

THE DUKE'S
HOUSE PARTY

I KISSED
THE
Duke

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON

**I
KISSED
THE DUKE**

THE DUKE'S HOUSE PARTY
BOOK 2

*by
Eva Devon*

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I Kissed The Duke

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My love for my husband and our boys is without words. I am so grateful for them.

Also, I need to give a big thanks to Louisa and Christy!

And, of course, you. You are always guiding me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Epilogue

Other Books by Eva Devon

CHAPTER I

Andrew Michael James, Duke of Hartmore, loved his brother more than words could ever say, and he was worried about him.

His younger brother, Charlie, had come back wounded from war on the Continent. A lead ball had burst through his shoulder and torn out the other side. The battlefield surgeon had done everything he could to stitch up his flesh and remove chipped bone.

And Charlie, being young and strong, had healed physically. But every day, Andrew noticed that his brother seemed distant, strange, drifting away from him. And today, as they sat on the pebble beach looking out to the sea, he felt it more and more. Charlie was drifting away from him like a bit of wood being pulled out to the great North Sea.

He swung his gaze to Charles and said, "Does your wound still hurt?"

Charlie shook his russet-haired head which glinted with a hint of red in the light. "Not much," he said. "The doctor keeps wanting me to take laudanum for it, but I don't feel pain." Charlie grimaced. "Not *that* pain."

"What pain do you feel?" Andrew asked, his insides twisting with a feeling of helplessness. Though he could listen, even if he couldn't fix everything as he wished.

Charlie blew out a harsh breath, then shoved himself up to a standing position. He stared out to where the sea met the sky as if there was some answer out of reach, but if he looked hard enough and long enough, he might finally see it.

"You can tell me, you know," Andrew said gently. "I promise I'm strong enough to take it."

Charles let out a low dry laugh. "Of course you are, Andrew. You're the strongest man I know."

Andrew winced inwardly. He didn't want Charlie to think he saw him as weak. It was quite the opposite in fact.

"That's not true, Charlie. You are. You've been to war."

"I'm not strong," Charlie gritted, his hands balling into rigid fists.

“What do you mean?” Andrew asked, astonished by the emotion darkening his brother’s tone. “You were commended for bravery.”

Charlie narrowed his eyes. “Throwing myself in front of enemy fire doesn’t make me strong, Andrew. Or brave,” he countered. His little brother’s throat tightened. “I did things that...”

Charlie’s voice died off as if his own voice wouldn’t let him speak.

Andrew wished that he could alleviate the pain radiating off Charlie. That he could make him see how loved he was, no matter what. “I shall not make judgement if you choose to share with me.”

“I did things for my commanding officer, but what was I supposed to do?” Charlie said, his face bleak.

The words came out of him like bitter poison. He had been quiet for so long, and now it was as if the words were erupting out of him like a spring from the earth.

“We’re supposed to follow orders. We’re trained to follow orders. It is the hierarchy of the military. They’re like gods, our commanding officers, and my men beneath me saw me as a god. You don’t question. You just do.”

“To win the war,” Andrew said simply. What his brother said was fact. “We must defeat Napoleon.”

“Of course, we must defeat Napoleon,” Charlie said. “But surely we should not slaughter people.”

The words came out of him harshly, and his eyes looked as if he had seen hell.

“The French?” Andrew clarified, confused.

“I did not say the French,” Charlie bit out.

“I beg your pardon?” Andrew gasped.

Charlie looked away and his shoulders bowed. “A butcher, that’s the man I served, and not a butcher of the enemy. I cannot tell you what it is like to order men to needless death, Andrew, and I hope to God you will never know. My wounds are nothing compared to what I saw, and I don’t wish to speak of it again, so please don’t ask. It is like a stone pulling me down, and, frankly, I wish it would pull me all the way down so that I never had to...”

Charlie yanked off his boots swiftly, then began to walk down to the shore where the waves frothed on the pebbles.

Andrew followed his brother. “Stop,” he called.

Charlie didn’t stop. He did not stop until he was wading into the frothing,

freezing sea. Andrew raced after him, pulled off his own boots, and rushed into the water. “Come,” he said. “A swim will do us both good.”

Charlie nodded and lowered himself into the waves as if it could somehow cleanse him of his perceived sins. His eyes were haunted, dark, full of pain, and Andrew wished that he could take all that pain and pull it away.

What had his commanding officer made Charlie do?

But in Charlie’s mind, he had not been *made* to do it. Andrew could see that it had been a choice Charlie had made. But Charlie was not mistaken. Commanding officers *were* like gods. If Charlie had disobeyed, he would have been executed for disobedience. For mutiny.

“Charlie,” he called out, but Charlie was staring out to the horizon again, lost whilst waiting for answers that his brother was clearly afraid would never come.

His throat seized up with fear for a moment, but then Andrew called, “I love you, Charlie.”

Charlie looked back over his shoulder. “I love you too, Andrew, but love does not heal everything.”

Andrew wanted to growl, “Of course it does. It always will.”

Their family had been so full of love and joy, and they’d done exactly what they were supposed to do. He was the duke, the eldest brother who took care of the estates and their power in Parliament.

Charlie was the second son and had joined the military, just as he was supposed to, to gain glory for the family in that way. It was the way of things. But now, Andrew wished he’d never allowed his brother to go, that he’d kept him here and found some other work for him. Because though Charlie’s body was healed, he could see that his brother might never truly heal. That the wound in him was different, that there was a poison in his body that could not be lanced.

