

THE DUKE'S
HOUSE PARTY

How I DANCED

WITH
THE

Duke

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON

HOW I DANCED
WITH THE
DUKE

THE DUKE'S HOUSE PARTY
BOOK I

by
Eva Devon

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How I Danced With The Duke

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I am so grateful for my three lads and Mr. D.
Your love sustains me.

Many thanks to Louisa and Christy!
And you. Thank you for guiding me.

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CHAPTER I

*P*ain rattled through Griffin John Edward Harrington, Duke of Wildwood.

Or at least he assumed it was pain. The intensity of the emotion was unfamiliar to him. Grief? He knew grief, but this was something different.

It charged through his body like a current.

It swept over him, crashing, seizing all his ability to remain at ease. His breath began to come in startled, ragged gasps. He stared at the diary which had been thrust clumsily into his hand by a frightened young woman who had traveled a great distance to deliver it.

As he stared at his sister's handwriting, he could sense the young woman, a Miss Thomas, tightly clenching her hands together before her simple gown of grey cotton.

She was the niece of his sister's housekeeper.

"How did you get this?" he rasped.

The young woman sucked in a breath, then began in a shaking voice, "Me auntie gave it to me, Your Grace. She made me promise to put it into your own hands. You see... Her ladyship, your sister, gave it into me auntie's keeping...in the event of her ladyship's death. And me auntie, well, she held onto it all this time. But she was on her deathbed, and she said she couldn't go to her maker without ensuring you had it."

His eyes burned, and he realized he had not blinked. He forced himself to close his eyes for a moment as he struggled to understand. "Why did she not deliver it before?"

Miss Thomas let out a distressed note. "Forgive her, Your Grace, but I think she was afraid."

"Of me?" He was a duke and rather unapproachable but...

“No, Your Grace,” she rushed. “Of *him*.”

Of him.

He cocked his head to the side, taking in those words, and he lifted his gaze to Miss Thomas’s pale face. His stomach tightened with dread. “Do you mean the Earl of Wexford, my sister’s husband?”

She gave a quick nod, even as her brow furrowed with worry. For, after all, she almost certainly lived on Wexford’s estate. And it was very possible that most of her family was employed by the earl.

“I see,” he said gently. “Thank you, Miss Thomas. You have done your duty. You shall be taken to the kitchens, given a hot meal, and then taken to a room to rest until you are ready to return home. And I shall compensate you for your time and the journey.”

“Oh, thank you, Your Grace. But it was a promise—”

“And taking care of people is my duty,” he assured her quickly. “And since you have brought me my sister’s diary, I must see to your welfare.”

Miss Thomas gave a quick curtsy, and he gestured for her to leave him.

She turned quickly. Eager, and no doubt relieved, to be done with her task, she hurried out.

Griffin contemplated the diary, feeling as if the leather might burn a layer of skin off his hand as he scanned page after page.

He couldn’t stop reading, for this was no domestic tale of the duties of a countess.

No, this was a harrowing account of a brutalized life.

Surely, the perfect, though increasingly frantic, hand of his sister was a mistake. Surely, none of what he was reading could be correct.

He quickly read the lines, acid rolling in his stomach as the meaning of the entries began to become clear.

His sister's penmanship had always been beautiful, for she had had the most expensive education a young lady of society could have. She had had governesses from Paris and then she had attended a finishing school in Europe. When they'd been parted while she was away, he had been so terribly lonely, but her daily letters had bolstered him, and he had written in turn.

Then finally, after a year away, she had returned! He'd never been happier to be at her side, doing whatever she needed when he was allowed.

Yes, she had been ready to take on the world. And his sister, Anne, had been the diamond of her Season. She had made a great marriage to a powerful earl.

Griffin had been a boy at the time, and he had adored her.

How he had loved seeing her in her full glory as she took London by storm, smiling, laughing. Her eyes shining with mischief and joy as she received callers and went to balls, parties, and fetes.

She went out in her riding costume every day, and he would often go with her, though he was but a boy. He watched as people gazed upon her with worshipful eyes.

Yes, Anne had been the paragon of his life until...she'd suddenly disappeared from his existence.

Once she had married the powerful Earl of Wexford, she had vanished into Cornwall, at the edge of England, and Griffin had not seen her again. He couldn't explain how that loss had affected him. He couldn't put it into the words. For they had been together often when she was home. And especially when he was small.

And when news had come of her death?

The darkness that had swallowed him up upon learning his sister had perished in childbed had driven him half mad. Perhaps, some thought that was being too dramatic for a boy,

but the truth was that his own mother had been caught up in her own world, distressed at her husband's rather callous treatment.

As was the case with many duchesses, she'd spent little time in the rearing of her children. Except for when it was time to launch them into society.

For all intents and purposes, his sister had been his mother—caring for him, loving him, reading him stories, taking care of his injuries, and assuring him that he was more than just a title.

Something his father certainly wasn't willing to do.

His father barely took notice of him except to send him to receive training to be a duke. Oh yes, he had a great education. Tutors of renowned philosophers from Europe, mathematicians, scientists, all of it. But it had been his sister who had kept him afloat in a sea of loneliness and little love.

For according to English society, future dukes and dukes themselves did not need love; they only had need of power.

And he had a great deal of power now that he was a duke, but in this moment, with the diary beginning to shake in his big hand, he did not feel powerful.

He felt desperately ill at ease.

The diary spoke of tremendous fear, of uncertainty, of risk, of his sister feeling unsafe in her own home.

The words "I shall beg Papa to let me come home" shook Griffin to his core, for clearly their father had not let her come home.

She had been forced to stay with her husband, and now Griffin wondered what sort of a devil of a man the earl was.

A hideous thought whispered through him.

Had she truly died in childbed? For the things in this diary depicted a terrifying life for his beautiful sister, a sister he had

not seen again once she'd gone to Cornwall and whose letters had stopped coming.

"I'm so terribly unhappy, and I am afraid," his sister wrote in her final entries. "My husband is a tyrant. I did not realize he would be thus when we wed. He was so kind when he courted me, so caring, so determined to please me. He sent me flowers every day, gifts every day, and assured me that I was his shining star, his queen of the ton, but it is clear now that he only wanted to control me. What I wear, what I eat, what I do, and to whom I speak. I've even had to hide this diary behind my bed, for he reads all my correspondence. I must escape. There must be a way to leave this place. For I am afraid for my life. I cannot bear the strike of his fist when I displease him. Or the torture of his words."

Griffin swallowed. How could such a thing have befallen his marvelous sister? Slowly, he closed the diary.

He forced himself to draw in a slow breath through his nose and then out through his mouth, but it did not appease the sensation racing through him. He felt as if he was coming apart, coming undone.

He could barely feel the room around him. His thoughts warred and crashed through his head, and without thinking, the next thing he knew, he whipped around and charged out of his study.

And as he charged through the hall, his heart pounded so hard that he feared he was about to have an apoplexy despite his relatively young years.

He knew there was only one person who could alleviate his fears, who could explain what happened.

He rushed into his mother's bedchamber, which was attended to by her French maid, Heloise.

His mother did not look up from her toilet. She was getting ready to go out, of course, to the dinner party of a family who were quite near and powerful too.

"Mama," he called, "I need to speak to you."

“Not now, my dear,” she trilled, patting at her coiled hair which was still a raven’s wing black. “I’m about to go out. Can it not keep until tomorrow morning?”

“It cannot,” he said, trying to keep his voice even.

It was easy to distress his mother. Though she was one of the most powerful women of the ton, she had often taken to her bed with agues and pains when the world upset her.

And so he had taken great pains not to upset her as his father had often done. Though she was his mother, and he had kissed her cheek after teatime when she was at home, he had known her only at a distance, and he still felt the distance here.

But he didn’t wish to cause her pain. And surely such news would pain her.

“Mama, this has been entrusted to me,” he said as he crossed the room and extended the diary.

“What is it?” she asked, barely glancing back at him as she waved her maid to some bit of business by the bed and then put a diamond earbob into her lobe.

“It is Anne’s,” he said gently.

His mother stopped, her hand trembling slightly. “You may go now,” she said to Heloise.

The maid gave a quick curtsy, her perfectly curled hair bouncing under her cap, and rushed out of the room.

His mother adjusted her necklace, even as the color seemed to drain from her face. “My dear, if it is unpleasant, best keep it unsaid. For the past is the past.”

He blinked at her strange reply. Slowly, he closed the distance between them. “This diary suggests that she was in danger.”

His mother met his gaze for an instant, then quickly looked away as she forced a weak smile. “In danger? How? She was married to one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the country.”

“That doesn’t mean she wasn’t in danger, Mama,” he replied.

“Griffin,” she began, her voice breathy with growing alarm, “she was prone to dramatics, especially when she was first enceinte.”

“But, Mama, the diary—”

Her hand coiled into a fist, and she closed her eyes.

To his horror, a tear slipped down her cheek, tracing a trail through her powder.

“I cannot bear it, Griffin,” she stated and turned slowly to face him. “It is done. What happened to her—”

“You knew?” he whispered.

“That the earl disciplined his wife?” she replied as her watery eyes met his. A ragged laugh tore from her throat and then a sob. “It is the way of husbands with their wives. Sometimes wives require discipline. That is what your father said.”

His father had been a hard man. But Griffin couldn’t imagine wishing to discipline a wife. If he married at all—which he was expected to do, and he was a man of duty—it would be to a woman he chose for the woman herself.

The very idea that he could take a person and cut off bits of them and shove them into a shape that he wanted appalled him.

He could barely speak. “She wanted to come home. She wanted to leave him.”

His mother’s shoulders sank. “Oh, my dear,” she said, “you are naive in this. Your heart is too good.”

He snorted. He’d seen the Continent at war. He ran a good section of the country. He understood the dire straits that England was in, and that they were on the brink of revolution due to the poor sympathizing with France. He was not naive, but he *was* shocked.

“Mama, how did Anne die?” he gritted.

She licked her lips before she whispered, “In childbirth.”

“Is that even true?” he demanded. “The diary suggests—”

“Your sister tried to leave her husband.” His mother lifted her hands to her face and let out a shaking sob. “And I... I tried to help her. Good God, Griffin, I arranged for a coach to meet her on the edge of the estate to help her escape. But she must have been caught, for she never arrived at the coach. When your father found out what I did...”

A look of pure agony crossed his mother’s face.

He remembered that his mother had suddenly been unwell for several days close to his sister’s death, refusing to see anyone, alone in her dark rooms.

“Did Wexford kill her?” he asked.

“I don’t know if he struck the blow... But whatever happened brought on the babe early. And it killed them both.”

“Why did you not tell me?” he asked, his body tensing with the agony of all these revelations.

“And cause you more suffering? And myself? Your father was furious and forbade me to act any further.” She met his gaze. “Please forgive me, I tried. I tried. And I failed, and I knew how much you loved her. Far more than me, and I know that is because I failed you both as a mother.”

“I wish you had told me.”

“Why? Nothing can be proved, and I did not want to torment you.”

“It is too late, Mama.” He crossed to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, for though she had not been close to him, he understood the courage it had taken to stand up to his father and that she had no doubt paid dearly for it.

“What will you do?” she asked through her tears as she placed her own hand atop his.

The earl was still going about his life, powerful, strong, unhurt, while his sister was alone with her baby in the cold ground, and he would never forget that. Nor could he forgive it.

“I am going to torment *him*. He will pay for the harm he has caused, no matter how I have to do it.”

CHAPTER 2

“Will we ever arrive?” Agatha bellowed, throwing herself back dramatically upon the coach’s squabs.

Lady Virginia Milton laughed as she shoved a book at her cousin. “Don’t moan, Agatha,” she said cheerfully. “Here’s another book. And it won’t be long now.”

Her cousin greatly disliked travel, and Virginia couldn’t blame her. It was quite a bouncing state of affairs, traveling all the way up from London at this time of year to a house party in the north.

Most ton members would never wish to do such a thing, but when the Duke of Wildwood announced a house party, well, everyone who was invited went.

There was no question about it.

Aside from the fact that he was a duke, one of the most powerful men in the land, he was Wildwood.

Wildwood was an enigmatic character. Everyone read about him. Everyone talked about him, but very few people ever had the honor of being in the same room as him.

Over the years, he had developed a reputation, not as a recluse, but as a man of extremely discerning taste. He did not put himself out into society unless he absolutely had to go, or it related to his specific interests.

He was a serious a man who worked closely with the king’s cabinet, Parliament, and the party members he was patron to.

Rather than drink wine and gamble away his fortune as so many of his peers did, Wildwood used his power in meaningful ways.

Frankly, Virginia thought he was rather marvelous from all that she’d read, and she could not wait to meet the duke, since

he seemed far more interested in the practical side of this life than the silly one.

Though it sounded absurd, he reminded her of herself—or herself if she had any sort of real power.

She did not, but at least she had a rather benevolent grandmother, who was at present sleeping with a handkerchief over her face which billowed up every few seconds as she let out a breath. But her grandmother had been absolutely certain that they must attend this house party.

Firstly, because her grandmother wanted to see what the Duke of Wildwood had done with the house since she had last been there under his father's reign.

Secondly, because, well, it was a necessity for herself and Agatha.

They needed husbands.

Virginia scowled at her sketchbook, though not because she disliked her current work.

She quite loved penciling out the scenery unfolding before them, but she was quite annoyed by the fact that she was still on the market.

She likely would be for the foreseeable future, despite her grandmother's optimism that she would find a husband at the Duke of Wildwood's party.

Apparently, everyone had been invited.

Well, not quite everyone, but certainly all the great families were coming, and she would therefore be put on display to unique advantage. She could shine here in a way she simply did not in town.

Certainly, there would be dances. She couldn't imagine Wildwood wouldn't have at least one ball. Her ball gowns had been packed, but there were other things at a house party that a young lady such as herself might be able to take part in that would show off other skills.

She was an excellent walker, for instance. She could ride. She loved libraries, and she was a tolerable archer.

Surely something about her would catch the eye of a gentleman. She wasn't entirely certain if she wanted it or not, but she did know that the life of a spinster could be quite difficult. She had a tolerable fortune, so she did not have to worry a great deal, but she didn't want to let her family down. They had all been so absolutely marvelous about her oddities, and she was odd. She knew it.

There was no getting around it.

She'd spent most of her life with her drawing articles to hand and stains upon her fingers.

It didn't matter if it was breakfast, lunch, teatime, or dinner. She sketched and painted. And she spent every possible free hour in the galleries, studying the newest works and the old masters.

The only thing that she adored almost as well as art was taking long walks.

She had to take them. After the death of her mother, her governess and Grandmama, Lady Abbingford, had begun taking her out on long marches to combat the deep melancholia that had washed over her in girlhood.

Walks had become a lifeline and a deeply ingrained habit.

Besides, if she did not take them, she would grow pale and frail. Well, not necessarily frail, for she did adore cakes.

Still, she needed the outdoors to keep her mind alert and her heart light. She wouldn't allow the dark halls of melancholia to reclaim her.

The outdoors helped.

Agatha had been, and still was, a remarkable help. Her cousin dearly loved to ride and to walk too. So they spent most of their waking hours together.

She did feel sorry for Agatha at present.

For Agatha looked a little peaky.

“I do think that we shall arrive at the estate quite soon,” Virginia offered optimistically. “I think we’ve even turned down the drive.”

“Have we?” Agatha groaned. “I did not even know we’d reached Yorkshire.”

She reached out and patted her cousin’s hand. “Oh, Agatha, I told you we had hours ago.”

“I guess I am not listening.” Agatha managed a wan wink. “I am consumed by my misery. Misery, I tell you.”

“I am sorry you feel unwell, but we shall be there soon, and you’ll be able to take as many walks as you please or lie down.”

“A pillow and a bed and being absolutely still will be heaven,” Agatha replied. “Though I know you shall want a walk, and I shall somehow rally. I will not let you down, darling cousin.”

Agatha was prone to exaggeration, something that Virginia found quite amusing because Agatha meant it. Yes, everything she said, Agatha meant and felt. She lived on a grand scale and Virginia rather admired Agatha for it.

Although, she hoped it didn’t get her cousin into any trouble. So many of the grander feeling ladies of the day seemed to have launched themselves into difficult situations.

Still, Virginia would be there, a steadfast prop for her cousin, if and when such a thing occurred. Though her grandmother was determined that it should not. And it may very well have been that their grandmama felt a kindred spirit in Agatha. For their grandmama had been no shrinking violet, or so the stories went.

Grandmama had a tendency to watch Agatha with a loving but firmer hand than she did Virginia. For Virginia had never courted trouble. She was not interested in it.

Trouble took time away from her art.

Virginia peered out the window for the first time in hours, and she let out a gasp. "I do think we are here after all."

On the other side of the mud-spattered windows stretched gardens, mazes, and trees.

The vastness of it stunned her, as did the elaborate lakes, pools, and fountains all about them.

"My goodness," Virginia exclaimed. "Wildwood must be wealthy, indeed."

"How could you say such a silly thing?" Agatha teased. "Of course he is. Rich as Croesus! He's one of the wealthiest men in the land."

Her grandmother seemed to wake at the mention of money. She pulled the handkerchief from her face and waved it. "Wealthy? Eh? What?"

"We are just discussing how wealthy the Duke of Wildwood must be, Grandmama, to have such gardens," Virginia elucidated.

"Oh, the fellow is almost as wealthy as the king," her grandmother agreed.

"Is such a thing possible?" Agatha asked, amazed.

Her grandmother nodded, righting herself and her coiffure. "Yes. Now, we must ready ourselves to make our first entry."

"Will we be greeted by anyone?" Virginia asked, beginning to put away her sketchbook and pencils in her traveling desk.

"I would be surprised if we were not," her grandmama said before she gave them a playful smile. "Now, you shall be watched the whole time. Don't go about acting like silly bits of lace."

Virginia let out a laugh.

She rather liked the fact that her grandmama did not want her to act like a silly piece of lace. So many mamas of the ton

wanted nothing more for their daughters than to be puffs of pleasantries.

She was quite grateful to have her grandmother managing her Seasons. Her father certainly had little interest.

He was a man of science and experimentation, absorbed completely after the death of his wife. When she visited him in his rooms, her father would look up from his experiments, pat her on the head, mention that she had grown, and smile at her. He would tell her how much he loved her and then ask her to pass him a vial of some chemical that smelled like rotten eggs.

She swallowed. "We shall do our very best to please you, Grandmama."

"Please *me*?" Grandmama stated, wagging her silvery brows. "Not me. Some gentleman."

"Oh, Grandmama," Virginia tsked. "You don't mean that."

"Well, I don't want you to please *anyone*," Grandmama agreed, adjusting her lace-edged sleeves. "That would be lowering your standards quite significantly. But I do hope that you find someone, my dear, who enjoys art as much as you do. Though in the ton, that is quite a challenge."

"Shall I cast my eyes farther afield than the ton, Grandmama?" she teased, knowing that this would needle the older woman.

"Absolutely not," her grandmother huffed. "Standards must be maintained."

Virginia rather wished that things were different, but wishing never changed anything. And so she tucked her traveling desk at her feet, peered out the window again, and marveled at the estate.

She gasped when she spotted the towering house.

No, towering was not even the correct word.

The palatial building took up a vast part of the landscape, like a sleeping giant of gilded windows and stones that had

fallen asleep and become one with the hillside. Though its windows glimmered, it was old.

It didn't look like many of the new houses, which popped up from the green, begging to be noticed. This one looked as if it didn't really care what one thought, and it was magnificent. It stretched and sprawled and reached up with its spires into the sky.

Virginia found herself rather falling in love, for it looked like a fairy tale.

But she had a feeling that Wildwood's life was not a fairy tale. There had been whispers after all. His sister had died rather suddenly in childbirth, and Virginia knew that was a great tragedy, given the loss of her own mother.

She really rather felt for him.

And so, whilst she would usually come to these sorts of parties and have no interest in the host at all, she truly was curious about this man. This man who wanted to make changes, who did not really seem to care much about society, and whose sister had died.

Of course, there was the fact that he was throwing the grandest house party that anyone had seen in years. It was a strange thing to do for a man who did not care about society. Yes, the Duke of Wildwood was an enigma who had piqued her curiosity.

And that was most interesting, for once her curiosity was piqued, she could not let it go.

CHAPTER 3

*I*n grand Agatha tradition, she had changed her mind. Virginia was not surprised. How she adored her cousin, but Agatha was mercurial by nature.

Truthfully, she rather enjoyed the fact that her cousin was so mercurial. After all, Virginia was steady and constant, and so she had gone for her walk, even though Agatha had stayed behind.

As soon as they had arrived, the dowager duchess had greeted them with polite salutations, handed them off to a maid, and they were escorted to grand rooms at the back of the house. Their rooms were beautiful, but likely not the best. They were somewhere in the middle of the ranks of the ton.

Really, Virginia did not care as long as she had access to the gallery, room to sleep, and a good view.

What could bother her in such a situation? Not much. As long as there weren't bugs or mice. She'd stayed at house parties where vermin all but rattled around the walls. It was something she found appalling, and yet it was a notorious state of affairs in great houses.

It seemed, though, that the Duke of Wildwood kept an excellent house, for everything was gleaming, beautiful, and pristine. The house was full of art too, including sculptures and paintings, and music filled the air.

In a salon somewhere down below, someone sat at a pianoforte playing Mozart. She wondered if the duke had imported musicians up from London or perhaps even the Continent!

She would not be surprised. After all, entertainments were the key to a successful house party, and she wondered what treats would ensue. Would there be fireworks or midnight dancing outside?

Who knew?

Well, she needed time to gather herself, and so she had strode off, leaving her grandmama and Agatha to recover from the journey in their rooms.

The two of them had sprawled out on day beds, their gowns doffed and great dressing gowns put on.

Their maids, of course, were scurrying about organizing everything. She sometimes thought that maids deserved a lot better, and she did as best she could for her own, as did Agatha.

Otherwise, they couldn't be friends.

She'd seen young ladies treat maids appallingly, and she'd have to make certain that her own maid, Mildred, had a little time off to catch a bit of fresh air or at least have a good chat with the servants below stairs.

Virginia made a mental note of this as she opened her sketchbook and took out a charcoal from her pocket as she headed into the forest.

Now, some people might be afraid of heading into a dark forest, but not she. After all, she knew a hawk from a handsaw, as Hamlet had said, and she certainly knew north, south, east, and west.

She was also excellent with stars, and this evening the stars were already beginning to show themselves in the sky. There was not a single hint of clouds. Yes, it was an excellent evening to go out into the woods, and she had no fear of not getting back.

She'd always been an excellent navigator. Even as a small child, she had wandered into the woods of her own parents' many estates and never been lost, much to the horror of her nanny and the gamekeepers.

Once, when she was very small, she had wandered off. They'd all been terrified and searched about for her, but she

had managed to find her way back to the house with no difficulty and requested tea and cakes.

She had been given them, and in vast quantities, while everyone marveled at her ability to ambulate about. Other children, perhaps, with different parents, would've been scolded. She had been lauded, and that moment had rather shaped her entire life because it had made her unafraid.

So many children would've been scolded, punished, isolated. No, her parents had told her how marvelous she was and that had cultivated a sense of bravery in her.

So, here she was now, years later, staring up at the beautiful oak trees that filled the forest of the Duke of Wildwood, likely where the duke's family had got its name.

A wood that was wild.

She rather liked the idea that for all his power and all his privilege and status, his name came from the wilderness, from the very trees that made up the north itself.

How wonderful, she thought, as she skimmed the charcoal over the paper, making initial lines.

She'd become rather adapt at walking and working. It might seem a bit mad. But her art combined with nature made her feel calm and peaceful with herself. She turned to the west.

The scent of earth filled her nostrils.

She adored it.

London was all well and good, but the city could grow rather tiresome. It was wonderful to have an escape from it, and just as she was about to close her sketchbook and truly enjoy nature and all its glory, she charged into something.

She let out a yelp, dropped her book, a horror in itself, and tumbled forward.

She did not meet the ground.

Instead, she met something warm, hard, and unyielding.

“What the devil are you doing out here?” a voice growled.

“What the devil are doing in my way?” she countered.

A laugh met her ears, but then it quickly turned. “You are out alone on an estate that is not yours. You are lucky that I warned my gamekeepers not to shoot poachers.”

She jerked her gaze up to him. “You are the duke,” she said.

“I’m the duke,” he repeated.

“Poachers!” she suddenly blurted before she could stop herself. “People who are just going for a bit of food.”

“Bloody hell,” he groaned. “One of those, are you?”

“One of what?” she retorted.

“A social reformer,” he growled. “No doubt you’re about to tell me that every thief was hurt as a child and that we should all hold their hands and—”

“My goodness, are you one of *those*?” she drawled. “I thought you were different.”

“Different?” he queried.

She nodded, still making eye contact with his perfect cravat. “Different from those landed gentlemen who care nothing for people but only for their pheasants, dogs, and horses.”

“I do like pheasants, dogs, and horses,” he said. “Better than people,” he added.

She tilted her head back and met his gaze. For one moment, she couldn’t make any reply. His eyes were so riveting. They seemed to steal her every thought. Her every breath. But then she shook her head. “Well, then you are not as interesting as I thought you would be.”

His brows rose, and in that moment, she realized that she had not truly gotten a look at him because she was standing so close. She knew he was big, that he was strong, but he was

holding her in his arms easily, keeping her from falling to the ground.

She tilted her head back anew, letting herself take in more than his formidable gaze.

She caught a gasp before it slipped past her lips.

She refused to gasp in his presence, certainly not at his face, but he looked... Well, he looked like one of the sculptures in the galleries in London. Something brought out of Italy, something done up by Michelangelo, fierce, beautiful, strong, all hard planes and avenging glower.

His dark eyes were shadowed as the sun had long since set on the horizon and the moon was whispering its way up into the sky. Yes, he was a creature of moon and starlight now, the silver of it beginning to hum over them.

“You are out alone at night. What the blazes are you thinking?”

“I was thinking that certainly a young lady should be safe upon the Duke of Wildwood’s estate. Was I mistaken?”

His hands held her arms, strong fingers winding about her.

She loved the feel of it—so steady, so strong. She did not feel afraid even though her heart was pounding wildly against her chest, and she did not understand it.

He let out a sigh. “No. You are safe on my lands.”

“You were trying to get my goose,” she breathed.

His terse nature faded before her, and she understood. She did not know how, but she did.

“I beg your pardon?” he growled.

“All that nonsense about your gamekeepers shooting poachers,” she supplied. “You weren’t expecting company, and you are irritated that I startled you?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I do not allow my gamekeepers to shoot people for stealing, if that’s what you’re

asking.”

“I knew it,” she said. “It didn’t sound anything like you. That nonsense you just shouted. Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because sometimes nonsense is necessary to get rid of prying young ladies. Are you already looking for a husband?”

“No,” she said, “I’m out here to sketch and to get a moment’s peace. It must be difficult for you. Every young lady from here to London to Scotland wants your hand in marriage.”

“You don’t include yourself? Why?” he demanded, surprised.

She shrugged. “I don’t know you at all. How would I know if I wished to marry you or not?”

He laughed. “I feel this is a sentiment of very few ladies.”

“Well, this is my sentiment,” she said. “I’m not about to marry a man that I’ve barely met, duke or no. I might like being a duchess,” she said suddenly. “I don’t really know, but that said, I’m not about to marry a stranger. I don’t see how a thing could go well.”

“People used to do it all the time,” he pointed out.

“People have been miserable since the beginning of time,” she pointed out in turn. “That doesn’t mean that we should carry on the same old actions. When I marry, it shall be for—”

“Oh God,” he groaned. “Are you about to say for love?”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Why not, indeed? Perhaps it would make the world a better place.”

She shrugged. “It’s impossible to know,” she said. “Not enough people do it yet.”

He looked down at her. “You’re very odd.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “I think so too. It is one of my greatest characteristics, and my family indulges it terribly, I’m afraid.”

“My family would never have indulged oddness.”

“I’m sorry for you then, even if you are a duke.” She realized he was still holding her, and she liked it. There was a strength to him that was terribly appealing. “Now, perhaps I should get back, but...you are out here alone.”

“Is this an accusation or an observation?” he asked.

“Well, neither, I suppose. Really more of a reflection. You look—”

“What?” he asked bluntly.

She licked her lips, venturing, “Well, just a moment ago, you looked as if you would have avenged the darkest sins.”

“Avenged the darkest sins? What drivel.” But his voice dropped to a soft rumble and, for a moment, pain danced through his eyes.

“Thank you for keeping me from falling, but I do think you should let me go now,” she said.

And then with a start, as if he had not even realized they were standing as one, he did. His fingers slowly slipped from her shoulders.

“Truly though, Your Grace. Are you quite well? You look... Well, upset.”

That muscle in his jaw ticked again. “You came on me unawares. I was simply standing here gazing out at that.”

She dared to peer around her shoulder, and then her lips parted in astonishment at the sight before her.

“You like it too?” he murmured.

She gave a tight nod as she realized that she was staring out at rolling dales. The scene before her was so magnificent,

of purples and golds under the lowering lights, that she could barely breathe.

“*Like* is too small a word,” she whispered. “Perfection is before me.”

His eyes roved over her face. “Yes.”

And for one instant, she was certain that he was not speaking of the dales.

She cleared her throat. “I think nature is the only thing that is perfect.” she said. “Though humans are ever striving for it, doomed to fail as they are.”

His brows rose. “What a thing to say,” he said.

“Why? Why is it very odd?” she said. “Humans generally think they’re perfect.”

