thought he wanted her was because he’d never had a connection like this with anyone else. It wasn’t *Carole* who was special. It was the novelty of coming out of his shell.

When he returned to London, more secure and more confident, he would discover that any number of women would be delighted to be the object of his attention. Waltzes, promenades, even billiards. *Carole* wasn’t unique. In a matter of weeks, he would find someone just like her who could also offer all the other characteristics that she could not.

With that woman, with the better choice, he would be able to achieve so much more. Not just enrich his duchy, but expand his connections, be more popular with the set in Parliament. The thought made her shake with panic and jealousy and bitterness. But for every problem, no matter how hard, there was always one right answer.

She kissed him on his cheek and whispered, “No.”

The only solution was goodbye.



THAT WAS IT. The last of the few belongings Adam cared to keep were loaded into his coach. Two hours past dawn, and his driver was already waiting for him beside the carriage.

Under other circumstance, Adam might've taken one last walk through the cottage, just to be certain he wasn't leaving anything important behind. But today he could not bear to look at the billiard room. He knew exactly what he was leaving behind.

Carole had said no.

He gripped the doorframe until his knuckles went white. The idea of walking away from this cottage, walking away from *Carole*, made him dizzy. His heart was incomplete without her. Yet he would have to go to London alone. Have to marry someone else, knowing full well his heart was hundreds of miles north.

Perhaps Carole would wed someone else, too. She claimed she didn't want to, but maybe she just didn't want to marry *him*.

He could try to convince her, but her happiness came first—and, frankly, so did his. Having to *talk* an unwilling woman into marrying him was not the equal, loving union he'd been hoping for. If she didn't want him, then she wasn't the right one after all.

“Ready, Your Grace?” asked the driver.

It was then that Adam realized his proposal had lacked the most important words of all. He'd gotten the *Marry me* bit out, and forgotten the *I love you*. His stomach twisted. He covered his burning cheeks with his hand. Of all the henwitted mistakes a lovesick swain could make during a proposal...

Then again, she hadn't said she loved him, either. Or asked about feelings at all. Her answer was just... *no*.

He would have to respect her wishes.

“Ready,” he said with a sigh.

John nodded and swung the carriage door open.

Adam turned to Swinton. "Let's go. I won't be coming back."

The barest flash of pain cut behind Swinton's stoic eyes. "As you wish, Your Grace."

*Devil take it.* Adam's heart twisted as he stared back at his butler in belated realization. Swinton would do whatever he was told, even if it meant leaving the woman he cared about behind. The stubborn codger was loyal to a fault. Adam swallowed the tight lump in his throat.

"I can't ruin both our lives." He gestured at the open cottage door. "Stay."

Swinton's voice was stern. "I've looked after you since you were a child, Your Grace. I won't stop now. If you go, we both go."

They went.

Sleep was impossible. Staying awake wasn't any better. Carole missed Adam, missed her sketchbook, and had missed the perfect chance to explain to him that the reason she'd said no wasn't because she didn't care about him, but because she *did*.

Would it have made any difference? Probably not. Thoughts of her would vanish the moment he was back in the beau monde, surrounded by aristocratic beauties who could offer endless things that Carole could not. She slumped atop her writing desk. No matter who he married, she would always be the first one to love him for who he was.

None of this had been a game. She couldn't let him leave without a proper goodbye.

Leaving Judith to sleep in for another hour or two if she could, Carole ran out of her house without bothering with her hair or the wrinkled state of her day dress, and banged upon Adam's door with the knocker.

And banged.

And banged.

It wasn't until a sleepy-eyed young footman opened the door that she realized coming to call at nine o'clock in the morning after a party that had ended at dawn wasn't exactly the best idea she'd ever had.

"Adam," her mouth blurted. "Is His Grace awake?"

“I couldn’t say, Miss.” The footman stared back at her, his expression blank. “He isn’t here.”

Not... here?

“He went into town at *this* hour?” she asked in disbelief. “Where in the world would he—”

Not. Here.

“Gone?” She whispered to the footman.

He nodded. “I’m afraid so, miss. Left for London a couple hours ago.”

“When will he return?” She regretted the question as soon as it was out of her mouth. Of course the footman wouldn’t know the answer.

He shook his head. “Never, Miss. He took what he cared about, and said he wouldn’t be back.”

A blade of regret sliced through her, jagged and searing.

She’d always believed that the best thing about being a dedicated spinster was never risking the pain of loss. Not ending up like her father. But she *did* lose. Without even having the years of bliss first.

This was her fault. Not Adam leaving; they’d both always known it would come to that. But he didn’t have to leave so suddenly. With so many things unsaid between them.

“Miss?”

“Thank you,” she mumbled. “I didn’t mean to rouse you from slumber.” She started to turn away, then thought better of it. “When you speak to Swinton, can you ask him—”

“Can’t, Miss.” The footman made an apologetic face. “Left with His Grace, Mr. Swinton did.”