“Charlie, I admire you,” he declared as the frigid salt water rushed around them.

“Don’t,” Charlie said without looking back this time.

And with that hollow reply, Andrew felt dread. He had to do something, anything, to make his brother see.

Andrew charged through the waves and pulled his brother into his arms. It was a shocking moment. Most Englishmen he knew no longer behaved like this. It wasn’t like the times before when men easily displayed their feelings,

but he could not stop himself from embracing his brother. “You’re a good man, Charlie.”

Charlie hugged him back, but there was distance in it, coldness, as if Charlie was already slipping away. “Thank you, Andrew,” he said.

“Come. Let us enjoy the day,” Andrew urged, feeling that hope was slipping through his fingers. But he could not let go of it yet.

Charlie nodded. And then, suddenly, he forced a smile. “How can I not enjoy a day with you, Andrew? I’ll beat you to the rocks and back,” he said. “Come on.”

And with that, they both dove into the swirling, cold seawater and swam hard, as they always had.

They raced that day, and by the time they reached the outcropping of rocks, they were both laughing, freezing, their skin red with the cold water, and Andrew felt relief.

Things would be well. They had to be, for Charlie was his little brother, and he loved him.



Six weeks later

Andrew returned to the estate after a necessary vote in the House of Lords. Though he had hated to leave his brother, he could not miss it and speaking there had been important.

When he arrived home to the great house, he knew something was amiss. There was wailing coming from inside, and it was his mother’s voice.

Andrew crossed through the hall. His mama was sitting in the salon, her face buried in her beringed hands as she all but screamed out her agony.

It felt as if her soul was leaving her body.

“Mama, what has happened?” he begged, crossing towards her, even as her pain caused his body to quake.

But she could not answer. He pulled her into his arms, holding her tight as her gown spilled about his legs.

He pulled her close, trying to study her lined face for an answer. “What has happened?”

“Charlie,” she cried out. “Charlie.”

He tore his glance from her tear-streaked visage and met gazes with the butler, Abbot.

Abbot shook his head, his entire stance haunted.

“What has happened?” Andrew demanded.

The butler looked pale, horrified. Abbot swallowed as if he could not speak. But then he managed, “He was found this morning, Your Grace.”

“Where?” Andrew demanded. “Found where? Where did he go?”

Abbot licked his lips, trembling. “He went out to the sea, Your Grace, this morning. He must’ve gone for a swim, and he did not make it.”

“Make it?” he echoed, trying to make sense of the words. “Make it where?”

Abbot cleared his throat and rasped, “His body was washed up upon the shore, Your Grace. Some fishermen found him this morning.”

“I don’t understand.” He frowned, half expecting Charlie to walk in and tell them all to stop acting like fools. “What was he doing? Sleeping?”

“Not sleeping. He is dead,” his mother wailed. “He is dead.”

He stared down at her then, separated from himself for a moment in total disbelief. He staggered over to the butler, grabbed his shoulders, and dragged him aside, for his mother was so distraught, but he needed to understand.

“Charlie is not dead,” Andrew bit out. “I saw him but days ago. He was doing well. I don’t understand. How could the current have taken him out? He was so strong.”

The butler looked away.

“You’re keeping something from me,” Andrew insisted.

“There were stones in his pocket, Your Grace,” Abbot blurted before he bit back a note of despair.

“Stones?” he ground out, confused and refusing to see. “I don’t understand. What are you trying to tell me?”

“He weighted himself down, Your Grace,” Abbot whispered. “So that he would not be able to swim back to the shore, we think.”

His hands dropped from Abbot’s shoulders, and he blinked. “I don’t believe you. This is not funny, Abbot. Where is my brother?”

Disbelief rolled over him in shock after shock. It couldn’t be real, it couldn’t, but he glanced to his mother who was sobbing on the floor.

“I saw him,” she cried out. “I saw him. He is gone. My beautiful baby.”

“Mama,” he said, going back to her, pulling her into his arms, cradling

her as gently as he could. “What do you mean?”

“He is gone, Andrew.” With that, she raised her gaze to his, a gaze full of an agony that could not be duplicated. A gaze of agony so singular that he felt his own heart rip out.

“He could not stop talking in his sleep these last few days about his commanding officer, about Colonel Lucas Donaldson, about the brutality of it all and the men who died,” she gasped. “He looked like a man haunted, as if ghosts were about him everywhere. Oh, Charlie, what have you done?” she cried as shuddering sobs tore through her body.

And in that moment, he knew that Colonel Lucas Donaldson was responsible for his brother’s death, for tearing Charlie away from them, for wounding him in a way that no bullet ever could. And he was not going to stop until he had avenged his brother’s soul.

And Donaldson was destroyed.

CHAPTER 2

Colonel Lucas Donaldson slammed his hand down on the breakfast table. The silverware jumped, the teacups clattered, and Mary forced herself to remain still. Inwardly, she shook.

Her little brother, Jack, stared straight ahead. Both of them knew not to react. Both of them knew to show no fear. For if they did, it would only be worse for them.

Their father loathed those who acted the victim. Their father loathed anyone who looked afraid. And if he saw fear, he was like a rat terrier on vermin. He would grab the source of his disdain and shake it until they were nothing more than a crushed little spirit on the ground.