He cocked his head to the side.

“Oh, not me!” she protested quickly. “I’m full of faults, and I enjoy every one of them.”

“You do?” he queried.

She nodded.

“Now, I must go back. We should not be caught alone.” Virginia gave the duke a wink. “It would be terrible for your reputation.”

CHAPTER 4

Griffin longed to be furious with the young lady standing before him.

After all, she had invaded his private thoughts, his rumination on his plans, and the darkness in his soul. He realized that sounded rather dramatic, but it was also true.

But how could he feel rage at this young lady, this odd person standing before him speaking such interesting things and clearly unafraid?

She was a revelation.

At first, he was so deep in his thoughts that he imagined he had come upon some spirit, a sprite even. Of course, he did not actually believe in such things, but the moment startled him so deeply as the light changed and everything was in shadow.

The local people believed in fairies and ghosts roaming the forests and the dales. Especially at such hours.

For a moment, a shocking moment, he'd wondered if he'd come upon one of the ladies said to haunt these realms. But no, she was quite real, the person in his arms.

Griffin stared down at her face. Spectacles danced on her nose, glinting in the moonlight. Her face was pert, optimistic, sharp, and her cloak covered her slender shoulders.

He bent and picked up her sketchbook and delivered it into her hands.

Their fingertips brushed for a moment, and the shock of her touch slid up his arms and swept into his chest.

She clutched that sketchbook and stared at him as if she was as shocked by the power of their touch as he.

And suddenly he longed to see her sketches.

Would she let him?

He could not dare imagine it.

As her words struck him, he echoed, “Ruin *my* reputation?”

She gave a firm nod and her lips tilted in the strangest, and dare he say, most jolly of smiles. “Oh indeed, I’m not overly concerned about what my family would do if I was found alone with you in the forest. Now, if you acted the villain, they would have a great deal to say, for they are good people, but they would not insist I marry you. Even if I had a dalliance with you here, they would not insist I marry you if we were discovered.”

He blinked. “What the bloody hell are you talking about? Act the villain? I would never do such a thing.”

“I did not think so either or I would have made my escape several minutes ago. Besides, you don’t seem like a violent sort.”

There she was mistaken. He was most definitely a violent sort, but he was not a violent sort with innocents. As a matter of fact, one might argue he had become a champion of innocents, not through strict pursuit but by happenstance.

This year, he had already come to the aid of a young woman through a friend.

Yes, he would dare call Daniel Bedford a friend now, though largely they were engaged in business together.

Daniel and his wife would arrive later this evening. What a scene that would cause. He couldn’t wait.

But he did not wish for the young woman before him to be harmed, and he wished he could warn her away from the party. But he knew that such a thing was impossible. His mother had invited her. Therefore, she must be of a good family, and no doubt marriageable.

“So your family is better than most,” he observed at last. “You must have a large income.”

“We have a decent income,” she agreed. “But you see, I am not afraid of scandal. Our family already has known it.”

“Indeed?” he said. “Then I am rather surprised that my mother would invite you.”

“Oh, we’re still important,” she rushed. “The title is ages old, and perhaps that’s why we get away with it.”

He laughed. “Yes, that’s exactly why you get away with it.”

“My aunt is in Naples,” she explained. “She bolted some years ago. And well, she has had a few lovers, and if anything went amiss with me, I would simply join her there.”

“Naples?” he queried. “I see. Yes. The home of many an English lady who has run off when things did not go exactly according to plan.”

“Plans,” she stated with a slight shudder. “Who wants things to go exactly according to plan? How very boring.”

“How very safe,” he corrected.

“Ah,” she said, “but there is no guarantee of safety in this life.”

“I beg your pardon?” he said.

“There is no guarantee of safety in this life,” she repeated. “Have you not learned that, being a duke?”

“Life should be safe, especially for—”

“Who?” she said.

“Innocents,” he stated.

“I don’t know what to say about that,” she replied carefully. “You see, my mother died when I was quite young, and I learned that life is not safe. We cannot hold on to things, no matter how we wish to. I’m so very sorry about your sister.”

He stepped back, though much to his shock, he wanted to pull her closer because he felt connected to her in a way he

had not felt to anyone.

And the way she looked at him, when she expressed her sympathy for the loss of his sister, it undid him.

Yes, it felt like she was pulling at a thread that might unravel him, and it was bloody strange.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

“Don’t what?” she said.

“Talk about her.”

“I’m so very sorry. I did not mean to—”

“I am perfectly at ease.”

“Liar,” she said softly.

His eyes bulged at that. “Did you just call me a liar?”

“Are you hard of hearing?” she teased gently.

“No,” he stated.

“Then you know exactly what I said.”

He stared at her, amazed. “You know I could probably ruin your entire family.”

“Yes,” she said, “but you don’t strike me as the type to do it.”

“Damnation,” he said. “You have far too much good sense. How are you able to tell so much about my character?”

“Well, I’ve read a great deal about you in the papers, you see.”

“In the papers,” he groaned.

“Yes. They’re always talking about the good you do.”

“How very annoying,” he drawled. “I must not seem like a very interesting figure to a young lady then.”

“Oh, you do,” she said, scowling now. “Far more interesting than a wastrel or a rake. You actually want to change this world, and to me that is interesting indeed.”

“Is it?” he breathed.

A lock of her hair flickered across her cheek in the wind. Before he could stop himself, he lifted his hand and gently tucked it behind her ear. And then, it appeared, much to her astonishment, she turned her face ever so slightly into his hand.

To his own shock, he cupped her cheek and gazed down at her.

“This week, this house party, it will be odd.”

“Like me?” she teased.

“No, not like you,” he said softly, savoring the feel of her warm skin against his. “I have a feeling that your oddness is wonderful.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Bloody hell, the strangest ache whispered through him. “Perhaps at another time, we could have been friends,” he rushed.

“But not at this time?”

“No,” he said. “I have too many other things—”

“Planned,” she stated, cutting in.

“Yes,” he said.

“Oh dear, how very—”

“It is not boring,” he countered before she could declare it. “But I cannot tell you more. I shouldn’t have said so much already.”

She smiled slowly. “How is it that I have invited confidences from you? Who would’ve thought such a thing possible? My grandmother will be overjoyed to hear that I have inspired you so.”

He laughed because he knew she was teasing him, attempting to pull him out of his seriousness. At any other time, he would have been grateful.

“And who is your grandmother?”

“Lady Abbingford.”

“What a delightful gorgon,” he replied. “You mustn’t tell her about this, or she will corner me in my study and tell me that I’m the very devil for risking your reputation.”

She shook her finger at him. “No. No. Remember, I am not concerned, nor will she be.”

“My God, young lady, you say the most devilish things.”

“I only say what’s true.”

“Yes, and that’s what makes it devilish.” He drew in a long breath. “Our entire way of life is built upon lies, don’t you know?”

Her eyes filled with sorrow. “Isn’t it sad?” she observed. “So many people in pain, at war with themselves, unable to say what’s truly in their hearts.”

“I don’t comprehend you,” he murmured, trying to make sense of the young lady who had quite taken his senses here in the woods. “You cannot be real. At any moment, you’re going to fade into the night air and become one with the spirits.”

She laughed at that. “Oh no, I am of earth, Your Grace. I have my pen and my book, and I shall sketch all of this later and make sense of it myself. But I wanted to meet you and now I have. And that is a good start.”

“To what?” he said.

“To the week,” she said. “If it starts with this sort of adventure, surely it’s going to be positively marvelous.”

Marvelous.

How could he tell her that it wasn’t going to be marvelous, that it was going to end in ruin, and he was going to enjoy every moment of it?

But somehow he would protect her. “I want you to go,” he said.

“Right now? If you really wish it, of course I shall. It’s very sensible indeed.” And with that, she began to turn on her heel.

But then he stopped her, catching her hand with his. “You are too good for all of this,” he said.

“Please don’t go making me into a saint,” she protested swiftly, her gaze flicking to their intertwined hands. “That would be very boring. I’m not a saint at all. As a matter of fact, I’m very much a woman, and I find...”

“Yes,” he prompted. “Well, I’m finding you really rather very appealing.”

He should let go of her hand. He knew it, and yet he could not.

“This is not at all what I had planned on.”

“No?” she queried.

“No,” he said. And before he could stop himself, he lowered his mouth to hers and took it in a soft kiss.

Slowly, tentatively, he traced his mouth over hers as his reason seemed to vanish. She held onto him then, not moving, and he teased the line of her lips with his tongue. She gasped, and he slid his tongue into her mouth.

The passion of her, the wildness of her, the oddness of her seemed to steal everything from him, and he kissed her then with wild abandon.

Until at last, he parted his lips from hers.

“Not very boring, is it?” she whispered, dazed. “Going without a plan. I think it’s rather marvelous, don’t you?”

But he couldn’t reply because he was horrified by what he’d done. He had been transfixed, not by her intimacy or her beauty but by her kindness, and he’d misused it terribly.

“Forgive me,” he said. And with that, he turned on his heel and strode away from her, striding farther into the forest. Further into memory and pain.

And yet, he was still astonished by the kindness of her heart and the mischief in her eyes.

CHAPTER 5

Virginia slipped into the large set of rooms that had been given to them, facing out towards the forest.

The forest. What a remarkable thing that had been!

Her dear cousin, Agatha, sat on a beautiful pink chaise longue, a plate of sandwiches before her. It was clear that Agatha had already eaten several. She masticated happily, as if in heaven.

“You look infinitely better, cuz,” observed Virginia as she put her book and charcoal back in their case atop the dressing table.

“Why, thank you,” Agatha said cheerfully. “I feel much better now. This plate of sandwiches has done me the best of all worlds. Who knew sandwiches could be such a cure? Just the thing for the constitution,” Agatha said before adding, “Where have you been?”

Virginia didn’t know what she should say.

She strode further into the room, then doffed her cloak, slinging it over one of the beautifully embroidered chairs next to Agatha’s.

“I went for a walk, like I said.”

Agatha cocked her head to the side. “You look, well, different.”

“Do I?” Virginia asked, careful with her tone.

She felt different too. After all, she’d never been kissed before, and that kiss had been one for the ages, she was sure. Tristan and Isolde. Romeo and Juliet. Now, that might sound silly, but it was how she felt.

She hoped it wouldn’t also have the tragedy! Surely not with such a duke! Besides, she wasn’t going to do any of that

star-crossed love nonsense. She'd be sensible.

"Your cheeks are very colored," mused Agatha. "Your eyes are quite bright, and your hair is positively in a state."

"Well, it was windy outside. This is Yorkshire after all," Virginia explained.

"No," Agatha said, pursing her lips. "That's not it. There's something more."

And then, well, Virginia realized she could not hold it in any longer. She rushed to her cousin, flung herself down beside her, and confessed, "I met the Duke of Wildwood."

"You did not," Agatha said, her eyes widening with excitement.

"I did."

"Alone?" Agatha queried, her brows shooting up towards her curled hair which tumbled over her forehead.

"Indeed. I came upon him at the edge of the other side of the forest. I ran right into him and dropped my sketchbook." She could still feel his hands upon her, their heat and temptation. "He is quite large and very strong."

"He is?" Agatha said. "Most dukes are puny, and old, and wear powdered wigs."

"Yes, but not the Duke of Wildwood!" she assured. "It was a most curious meeting."

"How curious could it be? Dukes usually are so distant and Wildwood..."

"He kissed me."

"What?" Agatha gasped. "I should have gone with you. I have missed the most dramatic moment of the entire Season."

"If you had come, it likely wouldn't have happened," Virginia pointed out.

"Oh," Agatha said. "Too true. Well, then I guess I'm glad I didn't go, but this means you must tell me everything in

detail.”

“We had a very interesting conversation about reputation and the truth is that he didn’t speak much about himself at all.”

The duke had been most reticent in revealing any details about himself except for the fact that he did not seem particularly pleased by her presence. And yet that displeasure had vanished.

It was a dichotomy, and he certainly had enjoyed kissing her. She had no doubts about that. She felt his passion in the way he held onto her as if he never wished to let go before he turned and strode back to the forest.

“His kiss was like heaven,” she said softly, lifting her fingers to her lips.

“Oh dear,” Agatha said. “That is the most cliché thing I have ever heard.”

“Perhaps it is a cliché,” Virginia defended, “but it is also the truth. I’ve never felt anything so pleasurable, not even while drawing. It made me want to know what happens *next*,” she said brightly.

Agatha’s mouth dropped into a perfect O. “You cannot possibly be serious. Are you thinking of having a dalliance with the duke? You cannot. You are unmarried. You must get married first before you begin doing those things.”

Virginia laughed, then rolled her eyes as she leaned back against the seat. She contemplated the sandwiches. The truth was that she didn’t want to have dalliances. She wanted to find someone to love and who she would love for all life. Someone who would love her in turn.

She knew that for many members of the ton, it was not the way of things. The greatest members often had dalliances with other peers, having children that were called children of the mist. Those children were barely concealed secrets and given to other families or friends to raise.

She never wanted to part with a child of her own, and she never wanted to have an affair. No, she was looking for a lifelong love, and she would settle for nothing else. So she had been quite sincere when she told the duke that if she had been caught with him, she would not marry him. She would not be forced to marry him.

No. She would not want to risk a life of misery based upon such a thing.

“You have the strangest look upon your face,” Agatha said.

“I was contemplating marrying the duke.”

“Oh, well that is very different than a dalliance,” Agatha said.

Virginia laughed merrily. “It is. He was very concerned for a moment that we might be forced to marry, and I told him that nothing of the sort would happen.”

Agatha grinned. “Not in our family. You don’t wish to marry him? He wasn’t handsome or pleasant? You kissed him, and you liked it.”

“Yes, I kissed him, and I liked it,” Virginia said, “but that doesn’t mean that I would want to be married to the man for years. He seems rather complicated.”

“That isn’t a bad thing,” Agatha pointed out. “It means that he’s not boring. So many members of the peerage are boring, and they have nothing interesting to say. There’s nothing deep about them at all.”

Virginia sighed. “I suppose you’re right on that score. But what if it turns out to be terrible? One doesn’t want to scrape beneath the surface and find out there’s Dante’s inferno down there, do they?”

“That’s true,” Agatha said. “Well, get to know him this week, and then perhaps you should set your cap at him.”

“Nonsense.” She sat a little straighter. “I have no desire to set my cap at anyone. If love comes my way, that is all well

and good. But in the meantime, I have my sketching. And let me tell you, I have many things that I wish to sketch now.”

Agatha beamed. “I imagine that you do. Only don’t let anyone see it.”

Virginia laughed. “You know my sketches are generally private and to myself. Sometimes I wonder what it would’ve been like to have been born a man so that I could have been an artist. A real one.”

“You are a real artist,” Agatha said.

Virginia smiled at her cousin and took her hand. “That’s very kind,” she said. “But you know what I mean. As a lady, it’s impossible to have any profession of one’s own. It would be so looked down upon.”

“You’re not afraid of having a dalliance and going to Naples, but you’re afraid of having a profession?”

Virginia groaned. “Oh, you point out my faulty logic. You are too clever. But yes, I suppose I am. I think in some ways, we’re expected to have dalliances in the ton. But the truth is very few devote themselves to a passion publicly. We are not supposed to work.”

Agatha leaned back and brushed a crumb from her dressing gown. “How true. How unfortunate really. None of us seem to have much purpose, do we?”

Virginia shook her head.

“Here, have a sandwich,” Agatha said, passing the silver tray to her.

Virginia snorted. “I don’t think a sandwich will cure my frustration.”

“No, but they’re absolutely delicious. Salmon with buttered bread, and I think the salmon must have been caught quite locally, you know. We are in the north after all. Perhaps it was brought down from the south of Scotland.”

Virginia rather liked that idea. A Scottish fish or a Yorkshire fish, and so she took up one of the sandwiches and bit into it. The bread was perfect, light, the butter delicious and salty, and the salmon was perfection on her tongue.

She let out a sigh of contentment.

They had a very good life. She had nothing to complain of. She had her drawing. She had her grandmother. She had her cousin.

Sometimes she wished that her mother was still alive and that her father paid her more attention. But he was a jolly good soul, and he didn't try to stop her from doing anything that she enjoyed. So she shouldn't wish for anything different. Not really.

Wishing for more seemed such a dangerous thing to do when she had so much.

But sometimes, she wondered if there couldn't be just a little bit more than going from drawing in her sketchbook day by day and watching society pass by.

Oh, she loved drawing.

It fulfilled her. She wanted to set everything down that she saw, to see it through her own eyes and give it life on the page. But she did not know if she would ever feel the great love that she'd seen in so many of the masters' works hanging on walls of the houses that she'd visited as a child or in the galleries that she'd seen in London.

She wanted it to be true, but she feared it was a fool's dream. For she rather believed that that sort of love was created in books, and poems, and paintings, and songs. Created by artists to give people hope.

Life often felt so, well, dangerous.

Anyone could be taken at any moment, and though she had a good life and felt very little fear, she was no fool. She was rather amazed that the Duke of Wildwood had seemed so afraid. So worried.

But the truth was she had learned long ago that safety was but an illusion. She could not be protected from the vagaries of life. She could only do her best and not throw herself at anything too dangerous.

Now, walking along the cliff's edge, that would be foolish, for one never knew when the ground might give way. But walking *close* to the cliff's edge, well, that was perfectly acceptable, wasn't it?

And suddenly, thinking of walking along the cliff's edge and being close to it, she thought of the duke—his arms wrapped about her, his mouth upon hers, his kiss teasing her to life.

Agatha let out a note of chagrin. "Oh my dear, I don't care what you say. I think you are well and truly done for."

CHAPTER 6

*A*s if on cue, thunder rolled across the dales.

Griffin looked up to the sky.

Thick clouds were rolling in from the north, bringing a storm. It was rather symbolic, given the intentions of the next few days with his friends, but it was also rather difficult. It would play hell with his entertainments.

Luckily, the fireworks were not for tonight, nor was the outdoor dancing. He hoped that the storm would pass quickly and all would be well, at least for most of his guests.

At present, his insides felt like the storm rolling in, and he hoped that most of his guests had arrived. He did not want anyone stuck out in the mud or in a storm.

Yes, his insides felt shaken like that rain and thunder and wind that was coming in from Scotland and off the sea.

He was about to embark on something. He had no idea if it would meet success, but he was damn well going to try, and as he strode up towards his house, rain began to fall.

For one brief moment, he wondered if he should he go back for her.

She was no fool.

No doubt she had quickly made her way back too. She seemed well acquainted with forests and wind and rain. Yes, a fairy creature, or perhaps more like a witch. He wasn't certain. He was not one of those people who believed that witches were devils and fools.

No, he was more a believer of the wise women of the past, the midwives, the people who brought babies into this world and understood nature. She seemed to understand souls to their core, and he still felt shaken from the way that she had matched his.

That kiss, good God, that kiss had gone through his body and done things to him that he did not know could be done.

He was no stranger to lust or desire.

Like any duke, he'd had mistresses. It was almost part of the duty of a young man to immediately be thrust upon the scene, taken from house to house, and introduced to beautiful woman after beautiful woman.

He had long grown tired of it though. It was no longer interesting to him to lose one's self in a mistress. No, he wanted to lose himself in far more interesting things now.

In life.

He wanted to be fully alive and not just patching bandages of pleasure over the pain inside him, and he was bound and determined that this week would at least eradicate some of the pain.

Yes, he was going to pull the poison out of him through this revenge, and his friends were going to help, as he would help them.

Griffin strode in through the hall, heading up towards his private chambers, and as he wandered through the dark corridors lit with candles, he headed up to a secluded passageway, far away in the turrets of his great house.

He stopped at the door and heard voices inside.

He let out a grateful breath.

Without another thought, he tugged the heavy oak door open and strode in, shutting the panel quickly behind him. For he did not want anyone to know that they were in league together or that they had plans.

He stopped, standing in the fire's glow, and looked about the chamber. Three dukes were already inside, already at debate, already at the brandy. Talbot and Truebridge sat with a snifter in hand.

Not Hartmore. He did not drink and was consuming tea. Frankly, Griffin had considered doing the same as of late. Whilst he loved to lose himself sometimes in the pleasure of a brandy, he often wondered if he might just simply be better without it, living full tilt instead of trying to numb himself.

The others stared back at him, figures of power and pain.

“Well met,” Griffin said.

There was a murmur of agreement before Daniel Bedford strode from the shadows, a slow smile on his lips.

“Indeed, Your Grace, well met. All is arranged and things are going apace. Glenfoyle is not here yet. Something has stopped him in Scotland, but I did hear word from one of my riders that he will arrive soon.”

The man’s soft Seven Dials accent filled the room.

Daniel Bedford had been born to poverty in the slums. He had clawed his way up, fought in the military, and come back to build an empire, and it was why Griffin had chosen him.

Their mutual friend, Abernathy, who was no part of this, had made the introductions and now Daniel and Griffin were linked by many things.

For without Griffin, Daniel’s wife and Daniel himself would have quite possibly met impossible ends.

Griffin was rather glad to be linked to the man like this, linked to the others too. They were all tied together in their quest for righteousness and revenge now.

All of them were dukes, except Daniel. All of them born to power and all of them wronged in ways that no duke should have been wronged. Each had their cause. Each of them had vowed to the other to make things right, no matter the cost, and that they would not abandon each other in the pursuit.

Still, this was no easy thing.

They knew the dangers of it, and as he strode towards the fire and warmed his hands, despite the relatively warm air

outside for Yorkshire, he felt a shiver go down his spine.

Griffin's friends seemed as if they were on the eve of battle. There was an air of tension in the room because they all knew that a single mistake could send things amiss.

Hartmore stood and crossed to him. "Has he arrived?"

"I don't know," Griffin confessed.

Daniel cleared his throat. "Wexford arrived an hour ago and is currently taking a bath."

Griffin's hands coiled into fists and, for one moment, he longed to slip downstairs and murder the man in his bath.

Hartmore placed a hand on Griffin's shoulder. "You'll need to stay calm when you are in his presence."

He let out a snort. "I want to grab him by the neck and throttle him from here to the Highlands. But I won't. Not yet."

Hartmore let out a soft laugh. "I could kill him for you, of course, or Bedford."

Daniel tsked. "Now, now, you know that I don't do those sorts of things."

Hartmore rolled his eyes. "So you say, but I've heard different."

"The world is full of lies, rumors, and malicious gossip, Your Grace," Bedford said. "Do not believe it for a moment."

But Daniel's eyes twinkled.

Daniel was a dangerous man, but a good one. Griffin had little doubt that Daniel had made men disappear, but those men would've been evil to their core, hurting people beyond all possible belief.

It was why Daniel was here. Daniel's ability to slide through all strata of society was important, and his ability to set men to watch.

There would be eyes and ears everywhere. Dressed as servants, in the corridors, throughout the gardens—no one

would be able to escape Bedford's attention.

"Are you all right?" Griffin asked Hartmore.

Hartmore's face tensed, a muscle ticking in his jaw as he blew out a breath.

"I don't know, if I'm honest." He turned his gaze to a bottle of wine. "It's tempting to drink that, to dull the pain, but I want to feel it. I want to feel it in every fiber of my body. I want to remember the agony that man caused my family."

That person was not the same man as Griffin's.

Hartmore's vengeance was of a far more complex and delicate nature.

Wexford was but one of the five men who would be meeting an interesting end or result this week.

Still, he wished that his friends had not suffered. He wished that they had not had to band together like this.

Griffin wished that there was more justice for peers, but there wasn't. Powerful men often evaded justice. It was difficult to prove guilt too. They all knew the dark secrets wafting through the halls of power, and they knew that something had to be done.

He held out his hand to Hartmore, and Hartmore took it.

"It shall go well," he said.

The Duke of Truebridge stood up, his blond hair shining almost silver in the firelight. He crossed to them and placed his hand on theirs.

"Indeed it will, for we are resolved, and we are brought together, not just by events but by fate. I feel it in my bones."

Talbot stood too and joined them, though he paused before he added his hand.

This duke was a rather serious fellow. Griffin liked him well because there was darkness in his eyes, and resolve and power there.

None of them would be shaken from this.

And then Bedford crossed and, without hesitation, placed his hand upon the dukes'. He clearly was not a man who was afraid of power or afraid of upsetting his *bettors*. No, Bedford was a resourceful fellow and he knew his worth. He also knew the machinations of society.

“Pay attention this week,” Bedford warned. “Be careful and do not lose your heads, Your Graces. One misstep, one impassioned word, one spark, could set it all wrong, and then everything you have worked for, everything we have planned, will disappear.”

Plans, Griffin thought to himself. What had she said?

Plans were boring.

Not these plans.

And while it was true that life did not always go according to plan, this time it had to.

They had to.

CHAPTER 7

The ballroom was as packed as a barrel of sardines, or at least so Virginia assumed. She had not actually seen said barrel; she had only read of it. Still, it was quite a crush.

And suddenly, she found herself wishing that she had brought her sketchbook down. Only Grandmama would've positively murdered her if she had. Perhaps not in truth, but withering stares would have commenced. And she adored her grandmother so much she did not wish to give her an apoplexy.

As it was, she stood next to Agatha, arms linked as they made their way, winding through the packed crowd of people eager to take to the floor.

Their grandmama sailed behind them, her sapphire gown magnificent, her silvery, curled hair resplendent. It did not matter that she was well into her sixties. Their grandmama took balls very seriously. And she always made an entrance.

Her gown was covered in beautiful embroidery of butterflies and laced through with silver threading. Jewels crusted the gown, and her hair was magnificently dressed with feathers.

Yes, she looked like a great galleon that had taken sail. And there was nothing silly about it. No, her grandmama looked as if she could command the entire room, and possibly the entire court at St. James as well.

Virginia was rather proud of her and wondered if she would ever have the ability to do the same. At present, she was dressed in a pale pink frock. Pink was not a color that bothered her. She actually thought it quite lovely. After all, some of her favorite flowers were pink.

And the color of a pink sunset? It did the heart wonders. Her own hair was coiled atop her head and laced with

beautiful flowers that had been brought up from the gardens.

Her maid was quite good at wheedling things out of gardeners, and she was deeply grateful for it.

Agatha too was dressed beautifully in a silvery moonlight-blue frock, and the two made quite a pair.

Agatha all but bounced on her slippered toes, clearly eager for a gentleman to come up and ask her to dance.

They both had their dance cards attached to their wrists as they followed their grandmama in.

The scent was nearly shocking, except all the windows on the west side had been opened and the scent of the garden drifted in. Luckily, a cool breeze came through as well to mitigate so many bodies pressed close together.

The storm had been a wild force and then gone. She could still feel the delicious roll of the thunder through her body and the energy of it. Yes, Thor's mighty hammer had done its work.

Oh, how the Norse people had known the glory of describing a god! She loved the idea of some celestial being in the sky, hitting a hammer to an anvil. She often wondered what the Vikings must have thought in their boats out at sea as Thor struck overhead.

Yes, the ancient Norse gods were some of her favorites. And every time the thunder rolled, she could not help but think of them.

During the rolling thunder, she had thought of the duke, and of course she had thought of his kiss. She couldn't shake it. Her entire body seemed to tremble with it.

Tremble! The ridiculousness of it! She had not trembled in her entire life. But she wanted to see him again. There was no questioning it. Her eyes kept darting about, looking for any sight of the Duke of Wildwood.

“Stop that. You look possessed,” Agatha said.

She let out a laugh. "I suppose I am. But I cannot help it."

Agatha laughed with her. "I am curious too. I want to see what could spark such a change in you. You had so little interest in gentlemen but a few hours ago. Only your sketchbook would do."

"Only my sketchbook will *still* do," she declared, "but you will know when you see him."

Agatha grinned at her. "Well, then where the devil is he?"

"That is a very good question. Grandmama, where do you think the Duke of Wildwood is?"

"Oh, I'm sure he shall make an entrance soon, my dear," Grandmama said as she whipped open her fan. "His mother is already well on the field of battle, making certain that everything is running as it should."

And just as her grandmama said such a thing, the orchestra, which had several pieces to it, began a sprightly air. The dance was a reel, bright and delightful, and suddenly couples were lining up on the floor.

Agatha was snatched up immediately by a gentleman, and she smiled at Virginia as she headed out onto the floor.

Virginia stood by her grandmama and wondered why she was always one of the last to be chosen. She was fairly certain it had nothing to do with her spectacles but with her general air, which gave off a note, she was convinced, that told gentlemen she was not about to appease them and say silly things into their ears to make them feel better about themselves.

Oh, she would not be rude! She was quite a pleasant person, but she did not go in for banalities or the sort of compliments that ladies were supposed to give to gentlemen. She found it rather pointless, and she simply could not be bothered with such conversation.

After the loss she had experienced, she really had very little interest in idle chatter. No, she wanted to know the depth

of a person, of their souls. She longed to know the things that moved them. And peers generally had no desire to speak about such things.

Her grandmama smiled at her, took her hand, and patted it. “Never you fear, my dear. I have it on good authority that a gentleman will be asking you to dance this evening.”

She blinked. “Do you, Grandmama?”

“Yes. Your father told me that a gentleman had written to him. He is interested in you, my dear.” Her grandmother beamed. “There’s a very good chance a proposal could occur this week.”

“To someone I’ve never met?” she choked.

“Well, you don’t have to marry him, my dear,” her grandmother assured. “You know we would never do that. But I think it’s most interesting. The Earl of Wexford thinks you would make an excellent wife. He admires your education. He has seen some of your drawings in your father’s study and, well, I think that speaks volumes for him, don’t you?”