Carole stared at him in horror, her heart beating too fast. She’d ruined Judith’s chance at happiness as well as her own. This was going to destroy her.

Just as it was destroying Carole. There was nothing left for her here.

Somehow, she stumbled down Adam’s front walk and back into her

bedchamber. She shut the door firmly, crawled up into her fourposter bed, and closed the curtain tightly.

Darkness. That was what she needed. And her pillow. And a good cry. But the tears didn't come, no matter how long she lay there, staring blindly into the dark. They didn't come until Judith crawled in beside her and said it wasn't Carole's fault. Sometimes people leave, even when we love them. Sometimes they leave and never come back. That was life. All they could do was carry on.

The days blended together. Carole stayed in her dark hideaway where it was safe. Where she could pretend she was still dreaming and might wake up at any moment.

The rattle of a tea tray jerked her back to the present. She waited in silence for the sound of the tray sliding onto the table and the metallic latch of the door, indicating Rhoda had returned to her duties. The tray rattled onto the table. The door did not close behind the maid.

Carole slipped a finger in the crack between her curtains and gasped.

Her father sat on the dressing stool next to the tea tray.

"What are you doing?" she stammered.

He poured two cups. "You didn't keep our billiards match."

A hitch somewhere between a laugh and a sob tangled in her throat. That was what it had taken for her father to take an interest in her life.

"Did you wait long?" she asked bitterly.

"Two days." He stirred a lump of sugar into one of the cups. "But I'm getting better at making your tea how you like it. Do you want some while it's still hot?"

*Father* had been bringing in her tea trays?

"I..." was all she managed.

He tied the curtains to the posts, then brought two steaming teacups to the edge of the bed. "Sit with me?"

She sat up and accepted the warm cup. "You forgot the saucers."



“I’m not very good at this,” he answered lightly, but his eyes were full of pain. “I’m *not* good at this, love. I haven’t been good at anything since your mother died.”

Her heart twisted. “I’ve been trying to help. I—”

“You’ve been singlehandedly running this household since before you were old enough to leave the schoolroom. In my grief, I let you. I shouldn’t have. I closed myself away when you needed me most.”

“I didn’t mind helping,” she whispered.

“That’s how you dealt with *your* grief. If you personally filled the hole, then maybe there wouldn’t be one. Being in charge gave you a purpose. Making decisions about the menu made you feel you still had some say over life. I know, because I was doing the same thing, up in my study. I couldn’t save your mother, but maybe I could save more money for our household. I just had to research a little more. Sell this stock. Buy that bond. Concentrate on the market.”

She stared down into her cup and nodded. “I knew you were working.”

“I wasn’t working, sweetling. I was running away. I was hiding inside ledgers and books and numbers. Sound familiar?”

“Maybe.” Sketchbooks, billiards. Geometry she could predict. Drawings she could control. “So what do we do?”

“We stop running away and start running *to*. That’s why I came here to you.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “What do *you* want?”

What she couldn’t have.

“The duke next door?” Father guessed, his gaze fierce. “If he hurt you—”

“He asked me to marry him,” she blurted. “I said no. He doesn’t really want me. I’m not duchessy enough.”

Father frowned. “What do duchesses do that you can’t?”

“I don’t know. They organize parties and decorate homes and manage households...” At her father’s smug expression, she clarified, “*big* ones. For important people.”

“Did he mean it?” Father asked. “When he asked you to marry him?”

She sighed. “It doesn’t matter. He left.”

“You said no,” Father reminded her. “Maybe he needed a moment to hide, too. No one is perfect, love. Nothing ever is. But when it’s right for *you*... say yes.”

“It’s too late,” she said dully. “He’s in London by now, with a gaggle of debutantes quacking at his heels.”

Father’s lips quirked. “I can’t imagine you quacking.”

“I missed my chance to find out,” she said with a little shrug.

“Did you?” He rose to his feet and lifted a folded square of parchment from the tray. “Seems to me, your Great-Aunt Murray invites you to London every Season.”

“I can’t go,” she stammered. “You need me here.”

“You needed to be here,” he said softly. “You tried so hard to be useful that you never noticed when you turned into the most capable young lady England has ever seen. If you want to go to London, you have my blessing. Do what your heart tells you.”

“In that case...” Hope began to blossom. She hooked her arm through her father’s. “You and Judith are coming with me.”

Carole rolled back her shoulders and stepped into a magnificent Mayfair town house. Mrs. Sands, the owner of the town house, was bosom friends with her great-aunt Murray.

Mrs. Sands had also landed the enviable coup of having the most eligible bachelor on the Marriage Mart accept her invitation to tonight's soiree.

Carole and Aunt Murray were running late. Judith had spent no less than an hour curling and pinning and arranging Carole's hair. She'd told her maid not to bother, that by now he'd have a dozen paramours.

"Not anymore," Judith said when she finally let her out the door.

But now that she was here, in the grandest residence she'd ever seen, surrounded by the cr me de la cr me of High Society, Carole once again felt like the green country girl she'd always been. How was she meant to compete with elegant ladies dripping in jewels and draped in the latest fashions?