And so she and her brother had long ago learned to show nothing in the face of their father's wrath.

"That boy failed me," her father ground out.

She knew better than to prompt him or offer comment in any way. He enjoyed monologues. He enjoyed speaking, but his fury? It felt raw.

"He was supposed to make me close to the duke. Instead, he was weak."

She knew exactly who her father was speaking of. Charles. That young officer, Charles. Her father had spoken over and over of the officer who had been too afraid and too weak to truly carry out his commands, how he had gone home and then died.

How it had ruined everything and how it was beginning to make his life incredibly difficult. As the second son of an earl, her father had always striven for power and to climb higher. Because he was not born to a great title, he was fighting to make a name for himself. He wanted to be as important as one of Wellington's closest advisors. And he had won many battles for Wellington over and over again.

He had proved how important and necessary he was to defeat the French columns that Napoleon constantly sent across Europe.

But even she knew her father's tactics were no doubt terrifying to the men who were forced to fight for him.

After all, she'd lived with him her entire life, and she knew that his smile was just a predecessor to a blow. The French, no doubt, should be terrified of him, but the truth was the English soldiers under him were likely just as fearful. For her father did not believe in using any sort of praise.

He was a master of the stick, of the harsh word, the brutal blow, controlling all those about him to make certain they did exactly as they were told.

Any freedom that she and her brother had experienced had been away in the woods by the river, slipping away into the fields when they could. And there, they had created their own private worlds amidst the wild flora and fauna, telling tales of a life where they were free, free from the madman who was their bloodthirsty father. A man who was determined to have power and power through blood, power at any cost.

Mary felt her stomach coil, but her father would not have launched into this particular line of conversation this morning unless there was a reason.

And as she expected, he began to explain.

"You both are going to aid me on my path to victory. Your mother failed me, weak thing that she was."

Weak? She had endured his never-ending cruelty. Illness had claimed her, and Mary was convinced it was her father's vitriol that had created the disease, and taken away the only love she and her brother had ever known.

Her father snorted. "I cannot do it alone any longer. It's why one has children anyway. You both will make certain that my power expands."

He arched a brow at her, which she knew meant she should speak.

"What would you like us to do, Papa?" she asked.

"We have been invited to the Duke of Wildwood's house party."

She blinked. They were in the upper strata of the ton. After all, they were attached to an earl's family and her father was an earl's son and a colonel. It was no surprise to her that they would be invited to such a great party. Still, she did not wish to go. She was not overly fond of parties, even though she knew it was her place to shine at them.

Her mother had once shone like a jewel. But that jewel was made brilliant through copious amounts of wine and laudanum. It was the only way her mother had found to cope with her father's anger. She had hidden behind anything that could make her feel less. Mary had seen the price her mother paid to be married to a man like her father. Though her mother had done all

she could to love her children, she had not been able to endure.

Mary was determined to never marry someone like him, determined to never have to sacrifice her soul. Half of her wished to run away, to go anywhere across the continent of Europe or to the Americas to achieve freedom. But she had no money of her own. She was not yet of age, and she knew to do such a thing would possibly present a risk of greater danger than being her father's daughter.

"I am so glad you are ready and willing to step into your role as so many are not," her father gritted. He paused and then smiled slowly. "You are going to catch the Duke of Hartmore's attention."

She stilled and lifted her gaze to his. "He does not like you," she stated. "It will be difficult."

Her father's mouth tightened, and for one moment, she was certain that he was going to haul back his hand and slap her. It would not have been the first time.

She did not flinch; flinching would cause him to let fly.

"You are bold, and you are correct. And you're going to rectify that," he said.

"Am I?" she queried tightly, aware she was walking on the edge but feeling panic at what he was proposing. "You think highly of my skills, of my ability to manipulate a man as powerful as the Duke of Hartmore."

Her father cocked his head to the side. "You are a master in the art of survival, my dear. I know because I have trained you. You will do it. You are going to gain his favor. You are going to lead him to your tune. And then you are going to make certain that he asks you to marry him."

She let out an unbidden laugh, shocked at her own boldness.

Jack blanched.

And her father's gaze darkened.

"A duke, Papa?" she rushed. "You wish a duke to ask me to marry him? One who does not like you."

"Oh, my dear," he said with a sickening sweetness that was a warning, "I think that you have enough wiles up your sleeve to assure that the Duke of Hartmore will be interested in you. I have seen the way you attempt to manipulate me."

She ground her teeth. She *did* manipulate her father. She had to. If she did not, she would've been plastered on the floor every day under his cruelty and

his blows.

She had to manipulate him to protect Jack. Jack, who was a sensitive, artistic boy. A boy who had to fight, who had to duel, who had to wrestle to show his Papa that he was strong when, in truth, all he wished to do was dance, tend animals, and stare at the stars.

It would be a miracle if Jack survived her father, but she was going to make certain that he did. And suddenly, something hit her. If she married the Duke of Hartmore, she could rescue Jack, couldn't she?

She could convince Hartmore to let her little brother come and live with them. She could get away from her father. And then once she was a duchess, she would have power, real power, and her father would not be able to do anything to hurt her.

Or Jack. If she but knew how to convince Hartmore to help her.