She paused. “Do you know him, Grandmama?”

“No, I don’t.” Her grandmother frowned as she waved her fan slowly. “I think he was married to the duke’s sister. The one that died. Poor thing.”

Virginia bit back a gasp.

It was a very strange connection, for had she not just this very evening given the duke sympathy for the loss of his sister?

And the idea that the duke’s brother-in-law might wish to court her? It sent a strange shiver down her spine. She did not care for it. It felt wrong, as if the universe was sending her some sort of message.

Still, it was ridiculous.

Surely, it was simply an odd coincidence, and the Earl of Wexford was no doubt a pleasant man. After all, if he enjoyed

her father and her drawings so very much, could he be so very terrible?

She did not know.

But just as she thought this, a gentleman came striding toward her with magnificent dark hair and wings of silver at his temples. His face was strong and handsome. He had good posture, beautifully cut clothes, and an air about him which suggested great authority.

“The Earl of Wexford, I presume,” she whispered towards her grandmama.

“One can only think so,” her grandmama agreed. “Odd that I’ve never met him. I usually know everyone.”

The Earl of Wexford swept towards them and bowed. “May I introduce myself, ladies? I know it’s not quite done, but since I’ve written to your father, I don’t see how it could be too badly done of me to do so.”

She gave a quick curtsy. “How do you do, my lord?” she said.

“I do very well now that I’ve met you,” he said smoothly. “I saw you, if you must know, out on the Serpentine a few weeks ago. You were sketching away madly, and I thought, ‘What young lady could look so possessed by something as she worked?’ You were so full of joy in that moment, and I could not help but feel admiration for you. I went to go speak to you, which again, I know is not quite the done thing, but you were gone. In a trice, you had finished your work, tucked your sketchbook under your arm, and were off marching down Rotten Row. I thought it might look terribly odd to pursue you. Nor did I wish to alarm you. So I thought that this might be a better setting for us to meet.”

“Well, that was rather kind of you,” Virginia said, “to not wish to alarm me.”

He smiled as if he need say no more. “Would you care to dance?”

“I would. I adore the reel,” she said.

“As do I,” he replied.

And with that, he offered his hand. She placed her own upon the white gloved surface and Grandmama gave a nod of approval.

She followed him out onto the floor, and they immediately joined a line and started dancing. She was quite surprised. The Earl of Wexford was an accomplished dancer. He moved beautifully to the music, as if his body was born for it.

Many gentlemen were fine dancers, but they didn't seem to feel it in their soul.

Mischief danced in Wexford's eyes as he led her, weaving her about, bouncing her to and fro, crossing back and forth through the line, and she found herself full of mirth and laughing.

The evening was going in a far better direction than she had thought it might. She was accustomed to standing along the edge of the ballroom. She wasn't exactly a wallflower. But nor was she someone who danced many dances, usually just one or two, which was an unfortunate state of affairs, given her love of dancing.

She and Agatha danced in hallways at home all the time. It gave her great joy. And to suddenly have the opportunity to dance with someone who was so good at it filled her with a great deal of glee.

She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

“You like art, do you?” she asked brightly.

“Indeed, I do. I am not particularly good at making it myself, but I admire anyone who takes brush or charcoal to paper or canvas and makes the attempt.”

She smiled, pleased. Many did not share her enjoyment. “How wonderful.”

He turned her quickly under his arm, bouncing them easily in tune. “And your father showed me some of your drawings. You are quite good,” he said. “Your work should be hanging at the Academy.”

She gasped. “I beg your pardon?” she blurted.

“Yes,” he said enthusiastically. “Don’t you think so?”

His sudden line of compliment surprised her. “No one has ever said thus to me before, except my closest friends.”

She did not wish to say her cousin. That felt a bit too silly.

“Well, *I* think so,” he said firmly as he turned her again and sent her across to the other line.

But there was something in his voice, something in his eyes, about his overt compliment, which suddenly made her feel... She did not know. But it did not feel as good as it should.

He was eyeing her not as a person or an artist, but as something he might wish to acquire. And though he was an excellent dancer, and though he smiled at her with warmth, she suddenly felt that chill again running straight down her spine.

CHAPTER 8

The dukes had left nothing to chance.

Glenfoyle had arrived an hour before the festivities started and had prepared himself for their collective entrance.

And so when the final notes of the reel took place, the doors at the back of the ballroom boomed open, and Griffin and the other dukes strode in.

They were a veritable sight, Griffin knew it. Like gods descending from Olympus.

It wasn't their looks or height. Though they were all of unusual height for dukes. They all came from strong-looking families, descended from warrior lines who had fought at all the major battles of English history.

But simply the five of them together? It was the fact that they were all dukes, some of the most powerful men in the kingdom, descending upon the room at once that caused such a stir.

The crowd let out a gasp of astonishment, or amazement, or perhaps it was appreciation. The lesser titled gentlemen squared their shoulders a bit, lifting their chins. The ladies preened, eager to be noticed.

The marriage-minded mamas bounced on their slippers, their bosoms heaving with veritable anticipation that one of the dukes might look upon their daughters favorably and elevate them to a whole new status in society.

Being almost as powerful as a king had its advantages. They had planned this moment carefully. No one would suspect what was to befall some of the occupants of this ballroom. After all, the dukes had no other connection except that they were dukes, that they were peers, and therefore expected to be in each other's company.

No one knew they were bonded in pain.

Hartmore followed him closely, his long emerald silk coat, something a bit out of style with English aristocracy, flying out behind him.

And as Griffin swung his gaze about the room, ready and eager, looking for Wexford but having to be extremely careful not to draw too much notice, he almost stopped dead in his tracks.

Hartmore sensed the brief hesitation. "Keep striding. What the bloody hell has disturbed you, old boy?" he whispered sotto voce.

He gave a tight shake of his head, one that he knew would only be noticed by Hartmore. But the truth was his insides suddenly roiled and anger boiled through him.

This was not supposed to be happening.

She was not supposed to be happening to him.

And it suddenly felt as if the gods were laughing at him, that the universe, the fates, had stepped out of the heavens and were taunting him because there was the Earl of Wexford with *his* young woman standing on the dance floor.

It was clear that they had just danced together.

Both of them had a slight sheen of perspiration upon their brows from having danced a lively reel. Her chest was moving up and down, straining her bodice ever so slightly. Her spectacles with their gold rims glinted more beautifully than any jewel possibly could, in his personal opinion.

And Wexford was gazing at her. Not at him, not at the dukes, but *at her*. He was like a dog on the hunt who had found its target, and Griffin suddenly felt sick.

Was this what Wexford had done with his sister? Had he picked one of the most glorious, most interesting creatures in the room and then gone after her?

By common standards, this young lady was not a beauty. She was not one of the diamonds, but she was *singular*. And suddenly it struck him that such a thing might appeal to Wexford very much indeed. And from the way that Wexford was looking at her, he had a terrible feeling that Wexford had found his next target.

Suddenly the stakes of his own goals seemed to rise.

“Something is amiss,” the Duke of Truebridge whispered through a forced sardonic air. “Focus, man. It is too early to lose your game.”

“I can control myself,” Griffin managed with a forced smile. “It is simply that...”

“What?” Hartmore asked.

Bedford slowly crossed beside him and said lowly, “That there is a new player in the mix. Your Grace, why ever did you not say that you had met a young lady this evening?”

He flinched.

People were watching, wondering what they were discussing, wishing they were a part of such a group.

Griffin forced himself to appear calm, even as he felt brittle with fury.

Bedford was one of the most observant and clever fellows that he knew, and he should have told him immediately about meeting the young lady in the forest. But he’d wanted to pretend as if it hadn’t happened.

He’d desperately wanted to pretend that he hadn’t been so moved and so struck by her, so captivated, so enamored that he felt himself being tugged by an invisible thread away from his plans and path.

“Forgive me,” he said. “She is of no consequence.”

“I beg to differ,” Bedford replied. “If she can make you pause like that, she is of significant consequence, Your Grace.”

And I don't think that we should act otherwise. Go and ask her to dance immediately.”

“What?” he said under his breath.

“Now,” Bedford instructed. “People are staring, and I think this will play into our hands very well and set Wexford off guard. Do it.”

And so without hesitation, Griffin did exactly as Bedford advised.

Since becoming a duke, he could count on one finger the amount of people who had instructed him. And that person was Bedford.

Griffin strode across the room easily, his evening shoes pounding on the polished wood floor. Eager eyes followed him, wondering who he would pick.

And when he strode up to Wexford, he gave the man a slight incline of his head. “So very good to see you here. You're always welcome in this house, as you know. It's been far too long.”

Wexford gave him a quick bow. “Thank you, Your Grace. I always carry your sister in my heart. I'm so glad to be back here where she was so happy as a child. It fills my own heart with joy.” Wexford then hesitated. “Do you know this young lady, Your Grace?”

“No,” the duke said truthfully, for they had not been introduced.

“This is Lady Virginia—”

“Would you care to dance, Lady Virginia?” Griffin asked swiftly, holding out his hand.

Wexford looked sightly irritated.

Good, Griffin thought to himself. He wanted the man to be off his guard and irritated, as Bedford said. Irritation caused people to do ill-advised things.

Lady Virginia placed her gloved hand in his. She smiled up at him. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. I’ve heard so many interesting things about you. For instance, I’ve heard you do like good walks.”

His hand tightened about hers, and he could not stop the slight tilt of his lips. She was a veritable minx to poke at their meeting.

“I do. Yes,” he said. “Perhaps we can take one later.”

Wexford tensed, seemed about to say something, and then thought better of it. He gave a bow and headed off the floor.

The duke led her to the center, and everyone waited as the other dukes went about and chose partners. The music began.

It was a waltz. A new one from Austria.

And as she began to rock back and forth with him, he gazed down into her eyes and there he saw that she was no fool. She had not been taken in by the Earl of Wexford, or at least he prayed not. He began to sweep them about the room, arcing, swirling, and others began too.

The gilded couples filled up the space, so that he had to dance carefully, even though people got out of his way quickly, what with his status.

“I say, do you like the Earl of Wexford?” she asked.

“That is an incredibly bold question,” he said.

Her brow furrowed as she did not mince words. “Yes, but there’s something quite odd about him, isn’t there?”

“Do you not consider consequences before you speak?” he queried.

“Not really, no. Honesty is my maxim.” She sighed dramatically. “They did try to break me of it as a child.”

“Break you?” he echoed, horrified, ready to pummel her father and teachers.

“Forgive me, a turn of speech!” she corrected quickly. “No one has ever laid even the smallest finger upon me,” she assured. “I meant verbally. They would ever insist that I should listen, and I would ever insist that I should not. It has been a back-and-forth game between many a governess and nanny and tutor my entire life. No doubt it is why my father will not leave his study.”

He laughed. “I see,” he said.

“The only one who truly knows how to handle me is Grandmama and my cousin, Agatha,” she explained. “They both like my quirks.”

“I like your quirks,” he said softly.

“Do you?” she said, her gaze softening. “That’s a bit of a surprise, given how proper you are.”

“Well, we cannot be proper all the time, can we?”

“No, we can’t. I’m surprised to hear you say it, being a duke and all of that, so full of duty.” She tilted her head back, her gaze searching over his face. “But then again, you were out staring at the dales earlier, weren’t you? That gives me hope.”

“Hope?” he queried.

“That you have a deep soul with deep thoughts, and that you aren’t going to tell me about who’s racing what horse at Newmarket.”

“No,” he confessed, “I’m not.”

And with that, he held her just a little bit closer, not caring who saw, not caring a whit.

He knew that Bedford wanted Wexford to see them together. But for a single moment, he did not even think about that. All he thought about was the feel of her in his arms, the way that she was so herself, so entirely honest, so entirely true.

And he knew that was exactly why Wexford had picked her. Because she was the perfect sort of person to break, to

mold, to hurt, and he was going to do everything in his power to make certain that never happened.

Because as he stared down on her beautiful shining face with her wondrous soul, he knew that no matter what happened to him or how he had to twist his insides, he would not allow darkness to touch her.

No, Wexford would never hurt anyone again. Certainly not the woman in his arms.

CHAPTER 9

Something was afoot, of that Virginia was certain.

She was not the fascinating object of powerful men's desires. This was something she had not learned through false belief or anecdotal evidence, but through two years on the marriage mart without much interest.

It was fair to say that she was passing fair, but not beautiful, and certainly not the kind to inspire a duke and an earl to dance with her in tandem.

And now the entire ballroom was *staring*.

One might even dare say, gaping. For who was she to draw such notice?

Perhaps those who were falling in love with each other or were planning affairs did not gaze upon her and the duke. But certainly all the marriage-minded mamas were looking their way. After all, she might have potentially caught one of the Season's most eligible bachelors. Two if you counted Wexford, though some people would not care for the fact that he had been married before.

She knew some mamas had a prejudice towards that, but most did not.

Though there were other dukes present, Wildwood was the host and focus of this party. The frustration of the mamas was all but vibrating through the room! The effort! The lace! The gowns! The hours rehearsing posture, dance, and turn of speech, all defeated by a young lady who had never caught the eye of a single person before.

She couldn't blame the mamas for their narrowed eyes and amazement.

She was equally amazed, though not out of any poor feeling for herself. She rather liked herself. But that didn't

mean she wasn't fully aware that she wasn't a diamond. She liked her place in society.

And suddenly, with so much attention, she was not entirely sure what to make of it.

Virginia wanted to ask bluntly what the blazes was going on. The duke found her fascinating, as she did him. There was no question in that. Something had happened when they met, like a piano string being struck, vibrating with an undeniable hum of perfection.

But Wexford was a different matter, and she had no idea how to handle the possibility that she might have *two* suitors.

Her grandmama would be in heaven.

Virginia was not.

So, as the music came to a pause, and her skirts swung up against the duke's legs, he stared down at her for a long moment before he whispered, "Not Wexford. Anyone but Wexford."

"Anyone?" she whispered, raising her brows, stunned by his comment. It felt so very personal. His voice was as deep and emotional as the thunderstorm that had just passed.

He smiled ruefully, though he looked pained. "Perhaps not anyone, but certainly not him."

And then before she knew what was happening, he was whisking her off the floor and back to her grandmama.

She wanted to ask him for more clarification as to why he disliked his former brother-in-law. What could cause him to warn her so? And yet from the strong line of his jaw and the way he looked straight ahead, she dared not, especially not in company. Once she was standing before her grandmama, the duke looked at the older woman. "You have done a marvelous job raising a charming young lady, Lady Abbingford."

"Charming?" Grandmama said, snapping her fan shut, her eyes twinkling with approval. "Now that is kind of you to say."

“Do you not think her charming?” the duke asked, a brow arching.

“I do, but many foolish people do not find her particular style charming. I’m glad that you do. *You* have sense and taste.”

The duke let out a loud laugh. “Coming from you, that is a remarkable compliment, for I have heard stories of your youth from my own mother.”

“It is a miracle I have lived to such an ancient age, given my exploits.” Her grandmother tilted her head to the side, considering him. “It’s odd that we have not met, my boy.”

“I have not spent much time in the buzz of society, nor do I particularly wish to.”

Her grandmama gestured with her fan. “Ah, you and Virginia have much in common then.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “It is quite possible that we do. But I cannot linger. I have guests to see to and things to sort out.”

And with that, he gave a quick bow and headed into the crowd.

Things to see to and sort out.

She wondered exactly what that was.

And suddenly the Earl of Wexford was by her side again. “Would you care to dance again?”

“You are most kind,” she said swiftly, looking for an excuse to stay off the floor, something she’d never needed to do before. “I have just done two and find I am out of breath.”

“We shall have to get you accustomed to dancing every dance,” he said. “It is good for the heart.”

Grandmama harrumphed. “Now, now, Wexford. You can ask her to dance again, but perhaps wait a little bit. Let’s not cause a scandal with you, the duke, and then you again. It is too interesting of a sandwich,” she said.

The earl had the good grace to look slightly flummoxed. “Forgive me,” he said. “I shall wait until later in the evening and claim a waltz.”

“If that is what you wish,” Virginia said with a quick curtsy. And then the earl turned on his heel and headed into the thick crowd, his good humor fading, though he attempted to hide that fact.

“I don’t like him,” Virginia said quickly, wishing to make her feelings plain to her grandmother and hoping beyond hope that the more experienced lady felt the same.

“Yes,” her grandmother mused, her lips pursing slightly. “Strange fellow. There’s something slightly off about him, though he is handsome and has a good turn of phrase. I don’t think most have noticed.”

“Noticed what?” she asked.

“That he’s like a cheese that’s aged one day too many.”

Virginia choked on a laugh but managed, “I don’t want to dance with him again.”

“That could be difficult, my dear, unless you wish to claim illness now. And then everyone will think you’re simply overborne with the attention of the earl and the duke.”

She sighed. “Well, I refuse to do that,” she said. “I think I shall go for a breath of fresh air instead.”

“Very wise, my dear, very wise. Would you like me to accompany you? Or will you just go to the retiring room?”

“I prefer a moment alone to gather myself.”

Her grandmama snapped her fan open, waving it swiftly, causing the curls about her face to flutter. “Now, don’t go getting into any trouble on some balustrade and finding yourself in the arms of the duke or some other young man,” she warned. “You’ve already caused a great deal of excitement this evening with your stunning turn upon the floor.”

“No, Grandmama. I shan’t. As you suggest, I’m just going to take a quick walk to the retiring room. I think that should be enough, and then I will return.”

“Good,” her grandmama said.

With that Virginia scurried off, eager to gather her thoughts. She wished Agatha could come with her, but Agatha was merrily dancing with another partner. No doubt Agatha would have a different partner for every dance because that was Agatha. She was wonderful at captivating people with her cheeky speech and dramatic nature.

People adored being in Agatha’s company. It was wonderful, only it did mean Virginia had to eschew her dear cousin’s presence more than she wished.

Virginia headed down the hall, gazing at the paintings.

So many of them were distinct and unusual. Most noblemen collected portraits of hounds and horses, and apples and oranges, but not the duke. He had several interesting works. Dutch masters, Renaissance beauties, and even some Spanish works lined the walls.

The retiring room was only a little farther down the opposite hall, but she paused and turned to a long gallery.

The paintings there called to her. She could not stop herself from wandering into the moonlit long chamber.

The way the silvery light spilled through the windows and danced upon the canvases made her heart sing. They were so beautiful, beautiful beyond words.

How she longed to touch them. Of course she never could. She knew that her own fingers could harm them.

“I’m going to tell you something,” a voice said from the shadows.

She jolted as she whipped towards the sound, recognizing the voice. Even so, her heart leapt to her mouth and her palm shot to her bosom to try to still her suddenly racing pulse.

“Good God, Your Grace. Do you mean to give me apoplexy? If we keep meeting like this, I’m going to start to think that you do it on purpose.”

He took a step towards her, his face barely illuminated. “Forgive me. I don’t wish to cause you apoplexy. I quite like you up and about.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said. “So do I. Now, what is the meaning of this?”

“I saw him come back,” he stated as silvery light fell over him, bathing him in a cold light that only emphasized the hard planes of his face and the power of his body. “You turned him down.”

“You told me that I should,” she replied simply.

“And you take my advice so easily?” he asked.

“Should I not?” she countered softly. “Are you nefarious? Are you giving me untrustworthy advice? Would Wexford make me a marvelous husband?”

“No,” he growled with shocking passion. “He will make you a terrible husband. I should not say so much, but I find I must. Stay away from him.”

She bit her lip, her skin tingling at his nearness and a sudden sense of alarm at his words. She was determined not to be afraid and so she replied, “Oh dear. That sounds rather ominous. Even though you do seem well intentioned, *stay away from him* sounds like a villainous line from a novel.”

“It’s not,” he said firmly. “He is the villain. Though I cannot give you more details at present.”

“Why? Would you lie?”

“No,” he said as he closed his eyes for a moment and pain washed over his features. “But my sister was not happy with him. I can tell you that much.”

“I see. I’m sorry. Was she generally unhappy?”

“No.” His eyes snapped open, and they shone. “She was like you. Bright, interesting.”

“She was the diamond of her Season, was she not?” she protested. “So not so much like me.”

“That is true, but that is not how you are similar,” he gritted. “Wexford has a liking for strong-willed, exceptional young ladies.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. “Oh dear. I see. He likes to put them to the bit, does he?”

The duke’s hands curled into fists at his sides as if he wished he was strangling Wexford at that moment. “Yes. You understand quite quickly.”

“I’ve known men like that,” she said honestly. “Unfortunately, the ton is full of them. There are some men who seem to enjoy the idea of tormenting more than the idea of union. And I can’t understand it. How exhausting it must be.”

“Some people want power everywhere,” he explained. “Power in every aspect of their lives. They think it’s the only thing that can give them joy or importance. But I will not allow it.”

“How can you stop him?” she said.

“Well, first, with you,” he began. “Would your father make you marry him? If circumstances—”

“I already told you. I can run to Naples anytime I wish,” she said playfully before she added somberly, “No, he would not. Even in the worst of circumstances, if I told him about my fears, my father would never force it.”

“You are luckier than most. My father certainly wasn’t like that.”

“Was he not?” she asked, her heart hurting for him.

He blew out a ragged breath. “How are you causing me to say these things? I don’t talk about this with anyone. Well,

almost anyone,” he said.

And from the deep rumbling of those last words, she wondered who his confidantes were. There was a fire to his voice and suddenly he reminded her a bit of a dragon, as if fire and smoke might suddenly rumble from him. And she found herself drawn like the maiden of the story to his power and his safety. After all, dragons did like maidens.

“Tell me the tale,” she said, “and I shall help you.”

“I don’t need help. I’ve help enough. And now I must go. But—”

“But what?” she said.

His brow furrowed, and though it was clear he did not wish to speak, he said, “I couldn’t bear it if he crushed you.”

“Why?” she said. “You barely know me.”

“Do I have to?” he asked. “Must I know you for an eternity before I care?”

“No,” she said honestly. “For I believe that we can recognize those we are meant to be with in a moment, if we are open, if our hearts are—”

“My heart is not open, Lady Virginia. So please don’t think that,” he said softly.

“Oh,” she said, shocked by her own sharp disappointment. “I see.”

“I doubt you can,” he replied, his voice full of regret. “I simply don’t wish you to hope for something I cannot give at present. You see, I have a particular focus, and I must stick to it. I cannot become distracted.”

“And I’m a distraction?” she asked, stunned.

“Yes,” he said with force. “You are.”

His eyes dropped to her mouth.

“Would you do it again?” she asked suddenly, and then she pressed her eyes shut for a moment, cursing herself for a fool.

“What?”

“Kiss me?” she said. “I wish to know it again.”

“Know what?” he queried, his eyes still focused on her mouth, growing soft, his lids half hooded.

“The bliss of it,” she whispered. “For if you tell me not to hope, then I must take what I can and not worry about the future.”

His dark gaze sparked with passion. “I—”

“It is what I wish,” she cut in. “If we cannot have more, let us kiss now. Again. And then be done with it.”

For surely, if he kissed her one more time, she could put him and the feelings he had awakened in her aside.

With those words, the duke crossed the distance between them, swept her into his arms and took her in a kiss.

As if all his passion had been locked away, it suddenly rushed forward.

And she felt nearly undone by the power of it, the temptation of it.

As his mouth roved over hers, she wrapped her arms about his strong frame, determined to remember every moment of this perfect passion.

And as his kiss deepened, she felt her knees give way. He held her tight, his mouth teasing over hers until she teased him back, and the kiss grew deeper and deeper.

Instead of feeling satiated, she knew in that moment that one more kiss would never be enough. And she was lost to it.

CHAPTER 10

“Well, drat,” she breathed as he pulled back from the kiss.

He hated pulling back, but if he did not... Bloody hell, if he did not, he would no longer be in control. He’d be tossed on the storm of his sudden hunger for her.

He hated that he had given into temptation.

And yet, he couldn’t regret it. How could he ever regret Virginia?

Still, he never should have done it.

He never should have given in to kissing her again because all he wanted was to take her, press her up against the wall, and show her how very much he could give her. And he had a significant feeling that she could give him just as much in return.

It was almost frightening understanding that, that she was as giving as he could be, or at least he felt certain that was the case.

It infuriated him. Why was this happening now? Why was this distraction occurring right in the middle of his quest for revenge? Why couldn’t it have been before or after? Why now, he wanted to rail, but railing did no good. Only action did. And so he slowly stepped back from her, letting his hands trail away from her body.

“You’re going to do it again,” she sighed through thoroughly kissed lips.

“Do what?” he queried, his brain barely capable of thought.

“Turn on your heel and charge away.”

A pained laugh slipped past his lips. “That does make me sound like a character from one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels.”

“Well, you do act like a character from one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels,” she pointed out. “All that staring out at the dales and brooding.”

“You’d brood too if you were in my situation.”

“Perhaps I would,” she allowed. “I do not know the particulars of your situation, but I do know that brooding can be quite dangerous. Once you enter that state of mind, it is incredibly difficult to get out of it. You see, a mind will do everything it can to stay there because it is so full of fear. It’ll spin and spin and create more and more thoughts of doom and worry.”

He tensed. Perhaps she wasn’t mistaken. Perhaps his mind was rioting with anger and fear and outrage at what had happened to his sister. But he did not wish it to stop. No, he did not wish to come from this dark cave. Not until he had taken care of justice.

“Do not offer me a hand out of my situation, Lady Virginia,” he said. “It would be a mistake.”

She nodded. “Fairly warned. I shan’t then. I am no fool. I have no desire to bang my head against a brick wall.”

He cocked his head to the side, shocked. “That is not at all like many of the ladies that I have met. Most of them can’t resist a challenge.”

“Oh, I love a challenge,” she said ruefully. “But you’ve told me flat out that you do not wish to change. So why would I try to change you? And why should I *wish* to change you? You are who you are, Your Grace. And I quite like you for who you are.”

Her brows drew together. “Or at least I *think* I do, given how little we know each other. But I don’t like to see you suffering, and I can see that you do.”

Her words should have been like caresses. Instead, it felt as if she was driving into his wounds, probing them, pouring salt on their raw surface.

He let out a hiss. “Your kindness is very generous, but misspent. I must return to my guests.”

She licked her lips, sorrow touching her gaze. “Of course you must. It is your house party.”

He gave a tight nod, and he started to turn.

“But, Your Grace,” she called out. “One last thing.”

“Yes?” he said softly.

“In your quest to help me, I beg of you, help yourself too.”

“Oh, I am,” he said softly, though his insides twisted at the feeling in her voice. “I promise you. I am.”

She stared back at him, but doubt filled her gaze.

He couldn’t bear to see it. And he ripped his gaze away.

As he strode away from her, he felt an ache, as if there was something between them trying to pull him back. Back towards her. And yet he would not give into it.

He kept walking and walking, faster and faster, knowing that he needed to return to his quest for revenge and the plan that had been laid down. But he could not deny that now he was a man at war with himself. For whilst he was determined to commit to his revenge, he also desperately longed to go back to her, to take her into his arms, to give up what he was doing and know a moment’s peace.

Because he felt an irritating and terrifying possibility that she could give him that peace, or at least he could learn to have it with her.



Virginia let out a long sigh.

It was extremely irritating that he kept doing that. Was that to be the entirety of their experience together? Sharing their innermost selves and passion, only to have it swiftly taken away?

She never should have asked him to kiss her again. She wondered if he felt the same. She rather thought that he did. But it had been impossible not to. After all, surely such a delicious feeling could not exist with anyone else, and she wanted to shore up the memory of it.

And so, here she was in a long gallery, gazing at paintings again, trying to find herself as transported by the canvases as she was by the duke.

Yes, it was extremely irritating. She had never thought herself a silly sort of person to fall in love. And she wasn't in love. Truly! But she was captivated. She was drawn to him.

She felt something between them that she'd never felt before, and it would be foolish to deny it. Still, he had warned her, and she would not leave that warning unheeded.

After all, only fools tried to change other people. They couldn't be changed. They had to want to change for themselves. She'd learned that long ago with her Papa and society. People could not be dragged out of the darkness. They had to want to find the light. And even though it pained her greatly, she would not alter her thoughts on this.

She'd had to crawl her way out of the darkness. And it had been no small feat. As a child, when her mother had died, she'd wanted to disappear, but she had forced herself not to.

She had forced herself to focus on the beauties of the world. Her grandmama, her cousin Agatha, flowers in the garden, her drawing. And those things had slowly brought her back, even as the tides of grief had tried to take her out and drown her.

“It is a beautiful gallery, is it not?”

Virginia jumped, whirling around. The feminine voice startled her, but not nearly as much as a man's would have.

“It is,” she said, trying to spot whoever it was.

A young woman came out of the shadows. “How do you do? I am Mrs. Bedford.”

“Mrs. Bedford?” she queried. “I don’t believe I’ve had the privilege of making your acquaintance.”

“You have not,” Mrs. Bedford said with an assuring smile. “But you’re about to.”

“How very curious,” Virginia said.

And it was curious.

People did not generally just go about introducing themselves in hallways, certainly not at house parties. Perhaps Mrs. Bedford was not of the aristocracy and did not know this, but she seemed to be. She certainly spoke like a lady, and she was dressed plainly but well.

Mrs. Bedford crossed towards her, confident and at ease. “If you must know, my husband saw you with the Earl of Wexford and was concerned that the earl might follow you. And so here I am.”

Virginia frowned. “You mean your husband wished you to make certain that I was safe?”