She forced one foot in front of the other anyway. Maybe he wouldn't be there. Maybe coming all this way was all for nothing.

Maybe he'd be here, and refuse to acknowledge her in front of his fancy peers.

"Fetch me a lemonade, dear, would you?" her great-aunt asked.

By herself? Panic rushed through her, causing her knees to tremble. At home, Carole knew everyone. Here, she knew no one. Worse—here, she *was*

no one. But her aunt was thirsty and Carole owed her everything for her hospitality, so she rolled back her shoulders and pretended not to feel like a crow among swans as she made her way to the refreshments table.

The Season wouldn't start for months, so at least she could only embarrass herself in front of the minimum quantity of people. Of elegant, rich, well-connected—

The familiar *snick* of ivory balls colliding caught her attention, and her gaze jerked toward an open doorway. Inside the adjoining room was a beautiful billiard table. A dozen spectators cheered on two impeccably dressed gentlemen.

*Adam.*

He adjusted his stance, lifted his cue, and delivered a perfectly competent cannon.

His opponent murmured something that made Adam laugh. Adam responded by saying something that made the three young ladies cooing behind him erupt into giggles.

Carole's fingers dug into her clammy palms. She did not belong. What was she doing here?

But as she turned to go, Adam's eyes met hers from the other side of the billiard table.

He froze half-stretched across the table, caught in the middle of positioning a shot. "*Carole?*"

"I need to talk to you," she managed. Or tried to. She wasn't certain the hoarse creak of her voice traveled loud enough for him to hear.

Adam handed his cue to one of his friends. He walked around the table to the doorway, but did not step into the main room. "What are you doing here?"

She took a deep breath and met him at the threshold. They would be seen, but not overheard.

"You don't have to say anything back," she said quickly, "but I can't

leave things how they were without telling you the truth. And the truth is... I wanted to say yes, but I was terrified. I knew you meant it in the moment, but I also knew you'd come back to—" She gestured around them. "—*this*, and realize your mistake. I didn't want to be that mistake. I love you too much to spend the rest of my life knowing I was never truly good enough."

There. The words were out. She held her breath.

"I found your sketchbook," he said quietly.

Heat blazed her cheeks. "I... er..."

"I don't know what to say because I never do seem to have the right words. But I do have this." He slid his hand inside his waistcoat and pulled out her sketchbook.

Her mouth opened wordlessly. He'd been carrying around her sketchbook.

"Here." He teased out a folded sheet of foolscap he appeared to have been using as a bookmark. "I started working on it the day you agreed to help me find the perfect woman."

With trembling fingers, she opened the paper.

### *Required Qualities for my Future Wife*

SHE GLANCED UP. He motioned for her to keep reading.

*Friendly*

*Fearless*

*Good with children*

*Must like each other!!*

*Honest*  
*Reciprocates feelings*  
*Thoughtful*  
*Puts family first*  
*Knows what she wants*  
*Does everything she can to achieve it*  
*Even though she doesn't need me... still wants me.*

“*THOSE ARE* the only characteristics I care about.” He took her hands in his and pressed them to his chest. “I modeled them after the perfect woman. *You.*”

## EPILOGUE

*Six months later*

Adam leaned his cheek against his wife's soft hair as they cuddled close for warmth in the outdoor seats of Cressmouth's bustling amphitheater. The annual Christmas performance of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* was about to begin.

After having spent the months after their wedding nestled up north in their cottage, he'd miss moments like these in this cozy village when they returned to London for the parliamentary session.

On the other hand, Adam was looking forward to sharing a different kind of Season with Carole. Not just because she loved to research with him—her analytical talents meant he could finish work much faster, with more time to spend with each other.

That was what he was really looking forward to: introducing her to all the sights and tastes of London, waltzing with her anywhere they found an orchestra, challenging their friends to a memorable game of billiards...

It was hard to believe that when he'd first set eyes on his father's completely rearranged library, his instinct had been to throttle whoever had

dared lay a finger on his cherished books. Instead, when he and Carole had discovered that the culprit was Adam's friend Theo while he was recuperating from his battle injuries, Adam could have kissed him and thrown him a parade for helping bring him and Carole closer together.

He and Carole weren't the only ones to benefit. Adam glanced over the top of Carole's head to grin at the couple seated on her other side. Now that Swinton and Judith lived in the same household, there was no longer any reason for them to have to sneak away to hide their attraction. In fact, they were *both* Swintons now, having called the banns the month after Carole and Adam's wedding.

Carole's father was coming out of his shell more and more. Instead of exiting his study once a week, the Azurefords and the le Ducs had joined forces to create the first annual Cressmouth billiard tournament—with Mr. Quincy as captain.

Adam nuzzled his wife's hair. "If you could sketch anything you pleased into this moment, what would you change?"

"Nothing at all." She smiled up at him. "What would you change?"

"I'd add *this*," he said, and lowered his mouth for a kiss.



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