Her father thought he would be able to continue to manipulate her once she was married because he had held such a chokehold over her entire life. But such a marriage? Such a marriage would make her truly free. And Jack.

She would have to manipulate Hartmore. She would have to make him want her. She would have to lead him to her tune, just as her Papa said.

Could she be that cruel to force someone to choose her through manipulation? A moment of self-loathing washed over her. She had been twisted into such a creature that she did not care about another person's happiness in the great quest to rescue herself and her brother.

But in that moment, she made herself a promise. If she could convince the Duke of Hartmore and trick him into wishing to marry her, to choose her, well, then she would be the greatest duchess in all of England.

She would convince him that she was worthy, and she would do everything she could to make him happy. Yes, she would make it clear. She would show him that she could be good. And she could, she was certain of it.

If she could just get away from her father, all this would stop. She looked to Jack.

Jack's face was a mask, for he had perfected the art of hiding his feelings from their father too. But Jack's gaze darted to her. And for one moment, she could have sworn that Jack was begging her not to say yes, to keep her freedom, to not involve herself in her father's machinations and manipulations.

But she was old enough to know that there was no escaping their father's

manipulations. Not unless she could leave his house entirely. And perhaps the Duke of Hartmore was the ticket to all of that.

So she lifted her gaze to her father's, gave him a smile and said, "Whatever you wish, Papa, I shall endeavor to do. After all, being a duchess would not be such a very bad life."

Her father let out a dark laugh, and then he clapped his hands together. "I always knew you were my daughter," he said. "In the end, my dear, you are just like me. Clever, capable, and ready to do whatever it takes to get the job done."

She hid a shiver that traveled down her spine. She was nothing like him. She couldn't be. But in that moment, there was also a whisper of fear because she was willing to do anything it took to escape him.

Did that make her like him? She looked at Jack one more time and reached out underneath the linen tablecloth, took his hand, and squeezed it.

She would have to not care. She would do whatever it took to rescue her little brother, and she would spend the rest of her life making up for it if she had to.

CHAPTER 3

Andrew dug his nails into the windowsill and stared out at the line of coaches making their way up the long drive to the Duke of Wildwood's majestic home.

It was quite the house.

Even the greatest aristocrats of England were impressed. Everyone was in awe of Wildwood. He was a bit reclusive—elusive, really—and everyone had come to this party for the opportunity to see the massive house that had been made by great masters over the years.

Even, he, a duke himself with several large homes and more resources than most could ever hope for, could not deny the sheer perfection of Wildwood's estate.

The grounds sprawled out to forests and the sea. In those forests, magical grottos and follies awaited where people could go to have entertainments or affairs or fights. He did not intend to experience magic in these next days.

No. Revenge was his destiny.

He did not think he would ever be able to heal the wounds deep inside him, or feel any sort of magic or awe again, but he would at least be able to feel as if he was in control once more. Not a victim of the tides of fate, battered down by the cruelty of waves so strong he could scarce hold on.

He had always been a kind man; dare he say even nice. Over the years, he had helped others and he had braved the vagaries of life with ease. At the time, he had not truly understood that he had a charmed life, free of difficulty.

It was only his brother's death that had taught him what true difficulty was. For that loss had been a loss that made him feel as if he had been hacked apart, never to be put back together again.

His soul had been shattered.

He did not think it could ever be righted again, but worse than his own suffering had been watching his mother. He'd had to watch her be crushed under the grief of losing her child, her young son, her baby. It had nearly

undone her.

And that had nearly undone him.

She refused to see anyone now, lost in her grief. She was but a figure who walked the halls of the house like a specter from a novel, and nothing that he did or said could bring her back.

It was like another death after his brother.

He tore his gaze away from the window for a moment. Colonel Donaldson and his family would arrive soon. They would arrive and his revenge would begin.

And then just like the other dukes, the men whom he had become bonded in pain with, he would at last have some sort of relief if all went exactly as it should.

He forced himself to look back down to the beautifully appointed coaches of varying degrees and size making their way up the drive which wound through the vast estate.

Some bore the most powerful people in the land. They came simply to enjoy and revel in the entertainments. Others were from a slightly lower strata, hoping to climb their way up this week at the house party and find matches and mates and opportunities.

The majority of the guests held little interest for him.

With every moment his tension grew until, at last, he spotted *him*. A coach pulled up to the front steps and Donaldson got out.

The man was in his uniform, of course, dressed beautifully, and then the man turned, whipped up his gloved hand, and offered it.

Andrew's breath caught in his throat.

The young lady that descended... He tried to catch a glimpse of her face, but he could not. Her silk-covered bonnet kept it hidden from him.

Andrew wondered if she looked like her father.

His insides twisted as he contemplated the next days and how he would will himself to do what must be done. After all, she was going to be the object of his revenge, a tool to get to Donaldson.

He swallowed back bitter bile.

All his life, he had been good and kind and done the right thing, and he had still ended up in this hellhole of pain.

A hand clapped him on the back.

Andrew drew in a sharp breath. "Bloody hell, man. You're lucky I didn't

kill you for that.”

The Duke of Truebridge let out a low laugh. “You’d make a worthy attempt, I’m sure,” he said, his silvery blond hair gilded in the late afternoon light. “Are we feeling a bit on edge?”

Andrew ground his teeth together. “Aren’t you?”

Truebridge gave a wry smile. “If I’m honest. I’m quaking inside, but this is how I deal with things. A stiff upper lip and a witty repost.”