“Oh yes. And then, you see, your grandmama suggested that you liked drawing. I stopped with her first to see where you might have gone,” explained Mrs. Bedford as if this wasn’t all very unusual. “And she said you’d gone to the retiring room. But since you like sketching, I thought that nothing could pull your interest as much as a room like this. So eventually I found myself here. And here you are.”

Virginia smiled, though she did not feel particularly lighthearted. “How very astute of you.”

Mrs. Bedford was quiet for a moment before she said, “Great paintings and great men are very alike, don’t you think?”

She stilled. What the blazes did Mrs. Bedford mean by that? And then she felt rather certain that Mrs. Bedford knew that the duke had been here. She did not know how, but there was something in her eye, a knowing look, and no judgment whatsoever.

“You see,” Mrs. Bedford continued, “great men and great paintings have many layers to them. There’s the base coat and all the texturing that must happen, all of the sketching, all of the envisioning. Now, I am not an artist, so I can only imagine, but you understand what I mean?”

She gave a nod, following the train of thought warily.

“The duke is like that,” Mrs. Bedford said, crossing to her side. “My husband is like that, though he is not of the aristocracy, and I am grateful to be with him. But you should not be out here by yourself, especially since there are so many gentlemen who are not to be trusted.”

Her shoulders sank. “I did not mean to venture in here. I was supposed to be going to the retiring room, but I wished for a bit of time to think and was suddenly drawn to the beauty of this room. I hate that I must give up being on my own for fear of—”

“I understand,” Mrs. Bedford assured. “But perhaps you would allow me to keep you company throughout the house party. If you wouldn’t mind.” A rather serious look overtook her visage. “You see, my husband thinks it’s important that the Earl of Wexford not bother you, and therefore it is important to me.”

“And also,” said Virginia, “the duke feels the same.”

Mrs. Bedford cocked her head to the side. “I beg your pardon?”

“The duke has warned me off the Earl of Wexford.”

“Has he?” Mrs. Bedford queried. “And did you take his advice?”

“Oh yes.” She shivered. “I don’t like the man either. There’s something off about him, rather fishy.”

Mrs. Bedford let out a relieved sigh. “Good. You’re remarkably sensible. Then we shall be friends, and I shall keep you company.”

“If you’d like,” Virginia agreed. “And even if you follow me about to make certain that the Earl of Wexford does not bother me, as you say, I shan’t mind. For you seem a kind sort and ladies should stick together to make sure that gentlemen can’t do anything nefarious.”

Virginia scowled. “Though I hate to think that they could, I know that they can.”

“You are wise,” said Mrs. Bedford with a smile. “Generally speaking, gentlemen are very good sorts, but there are some who just have to—”

“Establish their power?” Virginia said, thinking of the duke’s words.

“Yes. I think that is a good way to put it.” Mrs. Bedford linked her hand through the crook of Virginia’s arm. “Now, show me which one of these is your favorite.”

She angled towards the paintings. “Favorite? How could I pick a favorite?”

But then she spotted one. One that reminded her of the duke. A ship struggling at harbor, turning too soon, about to crash on the rocks. And she felt her heart rend then as she feared the duke was steering himself into such a storm, into such a calamity.

She prayed he did not break upon the shore.

CHAPTER II

“You’re not going to murder anyone, are you?” Griffin drawled as he studied the Duke of Talbot.

The Duke of Talbot smiled. It was not reassuring.

He was a cold bastard, and his smile was a bit terrifying. Talbot was polishing his dueling pistol at the table by the fire, and he didn’t cease at Griffin’s query.

Hartmore and Glenfoyle smoked cheroots, staring out the windows towards the forest.

There was a great deal of silence as all of them realized just how serious the week was going to be. And that it was not going to be easy.

Bedford strolled into the room and caught sight of the duke. Griffin winced. He knew Bedford was going to come to him.

“Is she well?” Griffin asked.

“Yes,” Bedford said, though the man looked on edge. “I’ve asked my wife to keep her company. We can’t trust Wexford not to harm her. He doesn’t seem the sort to do something drastic at a house party, but one never knows with that kind of man. With the turn of events, I wouldn’t put it past him getting her in a corner and making it so that she has to marry him.”

Griffin ground his teeth. “Nor would I,” he hissed. He should have left her alone, for he had a strong feeling that his interest in her might cause Wexford to lash out.

Hartmore glanced back over his shoulder, downed his tea in one, and shoved himself up. “You know,” he said. “We could just kill him. We really should. Perhaps we were too arrogant and it’s not possible to handle all of these events at once. The young lady that I am pursuing? It feels like a fool’s

errand. She has no interest in me. And my revenge is slipping away.”

Griffin stared at Hartmore. It was hard to believe. Hartmore was beautiful, strong, and interesting. He wondered what the blazes was going on with the young lady, but he knew he could not speak on it just now. His mind was spinning with thoughts of Wexford and Virginia in his arms.

Hartmore blinked. “Bloody hell, old boy. Your wits have gone wandering?”

Griffin made no reply, but Hartmore’s dark eyes widened. “Your thoughts are with Lady Virginia.”

He balled his hands into fists. “Don’t be absurd.”

Bedford looked at him, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “I see it too, Your Grace. No shame admitting you’re human.”

Talbot snorted as he polished the barrel of his dueling pistol carefully. “You’re falling in love with her.”

“Sod off,” Griffin said. “That is not—”

Talbot’s brow arched. “Look, I’m a cold bastard, but I see what I see, and I say what I see.”

“Thank you for that very edifying statement,” Griffin ground out. “I have known her for less than twenty-four hours.”

“Less than twelve,” Glenfoyle pointed out, his thick Scottish accent filling the air. “The lass must be fine and full of interesting qualities. I’d never heard of her before. Has anyone heard of her?”

“No,” Hartmore said. “No one has ever heard of her. But that doesn’t mean that she’s not interesting. London’s society is not celebratory of interesting young ladies.”

“No, they wish them to be as biddable as sheep and ready for the slaughter,” Talbot ground out.

The intensity of Talbot’s words shook through the room, though his voice was little more than a whisper.

Talbot's own mission was dark and cynical, and he was pursuing it slowly, carefully. But the truth was Griffin was concerned Talbot might indeed shoot someone before the week was over. He was a bit of a loose cannon.

After their initial meeting, they'd found Talbot one night on a bridge in London, clearly contemplating his life after a night of revels and gambling.

They'd all known then that the pain inside them had to be dealt with. The injustices that they'd felt. And banding together to keep Talbot alive had seemed the right thing to do.

But the truth was this action was keeping all of them alive, for they had all faced that abyss, a feeling as if life did not matter, given the pain inside them.

Not one of them would yield. They couldn't. Their pact with each other was far too important.

Which was why Griffin had to squash any feelings he had for Lady Virginia.

"Right," Griffin stated. "I will forget about her, and I will continue on with my business. Wexford is already on edge, and I don't think it shall be difficult to get him to call me out. And then I can shoot him. And all will be well."

"And he can die from his wounds," said Talbot with a grin.

Bedford sighed. "It feels a bit on the nose, but I think it is still the best."

"Wexford is a good shot," Hartmore reminded.

"Yes, but his pistol," Talbot mused dramatically. "Who knows what shall happen to it."

They all laughed softly. They were not above meddling with things and playing a little bit dirty. Certainly Talbot wasn't, especially when they were dealing with villains like Wexford.

Anne had endured a living hell and had died alone. Wexford had destroyed his sister's mind, her spirit. The diary

he had read of the daily terrors that she had faced had nearly undone him.

They had certainly broken his mother.

He did not know if she would ever recover after discovering what had happened to her only daughter when she thought that she had arranged such a good marriage.

He looked at his friends, the men he had become so close to over the last year. He had to choose them. He could not choose a young lady he'd met three times, danced with, kissed... Felt his soul—

No. No, the depth of what he felt for her did not matter. This, here in this room, was all that mattered, and he had to make certain of it.

Bedford cleared his throat. “Wildwood, I don’t think that you should give her up.”

The words hit him like a blow to his gut, given that they were the exact opposite of what he was just declaring to himself.

“I beg your bloody pardon?” he said.

Bedford locked gazes with him, his eyes full of intent. “If anything, she’s the perfect thing to lead Wexford to challenge you to a duel. You need to find something that will provoke him. And I think that she would be a better key than anything we have thought of before.”

“But what if I—”

“Get too close to her?” Talbot teased. “Are you afraid you won’t be able to control yourself?”

Hartmore’s gaze narrowed, and he drove a hand through his hair. “He *is* afraid.”

Guilt sliced through him at how far he had already traveled down the road of temptation.

Glenfoyle stood and crossed to them. “Och, mon. You’ve kissed her, haven’t you? You are one step away from dancing

in hell.”

“I am already dancing in hell,” Griffin replied sharply. “I want her. I can’t deny it. And I have kissed her *twice*. Damnation. Once out on the dales and again in the long gallery after dancing with her. She asked me to. And I couldn’t —”

“Turn the young lady down?” Talbot mocked lightly. “Ever the gentleman, Wildwood.”

“Cease, Talbot,” Bedford warned softly.

Talbot lifted his icy gaze to first Bedford and then to Griffin. “I’m not angry with you, Wildwood. I understand. I can see it. She is like a siren, your true north, calling you home. So stop resisting so hard. Perhaps you should consider just giving in. How could she possibly get in the way of all this?”

Give in? How the bloody hell could he do that? For if he did, surely he would rattle apart. He had been holding on so tightly that any sort of capitulation to an emotion outside of revenge would ruin him.

“Because if I give way to emotion, I will not be able to see clearly,” he bit out. “I need to in order to conquer Wexford. I need to be able to—”

“Listen to yourself now,” Bedford said. “You are already far too emotional.”

“I am not,” Griffin roared before he snapped his mouth shut.

“You are,” said Hartmore.

Glenfoyle frowned. “You’re a mon with human traits. Your feelings have been evoked in the young woman, and you don’t wish her to be harmed. So, don’t beat yourself up over it. Bedford’s wife is looking after her. You can make certain that she’s all right. And if your affection for her, or hers for you—because it was clear by the way that she was looking at you that she thought quite well of you—bother Wexford? All the

better. You will be able to destroy him quickly. There will be no looking back. And then, once Wexford has gone, you will have no fears. And if you wish to pursue the young lady? You can.”

Pursue the young lady.

But his soul would be black as hell. Yes, he'd have relief from the pain and the grief. Yes, his revenge would be complete. But he'd be a murderer, for all intents and purposes.

Yes, a murderer out of justice, but still. He winced. He could not give up the memory of his sister. He could not abandon finding justice for her just because he had met a young lady who was now making him question everything. Bloody hell, the things that she had said to him in the long gallery...

How had she grown so damn wise?

“Bloody hell,” Talbot drawled. “You look as if you've been through the wars.”

“The things she said,” he said softly.

Talbot placed his pistol back into the case. “Like what?”

“That she has no wish to change me,” he said.

“A young lady who has no wish to change the man she's interested in? I don't believe it for a moment,” Hartmore teased.

He groaned. “I cannot shake her from my thoughts. I am thinking too much of her.”

Bedford squeezed his shoulder. “No, you're not. When I met my wife, it was much the same. I did not know what was happening, but I knew something was changing me. Something indelible, something powerful. And if that is happening to you now, the more you resist, the worse it will be.”

“Surely, I have to resist.”

“You are spending all of your time thinking about resistance,” Bedford said. “I beg of you. Stop resisting her so hard. If you simply carry on as you normally would, as if vengeance was not at stake, I can protect her and you. And then all will be well.”

But vengeance *was* at stake.

All will be well, he thought to himself.

That was a lie. When the world allowed such awful things to happen to young ladies like his sister, to the other people who had been harmed, the people that his friends in this room had loved so dearly, how could anyone say all would be well?

It was a fool’s panacea. And he had never been a fool. And he wasn’t about to become one now.

And though he did not think Bedford was a fool, in this moment he felt that love had changed the man. The love he had for his wife was coloring his vision. And that was dangerous indeed.

But still, Bedford would not snatch their success from them. So if Griffin had to stop resisting to get his revenge, he would.

He let out a harsh breath.

“You make certain that nothing happens to her whilst I’m giving in,” he ground out.

Bedford nodded. “Done,” he said.

And with that, Griffin turned to the fire, wishing with all his heart that the pain of the past had never happened, but such wishes were impossible things.

CHAPTER 12

“*I* would call the man a besotted puppy,” drawled Virginia’s grandmama, “except there is nothing endearing about him. Why does he keep following you about?”

Virginia winced. “Well, Grandmama, he made it very clear to Papa, did he not, that he wishes to ask for my hand?”

“Yes, but this is dogged, dare I say.” Her grandmama harrumphed. “His interest in you is most frustrating. He’s not allowing anyone else to approach you. He just keeps hovering about you. If I had not sent him off just now to get lemonade, he never would have left.”

Frowning, Virginia peered after the earl, who had reluctantly headed off to be of service. “Yes, it does seem as if he’s decided to stake his claim,” she said, “which is most annoying since I have not given him any sort of encouragement. And I am not a continent to be conquered.”

“I’m certain he realizes a lady might not wish his attention,” her grandmother said, narrowing her eyes, her silvery curls shining in the sunlight as they sat out having their alfresco lunch.

Several people were out on the lake rowing boats about, and Virginia was quite worried that Wexford might try to get her isolated out there and propose, and then a whole scene might occur.

She did not like scenes, though she would make one if necessary.

Still, she did not wish the talk of the duke’s house party to be about her. “I am not entirely certain what to do about him. He seems so set on the idea of making me his, and I can’t really understand why.”

Her grandmother rolled her eyes. “Men like that, once they put their mind to something, they cannot be shaken.”

“Well, it’s not as if I can be purchased,” she said, relieved.

“Many men think that you can,” her grandmother warned. “He seems to be one of those. It is such a shame that such a handsome fellow has to be so horrible.”

“Grandmama!” she said. “What a terrible thing to say.”

“Well, my dear, I just hate seeing so many advantages go to waste. His charm is quite artificial though. I’m going to have to tell him to skive off. Then again, I might not have to. For it does appear the duke might do it for us.”

And it did seem as if the duke was suddenly descending upon them with purpose.

The Duke of Wildwood’s face was stony.

She wondered if he always looked thus, or it was just his face. She rather liked it personally. She found people who smiled all the time to be slightly untrustworthy, mostly because she did not think that it was easy to smile all the time when life could have its challenges.

It was perfectly natural to be upset and angry sometimes. Much to her frustration, young ladies were always being encouraged to smile, so she rather liked the idea of not doing it. Perhaps she would give a stony visage a try herself and see if that put off Wexford.

Wildwood paused before them, all but towering before he had the good wits to kneel gallantly beside them. “Are you enjoying your luncheon?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she said, “it is most delicious. I particularly like the cold pheasant, as well as the strawberries. They are so sweet. They’re like little jewels on the tongue.”

His eyes widened at that as his gaze traveled to her mouth. A spark warmed his eyes, and she coughed before that spark could warm her.

She did not know if she'd said anything inappropriate. She did not think so.

“Come,” the duke urged. “Will you come out to the boats with me?”

“Oh dear,” she said. “Well, yes. I suppose I should like it very much. I've been avoiding it all morning.”

“Have you?” the duke asked.

“Yes,” she said, swinging her gaze to Wexford warily.

“Well then,” he said, “let's go together, and then you will avoid his invitation.”

Relieved, she smiled. Then she held up her hand and slipped it into the duke's large palm.

She had not thought she would be in his close company again since he'd departed so swiftly last evening. But she found herself delighted.

Instead of the quick jerk to her feet that she had expected, he did it slowly, taking his time, which caused her gown to tumble about her legs, sliding down his long limbs. She found herself almost toppling forward, leaning into him. It was delicious, his scent of oranges and spice. She wanted to drink him in, and much to her surprise, she found herself leaning forward to do just that before her grandmother cleared her throat.

“Now, now, my dears, go and enjoy yourselves. I should be perfectly happy here.”

Virginia blushed and smoothed her skirts.

The duke took her hand, placed it atop his, and led her down to the great lake and the little boats bobbing on it. He easily held one still so that she could climb in.

She laughed delightedly. “Goodness, it would be quite easy to take a plunge.”

“Indeed it would,” he said, “but never you fear, I am a good sailor.”

“I’m not surprised,” she said. “I would wager that you’re good at everything that you try.”

“Not everything,” he said, “but close. It is what dukes are supposed to be. Excellent at almost anything.”

“That must be rather trying,” she replied.

“Do you think so?” he said.

She adjusted herself to the rocking boat, feeling shockingly safe in his care. “Are you allowed to fail? Because when I do sketches, I fail all the time.”

He gaped at her. “You do?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied boldly, smoothing her skirts over her knees as he lowered himself to the bench and took up the oars.

She tried not to stare at the beautiful way his limbs and muscles worked as he rowed them out. So she focused on her subject and added, “One can’t get it right all the time, and the only way to even make the attempt to get it right is to *try*. I’ve had so many failures, hundreds of them, and I’m fairly certain that most of the great artists have. After all, one can’t do anything great without making mistakes.”

He stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

“Oh dear, I’ve said something shocking.”

“Not shocking but revelatory,” he said, his hands gripping the wood oars, working them seamlessly until they were out towards the center of the water. “No one has ever intimated to me that making mistakes was a part of the process of living.”

“Well, it is,” she said, “Look at a child. How many times does a child fall down and then get back up again, laugh at the very act of falling, and then get on with it?”

“I’ve never really thought about it,” he confessed as the sun shone off his dark hair.

“You’re not around children, are you?” she realized.

“No,” he said, “Are you?”

“Well, not as many as I would like, but when I observed them in the park—”

“You like children?” he said.

“Oh yes, they’re lovely.”

“Are they?” he said.

“Once again, you’ve not been around many of them, have you?” she teased.

“No, though I will be required to reproduce them.”

She gaped at him. “Oh dear, that sounds terrible. If you feel required to do it, perhaps you shouldn’t do it at all.”

“Dukes must,” he said rather firmly.

“I see, you poor thing,” she said. “And poor babes.”

“Poor babes?” he echoed, “They will have the height of privilege.”

“Yes,” she agreed quickly. “They will have beautiful clothes and servants and good food and toys and education, but it does not sound as if you plan to give them a great deal of love.”

He winced and one of the oars seemed to almost slip from his hand, which she took as a sign that the duke was quite perplexed by her line of speaking.

He grabbed hold of the oar and turned it.

“I should likely be silent,” she observed.

“I don’t see how you shall,” he teased. “You seem compelled to say whatever you think.”

“Is it such a terrible thing?”

“No, I’ve told you before that I rather like it, but the idea of loving one’s children... I suppose it’s really very natural,” he said, “but I did not receive love, and quite frankly, most of the aristocrats that I know...”

“Didn’t receive it either,” she finished sadly.

“Exactly,” he said.

“It is not the way of the English,” she said, “to be affectionate with their children, which is rather unfortunate. They put them away in nurseries and trot them out once a day. Perhaps an affectionate family does it far more often. And parents go away so very often! It’s sad, really,” she lamented. “Poor people spend so much more time together. Their lives are very, very hard, and I would not wish to romanticize the lives of the poor, but I have seen the affection of large families. I wonder sometimes if, for all our privilege, we are not missing something very important.”

He took them out along the edge of the lake, allowing the boat to skim along the willow trees. “Did your parents love you thus?”

She smiled, thinking fondly of her past. “My mother certainly did, and I think my father meant to, but the loss of my mother was simply too much for him. He holed himself up to protect himself. He could no longer face the world. He’s a good kind man, and he smiles at me whenever I interact with him, but he immediately puts his head back into his studies. I know it’s because he cannot face the cruelty of the world without her.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said kindly.

She drew in a fortifying breath. “I do not begrudge him. It is a very hard place without her. You see, when I was small, she cradled me and slept with me and kissed me and sang to me. All of the stories and songs that I know are from her, and she taught me my first skills in drawing. She showed me so much love. I always knew that I was safe with her, that I was wanted, and that the world was a beautiful place. So when she was taken away... It was very terrible.”

“I’m so glad that you had her though,” he said softly.

“As am I, and I don’t regret the past for a moment,” she said firmly, squaring her shoulders against the sorrow. “I

would not trade a cold life for having a mother now. No. The quality of what I had was so great that I cannot ever feel regret.”

“Regret,” he rasped, his face turning to a mask of pain. “It is a cruel thing.”

“Do you know it well?” she queried.

She feared he did intimately, but she did not want to push. He did not seem to like to speak of it.

“My regret is not for me,” he said, “though perhaps a more loving father would’ve prevented the regrets that I have now.”

She stared at him, narrowed her eyes, and tilted her head to the side. “Your sister,” she said. “Your regrets are for her?”

“Yes,” he said softly, “She made my childhood wonderful, for our parents were absent. But she was repaid with cruelty when she grew up, and I cannot let that go.”

She wanted to reach out to touch his hand, but she knew if she did so it would cause a scandal, and so she forced herself to remain sitting and very still.

She looked up at the sky, at wispy clouds dancing across it.

“It is not right that people should be crushed by the wheel of life,” she said. “I don’t understand why there must be so much mire, but I know that there can be no creation without it. Look at the lilies growing along the edge of the lake.”

He blinked “How do you mean?” he said.

She pointed to the snow-white flowers dancing over green pads. “Their roots are embedded in the mud, and they must grow in such stuff until, at last, the flower emerges on the other side of the water! How remarkable. And I often think of trees. Look at your own forest!”

“Trees? I don’t follow.”

“Well,” she ventured, feeling a tad silly but compelled to speak. “Trees in a forest must rely upon the strength of other

trees too, and if those trees are too close, well, it will grow sick, will it not?"

"How do you know so much about trees?" he asked.

She grinned. "I spent a great deal of time reading about them when learning to sketch them."

"I see," he said.

"And people are like that," she continued with fervor. "Life is like that. If we are not balanced in the right ways, we shall hurt each other, crush each other, and there can be no life."

"How the devil did you become so very wise?" he marveled.

"I don't know exactly," she replied, not denying his compliment, "but I've spent a great deal of time in solitude and thinking and drawing. After my mother died, I had to."

"Why did you have to?" he asked softly.

"Because if I had not, I would've been lost to it. The pain was so unbearable. I don't know if I ever would've recovered."

"You're sharing a great deal with me."

"Am I?" she said with a smile. "I suppose I am. And in our society, to confess the pain of one's heart and soul, and to admit that I almost didn't wish to keep going, is very scandalous, sinful even. And yet, somehow, through much contemplation, I felt strong. Sometimes, I swear I feel her, you know. I sense her voice whispering to me, urging me to go on, and I see her everywhere. I see her in the trees that I sketch. And I so often love to go and sit in trees because then I feel very close to her. I feel as if I am being embraced by her again."

"Dear God, Virginia," he said, "you are so beautiful."

"I am not," she said.

“No, no,” he rushed. “You’re very pretty, but your soul,” he said, “your heart... I’ve never met one like it, nor seen one more beautiful.”

Tears sprung to her eyes. “That is the kindest thing I think anyone has ever said to me,” she said, “and I can see that you mean it.”

“I do.”

And in that moment, she knew that if she had already lost her heart just a little, she was losing it a great deal now because the duke was seeing *her*. And he was not telling her to be quiet; he was not telling her not to feel.

He was accepting her just as she was.

CHAPTER 13

The last thing Griffin thought was that Bedford would put a young lady in danger.

As a matter of fact, Bedford's entire life was based upon keeping women *out* of danger. It was what had started his life in Seven Dials as a man of action, and still he fought to protect young women in the Dials.

It was also how he met his wife.

And it was how Wildwood had come into his young wife's life. They were all friends now. *Friends*. It was such a strange word. To make friendship over such terrors and difficulties seemed wrong, but that was often how the greatest friends were made.

They were bonded together, not through peerage or wealth or dynasty, but through deeds and actions and experiences. He had almost watched Daniel bleed to death, and he had had to bring that body back home to his wife and pray that Daniel would survive.

Not just for the wife, of course, but also for the planning of he and his friends' needs.

At least that's what he told himself. It was likely a lie. He cared about the rough man who fought with such a pure heart.

Griffin could still feel the horror at the sight of Daniel lingering, his face pale, on the edge of death. But Daniel was made of tenacious stuff, and being thrust in the belly with a poker had not done him in.

Now, it seemed as though it was harder to trust when his own spirit was at stake.

And he was entrusting much of Virginia's protection to Bedford.

It was no easy thing.

The way her face transformed when he had told her she was beautiful, and not her face but her heart and soul? It shook him to his core. Clearly, not enough people had made her aware of it. He wanted to throttle everyone who had ever managed to make her feel as if she wasn't the most glorious creature alive, for she outshone anyone that he knew.

He looked to the shore.

His goal was met.

Wexford was watching.

Even from this distance, he could tell by the man's posture and stance that he was not pleased.

"I think we must go back," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "Though I might just have to turn right back around."

"Whatever do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I think my sheep dog is waiting to hem me in and take me back out."

"Sheep dog?"

"He follows me about. No matter the company."

He narrowed his eyes. "Tell him that you have a case of seasickness."

She frowned. "Well, that would mean that I have to go back inside the house," she said.

"True, but you'd get to avoid him."

"It is extremely irritating that for a young lady to avoid a man, they must deprive themselves of the pleasurable events around them," she rushed with irritation.

He considered this. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're right. It's not just."

"Life is not just," she sighed, "so there's little point in being silly about it. Still, it is most frustrating. All right, then take me back. I'll tell Grandmama I have a headache from the

sun or something, and then she'll give me a great deal of trouble for not wearing a better hat.”

“I like your hat,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, patting it.

It was a small affair with little fuss to it, but it covered her dark curls, and it should have kept the sun from her. Still, grandmamas did like to fuss, especially when they came from a century in which hats were veritable model ships.

He brought them back easily to the dock.

Other couples were happily going out, eager to have moments alone where they needn't worry about the subject of their conversation in front of chaperones and mamas.

He helped her out easily and guided her back to her grandmama, and just as he did, there was a splash upon the lake. He turned, narrowed his eyes, and spotted Hartmore. The duke and the young lady of his pursuit had gone into the water.

There was much splashing and spluttering.

How the devil did that happen?

He prepared to race toward them, but he noticed that Hartmore had matters in hand. The young lady was carefully in his arms and the two were swimming to the shore.

“I am afraid this is my cue,” he said, “to make certain my guests are well.”

She gave a nod. “Go,” she said. “Go be an excellent duke.”

A smile tilted his lips. “What a thing to say,” he said. “I am always an excellent duke.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” she said. “Lots of dukes aren't. And Hartmore,” she said. “Is he a good duke?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “He is.”

“Then go help your friend,” she said, and with that, she turned from him and headed back to her grandmama.

For a moment, he wanted to stop because Wexford was clearly about to go after her. He looked back to Hartmore and then back again.

This was the dilemma. He wanted to go to her, but he also wanted to make sure that his friend was not in difficulty. Friend.

Truly, it was such a powerful word. But Hartmore gave him one look and shook his head as if to say he did not need intervention. So Griffin raised his hand, gave a quick salute, and turned on his heel, heading back to meet Wexford, the grandmother, and the young lady who was the center of a great deal of attention.

CHAPTER 14

Much to Virginia's chagrin, even though a couple had just gone into the lake, it seemed that she was still of great interest to those seeking entertainment on the shore.

Since Hartmore and the young lady were safe and out of the lake, having run off to get dry, people could not stop observing the fact the Earl of Wexford and the Duke of Wildwood were now standing about her.

Again.

Despite the duke's earlier protestations that he needed to depart, he had changed his mind and showed up at her side.

Her grandmama looked most irritated, not at the Duke of Wildwood but at Wexford.

It was clear that Grandmama was certain the Duke of Wildwood was the one for Virginia and that he would make a proposal almost any moment, which, of course, was absurd.

Dukes did not generally propose to the likes of her. She wasn't interested in being a great society hostess, or at least she didn't think so. Though, for a moment, she thought of all the artists that she could support and the galleries she could sponsor.

Perhaps being a duchess wouldn't be so very terrible. She could buy heaps and heaps of art. It would be absolutely wonderful. Yes, that wouldn't be so very bad. And as she contemplated the Duke of Wildwood, she thought of his excellent collection.

Yes, being married to such a beautiful, capable man with such artwork in his possession could be quite nice. He had other houses too, which meant more beautiful art!

Of course, there was also the fact that she liked him, liked him well, and could not forget the feel of his hands upon her

body. She'd liked that very much indeed.

"Will you come for a stroll with me?" Wexford asked, holding out his arm to her. He was dressed in a hunter green cutaway coat, his snowy cravat studded with a silver pin. And silver flowers had been embroidered into his waistcoat.

The silver matched the snowy peaks at his temples.

And his pale breeches clung tightly to his legs. The gleam of his boots would have done Brummel proud.

Did he polish them with champagne like the society buck?

She did not know, but she wished the man would hie off at the duke's presence.

If anything, he seemed to be more determined.

"If you must know," she began, "I am a bit tired, and the sun has given me a headache. I think I must retire back to the house."

Wexford immediately thrust his arm closer to her. "Well, I can take you."

The duke began to say something, but Wexford shot him a glance. "Come now. You've just had her to yourself for several moments."

"But I cannot bear to be separated from her," the duke protested grandly.

Wexford narrowed his gaze. "Oh?" he said softly.

"I can see you have realized what a great companion she is, Wexford," the duke declared. "Who could bear to be apart from her? We shall all go together."

She tensed. The very idea of standing between the two gentlemen as they marched back up to the house seemed quite challenging, but off they went.

Grandmama's face was one of complete surprise as they departed.