Yes, the Duke of Truebridge was renowned amongst the ton. He was capable and strong and full of pain, but few knew it. Andrew understood that sort of hiding. He too felt the shame of the loss of his brother’s death, not because his brother had drowned himself but because it felt like Andrew had somehow failed his brother.

He should have been able to pull him back from the abyss.

“Do you have the stomach for it?” Truebridge asked quietly as they studied the approaching coaches and the guests coming up the grand stairs to the front of the castle.

A muscle tightened in his jaw. “You know I do.”

“I don’t,” he sighed honestly. “I fear you’re going to fail. You’re too kindhearted.”

Andrew snorted. He had not felt kindhearted in some time. In fact, his heart felt empty of anything akin to kindness. “Thank you for the hearty encouragement.”

Truebridge met his gaze. “It’s no small thing to ruin a young lady.”

“Well,” he said with a cold smile, “my brother’s death wasn’t exactly a small thing either, and yet here I am.”

“But will you be able to survive this?” Truebridge challenged softly. “The knowledge that you’ve ruined her reputation.”

“I’m not just going to ruin her reputation in fact but in name,” he spat out.

“True, but you won’t marry her when it all falls out,” Truebridge reminded.

“I’m not actually going to ruin her,” he ground out, annoyed that Truebridge was like this.

“You’re just going to make sure that everyone thinks that you have.”

“Exactly,” he agreed before pointing out, “and then Donaldson will be shamed. With his precious attempts at climbing to power ended, there will be far less suffering in the world.”

Truebridge said nothing.

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?” Andrew demanded, whirling around to face Truebridge.

The duke raised his hands. “Of course not. What I’m going to do is just as nefarious, as you know.” He gave a tilt of his head. “All of us are doing something that must be done. But that doesn’t mean we have to like it. And if we’re not certain—”

“I’m certain,” Andrew declared.

The truth was that he wanted to kill Donaldson. If he could have, he would have. Perhaps if he was lucky, he still could. An accident out on a boat. An errant shot during one of the hunting forays.

After all, lead balls did have a tendency to go astray during such things.

He’d never murdered anyone, and he wasn’t even really going to actually ruin Donaldson’s daughter, but he was going to make certain that people thought she was ruined. Knowing Donaldson, it was the best way to wound him. For he was a man who cared about how the world saw him. A man of strength, power, and control.

Once he’d shown that Donaldson was not in control, he’d make certain she was cared for.

He’d buy her a house somewhere, send her off, make certain that all would be well. She’d have a fortune to live out her days wherever she pleased.

It would be an easy thing to do, wouldn’t it?

“Come along,” Truebridge urged. “We’re going to need to go and meet the other dukes soon. The festivities will begin this evening and we must be one.”

Andrew drew another breath. “Are you truly ready for this?”

“I’ve been ready for months,” Truebridge countered honestly. “I would’ve loved to have done this sooner, but Bedford was insistent that we have everything lined up. Do you feel like everything is lined up? Wildwood seems ill at ease.”

“He’s gone up for a long walk, hasn’t he?” Andrew queried with a sigh.

“Yes. Out through the forest,” Truebridge said. He drove a hand through his silvery hair. “I hope he gets back in time. It would be our luck if he tripped and broke his neck.”

“You are ever the cynic.”

Truebridge arched a brow. “Hasn’t life proved to you that you should be a cynic?” he demanded.

He supposed so, though in his heart of hearts, he wished it was not true. In his heart of hearts, he wished he could go back to before his brother’s death, to when he saw the world as a place of beauty and hope and possibility. But now all he saw was shadow and pain and suffering, and he wanted to make Donaldson suffer as he and his mother did.

He wanted to make certain the man was shamed, and he wanted to find a way to permanently tear him down in society so that he could no longer hurt others. He wanted to push the man into a corner so that he would be forced to run, forced to admit defeat, and not be able to send young men to the slaughter anymore.

Andrew had tried other ways to get the man pulled from his commission, but it was almost impossible. He was too victorious in battle. It didn’t matter that his methods were unscrupulous. After all, most of the men he had killed were considered cannon fodder in any case.

No one cared about them, but his brother had. His brother had cared and so did he. Andrew would do what he could to save the men that his brother couldn’t, to save the men that Donaldson would so easily sacrifice for glory.

The truth was that the gilded halls about them were paved with blood and guts and bone and gristle, and not just from the men on the battlefield, but men like his brother who came home and could not face themselves in mirrors and so walked into water with stones in their pockets.

“You look like death,” Truebridge said abruptly.

He straightened his shoulders, knowing he had to pull himself together for this party. “I feel like death.”

“You’re not going to be able to seduce her looking like that,” Truebridge pointed out wryly.

He let out a laugh. “No, I suppose not. You don’t think my handsome face will do the trick of it right now?” he teased.

“Your handsome face looks as if you’ve seen your grave,” Truebridge replied. “No one wants someone who’s about to pop off.”

He let out another low rumble of a laugh, though he felt no humor. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“Good. Someone has to be honest with you.” Truebridge’s face grew serious. “You best be honest with me. I don’t want all of this going suddenly

wrong. For it certainly has the makings of it.”

He hesitated and a harrowing thought raced through his head. He blurted, “Is it worth it?”