But still there was nothing to be said to get her out of the situation, and so she headed off. Wexford began to talk most passionately about his house in the south of England near Cornwall and how beautiful it was.

“And isolated,” the Duke of Wildwood pointed out.

“Yes,” Wexford agreed. “It is isolated but absolutely beautiful.”

“One could lose their minds, couldn’t they, out there on the coast with the wind howling in?” Wildwood said innocently.

But there was an edge to his voice. And she wondered at the simmering anger there and what it meant.



Wexford swung his gaze to the duke, his eyes narrowed. It wasn’t public knowledge that Griffin’s sister had had a brush with nearly losing her mind.

Of course she would, with such a husband. No, no one had known about it. He was not even supposed to know about it or his mother. He didn’t know if his father knew, but the diary had been clear. She had been afraid, and the wind had been driving her mad as it howled in off the coast, and she was left there in the cold, lonely months of winter with her husband to torment her.

“I’ve heard Cornwall is very beautiful,” Lady Virginia put in quickly as if she sensed the tension.

How could she not? It was suddenly so thick he could have cut it with a knife.

“You must see it. You’d feel at home at once,” Wexford said.

“Perhaps I should visit,” she said carefully before quickly pivoting. “But I don’t think it will be for some time. My schedule is quite full. Besides, Yorkshire is enough for me at present. I can’t imagine being away from the galleries of London for too long.”

Wexford stared at her, and the duke had to bite back a laugh. He rather liked the fact that she was not easily taken in and that she danced around the man's difficult propositions.

"I have requested that you sit by me at dinner this evening," Wexford said. "I hope you shall enjoy it."

"Oh, most certainly," she said brightly, though her shoulders tensed. She cleared her throat and widened her eyes. "But just to warn you, I hate conversing over supper, don't you? I always like to enjoy whatever the cook has made."

Wexford blinked again.

The duke was fairly certain that she did not mean it. She struck him as someone who loved a good chat.

But his admiration for her grew by leaps and bounds. She was showing no pressure or difficulty under the signs of unwanted attention. And he rather thought of all the young ladies who'd faced unwanted or difficult attention and had not been able to bear up so well.

It wasn't right. He wished he could change all of that and sweep it away. But he knew he couldn't, and as they got to the house, she stopped and smiled at both of them. "I can make my way now. And I prefer to go to my rooms on my own. Besides, Agatha is taking a nap. I shall join her there."

Where the blazes was Mrs. Bedford? The question suddenly hit him and sent him ill at ease. Was she not supposed to be near at hand to be with Virginia?

But she was not. He'd have to find out quickly why the plan was being deviated from.

With that, the duke stopped and waited for her to retreat. Wexford made as if to take a few steps forward, but Griffin held his hand out. "Not now, Wexford. The young lady has asked for a moment on her own."

"Good." Wexford gave him a smile. "I'm hoping to get her on her own."

"Are you?" the duke asked, bristling.

Wexford's smile deepened. "Yes. I've already written to her father."

"Have you?" the duke said, willing himself to calm. "Does the young lady know of your intentions?"

"I'm sure her grandmother has made her aware that I'm interested."

Griffin longed to drive his fist into Wexford's face. Instead, he asked the obvious. "And you wish to marry her?"

Wexford inclined his head in what appeared dutiful subservience. "I hope you don't mind. I have spent years honoring your sister's memory, but it is time that I move on."

Wexford's face fell with sadness, as if the horrors and tragedy of losing Anne so many years ago had broken him.

How long had the bastard practiced that?

Griffin certainly didn't believe it for a moment and there was something brittle about his face whilst he said it.

A strange gleam entered Wexford's pale eyes. "She's so intelligent and so capable. She would make a wonderful mother."

Griffin tensed.

Yes. Yes, she would make a wonderful mother. After all the things that she'd said, all the wonderful things about children. And so Griffin said quite firmly, "Indeed she would. I wager she'd make an excellent mother to a *duke*. She'd raise up one who was so very different from the rest."

Wexford swung his gaze to him. "You can't possibly be serious after what I've told you."

"Why not?" he said with a shrug. "It's up to the young lady to choose, after all."

Wexford's eyes narrowed. "Of course."

The words *may the best man win* were not spoken, but he was certain that Wexford was thinking them. But the question

was how far would Wexford go to win?

Very far indeed, Griffin feared.

CHAPTER 15

*I*t was most annoying, but Virginia had decided to stay in her rooms for more than a whole day.

She was not generally given to such things, but getting away from Wexford and having some time to herself was proving extraordinarily helpful.

The amount of productivity that she'd had alone since coming up from the lake startled even herself.

There was something about Wildwood's house, something about him, which had awoken a zest for own work within her. Oh, she'd always been dedicated to her sketching and painting, but today she stood before the windows overlooking the forest and found the light spilling in to be pure perfection.

She'd requested that an easel be brought up, and one of the servants had easily found one. She'd taken one of her larger pieces of paper and begun to sketch. She had sketched the dales, the sight of the landscape upon meeting him. She could not get it from her head, and she had not been able to still until she had started all the preliminary work.

Now she was far in.

Soon, she would add watercolors to it.

Yes, those colors which seamlessly melded together were the only thing that would capture the beauty of that scene, and she could not tear herself from it. Her grandmother and Agatha had already gone down several times since she'd begun the piece, to break their fast, to play cards, and to take part in games out on the lawn.

She was not simply avoiding Wexford.

She was also losing herself in work and how she adored it! Much to her astonishment, Mrs. Bedford had also joined her, asking if it was acceptable if she simply sat and watched her

work. Virginia didn't mind company. Not at all. And Mrs. Bedford was deeply pleasant. They had conversed on many topics: London, social justice, the causes of those working to improve people's lives in the East End, and she rather admired Mrs. Bedford.

For it seemed that that was exactly what Mrs. Bedford was dedicating her life to.

She found it rather odd that Mrs. Bedford was at a house party in the north of England if her views were so strong about the classes, but it was clear that she cared very much about the Duke of Wildwood and her own husband.

From what Virginia had gathered, there was some business going on which required them to be here. So Mrs. Bedford sat on a damask-covered bench, read her book, and seemed to enjoy the solitude of simply being with Virginia.

Perhaps much like herself, Mrs. Bedford was not overly fond of silly company.

As she placed a careful touch to the edge of an oak leaf, there was a knock upon the door.

Mrs. Bedford put down her book and went to it. "Yes," she queried through the closed panel.

The door opened a crack.

Virginia glanced back over her shoulder, wondering who it could be. Her grandmama and Agatha certainly wouldn't knock to enter their own rooms.

And then Mrs. Bedford stepped back. "You have a caller, my dear."

"Heavens," she said. "Who is it? I don't wish—" And then she heard his voice.

Wildwood called out. "It is I, Lady Virginia. Will you allow me in?"

She beamed. "Of course I will. Come in, Your Grace."

The Duke of Wildwood entered in the late afternoon sun, looking resplendent in his beautifully cut clothes. His dark hair teased his jaw and cheeks, and she found herself wishing to touch his thick mane.

He was so impossibly beautiful, and she found herself smiling at the sight of him. She wished to set him down on paper too, and at night she had begun sketching him. Sketching his face—its hard lines and planes and his sensual lips. But she hid those sketches away. She was not prepared for Mrs. Bedford to see her making such a depiction of the duke.

“Are you well?” he inquired politely. “I have heard you have been up here since our last meeting.”

“I am perfectly well,” she assured, putting away the accoutrements of her work. “I simply wished a bit of time to myself, and I wished to focus on this.”

His gaze turned to her work on the easel. “I see,” he said. “You must have been working all hours to have achieved so much.”

“Yes,” she affirmed, blushing. “I could not stop myself, and I’m not at all tired. I found that the work has invigorated me greatly.”

“I’m pleased to hear that my house inspires such creativity.”

She beamed at him. “It does.”

She wanted to add, as do you, but she felt such a thing would be inappropriate.

“I have something that I wish to show you,” he said.

“Oh?” she queried, surprised and pleased because it was him who was singling her out.

“I know that your visit here is not entirely pleasant, what with Wexford’s advances.”

Virginia snapped a glance at Mrs. Bedford, who smiled softly, and then she swung her gaze back to the duke. “Well, that is very kind of you, but it isn’t really your responsibility to protect me from him.”

“Of course it is. You’re a guest in my house,” he explained, “and Wexford is connected to my family. I bear responsibility.”

She swallowed.

It was true. And there seemed to be some sort of significant personal animosity that the duke felt towards him, especially with him warning her off him.

How she longed to know, but could not ask for something so intimate, despite what they had shared. When he wished to convey it, he surely would.

“Thank you,” she said earnestly.

“I am glad Mrs. Bedford is keeping you company and making certain that no one bothers you,” he added, folding his hands behind his back.

She smiled again at Mrs. Bedford. “She is an excellent companion, and I am deeply grateful for her.”

And then it occurred to her. “Did you arrange it, Your Grace?”

The duke paused. “Will you be angry with us if I say that I did?”

“No,” she replied swiftly, wiping her hands on a cloth from her easel. “I will only be angry if Mrs. Bedford has been feigning friendship.”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Bedford assured. “How could I feign friendship when you’re such an interesting person with interesting capabilities? Do you not enjoy my company?”

“I do,” Virginia announced. “And the truth is, I find it quite kind of both of you to want to make certain that nothing

befalls me. Wexford is an odd man, and I'm not certain what to do with him."

"We shall simply make certain that you are never alone with him," the duke said with all seriousness, "and then there will be no difficulty."

She gave a nod. "If you think that will do it."

"Indeed I do," he affirmed. "Whether it is your grandmother, myself, or Mrs. Bedford, you shall not be alone with him."

She let out a sigh of relief. "I confess that does give me some satisfaction. He's quite odd. Like a dog with a bone, and I am the bone. I do not like it at all. I have never been the subject of such pursuit, and I find it deeply unpleasant. He doesn't seem to see that I take no interest in him."

"A man like that won't," the duke explained, his eyes narrowing. And then he shook his head as if shedding dark thoughts. "But I have not actually come to discuss him."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. "It is an unpleasant topic of conversation. I do hope that what you have to say is nicer."

"It is," he said with a tempting smile. "Would you like to come with me?"

She glanced to Mrs. Bedford, and Mrs. Bedford looked to the duke. "I can slip away and find my husband, if you don't mind,"

The duke smiled. "Of course."

Mrs. Bedford looked between them and wagged her finger. "As long as you two don't go getting into a scandal."

Virginia felt that they were already nearly there. But Mrs. Bedford seemed to appreciate the fact that they had a sort of affinity for each other and did not want to suppress it. She was not a typical chaperone, and she clearly wasn't concerned that the duke was going to do Virginia any harm, which gave her confidence.

“Let us go then,” Virginia said cheerfully, the idea of departing the rooms suddenly appealing.

The duke extended his strong hand to her. She eagerly took it. And as he swept her out of the chamber and down through the halls, she could not help but wonder what possible thing he could wish to show her.

Until at last, he took her into a large room.

It was fairly dark.

The paintings upon the walls took her breath away.

“Dear heaven,” she breathed. “These are—”

“These are quite old,” he finished for her.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Many of them are medieval. They were done by Raphael and other artists of a similar time period. You’re protecting them very well, aren’t you?” she observed as she turned to take in the colors and figures.

“I would hate to see anything happen to them, and my ancestors felt the same,” he explained. “So we keep them in rather unlit rooms so that the colors are not overly affected.”

“How very wise of you,” she said, her heart aching at the beauty before her.

He cleared his throat. “These are actually not what I have brought you to see.”

“No?” she asked. “What could be more important than these? They are magnificent in and of themselves.”

“I’m glad you agree, but come.”

And with that, he led her over to a set of cabinets, which he carefully opened with a key from his pocket. He pulled out a large folder and brought it to a long dark mahogany table.

“Come closer,” he said.

And she did.

Her body was tingling in anticipation of what it was that he was about to unveil.

And then, oh so very carefully, he lifted the folder's top cover. She stared down. "No," she gasped, "it cannot be."

He smiled slowly at her. "It absolutely can."

"I—" she gasped, "I've never seen..."

"No," he agreed softly, reverently. "Most people haven't. It is one of the benefits of being from a family like mine. We have been acquiring things for hundreds of years, and we do not put them all on display."

She glanced at him. "Is it truly Da Vinci?"

He nodded. "It is."

The sketches were shockingly beautiful. This was not one of Da Vinci's great paintings hanging in some church or some museum. No, these were intimate and small sketches of hands, of devices that had no name. Da Vinci's handwriting was scribbled all over the pages. There were beautiful faces of ladies that had been quickly dashed out. And it felt as if she was catching a glimpse into the artist's life.

"I cannot believe you are showing me these."

"Why?" he queried. "I do not think there is anyone else in this house who might appreciate it as you do."

Tears filled her eyes at the beauty of it. "But Wildwood," she said, "it is magnificent. It is the greatest mind speaking to me through the ages, and I shall forever feel small in it."

"Don't you dare," he protested firmly. "You are an artist just as Da Vinci was. Yes, he will resonate throughout the millennia, but what you do is important too. And I wanted you to be able to see this. So few people will appreciate him. Not truly. They think he's important and they care about his work because he's so revered, but you..."

She leaned towards him, her eyes trailing over the marks on the page, wonder filling her. "Yes, I see it, the magic, the genius."

And then she lifted a gaze to his. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for trusting me with this.”

He reached out and gently rested his hand atop hers. “I would not wish to trust anyone else with it,” he said, “because I have seen how beautiful your heart and soul are, and I wanted you to know that I meant it without hesitation, without any deceit when I told you. You seemed to doubt me on the lake, and so I say it again. I am so grateful to know you, Virginia,” he said. “And your beautiful, beautiful heart.”

CHAPTER 16

Given the events of the last days and the behavior of the duke and Wexford, it was incredibly tempting to continue to stay in her rooms and feign illness.

It had served her well. Why not continue on with it? But the idea of hiding away felt wrong. Virginia could sit and sketch for the rest of the evening rather happily. But a prolonged absence felt wrong and besides, she did not wish to explain to her grandmama exactly what was going on. Perhaps she should though. She bit her inner cheek. The truth was her grandmother was quite capable and treating her like a child was foolish.

“Grandmama,” she ventured as she turned to the older woman who was readying her gown to descend for the outdoor entertainments this evening.

It would be some time before the sun fully set, though the sky was already stained pink and yellow.

“Yes, my dear?”

“I don’t know what to do about Wexford exactly,” she confessed, “and the duke is being most odd as well.”

Her grandmama let out a delighted sigh and adjusted the lace at her sleeves. “The duke, my dear, is in love with you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Grandmama. We have known each other very little.”

“Even just an hour is all it takes, my dear.” Her grandmama beamed. “Some people have known each other for a lifetime and have never loved each other at all. Some people see each other, and, in that moment, they know.”

Oh how she wished it was true! But there was an undercurrent to the duke’s affection that she could not quite

put her finger on. “But that cannot possibly be how it is for us.”

“Why ever not?” Grandmama demanded. “It was how it was for your grandfather and I. We did not need a great deal of fussing. We caught sight of each other at a ball and knew immediately. I think that people spend too much time getting to know one another. The truth is, anyone that you marry is going to be difficult, and you’re not going to be able to stand them at some point during the long state of affairs. And you simply have to get on with it.”

Get on with it didn’t sound particularly romantic, but she could understand her grandmother’s point. Life could not be one long romantic interlude.

Could it?

“Find a man who is not awful, who is kind, who has a bit of money—the duke does, of course—and who looks at you as if you are the heavens and the stars,” her grandmama enthused. “And the duke does, my dear, look at you thus.”

“I don’t know why,” she admitted. “It makes little sense to me.”

Her grandmama reached out a bejeweled hand and touched her cheek. “Oh, my dear. It makes absolute sense to me. The duke has always been a unique man and unique men want unique wives. Wildwood is more than his title. I can tell he is an interesting man. And a good one.”

Interesting did not begin to cover what the duke was. Of that, Virginia was certain.

Her grandmama lowered her hand. “Now, tell me what you are so concerned about.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. For the first time, almost afraid to tell the truth. “Oh, Grandmama, if I begin to tell you, it shall be a scandal.”

“Oh, I do like a scandal,” her grandmama said with a wink, though she looked at her with a great deal of care now.

“Then I shall tell you,” Virginia declared, lifting her chin and willing herself to be bold. “I’ve kissed the duke twice.”

Her grandmama’s hand flew to her chest over her heart, her jeweled rings winking in the light. “Oh, my dear. Do tell. You *are* on the verge of scandal if you two have not agreed on a proposal.”

“You’re not furious with me?”

Her grandmama shook her head, causing her curls to tremble. “No, my dear, no. As long as you are being careful, and you understand the consequences. You do understand the consequences, don’t you?”

“Naples,” Virginia said.

“Yes,” her grandmother said. “Naples. And it is easy to say Naples without having been there. It’s a rather difficult city, you know, and wars are always happening all over Europe. One should not abandon themselves to Naples without considerable thought.”

“I appreciate your cautionary comments, Grandmama, and yet... I find I cannot stop myself from behaving as I do with the duke.”

A gentle but resolved look stole over her grandmother’s worn but magnificent face. “If that is how you feel, then surely it is meant to be. He seems to me a man of honor. If things went terribly wrong, you would marry him, would you not?”

“No. I don’t wish to marry him if we were to get caught. I don’t want to force a man into marrying me.”

“My dear, he is no fool,” her grandmother countered wisely. “He knows that by kissing you alone in the dark, he is veritably proposing marriage to a young lady of your social standing, unless he actively wishes to ruin her. Do you think he’s the sort of man who actively wishes to ruin young ladies?”

She winced. “No, I do not. He does not seem to be a villain.”

“I agree with you. So consider that he’s very seriously interested in marrying you.” Her grandmother reached out and squeezed her hand. “Otherwise, he would not take such a risk.”

She held her grandmother’s hand tightly, feeling adrift for the first time in years. “Don’t you think that one’s own compulsions can drive one to make decisions that are not in their best interest?”

“Of course I do, my dear.” Cocking her head to the side, which caused her emerald ear bobs to twinkle, she mused, “But in this particular case, I think the duke knows the risk and is willing to take it.”

Tears stung her eyes. She could not ever recall feeling so unsettled. For she wanted to believe in the possibility of love with the duke, but he seemed so ill at ease. “But what about Wexford?”

“Yes, tell me more about this.”

“I don’t care for him and neither do you.” Virginia swallowed. “And the duke has cautioned me about him.”

Her grandmother stilled. “If the duke is cautioning you about him, then we shall take note. He must know something that society does not.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I wonder, though, do you think the duke could be using me?”

Her grandmother blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Using me to upset Wexford,” she rushed. “Today, when he took me out on the boat, he kept looking to the shore and looking at Wexford. Almost as if...”

“What, my dear?” her grandmother prompted. “What was he doing?”

“I think he was very concerned with Wexford’s reaction to him taking me out on the water,” she blurted.

“Oh,” her grandmother said. “That would be most badly done of Wildwood. But it does not seem to be in his character, and he does look at you as if you are a wonder.”

She nodded. “Surely, you are right in that he would not be such a villain as to use me. Especially since his sister died. I do not think that he would wish a young lady ill.”

The words tumbled from Virginia’s lips, but she felt like she was trying to convince herself.

“There you have it,” her grandma announced as if it was all settled. “Likely you are imagining things. You have such a wonderful imagination. But if you are truly concerned, my dear, don’t ignore that. Be careful as you go forward.”

“I thought you might encourage me to be bold,” Virginia ventured.

“You can be bold and still not be a fool,” her grandmother drawled.

A laugh burst from Virginia’s lips. “Like you?”

“Yes, like me.” Grandmama patted her hand, then glanced back over her shoulder and called, “Agatha, it is time to go down.”

Agatha let out a groan as she stumbled out of her room, tugging at her gown.

“I do not like how it fits,” Agatha said.

Her grandmama rolled her eyes. “You look remarkably beautiful, Agatha. Now don’t be silly. It is the height of fashion.”

“But it barely covers anything,” Agatha whispered.

“Exactly,” her grandmama said. “The height of fashion.”

The gown did seem to leave little to be imagined, and it was one of the more popular styles. The bodice barely skimmed Agatha’s breasts and the fabric was remarkably thin, showing the shadows between her legs.

But even Virginia's gown was similar, though not as pale, and she wasn't quite as full figured as Agatha.

"Well," Agatha snatched her gold-edged, ivory shawl. "We shall go down then. If I am to catch a husband, surely it would be wearing a gown such as this."

Grandmama nodded. "Very astute, my dear. Another year on the mart would be terrible for both of you. It is your remarkable independent natures that have kept you on the shelf so long. Now, I should not wish you different because you would have terrible husbands if you were."

"Thank you, Grandmama," Agatha said with a cheeky grin. "Now, let us head down. I cannot wait to dance and see what the duke has arranged."

"I feel the same way, dear. I feel the same," their grandmama trilled.

And with that, the three of them linked arms and headed out into the wide halls. Halls that had been designed for ladies wearing much larger skirts than the ones that were de rigueur now.

Still, Virginia could not quite shake the feeling that things were amiss. It was terrible because she felt her heart giving way to the duke. Her grandmother was right. It didn't take years; it took moments. All the great poets knew it. Grandmama's own marriage spoke of it, and her parents' had too. They had seen each other across a park, connected, and never looked back.

So why should she question it now, this feeling growing inside her? What could be the cause? Because she knew somewhere deep in her core that something was happening that she did not understand, and she needed to understand it before she could trust the duke and risk truly giving her heart.

CHAPTER 17

The duke ground his teeth.

Hartmore looked downcast. “This is not going at all as we said.”

“That seems to be the reigning theme for all of us at present,” Wildwood snapped.

Talbot laughed and took out a dagger.

A wicked smile curved Truebridge’s lips. “Do you have one for me? At this rate, I shall wish to use it.”

Talbot grinned. “For you? A veritable collection awaits.”

Truebridge gave an ominous laugh.

“Good God, man. Are you armed to the teeth?” Hartmore demanded as he thrust a hand through his already wild hair. A bath had seen the lake’s effects eradicated, but he kept tousling it out of frustration.

“Of course I’m armed to the teeth,” Talbot said. “You never know when someone’s going to try to kill you in a hallway.”

Talbot had a great deal of experience with people attempting to kill him in hallways. Apparently, in Europe. When one was battling Napoleon and the downfall of an empire, death did linger around every corner.

Wildwood could understand Talbot’s paranoia. And Truebridge’s growing blood lust.

Still, he was hoping that Talbot did not attempt to stab anyone and that Truebridge kept his head. The pistol was bad enough, but the daggers? Those could be taken anywhere. Talbot just grinned that maniacal grin that seemed to suggest that he was one step away from being completely unhinged.

“Where the bloody hell is Glenfoyle?” Griffin demanded.

“Who knows?” Hartmore said with a beleaguered shrug.

“Does anyone know where that man is?”

“No,” said Bedford. “I think he’s wandered off into the forest.”

“The forest,” Wildwood said. “Where it all started to go wrong.”

Bedford shook his head. “I think everything is going just as it should.”

“How can you possibly say that?” Hartmore gritted. “The young lady that I...”

“Now, now,” Bedford said. “It often feels as if it’s going wrong before it’s about to go right. It is the nature of things. The dark before dawn. The storm before a calm.”

“Oh, good God,” Hartmore growled. “If you’re going to prattle on with more cliches, I won’t be able to take it.”

Bedford laughed. “You will indeed take it. You’re strong enough to. Now pull yourselves together and go find the people that you’re supposed to. Talbot... Be careful. My wife barely got you out of that situation this day.”

Talbot inclined his head. “Give her my thanks.”

The comment explained Mrs. Bedford’s sudden absence from Virginia’s side. But it hit Griffin like a blow that he couldn’t keep her protected as he wished to.

Because life, inevitably, got in the way.

Truebridge poured himself a brandy and stalked to the fire, gazing into the flames as if there were answers there.

Bedford continued as if this was all the most natural event in the world. “Glenfoyle is out in the woods, no doubt, punching a tree. I’ll go after him. And Talbot, you keep that dagger sheathed.”

Talbot winked. “Only for you, Bedford. Only for you.”

“Good,” Bedford said like a nanny sending their charges out into the world for an airing. “Let us disperse.”

They all looked at each other, drew in a long breath, then headed out into the hall.

Wildwood followed Daniel. “Is your wife all right? Is she able to do as we asked? I noted her absence this afternoon.”

Daniel Bedford nodded. “Yes. Her assistance with Talbot was unavoidable. And since you were there, I did not think it would be a difficulty. But she will take special care to look out for your young lady this night. And I will be in the shadows.”

Bedford smiled. “My wife and your young woman seem to be friends already, having discovered a mutual inclination for painting.”

He was glad. She deserved more friends.

“My wife’s maid, Claire, will be in the retiring room ready to take action, and Healy, my man, will be with me all evening.”

“They’re married now, are they not?” Griffin asked.

“Indeed. Healy couldn’t resist Claire’s cheeky nature. It seems that marriage is everywhere. Perhaps you’re next.”

He let out a startled note. “Perhaps.”

The admission felt like a betrayal. Allowing himself to think of any sort of future beyond revenge had never occurred to him until this moment.

Perhaps if all went well, he could...

But it didn’t feel like things were going well. And that was the most damned difficult thing because now he wondered if he was shifting goals from avenging his sister to ending all of this so he could have Virginia.

Would it be such a very terrible thing?

His sister would be happy for him, but would Virginia ever be able to look him in the eyes, knowing what he’d done.

Knowing the vengeance he had to take?

CHAPTER 18

*A*fter leaving Lady Virginia to ready herself for the evening's events, Griffin headed downstairs. He crossed through the long corridors, using back stairways, until he came out to one of the libraries below.

He wanted a moment to collect himself, to find a bit of peace from his friends, who were all pursuing their own goals.

He felt a bit on edge. He wanted to pursue what his friends told him, that he could surrender to her, which was why he had taken her to see the Da Vinci drawings. He felt compelled to be with her at all times now, but he couldn't; he was driven by something else. He wanted to give his heart to her. The temptation was so strong, pulling at him with such a power that he could barely resist giving countenance to it.

It did not matter that they had known each other such a short time—half a week now. All he wanted was to relent to the feeling.

But the continual pressure, the building up of Anne's memory, would not free him. He knew Anne would want him to be free, but it was his own mind that was keeping him on this track, and the fact that he could not allow Wexford freedom.

For if he did, surely he would hurt someone else again. He could still hurt Virginia if Griffin did not put a stop to it. And he was going to put a stop to it. He had a plan.

And that plan would make certain she was always safe. He was going to surrender, and he was going to make her his. It was the only way to protect her.

Someone cleared their throat at the edge of the library.

Griffin whipped round to it. Wexford stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe.

He looked causal, but there was a tension to his body.

It was as if somehow Griffin had summoned him out of the darkness.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice harder than he had intended.

“What a wonderful greeting for your brother-in-law,” Wexford said with a forced smile as he strode in. “So you have decided to pursue the young lady. And she is unwell. How very unfortunate for both of us.”

A muscle tightened in his jaw, and he forced himself to calm. “She seems to need a bit of rest. Perhaps all the attention is too much for her.”

“She’ll make a terrible duchess then,” Wexford said, “if this kind of attention is too much for her. I think you should best let her be and allow her to me. I will be a far better choice. She can come to Cornwall and work on her art. The light is beautiful there, and I will make certain that she sees all the success she desires.”

“Does she wish to be a great artist and successful?” Griffin challenged. “Have you inquired? Perhaps she has no desire to put her work on display.”

“Have you inquired?” Wexford countered, smoothing a hand over his cravat. “I’ve seen her sketches. I’ve seen her work in her father’s office. She could be great. She could be one of the greatest artists of this century, and I will make certain that she is seen for it.”

“If that is what she wishes,” Griffin began, “then you most certainly should. But is that truly why you wish to have her?” And he used those words specifically, *have her*.

“Oh yes,” Wexford said. “I can make her great.”

Could he not see she already was?

“Yes, but do you even care about the young lady?” Griffin demanded. “Do you know anything about her? Her likes or her dislikes?”

Wexford shrugged. “Why should I? I recognize that she would be an asset—”

Griffin cut in, “To attain.”

Wexford blinked. “Aren’t all women essentially assets, things to acquire?”

Griffin could barely reply. What the bloody hell was the man saying? “I see,” he whispered, his body coiling with emotion. “Was that how you felt about Anne?”

“Anne was a diamond,” Wexford replied honestly. “And she was an excellent countess and very happy under my care until—”

“That’s not what her writings suggest,” he snapped before he could stop himself.

“Writings?” Wexford echoed.

Griffin folded his hands and dug his nails into his palms. He had said too much. “Forgive me. It is nothing.”

“No,” Wexford bit out. “What are you talking of? I know that your sister didn’t write to you because I—”

And then Wexford stopped. Wexford cleared his throat again and there was that brittle smile. “Forgive me. We were never particularly close, the age difference between you and I and all of that, but I just wanted to suggest to you that you retreat. I want Lady Virginia. I have spoken to her father; she’s all but mine.”

“She is not yours,” Griffin replied tightly. “And I don’t think she ever will be.”

A muscle ticked in Wexford’s jaw.

He did not reply, but he whirled around and strode away.

The man was like a child and yet dangerous, for he had the power of an earl.

Griffin crossed to the windows and stared out to the lawns. The decorations were all being set up now. Soon it would be a

wonderful array of beautiful things for his guests to enjoy. His mother had been working tirelessly all day supervising the assembly of it.