“You’re having cold feet?” Truebridge challenged, his eyes rounding with surprise.

He gave a hard shake of his head. “There’s nothing cold about them. And I know it’s worth it, but I wanted to know if *you* do.”

His friend, a man who had only become his friend over pain and suffering, drew in a long breath. “I don’t have the answer for that yet, but all I know is that this is the path I’m on, and I can’t get off of it. We are all on this path together, and nothing is going to stop us. Nothing can, because if we fail, we’ll all go back to how that night was. That night Talbot was standing on the bridge looking out at the river, hopeless. I can’t live like that.”

And those words shattered through Andrew.

So many men could barely live. They couldn’t stand how they felt. They couldn’t handle the pain rippling through them. And yes, his friend was right. If they did not act, they would all go back to the hopelessness of the night on that bridge where they had all chosen each other rather than suffering.

They had all chosen revenge and doing it together rather than facing the abyss of sorrow alone.

CHAPTER 4

Their rooms were magnificent. Far more beautiful than any Mary could have ever anticipated. In fact, they were the most beautiful rooms she'd stayed in during her entire life. And she had not been limited in the scope of her experience of beautifully made furnishings and exquisite designs whilst living in London, or when staying with her uncle, the Earl of Cliveborough.

Even so, with her knowledge, she found herself agape and doing her best to hide it under the stoic facade she'd found necessary under her father's rule.

How could this veritable castle have so many beautiful chambers? She did not know, but the wealth of the Duke of Wildwood was clearly vast. As was his family's taste.

She knew the man she was pursuing, the Duke of Hartmore, was also wealthy beyond all possible imaginings.

He could have anyone. The only thing that gave her hope was there had been no gossip in the newssheets, or amongst the ladies, that he was considering anyone to take to wife as of yet.

He was still in the running, so to speak.

She had to believe she could do this, but the pressure welling up inside her was such she could not bear to be inside the castle. No, she could not bear confinement a moment longer.

It didn't matter how beautiful the place was. In some ways, the beauty itself was the oppressive force—the marble, the polished gleaming wood, the gilding, the silk tapestries. Everything was beautiful. From the pottery, to the ornaments, to the wild extravagance of items from all over the world.

But she needed space. She needed freedom. She needed to breathe and feel unconfined.

She needed a garden, and so, looking as calmly as she could from right to left for the way out, she raced down the stairs, through the foyer, and down the wide granite steps.

Now the guests had all arrived, they were empty. A strange contrast to the activity before and the grand presence of the Duke of Wildwood's beautiful

mother who had greeted them.

Without hesitating, she chose the raked gravel path that led around the back of the castle.

Though the way to the front of the castle was jaw dropping in its design, she did not wish to go down the beautiful path towards the fountains and the pools. No, she needed wilderness. She needed flowers.

She needed... Dear heaven, she needed peace in her soul. She'd known what she was doing when her father had looked her in the eyes and told her what he expected of her. She'd known the decision she'd made, but now the reality of it was coming down upon her. And the truth was she was not accustomed to being cruel to others, not like her father was.

Her father *enjoyed* it. She often wondered if it had something to do with his childhood when his brother, the earl, had wielded power over him, always reminding him of his lack of importance. Something she had witnessed first-hand and felt the effects of in private.

Yes, her father took pleasure in controlling others.

This was something she was going to have to *force* herself to do. And at last, when she came out to the large gardens at the back of the castle, she drew in a long breath. For the air was full of the scent of honeysuckle and roses and of lavender.

She slowed her steps until, at last, her slippers were skimming over the ornately arranged pebbled paths.

She wound her way through the wilder hedges and trees and the flowers, though she did not go far from the house and could no doubt be seen from the dozens of gleaming windows by any who wished to observe.

She did not care. No, instead, she felt the ground beneath her feet and tilted her face to the golden-hued sun and its last rays as it danced on the horizon, promising the purple tones of dusk.

She paused then, opened her eyes, and let herself drink in the senses of the garden. She listened to the hum of the bees and watched the wings of the butterflies as they drifted from flower to flower drinking in nectar.

Oh, how she wished she could be as free one of the butterflies. It was true they lived but a short season, but in that season, they were pure perfection. They were present, being exactly what they were meant to be. Blissful creatures with silken wings touched by magnificence. She had not felt touched by anything magnificent in years. As a matter of fact, she wasn't sure

she had been touched by anything magnificent ever. She had grown up in the bitter shadows and that was why she loved plants so very much.

They were her refuge.

They were proof to her that love existed in this cold world of maneuvering humans.

For when she took care of plants, they grew. When she tended flowers, they blossomed, and in nature, they needed no urging. They simply grew to be the heavenly things they were intended to be.

They were perfect, exactly as they should be.

She wondered how humans had grown so far away from nature and love with their hot houses, with their silk and gowns and slippers and jewels and their twisting hairstyles and rouged cheeks.

What had happened?

How had they lost it all in the pursuit of coin? Oh, she wasn't certain she wished she could run wild over the hills like the people had in ancient times, but sometimes she wished her life was very different than this one.

Oh, oh! How she wished—

“You look quite sad,” a deep voice rumbled behind her.

She whirled around and nearly fell backwards as she caught sight of the handsome speaker. Handsome was not the word. Not even close.

Her breath hitched in her throat as she made a quick view of him.

It wasn't possible. But there was no denying it! After all, her father had forced her to study the Duke of Hartmore's miniature.

She knew what *he* looked like.

For a moment, her thoughts raced so quickly she had no idea what to say. Were the heavens mocking her? Or were they aiding her by sending him to the garden at this exact moment?

Could this be her chance?

What tactic should she take with him? How could she draw him in? But before she could think of anything clever, she found herself admitting, as if he could draw only the truth from her, “I am sad.”

He folded his hands behind his back and his face softened. “That is a very honest reply,” he said. “I'm sorry for your sorrow.”

“You observe me thus. Would you prefer I denied it and talk about the impending party?”

He laughed a soft rumble. “Too true. I did mention it. But I suppose it is

the usual line, isn't it? We could talk about horses, the weather, dogs—”

“Or the garden,” she whispered as her fingers reached out and trailed over the tops of the flowers’ petals. “Do you care for gardens?”

“Oh yes,” he said easily.

She swallowed at the depth of his voice, and what it did to her. And she very nearly called him *Your Grace*, except she did not wish him to know she knew who he was... That she had made a study of him, in fact.

And so, to make certain he thought she was ignorant of his identity, she asked, “Is it yours?”

He let out another laugh. This one slightly darker. “No, it is my friend, the Duke of Wildwood’s.”

“I see,” she said. “But you have come down to the gardens too.”

“I needed a breath of fresh air before it all begins,” he said, an edge to his voice and to his strong body.

She nodded, feeling an odd sympathy with him in that moment. “I did as well.”

He offered a strange, slow smile that did the most shocking things to his already appealing appearance. “So, we are both here seeking strength from the garden before we go in to face the hordes?” he drawled.

She offered him a smile in turn, her heart beating fiercely, not just at the dance she was engaged in but at how she felt in his presence. “I think that is true.

Her heart... Her heart ached. He was a beautiful man who had come down to the gardens for a moment of peace, and she was already lying to him. How much would she lie to him? A great deal, no doubt.

Unfortunately, it was now her lot in life.

She tilted her head to the side, forcing herself to play her *tune*. “Are you here for any particular reason?” she asked.

He blinked, his dark hair glistening like a raven’s wing. “I beg your pardon.”

She grinned. “Well, hunting or boating or walking or...” She let the sentence trail off.

He arched a brow and folded his arms behind him.

Neither of them needed to say it. Surely a man such as he was in want of a wife.

“I don’t know,” he began. “And you, are you here for any particular

reason?”

“Oh, I go where I am told.” She shrugged. “I am a young lady. After all, we do not get to choose.”

“How very difficult for you,” he said with surprising kindness.

The tone... His bloody tone nearly ripped her heart in twain, for she could not recall anyone being so kind to her. Not in years. Not since...

“Sometimes it is difficult,” she agreed.

He strode forward, slowly looked down at the soft rose that she had been touching, and stroked its crimson petals. “It’s beautiful,” he observed.

Her whole body hummed as if it was she he was touching, as if it was she he was calling beautiful.

Such a fancy was mad, but there it was.

She licked her lips. “Yes,” she breathed.

And in that moment, one of the beautiful butterflies wafted right between them, its wings delicate as gossamer.

Her breath caught in her throat.

“What is it?” he asked, clearly mystified.

“I don’t know,” she murmured, but she felt... Something profound in her core at that happenstance. “I feel...” She shook her head. “Did you see it?”

“The butterfly?” he queried.

She nodded.

“Of course I saw it,” he said softly. “They are creatures of magic.”

“Then magic is around us,” she teased. “I used to believe magic was everywhere.” And she had, in the fields and forests near her home.

His brow furrowed and his sensual lips parted. “And you don’t you believe in it anymore?”

She gave her head a shake. “No, I believe in science more than magic.”

“I am sorry for you then. For while I have not experienced the sort of magic and awe I used to believe in, I simply think magic is what science has not yet made sense of.”

She frowned. “What an astounding thing to say.”

“Not really,” he countered. “Think of all those poor people who were burned at the stake simply because they said things that were true and yet people thought they were witches for it.”

She grimaced. The truth was many people were still being metaphorically burned at the stake for what they believed or what they hoped for. Her own

wishes and beliefs for independence and freedom were risky enough.

“It’s the nature of this life,” she lamented, “that if one goes against the beliefs of the current system they will be persecuted.”

“That is a rather grand statement.”

“It’s a true statement,” she replied.

“And do you plan on going against the rules of society?” he inquired.

She forced a laugh that was sharp even to her ears. “Of course not. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be at this party.”

“You just told me you didn’t have a choice.”

“In coming? I go where I am bid. But the truth is, if I was unruly, no parent would bring their daughter to such an exclusive event.”

And with that, she turned towards the gravel path.

She glanced back ever so slightly over her shoulder. “But while I do not have a choice, I am not altogether sorry that I am here.”

“And why is that?” he queried.

“Because of the garden and the magic of the butterfly and the rose and the lavender,” she said softly. “Lavender reminds me of my mother.”

“Has she died?” he asked gently, his gaze searching.

“Yes, but when I’m around lavender, I feel her presence about me, and I feel safe again. Even if it is an illusion.”

His brow furrowed. “Are you not safe?” he asked.

She whipped around to him and squared her shoulders and said with faux bravado, “Who in this life is safe, good sir?”