And he decided that it was important to go to find her, to see how she was holding up, having Wexford in her house. He had been remiss on this. And as he headed out to the gardens, he spotted her chatting with Mrs. Brook, the housekeeper. They were gesturing to the poles and lines, rushing back and forth, making sure that the lanterns were going up.

There was a slight breeze but nothing too concerning, and the sky was free of clouds.

“Mama,” he called.

She turned and strode away from Mrs. Brook and smiled at him. “My darling,” she said, “are you pleased with the turn of events?”

“Yes, Mama, you have set it all up beautifully.”

She lifted her hand and placed it on his shoulder. “I have done everything you have asked. And you? Is it going as you hoped?”

“It is not going exactly as I hoped,” he confessed.

His mama gave a rueful smile. The house party had given her purpose, and she looked brighter than usual. “Things seldom do,” she said.

“You sound like her,” he said softly, thinking of Virginia and her opinion on plans.

“Her who? Oh,” his mother exclaimed, her brows raising. “Lady Virginia, the young lady you are so taken with. I think I like her.”

“Have you spoken with her yet?” he queried.

“No, but there’s something about her presence, and I’ve seen the way you look at her, my dear.”

“Mama, I should not. I have things to do.”

“You will always have things to do, my love,” his mother argued gently. “There will always be dark things and life’s difficulties. But if she is the one for you, you should not let her go. I have seen the way Wexford is looking at her. If you are not careful, he will force—”

“Yes, I understand,” he said. “I do not think her family would force her to marry, but beyond that...” He drew in a breath at his mother’s concern. “I promise you this: I will protect her as I could not protect Anne.”

Her mother’s eyes softened, and a look of sheer agony crossed through them for a single moment. “I am glad, my darling. I am glad that she has a protector in you as your sister did not have in her father. I like the girl,” she declared. “She seems kind. She always looks at peace and as if she’s fully confident in herself, and that is an unusual thing. And so if you like her and you wish to protect her, you know exactly what you should do.”

“And you approve, Mama?” he asked softly.

“With all my heart,” she replied, “because all I want now is your happiness. I was afraid that you were never going to find it after Anne’s death. But now, perhaps, I have hope.”

He did not want to dare to hope, and yet he felt it springing to life in his chest. He smiled at his mother. “Thank you, Mama. I shall do what I can to set everything to rights.”

She bit her lower lip, then rushed, “It is a great deal of pressure on you, my love. And there is so much going on already. Talbot was causing a scene last night at the billiards table.”

“Was he?” he asked, wishing he was surprised but wondering what had caused it.

She gave a tight nod.

“Yes, the footmen had to pull him back. Too much drink, they say, but I’m not so sure.” His mother tsked. “I think he might have been launching a deception. He seems all too clever to me, that friend of yours.”

“He’s a good man,” he replied.

“All of your friends are good men,” she said. “All of them have been touched by suffering and pain. And I will happily have them here, to ease that pain and suffering, to set things right as you are doing.” He brow furrowed as she lamented, “I could not set things right, so I am happy to make certain that this party runs exactly as you need. Your party, their party, this dukes’ party. To make certain that I make up for my shortcomings and how I failed Anne.”

“Oh, Mama,” he said, pulling her into his arms. He wished he had never thought ill of her, that he had wished her different. She had struggled and suffered and wanted to do well, but she had been so alone with no one to support her in the face of his father’s tyranny.

“I hope you know now,” he said, “that I love you and that I will do everything I can to show you that love.”

Her face softened, and she nodded, even as her voice was rich with emotion. “Thank you, my love,” she said. “I do feel it. And if I could go back and change things, I would. I would stand up to your Papa again—”

“It wouldn’t have made a difference, Mama,” he soothed. “He was who he was.”

She drew in a long breath. “Thank you for that, my love. But I should have been firmer, and I should have been by your side and not allowed him to push me about that way.”

“He did it to us all, Mama. So do not think on it another moment. All we can do now is live and choose.”

“Then choose love, my darling,” she urged. “As soon as this party is done, you must choose love.”

CHAPTER 19

“*M*any a marriage shall be made here tonight,” Virginia’s grandmama declared, waving her fan about with excited anticipation.

The silvery threads in the folds shone beautifully under the torch lights.

Lanterns of many colors hung from cords and ornate poles through the hedges, tossing jewel-toned shadows over the greenery.

Candelabras had been hung from more temporary poles decorated with filigrees. The light from the candles shimmered and glowed.

Quite frankly, Virginia gasped at the sight of it.

It looked like a fairyland.

The duke and his mother had done wonders.

She had spent little time with the duke’s beautiful mother, but her eye for decoration and design was not to be outdone. Flowering trees had been brought in and filled the air with the most beautiful scents.

Indeed, the air was intoxicating to breathe, far better than any wine she could imagine.

That said, champagne and lemonade flowed from multiple silver bowls. Tables covered in cakes of every hue tempted. Flowers poured from vases on those tables.

And the company dazzled in their jewels and silks.

Yes, this was the sort of place in which one could feel completely borne over by romance and beauty and feel as if they had come to paradise.

“You are absolutely right,” Virginia said. “I can see many a romance occurring in this magical place.”

Her grandmama laughed, a full-throated bell. “That’s not it, my dear. Have you seen those hedges? My goodness, I do think that there shall be a tryst or ten tonight, and the forest is not far off, and it does look as if they wish for people to go in.”

She followed her grandmother’s gaze and blinked, amazed.

It was true. It did appear as if paths of torches had been set out to lead into the darkness. She wondered if the duke did intend for people to have escapades.

Still, it was the nature of house parties to go and be a bit wild outside of the City of London.

Agatha had already scampered off to the dance floor, which had been erected near the lake. Beautiful columns decorated with flowers had been built around it, and the orchestra was playing exquisite music as well.

The silvery, bright notes filled the air.

Virginia swayed back and forth happily.

“Now, where is the duke?” her grandmama called. “Surely he should be with us at any moment.”

“Oh, Grandmama,” she protested. “You must realize he has many people to see to.”

“Yes, but you are the most important one,” Grandmama declared emphatically.

She smiled at that. She wished it was true. She still couldn’t quite believe the possibility of what was happening between them. Still, she felt the power of it, and in that particular moment, as if her grandmother had called him out of the shadows, the duke came down a set of wide stairs that cascaded towards the lake.

His coat billowed out behind him. Quite unlike a usual gentleman’s evening coat, this one was made of gold and black, and it hugged his frame like angel’s wings.

He looked magnificent as he sauntered up towards her and extended a hand. His emerald crest winked upon that strong finger.

“Come with me, Lady Virginia?” he asked. “I have something to show you.”

She turned and looked at Grandmama. “Do you approve, Grandmama?”

“Go and have a marvelous time,” she said. “His Grace knows what will happen if you two act out of order.”

The duke locked gazes with her grandmama. “Indeed I do,” he agreed.

And with that, he whisked her away.

They walked along the paths, their feet dancing over the smooth pebbles arranged in artful patterns.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“Yes, very much so,” she enthused.

His gaze seemed to be scanning the hedgerows and the crowds, who were all rambling about, marveling at the wonders brought to entertain them.

With each moment, she gasped anew.

People in brightly colored garments juggled fire, swallowed it, then breathed it out like a dragon.

As one did so near them, she jumped and applauded. “How magnificent!” she declared.

He looked down upon her with pleasure at her happiness.

And then she noticed in another part of the garden, there were tightrope walkers, dressed in dazzling hues of gold. “Have you brought an entire circus for us to witness?”

“Something like that,” he said. “It is important to keep guests entertained. Otherwise, they will get up to a great deal of trouble, and bored guests are not allowed at a house party. At least not at a Wildwood party.”

She smiled. "I still like that name."

"My name?"

"Yes, Wildwood," she affirmed. "It seems so apropos with your great wilderness about the house."

He gently guided her, with a touch to her back, along the path. "How observant. The title comes from the archers who used to hide in the woods almost six hundred years ago."

"Truly?" she exclaimed, trying to envision a host of medieval archers disappearing into the wood.

"Indeed," he explained, pointing to the edge of the shadowy forest. "They'd go to battle, the men under my ancient line, and when the army would try to attack them, they'd run into the forest and wait, then pick them off slowly and easily with their long bows."

"My goodness!" she said. "How frightening and clever."

"Yes, they were very brave," he agreed. "I can only imagine that sort of bravery. War is brutal now, but then it was something else entirely, and here in our own country."

She smiled slowly. "I am glad that England knows peace. I hope we shall always know peace."

"We are at war on the Continent," he said, "but this country, I do believe, shall stand and hold the line. It shall be a jewel, just as Shakespeare said."

She considered this and replied, "Shakespeare was a great predictor of so many things."

"Including?"

"He knew a great deal about love," she offered.

His gaze warmed as he gazed down at her.

She swallowed, feeling completely alive under his attention. "Now, the question always remains," she whispered.

"What question is that?" he asked.

"Is life a tragedy or a comedy?"

“I don’t follow,” he stated, his brow furrowing.

She cleared her throat. “It is the eternal point. You see, in a tragedy, everyone dies at the end.”

Understanding dawned on his face. “And in a comedy,” he laughed, “everyone marries.”

“Exactly,” she said, grinning.

“Well,” he said, “I hope that we are in a comedy then.”

She gasped, trying not to read into what he said, or what her grandmother had hoped for.

As he led her farther away, he seemed in good humor this evening. Something was different, as if he felt free. A weight had lifted off him.

“Your Grace?” she ventured.

“You must call me Griffin,” he said.

“That feels very personal,” she replied.

“We are already intimate, Virginia. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And I think you know that I should like to be more intimate with you,” he began as they wandered away from the crowds. “There is something holding me back, and it must be done before I can offer you more.”

She shook her head. “You have already told me—”

“It has been brought to my attention that I have been being rather foolish,” he cut in.

Her heart pounded against her ribs, for the feelings between them seemed to be increasing, flowing between them easily. “By who? Grandmama?”

“No, not your grandmother,” he said softly, his hand still at her back as he guided her to whatever destination he had in mind. “Friends of mine, and I think they are right. I don’t see why I cannot have both things.”

“Ah,” she teased, breathing in the rich scent of earth as they head towards the forest. “Being greedy, are we?”

“Is it greedy,” he said, “to want love?”

“Love?” she queried, nearly stumbling. She braced herself against him, and his hand steadied her as his gaze met hers.

“Am I mistaken?” he whispered, his eyes aflame with intensity. And fear. “You don’t feel it?”

“I do,” she confessed, her voice shaking at the audacity of this conversation. Of the fact that it was occurring. For just a week ago, she never would have thought to find love. “With you, I feel the wonder of this world, as if I could be myself, as if I could finally be free. As if somehow together, this life will realize its full glory.”

Holding her carefully, he reached down and tucked a lock of her hair back from her face. “That is exactly how I feel. Now, come,” he said.

And then he led her into the shadows at the edge of the wood.

She trusted him. Indeed, she did. How could she not when her heart wanted him so very much? “You told Grandmama that we would not do as we shouldn’t.”

“I promise you that I know exactly what I am doing, and no harm shall come to you. Do you trust that?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You see, what I wish to show you is in the woods, and I cannot deny myself your company when I know that soon...”

“What is it?” she queried.

He swallowed. “Wexford will make his presence known, no doubt, this evening, and then things will go a certain way. And I don’t wish to lose you.”

“Lose me?” she bit out. “Over Wexford? How would that be possible?”

His eyes grew quite serious.

“You can’t lose me, Griffin,” she said passionately. “Once I give you my heart, I can’t take it back. It’s not as if it is a purchase from the hat shop.”

He laughed, but it wasn’t full of humor. There was something darker to it, as if his life depended on it.

And then without another word, he led her deeper into the woods.

Clearly knowing exactly where he was going, they wound through the trees into an older part of the forest where branches entwined and little moonlight slipped through.

It was thrilling, tracing over the earthen floor with her hand now in his so that she did not trip upon roots. She had no idea where he was going, and she wasn’t afraid.

At last, he declared, “There it is.”

The stone building rose up from the ferns. Moonlight bounced off the stones, making it glow.

He stopped and pulled her against him as he rasped, “I want you to be mine, Virginia. I could deny it. I could pretend that it wasn’t so, but from the moment we met out on the dales, I think it was evident that you were supposed to be mine. And I can give you my protection from Wexford.”

His words caused her heart to soar, and yet his last statement made her pause. “Your protection? Is that why you wish to—”

“No, I want you,” he said. “All of you. You’re who is making me hope that there could be more in this life than pain.”

“There is more,” she insisted, willing him to believe it.

Doubt darkened his gaze for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“I do,” she said and then lifted her hand to his cheek and caressed it. “Let me show you,” she said gently. “Let us be

together, and let us show the world that there is more than pain.”

He shook his head as if he could not quite surrender to her promise. “I brought you to this place because I want to show you something. I came here often when I was a boy. When I felt lost. When I needed to find myself again. And...there’s something else. Remember on the lake, what you told me about life?”

She frowned. They had said so much. She wasn’t certain.

Slowly, he took her hand in his and guided her to the stone folly, up onto the stone steps which had a balcony that circled to the back.

Wordlessly, he guided her around until he paused.

“Look,” he whispered against her ear.

He pointed to a small pond, shimmering in the night. And there she spotted them: lilies.

The lilies were a beautiful white in the moonlight, unfurled on their pads.

“You see?” he said. “Out of the darkness? Light. Out of the mire, creation.”

“Oh, Griffin,” she breathed, “I’m glad that what I said touched you.”

“So much,” he said, “that it has caused me to be at war with myself.”

“I have caused you to be at war with yourself?” she gasped.

He nodded. “Because I want two things at once, and I’m going to find a way to have them both,” he growled softly.

“There will be no looking back,” she vowed. “There will be no fear of the future. There is just you and me and now, and I don’t care about anything else. I feel like my entire life has been leading me to this moment.”

He stared down at her and whispered softly, “As do I.”

And before she could say another word or think twice, she lifted her hands to his face, tilted his head towards her, and kissed him.

CHAPTER 20

Griffin slowly led her to the bench under the folly's roof.

He could not believe how his life had changed so entirely with her presence. He had never been a man who tallied his triumphs with women. It had not seemed right to him.

So many men just lived for now, for pleasure, but not him. When he gave himself to her, he knew that it would be forever. It was terrifying and thrilling to feel on the brink of such promise.

When he was younger, he had indulged in passions, but over the years, he had realized that it was not what he wanted. A brief quick coupling to allow the passions to flame? No, he wanted so much more.

And so he would worship her body, her spirit, her heart.

He would become a guardian of it all, a protector, and he would show her pleasure. He wanted her to achieve new heights and understand what she deserved.

So many men were content to let the women in their lives never know pleasure, to make them unhappy, unimportant. But that's not what he was going to do. He was going to make certain that every moment, every hour, every day, Virginia knew how important she was and the joy she deserved. Life was too cruel to have it any other way.

Slowly, Griffin trailed his fingertips along her cheeks, tracing her chin.

He let his gaze wander over her face, a face he already adored.

A face that he knew was now in his heart forever. Every time he saw it, his own heart leapt in recognition of finding someone who saw beyond all his external parts and somehow was a witness to his soul.

He traced his fingers gently over her lips, then softly over her neck. He traced downward to her shoulders.

He wanted to make love to her. Make love in a way that both of them would hold in their hearts forever.

And so, when he lowered his mouth to hers, gently taking her lips in a kiss, he imbued it with all his hopes, his hunger, his desire for them to be as one.

Virginia melted beneath him.

He pulled her close to his body, savoring the soft curves of her, letting his hands slowly rove up and down her back, memorizing her curves. He teased his palms over her shoulder blades, her ribs, her waist.

This was harmony.

This was how they could become one. This was no act of frivolously seeking pleasure. This was so much more, and when her own hands wrapped around his waist, holding him close, twining like a vine to a tree, he knew that this was perfect.

So, carefully, he began to lay her back against the stones and then slide up her skirts. He leaned down over her, their bodies melding.

He let out a sigh—a sigh of rapture.

She arched into him, her form soft, open, and vulnerable.

For a long moment, he merely sat beside her on the long stone bench, gazing down at her. She was perfection. Heaven. He'd been to the National Gallery, and he'd seen the paintings displayed there. His houses were full of the greatest works of art.

None of them could touch her.

All those paintings depicting beauty had nothing on Virginia's perfection. She was utterly human, utterly open, with a heart that could not be matched.

Griffin placed his palm over her heart, feeling it beat.

“You are a wonder,” he said.

Her eyes widened with anticipation, and she took his hand in hers, brought it to her lips and kissed it. “As are you, Griffin.”

The tender gesture nearly undid him.

Longing to show her the depth of his feelings, he then trailed his hands over her silk-covered ribcage to her waist, then to her hips and down her legs.

He wanted her to be fully ready and unafraid.

So he stroked her as if they had all the time in the world.

When she was arching against his hands, he rolled atop her. Griffin kissed her again. He slid his hands between their bodies, finding the place that would give her the most pleasure. She was ready for him, warm and inviting. She let out a jolt of surprise as he found that spot.

“Do you like that?” he asked, fairly certain she did, but he wanted her to tell him so.

“Very much,” she breathed. “I had no idea.”

“Let me help you to understand,” he whispered back, and he circled his fingers until she was holding tightly to him, straining for her release.

He wanted her to feel bliss because he knew her first time could hurt, and he did not wish her to experience too much pain.

After several moments of attention, she tensed against his hand and cried out.

Then he took her mouth with his again, positioned himself between her thighs, and rocked oh so gently against her opening. She held onto him tightly, bracing for the moment.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, his voice rougher with passion than he’d intended.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“It might hurt,” he said honestly. “But on the other side of pain—”

“Is pleasure,” she said. “And love.”

“Yes,” he replied, his breathing ragged now.

And then he began to rock forward, thrusting his body in slow lengths.

And when he felt the resistance, he steadily pushed through it. Her eyes flared. And then she let out a breath of amazement as the tension seemed to vanish from her body.

“Are you—”

“It is very strange,” she rushed. “But I think I like it.”

He laughed softly and took her mouth again. Longing to feel at one with her, he entwined their hands. Griffin began rocking back and forth again, finding that spot which would give her the pleasure that she so deserved, that he so wished her to have.

After a few moments, he knew that she was the answer to all his pain... To his soul and to all that he had been seeking.

They had been on separate paths, but those paths had always been leading them to this.

Griffin felt a joy that he had never known as he made love to her, and he could hold back no more. Suddenly, her body tightened around his in ripple after ripple.

“Griffin!” she cried out.

And at the sound of his name, he thrust home. Finally finding exactly what he had always needed. Not just a night of pleasure, but this connection that would last forever.

CHAPTER 21

Griffin quickly helped her to adjust her skirts and her hair, but he could not change the look of pure bliss on her face.

He wondered if he looked the same, and he felt a wave of pure satisfaction that she looked so pleased, so free. Would her grandmother notice? Would everyone notice the difference between them? Did it matter? He rather thought it didn't because she was going to be his.

Somehow, he'd given himself permission to have her.

And so as they hurried out of the forest, he looked down at her and said, "Come dance with me."

"Surely I should go back to the house, and..."

"No," he said. "Come dance with me."

And so she smiled up at him, her eyes warm with love, and it nearly broke him. For he had never known a feeling like this.

"Let us go," she said.

And with that, they raced together to the dance floor. How he longed to feel free, and for a moment, he did.

He could almost taste what happiness would be like. What a life without sorrow or vengeance would be. With her hand in his, he longed to throw himself into that.

It took them several moments of winding through the hedgerows and torches until, at last, they stood upon the polished stage near the lake. The moon continued to shine beautifully over the water. The silvery rays whispered over them as the orchestra took up a waltz. The next thing Griffin knew, he felt transported.

By her.

They danced, swirling slowly, unable to tear their gazes from each other. Their hands, now soft and hungry to know more of each other again and again, were forced to remain still.

Even so, they moved as one, without question.

She beamed up at him, and he beamed down at her.

“Let me make the declaration,” he suddenly blurted. “Let us tell everyone.”

“Tell everyone what?” she breathed.

“That you are going to be my duchess.”

Her eyes flared. “You haven’t asked me yet.”

And then he stopped. “How bloody remiss.”

Her skirts belled and swung against his legs as he held her close, their feet now paused on the polished wood.

Deliberately, never losing her gaze, he lowered himself to one knee before the entire crowd as the dancers danced around them. But as he came to that knee, everyone stopped. Gasps filled the air and the couples stepped back around them.

He held out his hand to her.

Tears filled her eyes, and she slipped her fingers into his.

“Marry me, Lady Virginia,” he asked, his voice rough with emotion. “Be my duchess. Change my world and fill my life with love.”

She blinked and then smiled. “I will,” she said. “With all my heart.”

There was a long pause of astonishment, but then suddenly cheers went up around them, filling the air.

Griffin stood and pulled her into his arms, kissing her.

The moment filled him with such hope that it almost overcame the ever-present knowledge that vengeance was still waiting.

Gently, he broke their kiss and searched over the crowd for the servant who was supposed to be by the orchestra, awaiting his cue.

Griffin gave a nod. The servant bowed, his perfectly curled wig snowy in the light. The man raised a white gloved hand and gave a firm slice with it through the air.

And within moments, fireworks began to go off.

The crowd all about them and throughout the garden applauded.

“Did you arrange this?” she marveled.

“The fireworks have been arranged for weeks,” he said, gazing down at her rather than at the display. For she was far more magnificent than any show could be. “But I did not know I would be celebrating something so powerful.”

Tears shone in her eyes. Tears of wonder as she gazed up at him.

This was what he had been waiting for his whole life, not just vengeance, but *her*. He was still going to get that vengeance, of course. But now? Now he had a future waiting, someone who would bear his children, someone he could take care of, someone he could love.

And yes, everything was going to be well. Just as Bedford had said. Just as soon as he had taken care of Wexford.

As the fireworks burst and blossomed in the air, their beautiful colors unfurling overhead, Virginia’s grandmother rushed up beside them.

“Dear boy,” she gushed. “Welcome to our family!”

“I think your family will be marvelous to belong to,” he said honestly. “You are the most wonderful souls I’ve met.”

At that, Lady Agatha bounced up and hugged her cousin tightly. “It shall be the grandest wedding no doubt. I expect to have an excellent seat.”

Virginia laughed, her cheeks alight with joy. “Do we have to have a grand wedding? Could we not get married immediately? Quietly?”

He let out a sigh of approval. “I could not have thought of anything better. Do you think that we can get your father’s permission quickly? I could get a special license.”

Virginia grinned and bounced on her toes with delight. “I do not think he would disagree. Do you, Grandmama?”

“Of course not,” her grandmother declared. “If you two wish to join in union and not wait, I cannot imagine any sort of disagreement.”

“Then it shall be a great week indeed,” Griffin announced. “The best of my life.”

“No,” her grandmother countered sagely. “The best beginning of a wonderful life.”

And he smiled at them all, feeling hope whispering inside him again.

But even as he did so, he could not help but notice the shadow in the back of his mind. And as he glanced out to the darkness, the sun having set, he spotted Wexford standing near the shore’s edge.

Another volley of fireworks burst overhead, bathing the earl in red light. And for one moment, Griffin saw pure hate on his brother-in-law’s face.

And his hope began to twist into something else.

For he knew that they were not safe, and he had just done something that he could not take back.

But he did not want to take it back.

Suddenly, he was certain that he should have killed Wexford and buried his body out somewhere in the forest, because now he was going to be looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life.

Unless he could still make the man call him out. Surely, something could be done. Surely, by the end of the house party, he could make it happen.

He swallowed because now the stakes were different. Now he had everything to lose, and he'd never felt so contradictory in all his life.



“How did it happen?” Agatha burst out as the duke slipped away to take care of some business.

“I still don't really know,” Virginia confessed, her feelings so high that she felt she might suddenly float away.

“Felicitations,” Mrs. Bedford exclaimed as she rushed up towards them. “I could not think of anything better than this.”

“Thank you,” Virginia returned. “I cannot believe it myself.”

“You have known each other for a few days,” Agatha exclaimed. “Tell me how you did it so I can capture a duke myself and be married within the week.”

She laughed. “Well, there are several dukes here. You never know. Perhaps it could happen.”

“Exactly,” Agatha said. “Now, what was your skill?”

Virginia pursed her lips. “I was myself, and I was honest.”

“Oh, dear,” Agatha groaned. “How terribly annoying. I'm myself all the time, and I have yet to catch a duke.”

“I don't see why you couldn't,” their grandmama declared. “That Hartmore was quite an interesting character, as is Glenfoyle, and...”

“Talbot is most curious,” Agatha mused slowly.

“He looks dangerous,” her grandmama said quickly. “Best stay away from that fellow. I've heard stories about his exploits on the Continent.”

“Exploits?” Agatha said, waggling her brows. “How delicious.”

“No, my dear, not those kinds of exploits,” Mrs. Bedford corrected kindly. “He’s a very capable fellow, but I do not think he is looking to marry this year.”

“I see,” Agatha said with the sigh. “I suppose I shall just have to hope for the best or at least be delighted for my cousin. You are making the marriage of the century, Virginia! Or at least, that’s what everyone will say.”

“Yes,” she agreed without rancor. “Because no one expected that I should make such a thing.”

“It’ll be in all the papers. That is true,” Grandmama said.

Virginia groaned. “Oh dear, I’m about to become the focus of a great deal of attention.”

“I think you shall bear it rather well,” her grandmama said. “Your isolation was never because you were shy, but rather because you were so drawn to your work, and you don’t particularly like boring conversation. That could be a challenge, but as a duchess, you can invite as many artists and intellectuals to your homes as you please.”

“Yes,” she replied and suddenly another thought hit her. Her musings were coming true! “I shall set up galleries immediately.”

Mrs. Bedford smiled. “Well, you shall certainly have the resources to do so. And my husband knows many places in town that are available to rent.”

“Your husband must be an excellent fellow,” Virginia said. “How is it I have not met him yet?”

Mrs. Bedford tsked. “Oh, he is here and there taking care of business.”

“He’s doing business here at a house party?” Virginia asked, rather surprised.

Mrs. Bedford nodded, “Oh, he is always doing business, my dear friend. May I call you *friend*?”

“Please do. You seem to pop up at the most interesting moments, just when I am in need of friends.”

Mrs. Bedford held out her hand. “Those are the best friends, the ones who are there when we are in need. I know that is when I found mine, when my husband and I found the Duke of Wildwood.”

“And I am very glad of it,” Virginia replied firmly, taking the lady’s hand. “We all need good friends. Now, what shall we do? Shall we have a glass of punch?” she said.

“Surely champagne,” Mrs. Bedford suggested, her eyes bright.

“No,” she said swiftly, feeling so much joy she could barely credence it. “I do not wish to mar this moment. I want to feel every bit of it.”

“Come then,” Mrs. Bedford said, linking arms with her. “Off to the lemonade.”

And they all went in search of the lemonade bowl.

A footman was passing out cups efficiently and, within moments, they each had a silver cup.

Virginia happily drank and delighted in her light feeling because this was the beginning of a new life. She had not experienced anything before like the connection she had with Griffin, the union of their bodies, the love of two souls coming together.

She lowered her cup, the sweet notes of lemon and sugar playing over her tongue.

A strange sensation began to hum through her. One that was not pleasant and began to make her feel a hint of doubt. Where was it deriving from? She tried to will it away. For there was no reason for it.

And yet she felt there was still something about Griffin that she did not understand. Something he was hiding. Would that be their entire life? It might be. She recalled his warning that he was not willing to change.

She was not going to try to change him. He was the one who had asked her to marry him. He was the one who had led her into the forest.

She was not trying to lead him into something different, but she would have to accept him for exactly who he was every day, even if it did not turn out as she wished.

But as she had told him, plans were rather boring, and there was no safety in this life. The only way that she could have great happiness was to risk. And she was certain that with him, she could have it. Yes. Great happiness waited for them if they could but be strong.

And surely they would.

CHAPTER 22

Dawn was not far off, and it had been all Griffin could do to stop himself from asking her to come to bed with him, to already take her up to his rooms with him, to be at one with him as he continued on his path to revenge.

Perhaps he would whisper the full truth to her and confess what he was doing. But not yet. He couldn't. It was too great a risk to his friends to share it all.

What if she recoiled from him? What if she rejected him? He swallowed. He could not bear that. And so as he lay in his bed, his head upon his pillow, gazing up at the bed curtains he willed himself to sleep.

He willed himself to close his eyes and drift off so that he could be the duke he needed to be when the sun rose.

The outdoor entertainments had been an exceptional success. He still did not know the outcomes of Glenfoyle, Talbot, Truebridge or Hartmore this night.

After all, they had gone off in different directions. They would meet again in the morning and report. He prayed beyond hope that things had gone as his friends desired.

His life was going in a direction that he had not intended or dreamt of. And he was so, dare he say, happy. And yet with that happiness came fear.

Fear that it was all going to be seized away, that he was going to burn it apart. And that terror that he'd felt when he'd read Anne's journal rattled through him. He took in slow breaths and forced himself to calm. He had to be strong for her. He had to be strong for his friends.

Yes, he would be done soon. And then he could let go.

Sleep began to claim him, the exhaustion of the day finally hitting him. He drifted off slowly. And just as he was about to

completely give way, he felt something at his throat.

And then he heard it. Breathing. The ragged breathing of a man cut through the air, and Griffin's eyes snapped open.

The intense smell of rancid brandy filled the air around him.

Griffin swallowed back the acrid taste in his mouth.

He must have actually fallen asleep for a few minutes. And there before him was the man that he was supposed to have been focused on this entire time, the subject of his vengeance, holding a knife to his throat.

His eyes were glassy with drink, but his face was twisting with the sort of emotion that too much brandy could bring on.

Yes, brandy was responsible for a great deal of fun, but it turned men deadly and without reason.

He thought back to the fireworks, to the look on Wexford's face, and recalled his own hope that he could provoke Wexford.

He had succeeded far better than he'd planned but not within his control.

Where the bloody hell was Bedford?

"What are you doing?" Wexford gritted as he took a swift look at the book upon Griffin's bedside table.

Griffin could not look where Wexford had looked without slicing his throat, but he knew what Wexford had glanced at. Anne's diary.

"I came into your rooms this afternoon after our conversation," Wexford growled. "And I found that. Your sister was a mad woman, a fool."

He said nothing. What could he say with a knife pressed to his throat?

"If she had just done as she was told, nothing ever would have happened to her or my child, you understand?" Wexford

bit out, his voice rough with emotion. “And you are driving me to the edge just like she did. What the devil is wrong with your family?”

Again, Griffin could do nothing. For if he did, his vein would be severed. He would be dead, and all would be lost. And in this moment, he was not thinking of vengeance or of killing this man.

He was thinking of *her*. He was thinking of Virginia and how he was about to be taken away from her. Wexford was going to win again, destroying so much, destroying hope, destroying love.

Griffin’s hands began to curl into fists.

“No,” Wexford warned. “You are going to renounce her. You will not be marrying her. She will understand that it was a mistake.”

Griffin wanted to snort. A mistake? He could not renounce the marriage. She could sue him. And surely Wexford knew that.

But as he looked at Wexford, he understood in that moment that he had perhaps pushed Wexford into a corner that he had not intended. This was the problem with vengeance. Sometimes there were variables that one could not anticipate, such as Wexford finding Anne’s diary and reading it.

Such as understanding that Wexford was not just a villain. He was one who could not be predicted.

“She makes me seem a monster. I am not a monster,” Wexford gritted, his voice thick. “I simply wanted things to be perfect. She needed to be perfect,” he said, “and I was helping her to be like that, but she simply wouldn’t listen. I had to make her understand. I am not a bad man.”

The pain in Wexford’s voice shocked Griffin.

“I loved her. I loved her more than I can ever say,” Wexford lamented, and his hand began to shake as he held the knife. “And my child. When Anne defied me and my child

died, how could I forgive her? How could I let her live on being so foolish? In centuries past, it would've been my right to take her life."

Fury blazed through Griffin. And agony. Good God. This man truly thought he had been wronged and was not the wrongdoer.

He tried to make some gesture to let Wexford know that he would listen to him, so that Griffin could plan, so that he could retreat, so that he could take some other action.

But Wexford pressed the dagger ever so slightly to his neck, and he felt his skin slit and a bead of blood slip free.

He winced.

Of all the ways he could go, he had never imagined it would be Wexford in his room at night killing *him*. This was the opposite of vengeance. This was absolute loss.

Wexford shook his head again. "I could have helped her, you know. Virginia. I was going to make her a great success. Did you think I was going to take her to Cornwall and make her stop sketching? No. I was going to have her complete more art, and we would have put it on display for the world to see what a genius she is. And I would have shown her off to the world, a shining jewel."

Wexford's lip curled. "Would you do that? No. As your duchess, she will run your house and host your parties and be your broodmare."

Griffin realized now that this was the sort of man Wexford truly was. He wanted to consume, to own, to control. And he could not see that it was not love.

What had happened to this man to twist him so?

Wexford blinked. "She would have come to understand how much I love her."

There it was again, that word: love. But it wasn't love. It was control.

Wexford blew out a long brandy-tainted sigh. “I think I’m going to have to kill you here,” he said. “It wasn’t my intent. It never is when it happens. But sometimes a lord just has to show the world that he’s a lord.”

With those shocking words, Griffin knew that Wexford absolutely had killed his sister. Perhaps she had not even died in childbirth. Perhaps it had been a pillow. Perhaps it had been poison, but Wexford was capable of it.

The earl clearly saw himself as one of those old lords who had dominion over everyone under his control.

But this? This was out of that ancient order. An earl was not supposed to kill a duke unless it was on a battlefield. And surely Wexford knew this.

And that, combined with the brandy, was why he looked so out of sorts.

Wexford was going beyond the bounds of even his own ideas of what was right. Was Wexford losing the plot? Could Griffin use that?

But just as he was about to try something, anything, lest he be murdered in his bed, he heard a floorboard creak.

Wexford glanced back at the sound and gasped as something crashed forward, smashing into Wexford’s head. Wexford’s eyes flared open, and he collapsed down onto Griffin’s chest.

For one single moment, he was certain that Wexford’s grip would tighten, and the knife would slice his throat.

It did not.

Much to his astonishment, Wexford’s hand relaxed as he collapsed onto Griffin’s bed.

Griffin let out a shuddering sigh and shoved the man off him quickly. Wexford was unconscious, his eyes staring.

Griffin looked for the attacker.

There stood Virginia, a statue in her hand, the head of it covered in blood. She was shaking.

“I wanted to be with you,” she rushed, her voice uneven. “I couldn’t stop myself, and I’m so glad I didn’t.”

She lowered the statue and swung her gaze from Griffin to Wexford. “This is all my fault,” she rasped “He would not be here if it was not for me.”

“No,” Griffin protested, shoving Wexford away and onto the rest of the bed. He pulled himself up and strode to her. “That is not true, Virginia. It is not true.”

And with that, he took the statue gently from her hand and placed it down on his desk. Her shoulders curved and she let out a long breath. But then her eyes flashed with fear. “Is he going to die?” she asked. “Have I murdered him?”

Her face was white, her eyes wild.

He darted over to Wexford. The man’s eyes opened, and his hands went for Griffin’s throat. Griffin hauled his fist back and slammed it into Wexford’s jaw in an unrelenting blow.

Wexford eyes closed and he went limp.

Griffin grabbed a sheet and wound the man’s hands behind his back. Carefully, he checked Wexford’s pulse.

It still seemed to beat with fair steadiness. “We have merely stunned him. Soon he will likely come to.”

“Thank God,” she whispered. “But I could not let him kill you. I could not let him take you away from me. I love you too much. And all I could see was...”

“I am grateful to you,” he said, turning and crossing back to her. Quickly, he folded her in his arms, determined that she should feel his protection.

Protection. In the end, it was *she* who protected him.

“I was terrified that he was going to keep us apart,” he said, “that he was going to steal me away from this life, just like he did with—”

She lifted her gaze to him. “Just like he did with?” she echoed.

He swallowed. And yet he could not bring himself to say the words.

A look of horror crossed her face. “He killed your sister, didn’t he?” she whispered. “That is how she died.”

He gave a tight nod.

“That’s what he was saying when I came into the room,” she continued, beginning to put all the pieces together. “I couldn’t make sense of what he was saying. It all sounded like nonsense. But now I understand. Wait,” she whispered.

“This,” she glanced to the diary on the table. “This is what he was talking about, her writing. I don’t understand.”

“Oh my love,” he soothed. “It is not about you. You saved me, and I’m so grateful. Wexford did want to marry you, and he would have destroyed you if I had allowed him. So, when I saw his intentions, I had to act. I had to choose you and pursue you.”

“You did this because of him, not because you want me,” she stuttered.

“No, love. No,” he rushed, suddenly feeling as if he was on the edge and that one missed step could cost him everything. “You have given me hope and you have shown me love.”

“Tell me,” she bit out. “Tell me what you have been hiding.”

He winced. He couldn’t lie to her. Lies were no longer valuable to him. “Do you recall how I told you I was focused on something?”

She nodded slowly.

“It was him,” he explained slowly. “I brought him to this house because I was going to find a way to make him call me out. I saw the way he was focused on you and—”

“You used that,” she whispered. “You thought he might call you out because of me.”

“Yes,” he admitted, a wave of shame crashing over him. “But I could not hold myself back. I had to have you, not just to protect you, but because you are what my soul wants.”

She drew in a breath as tears filled her eyes. “I want to believe it’s true, but now I find there are so many lies.”

“No,” he said. “There are not so many lies, love. Just one. It was a lie that all I thought I wanted was vengeance. I kept that from you. But just being with you in this short amount of time, you have showed me that there is so much more to life. You showed me that I could have a life, that I could have love, that I could have a family, and I want it to be with you.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks. “Do I dare to believe it?”

“Please do,” he begged. “I will let him live. I will let him go,” he said, “if it proves it to you.”

“Would you kill him now?”

“No. I could not murder him in cold blood. I am not like him. And I could never meet your gaze if I descended to that. But he has just attempted to murder a duke,” he pointed out.

“What do you propose?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“I shall give him over to justice if you allow it.”

“Allow?” she queried. Virginia shook her head, then declared firmly, “You *must*. Because he must be stopped from ever doing this to anyone again, to a woman, to a man, to any soul. I don’t care how broken he is or what has led him to do it. He must be stopped. But I still don’t know how to feel,” she confessed softly. “I knew that something was wrong. I knew that you weren’t just pursuing me because you loved me. I’m not the sort of person that a duke like you pursues.”

“You are,” he protested, his heart breaking at her words. “With all my heart and soul, Virginia, I tell you that you are.”

She stilled. “I want to believe it.”

“Then do. I beg of you.”

She slipped back from him ever so slightly. “I don’t know if I can. But perhaps?”

“Yes,” he ventured, daring again to hope.

“Tell me the tale,” she urged. “And hold nothing back.”

And so for the first time in his life, Griffin prepared to bare his soul without hiding anything. Because love was worth the risk.

CHAPTER 23

Virginia listened carefully. It was so tempting to go to emotion, to be angry, to feel victimized by events, but Griffin was truly the victim. His sister had been the victim. And as she listened to the story unfold, and as he showed her passages of Anne's diary, her heart wept for him.

She thought of the boy who'd lost his sister, and of the man who had discovered that his beloved sister had been brutalized and killed.

He was such a good man, trying to find justice, and she felt for certain now that she had been sent to him as a balm to his soul, to show him that he did not have to suffer anymore.

That he could live out his life without never-ending pain.

And so when he finished and closed Anne's diary, she took his hand in hers.

"Thank you," she declared firmly. "Thank you for sharing all of that with me. And I beg of you to never keep a secret from me again."

He squeezed her hand, relief seeming to flood him at her words. "I shan't because I realize now that you are my strength, and you are what will give my life hope."

"My love," she said, her heart so full for him. "You are worthy of love without me, but I am happy to be the one to give it to you."

And as she leaned forward to kiss him, the door burst open, and three men charged in.

"Bloody hell, there he is," the tallest and most formidable of the men said as he glanced at the bed, taking in Wexford.

"You're a bit late, Bedford," Griffin replied.

Bedford groaned and showed his bruised cheek. “Things are afoot downstairs. You don’t want to know what’s happening with Talbot and Glenfoyle. It is a free-for-all, but we finally have it in hand.”

Wildwood let out a groan. “It has all gone wrong then?”

“No. No, it has not,” Bedford assured. “It is all going surprisingly well. And from the look of you two, it is going even better up here. Aside from Wexford.”

Bedford let out a sigh. “I am sorry, though, because I can see that this was a most difficult situation.”

“It was harrowing for a moment,” Griffin said.

“Forgive me,” Bedford replied.

“How can I not forgive you? You have done everything in your power to help. Your wife has too, taking care of my future wife. And we cannot predict the nature of these men. We knew the risks, and we took this on. And you have done an excellent job.”

“I almost got you killed,” Bedford returned.

“No,” Griffin said. “I did that. I’ve been pushing Wexford too hard, and I should have known that he would explode. Neither of us thought he was capable of outright murdering me.”

Bedford looked embarrassed. “It is still inexcusable. As my wife said, I’m at work this week. And I clearly needed more men.”

“Your plan was an admirable one,” she cut in. “For the duke is most capable. But your wife did not intimate that you were arranging all of this. And what is happening with Talbot, Glenfoyle, Truebridge, and Hartmore?” she queried.

“I shall tell you more about it,” Griffin assured, “but first, let’s permit Bedford and his men to take care of Wexford. Come with me,” he said.

Griffin turned to Bedford. “You’ll dispose of him and make certain that the bailiffs have him in hand.”

“We shall lock him up and make certain that he doesn’t go anywhere,” Bedford affirmed. “This man will be seeing the King’s justice for attempt of murder of a duke, I assume.”

Wildwood nodded. “That is correct.”

Virginia slipped her hand into Griffin’s, and together they rushed from the room, out to the hall, and down to the room where he had shown her the Da Vinci sketches.

As they slipped in, surrounded by the ancient portraits, he whispered to her, “I’m free now, at last. Will you have me?”

“I already told you yes—”

“But now that you know what I was going to do,” he rushed, fear lacing through his words. “What I was capable of.”

She lifted her hand to his lips. “My love, what I see,” she began, “is someone who is loyal and true and who wanted to honor the memory of his sister. A man who could not bear the idea of anyone else being hurt in such a way. So yes, I will have you. With all my heart. I am honored to have you.”

“As am I,” he replied, his fear at last vanishing, replaced by love and acceptance.

Griffin tilted her face back, lowered his lips to hers, and took her mouth in a passionate kiss. And she felt the weight of the world suddenly slip from his shoulders.

And she knew that whatever life presented to them, love would always rule the day.

EPILOGUE

Six years later

*F*ive-year-old Edward and four-year-old Anne darted about the gallery.

Virginia touched her burgeoning middle with her gloved hand. Soon there would be another beautiful soul to brighten their lives and make them realize why life was so delightful and full of mischief.

Oh, the children tested her often. Some days she felt like she might lose herself trying to stay calm and be kind. After all, they were new souls trying to make their way in the world and challenge everything about them. She was lucky she had people to help her.

There was, of course, her husband who was now chasing them about as if the long gallery was Newmarket and they were competing to see which of the horses would win.

Neighs and whinnies went up, and Virginia laughed at their transformation. Children amazed her with their ability to believe in anything and make play feel so very real.

She could almost see the horses darting about the track around the gallery.

Virginia lifted her gaze to the paintings surrounding them. All new artists, beautiful works, interesting works. Some of the works could not find a place at the Royal Academy because they were a little too bold. But because she was a duchess, she could host them all.

And after a few moments, Griffin gestured for the two children to go off to the nanny for a bit and he strode up behind her. Gently, he circled his arms about her waist and touched her growing middle through her gown.

“How are you feeling, my love? Any better?”

She nodded. “Yes. I feel almost entirely myself again.”

And she would, she knew now, for a few months. The nausea had disappeared as well as the exhaustion. And she actually felt rather spritely.

He turned and studied a specific painting. “Look at your work,” he mused with pride.

She smiled at Griffin’s encouragement.

She had begun to display her own work. Unlike Wexford’s determination to show her off as some sort of prize, Griffin had not wanted her to feel limited in any way.

Her work was well-received, and it was wonderful. But she did not truly care about that. What she cared about was that she did not have to hold herself back or hide. She could be who she was, an artist, a mother, a duchess, one who helped people, one who elevated other artists and showed the world what they were capable of.

And Griffin was her greatest champion. Whatever she wanted, he followed, and she in turn followed him. It was simply fortunate that their views, visions, and dreams were entwined. She leaned her head back and rested against his shoulder.

The portrait was the one of the dales where she had met him that day. She’d begun it years ago as a watercolor.

But this year, she had decided to do it upon canvas.

“Can you imagine,” she mused, “if I had not gone out for a walk, or if the carriage ride had been not so long, or if Agatha had come with me?”

“I refuse to imagine it,” he whispered gently against her neck. “Because this moment was always meant to be.”

“This one?” she queried.

“Yes,” he said, “my love.”

And he pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck before continuing, “This one, here with you, with me and our

children, and with all this beautiful work around us. Our life, the sum of it all? This is what all of that pain led to and will continue to lead to. A life full of love and hope.”

And with that, she smiled, and settled into his embrace. How could she not?

For through all the pain and all the vengeance of the duke and his friends, they had found love.

Oh, it had been no easy path. And there were moments that she had been certain it was all going to go terribly wrong. But here she knew that every fight, every dark moment had been worth it.

Love was always worth it.

Don't forget to try The Bluestocking War Series too!

[The Beast's Bride](#)

Lady Augusta Penworthy is in dire straits. Her father has spent every last coin and she and her sisters cannot even afford coal. One chance encounter and a torn gown change everything. While one might think a sudden marriage to a wealthy lord would be a relief, if that marriage is to to The Duke of Blacktower one would be vastly mistaken. For no young lady wishes to be the that infamous rake's bride.

The Duke of Blacktower has a secret. He has vowed never to marry and ensured his fearsome reputation would dissuade any hopeful lady or their scheming mama. Now, his hand has been forced and his fury is unleashed. But Lady Augusta is not the manipulative young lady he believed and suddenly he finds himself tempted by his own bride.

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[The Beast's Bluestocking](#)

Lady Phillipa's heart is on the verge of being broken. The man she has exchanged letters with for months now refuses to

answer her missives. That man, after the death of his older brother, is now the Duke of Grey, one of the most powerful lords in the land. When his sister invites Phillipa to the country, she jumps at the chance to discover why the duke forsook their love. But when she arrives, she finds a broken, brooding man who insists keeping her away is for her own protection. But in his beautiful face, marred by scars, she sees the soul of the man she loves. Nothing will stop her fighting for their love. Not even his quest for vengeance.

Brutally wounded at the battle of Waterloo, Anthony, Duke of Grey, knows he can never allow Phillipa into his life. It matters not that he treasured every letter she wrote him. Or that those letters sustained him under the brutal command of Captain Adams. But now a duke, even though his body is irreparably scarred, he is determined to bring Adams to justice for his horrible cruelty towards the youngest members of his crew. Grey will stop at nothing to keep Phillipa safe and away from his war torn heart. After all, he is not the young man he once was. No, he will not allow Phillipa into his tortured world, even as he longs for her body and soul. But when she arrives at his castle, can he turn her away or will love tame the beast?

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[The Beast's Belle](#)

The last Penworthy sister, ruined and saved from a trickster at the altar has one chance to come back to England and find a new life. . . She must become a companion to a recluse's sister in the wilds of Yorkshire. . . But the past wants to drag her back into the darkness, and when she meets the Beast of Hardcastle, she doesn't know if her last chance is worth surviving the dark nights in his domain. . . Until he begins to awaken her broken heart and tease her with the promise of pleasure.

The Beast of Hardcastle knows heart break. Tragedy destroyed his entire family in one night. When he agrees to take on a

ruined young lady for his former best friend, he plans on avoiding her in his vast castle. But a shocking first meeting changes everything and he cannot ignore the way he is drawn to her over and over again. He can never fall in love again. . . But perhaps. . . Just perhaps he can bring her into his bed.

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[The Beast's Beloved](#)

In the wilds of Scotland. . . A beast broods. The Duke of Clyde has been friend to many but none can climb the walls around his heart. None can thaw the ice that he has wrapped his soul in.

Until a bluestocking invades his castle, his life, and threatens to upend everything he has ever known.

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[The Beast's Bed](#)

Miss Margaret MacGregor has a secret. To protect her family she has done the darkest of deeds and now she is determined to find the protection of a good marriage. A marriage that will let her pursue her dreams. Arranged by a powerful friend, she is ready to marry the Earl of Derby. But when she arrives, the earl does nothing as expected. He demands a trial. Drawn to the Earl who seems to carry a shadow in his heart, she agrees. Margaret cannot deny her desire for him but if he learns the truth will he cast her out? When her heart begins to long for him, she is determined to keep him. . . And her secrets.

The Earl of Derby needs a governess not a wife. Except no governess has been able to manage his spirited sons! But when Margaret arrives on his doorstep, eyes flashing, and a wild plan in hand, he cannot resist her. To his amazement, her remarkable ways beguile him and his small sons in a way he never thought possible. But there is a wall around his heart that almost matches his highland lass'. Will she ever trust him enough to tell him why she has terrifying nightmares or will

they both keep to the fortresses of their hearts. . . Alone without love in a marriage of convenience.

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[The Beast's Betrothed](#)

Miss Mary Lucy is about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder at the notorious bawd, Mrs. Hughes', to pay off her father's debts. Just as she is certain she is about to become the possession of some lord who will do whatever he pleases for one night, a man comes out of the shadows and bids an astronomical sum of money. She is uncertain if he is the devil himself or her savior. But there is one thing that is true. The Earl of Blackmore is unlike any man she has ever met, and when he whisks her away from that place, she is shocked to find that the earl has no intention of using the night he purchased. She quickly hopes that she can convince him to be her permanent keeper. Instead, the enigmatic and dangerous lord offers her a chance at freedom she never expected.

The Earl of Blackmore is used to maneuvering people. All his adult life he has organized England from the shadows, but in one moment, his life changes entirely. For in that moment, he is determined to make a difference in Mary's life. After purchasing her for the night, he knows that is not enough. He must ensure she is safe from her father for all time. But there is only one way to truly offer protection to a young lady. He will ask her to become his betrothed. But can he let her in? Or will their marriage be only one of convenience?

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[The Beast's Bet](#)

Tom Courtney is a beast of the East End. Fighting his way up through the warrens, clubs, and halls of sins in London's darkest part of town, he has but one goal. . .

To survive and ensure that the weak aren't preyed upon. When he discovers a young lady is victim of a vicious bet. . . He

cannot stop himself from coming to her aid. . .
Even if it might cost him everything he has ever won.

[*Buy now!*](#)

[The Beast's Beguiled](#)

Catherine Ludlow knows the betrayal of family. Left alone, with a sister to support, and no money to run her house or even buy food, she takes matters into her own hands. She demands that the man responsible for her brother's infamous departure to the continent teach her how to be a mistress. After all, she will never choose to give her life into the hands of a husband now. . . But the dark duke arises a shocking passion in her. Not only does he heat her body. . . He awakens her heart.

The Duke of Blackwood has known much tragedy. It has twisted him into the sardonic, dangerous duke he is and when Cat steals into his rooms, he is happy to oblige her in her quest for independence. . . Until he realizes, that he wants her for himself. Can he open his heart to love or will his past keep her out and keep him forever alone?

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[The Beast's Ball](#)

Can one ball change a bluestocking's life and mend a beast's broken heart?

Scarred and sarcastic, the Earl of Argyle has abandoned society, choosing to live alone, away from Scotland in his London townhouse. But he needs an heir. Throwing a ball to find a woman who might be able to endure being married to someone so brutalized by war. . . He never imagined he could find the perfect woman in Miss Rosalind Worthing. The surprisingly tart young lady prefers hiding in the shadows, scribbling away as the ton dances in his glittering ballroom. But surely, a lady could never, ever love a beast like him. . .

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[The Beast's Bargain](#)

Sometimes the only way a beast can find love is with a bargain. . . But will the lady in question be brave enough to take it?

Miss Olivia Bliss is the delight of the ton! Charming, beautiful and. . . Living a lie. For in her heart of hearts, she'd rather discuss Roman philosophy instead of diamonds. But her mother and father are determined she should make an excellent match, of course. Olivia has one last chance at living her dreams and it means going all the way to an island in Scotland to seize it over Yule!

The Duke of Ayrshire is a nearly broken man. After the loss of his dear brother, he looks after his niece and nephew and the Roman collection his brother was working on. He has only one goal. To honor his brother. There is no room for love or a duchess in his life. But when Olivia shows up on his castlestep in the middle of a snowstorm right before Christmas, he dares to give her her dream. For surely, nothing can touch his heart. . . Not even Miss Bliss

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[The Beast's Beauty](#)

Sometimes beauty is in the eye of the beast. . .

Summoned in the dead of winter to his father's friends house, the Earl of Brookhaven discovers a bet has been made and the winnings are being called in. He is to marry without ever having met the young lady in question. Immediately. And as a man of honor, he cannot deny the demand, even if the young lady seems to hate him upon sight.

But when Brookhaven locks gazes with Miss Jane, he can see how wounded she is, and Brookhaven cannot allow that to stand. . .

No matter the cost.

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[The Beast's Bliss](#)

Lady Rose must marry. All young ladies do! Her mother is even certain she has what it requires to be the Diamond of the Season. But Rose cannot bear the crush of a ballroom. And one night, unable to endure the boisterous, dancing crowd, she seeks shelter in the garden. . . Where either the answer to her dilemma or her ruination waits.

For Viscount Clarence is beautiful, dangerous, and. . . Offers her help when no one else will. But is the cost of that help too high to obtain Lady Rose's desires.

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[The Beast's Broken Heart](#)

Lord Abernathy has seen the face of war and sacrificed his heart to it. Though his friends long for him to return to society and find joy again, his dreams are tormented by memories of battle fields and heartbreak. So, when a feisty young lady meets him in the library at a ball, he's determined to send her on her way. . . But something about her speaks to his soul and the heart he thought that could never mend.

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[The Beast's Bid](#)

Daniel Bedford knows the brutality of war and the position of being born in the worst parts of London. Nothing will stop him clawing to the top of power. Not even love. When he makes a bid to change his life and climb out of the East End. . . Love demands a chance. But can Daniel dare to open his heart and take it?

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Don't forget to try The Hoydens of Hyde Park Series too!

[To Have And To Hoyden](#)

From glittering ballroom to stunning castles, join four Hoydens as they turn London and the ton upside down in their pursuit of dreams, passion, and love!

Lady Pheobe is on a mission! She must wed to secure her fortune. . . A fortune being stolen by her guardian. She's found the perfect laird. Now, she just needs to convince him. And when he agrees, Laird Dunbroch's kisses convince her that passion is in her future. But will passion prevent the pursuit of her dreams?

Conn Sinclair, Laird Dunbroch is in dire needs of funds. His lands have been left in terrible debt by his ne'er do well father!

So, when Pheobe Danvers turns up on his doorstep and proposes marriage, he can't refuse. But first, he must extricate her from her guardian, and as they race to the highlands and the fulfillment of her dreams, he discovers that she is more than a plump purse. She may be the answer to his wounded heart. . . If he can but give it.

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[Happily Ever Hoyden](#)

A Lady Who Loves Lists:

Lady Evelyn is determined to do more than dance about ballrooms, even if she loves to waltz! Much to her good fortune, she's an heiress with a guardian who prefers reading to rules. When she meets Lord Blake, she's certain he's irascible, impossible, and absolutely deliciously gruff. He's also as determined as she is to make the world a better place. Quickly, she realizes with her vast fortune, they could make all their dreams come true. There's just one thing, she quickly realizes she desires his kiss as much as she desires their dream. Will passion destroy all they've worked for? Or will love find a way.

A Lord With A Broken Heart:

Lord Robert Blake served for years on the battle fields of Europe, stitching young men up and trying to save them from

death. Those years have left him determined to do all he can for the wounded who return home to London. A chance meeting with Lady Evelyn stuns him and gives him hope in a way he never dared imagine. For suddenly, someone cares as much as he and promises him aid. There's just one thing. Robert's hunger for her heart and body match his admiration of her mind and he knows he has but a hollow heart to give. Can he take a chance at finding love or choose the pain of the past?

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[A Hoyden To Hold](#)

A Hoyden at Heart. . .

Lady Evelyn Staunton, can't stand the idea of marrying the man her mother has chosen for her. Baron Ashby is powerful, handsome, and believes a woman's duty is to do exactly as her husband decrees. So, when Amelia encounters the Earl of Hastings in the dark, escaping the ton too, she knows she cannot accept her fate. And when the earl offers her an option to escape, she cannot say no. After all, the handsome earl with a tragic past awakens a desire in her she's never known and a belief that her life can be far more than she ever dreamed. But will her family stand in the way of their happiness?

A Lord Unlike Any Other. . .

The Earl of Hastings needs a wife and needs her now. After all, the London Season is a dreadful bore. But when he meets Lady Amelia and witnesses her fiery spirit, his soul recognizes her as the woman destined for him. He doesn't think twice and offers for her hand at once. But her family abhors his past and insist on marrying her to a man who will control her every waking moment. Hastings will not yield until she is free. . . No matter what it takes, but can their love survive such peril?

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[How the Hoyden Won the Duke](#)

A Lady Like No Other

Lady Thomasina Kent is determined to study science. Raised with benevolent neglect by parents who adore their own studies, she has been able to pursue things that other ladies have not. But now she has come up against a great obstacle.

For no young women are allowed within the hospitals or medical schools of London, but she has a plan. The Duke of Highcliff might just have her answer and when she corners him in The George coaching inn, she is certain that he can be of aid. There's just one thing. She has not anticipated the way his gaze makes her body burn with hunger or the way his words make her spirits soar. Will their deal be the answer to her dreams or the breaking of all that she's ever known?

A Duke Determined to Lead:

The Duke of Highcliff is a man of science and power. On the fields of France, he saw passion like no other to fight Napoleon. But he also saw blood and when he returns to London, he takes up the position of patron to Guy's hospital. When he meets Thomasina Kent, he's shocked to find that he's willing to help her because he does not wish her dreams to be crushed. For he is drawn to her in a way he cannot deny. When he offers her help, it is a dangerous ruse. To gain her dreams, he is putting her reputation on the line. And if things go amiss she will be ruined completely. Will he allow his heart to lead him or will his head win?

[Buy now!](#)

[The Spinster and the Rake](#)

The marriage game is afoot in this clever blend of *My Fair Lady* meets *Pride and Prejudice* with a twist!

Edward Stanhope, the icy Duke of Thornfield, likes his life in a certain order. Give him a strong drink, a good book, and his dog for company, and he's content. But when he goes to his library and finds a woman sitting in *his* chair, petting *his* dog, what starts as a request for her to leave quickly turns to a fiery

battle of wits, leading to a steamy kiss that could ruin them both if they were caught.

So of course, damn it all, that's when Edward's aunt walks in, and thereafter announces Miss Georgiana Bly is the future Duchess of Thornfield.

Georgiana was content to be a spinster, spending her days reading and working to keep her family out of debt. But now her days are spent locked away with a growly duke, learning how to be the perfect duchess, and her nights spent fighting the undeniable attraction to a man who was never meant for her.

As their wedding day approaches, the attraction between them burns hot and fierce, but is it enough to melt the duke's chilly facade?

[*Buy now!*](#)

Don't forget to try The Wallflower Wins Series too!

[The Way the Wallflower Wed](#)

In this wild and witty series the wallflower always wins. . . The rakes, rogues, and dukes won't know what's hit them. . . Lady Pippa Post is one of London's most woeful wallflowers. With a father who has lost it all and an intellect as sharp as a cutlas, she's firmly on the shelf.

But Pippa has no desire to retire to a wilting life in the country, even if she adores learning dead languages, and pouring over ancient tomes. So, when a position opens, curating the Earl of Roxly's ever growing Egyptian collection, she knows exactly what must be done. But she doesn't expect that Roxly's rugged demeanor and wicked wit will entice her into a game of passion.

Lord Marcus Drake, Earl of Roxley, has no time for shrinking violets. He has no time for Londoners at all! He's man of power, passion, and purpose. In but a short time, he is determined to leave English shores behind and return to the

Nile he loves so well. . . But when a waspish wallflower shows up, determined to take care of his artifacts, he's intrigued and shocked to find that she is a mystery to be discovered. . . And adventurer that he is, there's nothing Roxly loves more than a mystery.

Will Pippa shrink from a chance at love with this wild brute of a lord. . . or will the wallflower wed.

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[The Wallflower's Wicked Wager](#)

Miss Helena Highbury is destined to write romantic novels. She might have to be a governess along the way to make ends meet. And when she discovers that her employer is the very model of a brooding hero, she might just have to take the plot into her own hands.

After all, what is a hero without his heroine?

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[The Wallflower's Wild Wedding](#)

Miss Eloise Edginton has spent every single season as a woeful wallflower. Every year, she longs to sing for society as all the other young ladies do. . . There's just one problem. Eloise has a golden voice that even the greatest prima donna would envy. Desperate to fulfill her dreams of becoming a great singer, Eloise does the only thing she can. She petitions the famous opera patron the Earl of Hollybrook to aid her. In all her wildest dreams, Eloise never could have imagined his shocking solution but to fulfill her deep desires, she will do whatever he says. . . Even risk ruin.

The Earl of Hollybrook is a rake of rakes. Knowing the dangers of jealousy, he chooses to change partners as quickly as some gentlemen change their cravats. But when a young lady accosts him at a house party in his bedchamber, it isn't the sort of proposition he's used to. And he finds, he cannot resist Eloise's dreams. Determined to make them come true, as

his never could, Hollybrook takes her in hand. But as he does, she takes his heart. . . The very worst thing that could happen. For he fears the monster that love could make him.

[Buy now!](#)

[The Week The Wallflower Was Wanton](#)

Lucy McTavish dreams of being an artist. But being a wallflower, she's firmly on the shelf and destined for an arranged marriage with a strict husband in the wilds of Scotland. Determined to keep her dreams, there's only one thing to do. Choose ruin. Surely, Viscount North, rake of rakes, is the man for the job. But she never expects to have her heart stolen just as much as her breath when he sweeps her into his sinful world.

Viscounty North lives life to the full. After all, he knows how quickly it can end. Losing his entire family in a tragic accident as a child, he is determined to never know loss or such agony again. When the pert yet surprising Lucy arrives at one of his parties demanding ruin, he knows he should say no. But her passion to pursue her freedom and something about her has him falling under her spell. There's just one thing. He's vowed they have only one week to be wanton. But when the time comes. . . Can he let her go when his traitorous heart longs for her to stay?

[Buy now!](#)

Don't forget to try The Duke's Secret Series too!

[A Duke for the Road](#)

A Duke With A Secret:

Robert Deverall, Duke of Blackstone, is cursed. Or so he thinks. Inheriting a dukedom bankrupted by his dissolute grandfather, father, and elder brother has made him determined that the male line will end with him. He refuses to allow any one else to suffer at the hands of a Deverall man. When he meets his childhood friend, Lady Harriet Cornwall, he is

determined to stay away from her, despite the fact she makes his heart sing and his body ignite. When the two are caught in a compromising position, he has no choice but to marry the wild, independent Harry. But will his determination never to have children, and his fears about his family line, destroy their chance at love?

A Lady Determined to Unmask the Duke:

Lady Harriet Cornwall is determined to marry and quickly.

After all, she loathes the uninspiring parties a proper unmarried lady can attend. No, she longs to be just like her mother, a beacon of culture, literature, and fun. And like her mother, she longs for a large family. When she meets Rob again, she can hardly believe the transformation from mischievous boy to sardonic and mysterious man. In the breath of a single dance, her heart is lost. From their very first kiss, she knows he is the one for her. But he has a dark secret. Will he push her away as he has done to everyone else? Or will she be able to coax her dark duke back into the light to find love?

[Buy now!](#)

[How to Marry a Duke Without Really Trying](#)

A Duke Determined to be Perfect:

George Cornwall, Duke of Harley, is a perfect duke in almost every way. . . Just as he promised his father he would be. There's only one problem. He doesn't have an heir. When he encounters his childhood friend, Lady Eglantine, again he immediately knows she will be the perfect duchess and mother of his children. There's only one thing. She refuses to marry him without love. He desires her, admires her, and longs to make her his, but George knows that something so wild as love might lead him from his path of perfection. Will he be able to let himself lose his heart or will his quest to be the perfect duke be his undoing?

A Lady Who Will Marry for Love:

Lady Eglantine Trewstowe is interested in only one thing when it comes to matrimony. Love. Having the good fortune to be an heiress, educated, and part of a loving family she's in no rush to throw herself onto the mart. No, Eglantine is quite happy to wait for an unremarkable match to a marvelous second son who loves his library as much as he loves her. But when the Duke of Harley decides she's the lady for him, even if he doesn't love her one little bit, she rejects his cold proposal. . . Even if she finds her dashed heart has been lost to him. Will her merry manner crack the duke's quest for perfection or will her chance at love vanish?

[Buy now!](#)

[Duke Takes All](#)

A Duke With A Thousand Secrets:

The Duke of Raventon has sworn to never reveal his entire heart and soul to anyone. He has known loss and pain and failure. So much so, that the only way he can make up for the past is in saving everyone he can. When the wild, beautiful Highland lass shows up on his doorstep, he can't turn her away. More so, he will do whatever it takes to ensure her safety and happiness. Even if it means choosing her for his bride. But when his soul longs to know hers and his heart dares to yield, he must choose between all he has ever known as the most mysterious duke in all of Europe or a final chance at love.

A Fiercely Determined Highland Lady:

Lady Diana is fleeing her murderous brother and seeking her freedom. Only one man can help her. The mysterious Duke of Raventon. But he is a dark and ominous figure, his name whispered to her on the death bed of her aunt. Still, Diana has no choice but to go to London, knock upon his door, and meet the devil himself. As her aunt promised, the enigmatic duke agrees to keep her safe. She knows she can trust him with her life but when sparks fly, can she trust him with her heart?

[Buy now!](#)

[Between the Devil and the Duke](#)

The Duke of Ardore is about to take his revenge. . .

Annabelle Winters is determined to save him. . .

One roll of the dice will determine if. . .

A passionate decision can drive Annabelle from the safety of her golden cage into the arms of a man who just might turn out to be more devil than duke.

Or. . .

If a single night is all it takes for the duke to risk everything for love.

[Buy now!](#)

[The Duke You Know](#)

A lady made notorious

As a child, Lady Persephone Blakeney witnessed first-hand the dangers of a bad marriage. Despite that tragic past, she's blossomed into an independent, wild young woman, content in her unmarried state. Then one day she meets the wife hunting Duke of Drake; a man with a dark past of his own. Sparks and passions immediately fly. She knows better than to fall prey to the danger of marriage . . . but what about passion outside of marriage.

A duke with a ruinous secret

The Duke of Drake has never known love. Only passion and hate. Despised by his parents for a childhood stutter, he is determined to give a child the life and love he never had. Clever and clearly passionate, Lady Persephone seems the perfect choice. But a secret shadows his life and she has declared no interest in marriage. Can he give into the passion she so desires without taking her to wife?

When Percy finds her fortunes turn, she must consider a fate she'd long disavowed. A single proposition and one soul searing kiss will change everything. But can it lead to love or will the Duke's secret destroy them.

[Buy now!](#)

[My Duke Until Dawn](#)

A lady who loves to make mischief. . .

Miss Penelope Finley is about to have her first London Season. . . A Season she never expected. Growing up wild in the country, she's used to being free to do as she pleases. But circumstances suddenly change, and now she's about to be launched upon society with the necessity of finding a husband.

There's just one problem, the Duke of Royland. He's an infuriating man who absolutely drives her mad, mad with the passion, too. One kiss in the garden leads her down a path where she must ask. . . Is the passion is worth the price?

A Duke destined to be lonely. . .

The Duke of Royand is infamous for loving a good time. A rake to his core, he adores the ladies, and he always shows them a marvelous time. After all, he knows he will never fall madly, passionately in love. Not as his mother did. He has no intention of suffering that same miserable fate. Until he meets Miss Penelope Finley. She is wild, bold, and entrancing. When she makes a scandalous offer, he can't resist. When the dawn finally comes, will he let her go. . . Or will he take a chance on love?

[Buy now!](#)

[No Duke Will Do](#)

A Heart So Dark:

A high kick lady is the last thing Richard Heath wants. . . .

When Lady Mary charges into his club to settle her father's gambling debts with one night of sin, he's intrigued. Even

though she sets his blood on fire, he wants Mary to be free.
And so, he offers a very different bargain.

Will this bargain be his undoing or break the chains that have
kept him dwelling in darkness?

A Love So Wild:

Marriage to a wicked devil like Heath would be the final
disaster in Lady Mary's already troubled life. . .

Determined not to be condemned to an agonizing marriage,
like her mother's, Lady Mary offers herself up for a single
night. But when Heath turns her down, she finds herself drawn
to this dark lord of the underworld. His rough spirit dares her
to choose freedom.

But will his path to freedom lead her to a fire of passion that
will consume her or to a love that defies it all?

[Buy now!](#)

Don't forget to try The Dukes' Club Series too!

[Once Upon A Duke](#)

What a Widow Wants:

Everything is going swimmingly for Kathryn Darrell. She's
got an annuity of a hundred thousand a year, her lecherous-
heart breaking husband has had the good graces to pop off,
and best of all, she has her freedom—Something she has every
intention of reveling in to the fullest. And who better to revel
with than Ryder Blake, the infamous Duke of Darkwell?

A Duke's Desire:

Ryder Blake, Duke of Darkwell, known as the Duke of
Debauchery, is certain he will never love again. His heart lies
buried with his wife and he has vowed to never give more than
his body to a woman. But when Kathryn shows up on his
doorstep, quite literally, demanding he show her the ways of
London, he finds that his heart longs to love once again.

[Buy now!](#)

[Dreaming of The Duke](#)

A duchess who desires her freedom.

Cordelia Eversleigh, Duchess of Hunt, has spent her entire life in Egypt, sifting through the sands, cavorting with the local tribes, and uncovering the tombs of glorified ancient Egyptian accountants. Now, all she wishes is to go to Paris and study the mysteries of the hieroglyph. There's only one problem. She needs to annul her marriage to the husband she has never met. But when she comes face to face with the infamous duke, he stirs a wicked desire in her nature that shocks her to the tips of her oh so practical toes.

A duke longing to be tamed.

Born the second son, Jack Eversleigh, now the Duke of Hunt, has accepted he is going to be a terrible duke. Loving wine, women, and song, he knows there's only one thing to do. Live up to his debauched reputation. But when a young woman tracks him down in a London pub, prim, proper, and with a tongue that would make the devil envious, he is captivated. . . . Until he discovers that she is his wife.

Can these two embrace an arranged marriage á la mode or will their stubborn minds conquer their passionate hearts?

[Buy now!](#)

[Wish Upon A Duke](#)

A Widow Who Knows What She Wants:

Lady Imogen Cavendish loves making merry. After surviving years of marriage to an old man, having seized her freedom seems the only intelligent thing to have done. Even so, years of dancing her way through parties has lost its' luster and all she wants now is to spend most of the year on the small estate she's purchased in Scotland. There's just one thing. Her neighbor is an infuriating, superior, and exceptionally handsome duke!

An Arrogant Duke Who Knows It All:

Duncan Hamish Fergus, Tenth Duke of Blackburn, does everything right. Duty might as well be his middle name. After his father very nearly ruined his mother and sister's life, Duncan is determined to never let the family name be tarnished again. Sacrificing his own pleasure seems a small price to pay until he meets the mad capped English woman, Lady Cavendish. In all his years on the path of righteous, no woman has ever tempted him to stray into sin, but no woman has ever been as mischievous or voluptuous as his saucy sassenach neighbor.

Can Imogen teach the oh so proper duke how to have a little fun or will two hearts be broken by propriety?

[Buy now!](#)

[All About the Duke](#)

A Lady Who Vows Never to Wed:

Lady Allegra Portmund knows the cost of marriage. After the death of her dearest and only sister, Allegra swears she will never suffer the same fate. She will not become a possession shaped and destroyed by a husband. So, when her parents insist she marry the man of their choosing, there is only one thing for Allegra to do. Run. But when she runs, determined to be free, she meets the Duke of Roth, a singular man who sees her unique and vital spirit. Now that her heart is awakened to the most dangerous longings for love, how will she resist the temptation to break her vow?

A Duke Ruled By Honor:

Nicholas Andrew Edward Forth, Duke of Roth, values family above everything else. Despite his wild reputation, having lost both of his parents when he was a child, his most secret wish is to have a family again. When he meets a young lady in disguise, Nicholas quickly realizes that she is unlike any woman he's ever met and is also the only woman for him. But when he discovers how quickly she has abandoned her own family, he doubts whether she is the exceptional woman he believed her to be. Now, that he knows the truth about

Allegra's past, will his own sense of honor destroy his only chance at happiness?

[Buy now!](#)

[Duke Ever After](#)

A Duke With A Scandalous Secret:

The Duke of Aston has always been the talk of the ton. Wild, passionate, and eccentric, women fall at his feet and gentlemen won't dare to meet him on the dueling ground. But the duke has a secret. A secret that could destroy his family. While the world sees him as a prince of the realm, he knows that in truth, he's worthless. So, when Lady Rosamund enters his life demanding he teach her the artful ways of seduction, he's happy to oblige until he realizes she is the best woman he has ever known and therefore a woman he can never have.

A Lady Who Won't Be Intimidated:

Lady Rosamund, only sibling of the Duke of Blackburn, is lonely. Raised in the remote glens of the Western Highlands, Rosamund has lived a sheltered life where only books and long walks have relieved her isolation. When she meets the Duke of Aston near her home, a man as delicious as the heroes she's read about, the passion that sparks between them is undeniable. Adventurous spirit that the duke is, Rosamund knows he's the man for her. But as she grows closer to the duke, opening her heart to him, his own heart closes.

Can she teach this tortured duke that he is worthy of love or will his past drive them apart forever?

[Buy now!](#)

[Not Quite A Duke](#)

A Rake With A Broken Heart:

Deadly with a rapier and one of the most notorious rakes London has ever known, Lord Charles, twin brother of the Duke of Hunt, is hiding a dark secret. Wine, women, and song

can't drown his pain but when he wins Barrow House in a night of gambling, he finds that he's also won an entanglement with the owner's niece, Lady Patience. Prickly, forthright, and clad in black from head to toe, she's the opposite of every thing he's ever desired in a woman and yet, Lord Charles is inexplicably drawn to her. When he discovers she has a secret just as serious and scandalous as his own, he knows marriage into his powerful family is the only thing that can rescue her. But can a rake take a chance at marriage and risk losing his heart?

A Lady in Disguise:

Lady Patience has no wish to be rescued but nor is she willing to give up her double life as the extremely successful author P. Auden. When her secret identity is exposed, she has no one to turn to but the rake who won her family house in a card game.

But Lord Charles is all that she dislikes in a man. A womanizer and a gambler, she should abhor him. Only Lord Charles is not as simple as he seems. With each day she discovers the hidden depths and pain under his witty and cold exterior. And as she finds that underneath he is a good man nearly destroyed by a terrible secret, she cannot help but lose her heart to the rake who has sacrificed everything for his family's happiness. Can she save him from his past just as he has saved her? Or will the past claim them both and ruin their chance at love?

[Buy now!](#)

[A Duke By Any Other Name](#)

Her dance card is nearly full.

The only sister of the Duke of Hunt, Lady Gemma, is finally ready to settle down. After all, she's spent too many of her days frolicking all over town. As an Eversleigh, she's ready for an excellent match. Desiring a serious, reserved, and strong husband who can handle her antics, Gemma handpicks Captain Duke. Surely, she's selected the perfect man, but perfection may not be as it seems.

This pirate is treading on dangerous water.

Alexander Duke knows the violence of the seas, the brutality of humanity, and the dangers of fighting for a cause. He has no patience for a silly and persistent woman, who exudes more bubbles than a bottle of champagne. But when Lady Gemma turns on the charm, no man can resist her wiles, not even a rugged and courageous pirate. However, protecting his heart is Captain Duke's number one priority. When a scandalous event shocks his hardened soul, he's forced to take action, turning his back on his lifelong oath. Suddenly, he's asking for her hand and putting both of their hearts on the line. Can two stubborn people relinquish control to know true love or will they rock the boat too violently to find their happy ever after?

[*Buy now!*](#)

[My Wild Duke](#)

An Unlucky Lady:

Lady Beatrix Westport was once destined to be the most successful debutant the ton has ever seen. Now, it is all she can do to recover from the brutal coaching accident which killed her entire family. Now, she has only one purpose. Continue her family line and secure her father's earldom. When she meets Captain Duke, who awakens her heart and desires, she knows he's the best choice for husband. But will her dedication to her duty destroy her only chance at love?

A Wild Duke:

Captain Adam Duke loves adventure and justice. After spending his entire life working to free slaves, he comes to London to open offices. When he meets the wounded Lady Beatrix, he immediately feels a deep connection to her and longs to free her from her pain. But he refuses to be just the stud she longs for. Can he convince her to choose a life of love and adventure or will her broken past drive them apart?

[*Buy now!*](#)

[If I Were a Duke](#)

A Perfect Lady:

Lady Eleanor Paisley always does the right thing. After all, her work with the tenants on her guardian's land is the only thing that has made her lonely, orphaned life bearable. So, when she's informed she'd been matched with the new Duke of Ayr, a dissolute but oh so charming rake, she knows she can't say no, but she doesn't approve of her intended. Not at all. Yet, when she meets the recently elevated Anthony Burke, she discovers that while he might be a man of sin, his heart is kinder than any she's ever met. But will a lifetime of loss prevent her from taking a chance at love with her handsome, seductive husband or will she give in to temptation?

A Charming Rake:

Anthony Burke hasn't always led a charmed life. Once, he lived in poverty and knew the violence this world has to offer. But now, ascending to the title of duke, he's as charming as they come, for he's never let the dark side of life get him down. So, when he is informed he's too marry the terribly proper Lady Eleanor, he's not thrilled, but being a man of optimism, he knows exactly what he must do. Seduce his own wife. When he discovers that behind her prim, distant facade is a woman suffering from too much loss, he vows to show her happiness and to teach her that love always triumphs in the end. But even Anthony's optimism might not win the day if Eleanor will not let him shine love into her life.

[Buy now!](#)

[A Dukes' Club Christmas](#)

Lady Evangeline Pennyworth is done with being a wallflower. After being stuck on the edges of the ballroom floor, she turns to London's most notorious rake, demanding he teach her how to be desirable. This is one Christmas Season she refuses to be alone.

After witnessing the love of his parents devolve into pain and anger, Anthony Basingstoke has vowed never to be swept away by passion, even if he finds himself taken by this wallflower in a way he's never been before.

Only a Christmas miracle will make true love a gift that will last forever.

[Buy now!](#)

[Never a Duke](#)

Calliope Duke has spent her whole life on the high seas, traveling the globe. Abandoned as a small girl, she knows she's incapable of being loved. When a change in circumstances sees her named sole possessor of a ship, she lays claim to her fate in London. . . Her half brothers' shipping company. But once there, she meets the enigmatic Captain Lockhart Eversleigh. The somber gentleman is hardly one to give in to carnal nature...or will he? The more she gets to know Lockhart, the more she realizes that he's everything she's ever wanted. When passion strikes and the flame between them ignites will she dare to risk her wounded heart?

Captain Lockhart Eversleigh loves order. He's clung to it since his father's death. Rules are all that keep him from sliding from his path into disaster. When he meets the spirited Calliope Duke, he knows she's to be avoided. She's beautiful, articulate, and full of passion. Drawn to her in a way he never imagined, Lock can't deny the danger. . . Even as he knows giving in might turn him into his darkest self.

[Buy now!](#)

Don't forget to try The Must Love Rogues Series too!

[The Rogue and I](#)

A Lady Ready for Battle:

Miss Harriet Manning once made the mistake of falling completely, totally, and irreversibly in love with a duke's son. It's a mistake she won't repeat twice. Truly. Especially since

he abandoned her just when they were about to elope to Gretna Green. Five years later, Harriet hasn't forgotten the way Lord Garret's smoldering gaze and wicked sense of humor touched her soul. Still, there's no way she'll forgive the traitorous libertine, no matter how he stirs her passions. Now, Harriet is determined to show him she doesn't care, and never did, by making merry right under his nose but a tragic turn of events at her cousin's wedding has her wondering if just maybe, love deserves one last chance.

A Lord Who Lost His Heart:

Lord Garret Hart, second son of a duke and now brother to the present Duke of Huntsdown, is never ever EVER getting married. Bachelorhood is for him. After all, women are the very devil. Especially one woman. Miss Harriet Manning is Garret's own personal Medusa and she has turned his heart to stone. Indeed she has, but not before she absolutely ripped it to shreds, leaving him a complete wreck. Nothing will ever induce him to matrimony or nauseating protestations of boyish love again. But when he is forced into close proximity at his brother's wedding with the woman who first taught him to dream and see the world as a wondrous place, sparks flash and passions explode. Still, Harriet is not to be trusted. She callously betrayed him once. So how can he ever allow himself another chance at love when love always seems to hurt so much?

[Buy now!](#)

[If the Rogue Fits](#)

A Misunderstood Shrew:

Lady Margaret is infamous throughout London as the most volatile and shrewish of all young ladies. After four years on the market, with a vast fortune, her determination to remain unwed is legendary. Having a decidedly plain face, Margaret has learned that men only want her for her money, and the unkindness of those around her has led her to protect her heart with a cutting tongue and willingness to shove silly young

men into orchestra pits. When she meets the Earl of Carlyle, the beautiful and seductive lord, who makes her body yearn for his touch, seems like he might be different than the rest. But when Margaret finds out the earl has been less than honest in his pursuit for her hand, will she ever be able to forgive him and find a way to love?

A Lord Who Has No Wish to Tame Her:

William Deveraux, Earl of Carlyle, is in desperate need of funds. His father, a ruinous gambler, has driven the earldom, its estate, and his tenants, into destitution. There's only one thing for William to do. Wed and wed well. Undaunted that the only available lady with a sufficient fortune at present is Margaret the Mad, he's determined to win her by any means. . . Even by deceit. But when Margaret discovers his lies, he finds he's fallen for the plain yet oh so witty woman who is his savior in many ways. Will he ever be able to win her heart and convince her that she is the most wonderful woman in the world? Or will her years of being treated foully by society, ensure Margaret never lets him into her heart?

[Buy now!](#)

[Duke Goes Rogue](#)

A Duke Who Demands Perfection:

James Hart, Duke of Hunsdownt, is ruled by duty and honor. All his life he's been driven to be the antithesis of his father. Every choice he has made is weighed by whether it is the right thing to do. When scandal does brush his ducal role, he only works harder to ensure that he hurts no one and nothing by his power. In his noble work for the impoverished, Hunsdownt comes to rely on and value his new secretary, Mr. Stanhope.

But when the duke discovers his secretary is a woman in disguise he knows he must, for propriety's sake, send her away. Yet, his admiration now has turned to passion. Now, he longs to possess the young woman who has broken society's rules. Will he yield to temptation or cut the rebellious young lady from his heart?

A Lady Who Breaks Every Rule:

Miss Olivia Stanhope has known a life full of adventure aboard her father's ship. But when she tragically finds herself alone in the world, she is left with few options. When forced between giving up her independence or duplicitously working in the Duke of Huntsdown's employ, she chooses the latter. But from the moment they meet, she cannot deny her feelings. Falling in love with her employer isn't the safest thing she can do, but when he discovers she's a woman, Olivia knows that she will do anything to have him.

And a passion that cannot be denied:

When the duke insists that they must do the right thing, Olivia refuses to give into a life of propriety and decides to help her duke go rogue.

Will these two passionate people learn to fight together or will they be torn apart by the rules of the ton?

[Buy now!](#)

[Live and Let Rogue](#)

When the Prince isn't so charming, you can either Live and Let Rogue. . . Or bring him to his knees.

A Rogue Who Demanded Revenge:

John Forthryte, the newly made Earl of Mooreland, is an absolute bastard. Born the illegitimate son of a duke, hate has filled John's heart since he watched his mother die in harrowing poverty. Once a small boy, forced to survive alone, John desired only vengeance. But after years of planning, successful feels hollow. Worse, he's hurt a young woman in his relentless pursuit. Much to John's shock, that woman awakens his cold heart. Now, he's determined to see her happy. . . Without him. For a bastard and blackhearted rogue could never deserve her love.

A Lady Who Loves Life:

Meredith Trent, known as Merry, loves life. Perhaps too much, for her wild love nearly caused her ruin. When the man she loathes shows up at her isolated home in the Highlands, offering to atone for his role in her fall, Merry tells him to go to the devil. But the more time she spends with John Forthryte, the more she sees he is a heartbroken man longing for love. When he fights again and again for her happiness, she cannot help but fall in love with the wicked man. But can a man as broken as John ever abandon his past and choose love?

[Buy now!](#)

[Rogues Like it Scot](#)

A Lord Who Loathes London:

Years ago, after having his heart and soul destroyed, Lord Damian Peterboro turned his back on society and left for parts unknown. Now, he's returned, the rudest, most scandalous, most shocking man to come out of the wilds. An avid adventurer, determined to preserve the antiquities of the old worlds, Damian needs funds badly. What better way to get them than to marry? But when he meets Lady Andromeda, he cannot deny that she is the most intelligent woman he's met in London who makes his blood sing with desire. But can he chance his heart again to love or will he disappear as he did once before?

A Lady Who Will Not Wed:

Marriage almost broke Lady Andromeda, sister to the Duke of Clyde. A wealthy widow, she has every intention of enjoying her position as one of the ton's most glittering hostesses. But when Lord Peterboro crashes one of her salons she is both shocked and absolutely drawn to the wild and scandalous man. With each day that passes, she finds that he understands her as no one ever has. Yet, can she trust him with her tragic secret? Or will she cast away her only chance at love.

[Buy now!](#)

[A Rogue's Christmas Kiss](#)

Bah and a hum bug:

Sebatian Rutherford, the new Earl of Gray, has no desire to settle down. Ever. The only thing he dislikes more than the idea of taking over his recently inherited earldom, and all its responsibilities, is Christmas. So, when he agrees to an arranged marriage to the former earl's daughter, he plans on a quick wedding and a quicker return to his adventures abroad.

Surely, even a hint of Christmas cheer won't need to be shared? But when his clever new wife, Lady Marabelle begins to thaw his heart, he finds that not only is family a joy, but Christmas may be the best season to lose one's heart.

Deck the Halls:

Lady Marabelle loves Christmas. She loves everything about it. So, when she faces her first Christmas since the death of her beloved father, married to a man she's never met, she decides to make sure that the Christmas hating new Earl must be taught the spirit of the season. But with each day toward Christmas that comes her way, she begins to find that perhaps a marriage of convenience can be a marriage of the heart and a veritable Christmas miracle.

[Buy now!](#)

[Rogue Be A Lady](#)

A Lady Gone Rogue:

Miss Emmaline Trent is notorious. And she loves it. Once, she was a sweet young lady, eager to please all around her. But a single act of a stranger ruined her reputation and the young man she so desperately loved rejected her and her "sins". But when the truth is revealed, it is too late and she has chosen to embrace her scandalous state. After years in France, Emmaline returns to London, determined to show the man she so deeply loved she has not been crushed by him or fortune's wheel.

A Rogue of a Lord:

Lord Edward Hart will never forgive himself. After believing horrific lies about the only woman he he ever loved, he

condemns himself to the darkness. Despite the fact that he longs for Emmaline with every fiber of his being, he knows he will never deserve her love again.

But a chance of fate crashes these two lovers back together and their passion is once again fanned aflame. Can they allow themselves to find happiness or will they condemn themselves to a life without love?

Buy now!