He bowed. “A point to you, lady.”

The beautiful duke with the haunting eyes glanced up to the house. “I must go in. My friends are expecting me.”

She smiled. “How nice to have so many friends who expect you.”

“Do you not have friends here?” he asked, surprised.

She shook her head. “No, I do not.”

“Then you must dance with me this evening, and I shall make certain that you meet many new friends.”

“That is very kind of you,” she said. Then she dared, “I hope you won’t regret it.”

He gave her a strange look as his gaze lingered over her face. “Why would I regret it?”

She shrugged and returned, “Kindness is easily given and not always

repaid.”

“Are you trying to tell me you plan on being unkind?” he teased softly.

She gave him a mischievous glance. “Perhaps,” she said, and it burned inside her that that was exactly what she was doing, but she did not wish him to know the truth about her. He could not. Not yet.

She took a step forward and gave him a smile. “You must not keep your friends waiting.”

“No,” he agreed softly. “Until later.” He took her hand in his then and, oh so gently, skimmed her knuckles with his lips. “I wish you peace in the garden.”

Peace? At such a touch? Impossible! For it felt as if the touch of his lips had brought her awake when she had not even realized she was sleeping.

As he paused a moment longer, his gaze most serious, she could scarce give credit to the sensations his gaze evoked in her. They shocked her to her core, but she had not experienced anything so vital in all her life.

He was a different sort of creature.

She understood that in an instant, and as he turned from her and headed back up the garden path towards the house, she fisted her hands and longed to rail at her fate.

She wished her mother had had the strength and courage to run away from their father, to take her and Jack away, to choose another life before illness claimed her and sent her into an early grave.

But Mary could not judge her mother, for she did not have the strength and the courage to run away from her father either. For she knew the cost would be far too high.

No, she had to pay, no matter who she hurt, she had to pay to save her brother and herself.

CHAPTER 5

Andrew headed back into the house, his heartbeat pounding in his chest, his blood thrumming through his veins. He opened and closed his hands.

What the bloody hell was he doing?

He stopped on the ornately woven Axminster runner and turned back to look through the windows out to the wild garden. He had seen her as he was coming down through the hall, her sad figure as she examined the rose, and he had felt compelled to go outside.

It was if a thread had been sewn into him and then pulled. He had not been able to ignore it, to cut it, to walk away from it.

No, he had found himself heading out into the garden, into the air, into the slowly descending evening to walk amongst the beautiful flowers and the butterflies that skimmed through the air about her.

And dear God, he had felt compelled to ease her pain. Perhaps it was because he had suffered so much since his brother's death, since his mother had suffered so much. He did not like to see others in the kind of pain he assumed she felt.

And so he had gone to her, to speak to her, to distract her. And that conversation had been a mistake, for he was here for a purpose. He was here for the daughter of Donaldson, not this young woman out in the garden with her beautiful face, and her sad soul, and her broken heart.

Yet, there was a resolve to her spine he admired. And he had dearly loved watching her lean over the rose and touch its petals as if it was the dearest thing in all the world. He had not seen such a thing from another person, not since perhaps he was a child, and had seen other children who loved pebbles the way some people loved jewels, who loved leaves the way some people loved silks. She had looked at that rose as if it was the greatest treasure in the entire world.

Then when the butterfly danced by, he thought that she had seen heaven. For one moment, he had truly believed that heaven could be here on Earth, but hell was here instead. For the moment he had pulled himself away, forced

himself to depart from her and gone inside, he knew.

He knew what he was here for. And it was not this young woman.

Oh, he could help her. He could introduce her, and he could dance with her. But he was here for a single purpose, and he could not forget that.

The sun was setting now. She would be going in to get ready for the ball. And as he climbed up through the house, to the top halls and the turrets of the sprawling castle, looking for his friends, he knew he had to steel himself against distraction. He could not be diverted in his course. No, there was far too much to be done and his friends to support.

And as he headed through the door, the loud noises of men talking struck him.

“There you are, Hartmore,” the Duke of Talbot drawled as he sat at a table contemplating weaponry. “What the bloody hell were you doing down in that garden capering with that nymph?”

“I wasn’t capering,” he returned. “I was merely trying to cheer her spirits.”

“It looked as if you were about to kiss her,” Truebridge pointed out as he sipped from a snifter of brandy.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he barked. “Where’s Wildwood?”

“Last I heard he went for a walk out to the woods,” Talbot stated. “He needed a moment to clarify his thinking.”

“I needed a moment too,” Hartmore said.

“Have a drink,” Truebridge urged.

“I think I shall stick to water and tea. Thank you very much.” He stared at the fire, feeling cold despite the warm air. “I need all my wits about me.”

“Well, I need my feelings dulled,” Talbot growled.

Hartmore headed into the room. They were a strange group of men. Oh, all of them were powerful. All of them were from families with lineages that stretched back to before the Tudors, some even as far back as the Norman Conquest.

They were a group of men who should have been able to make anything happen that they wished. And yet, generally, they were all honorable and good. And it was difficult sometimes to operate the pedals of power clearly and in plain sight. So, they had banded together to make certain that revenge was possible, for each of them had been scarred.

Each of them had been full of suffering.

And as he glanced over to Talbot, he nodded. This was the moment when they would all begin. It was all in play now.

Soon, they would all go downstairs to the ball where they would give the appearance of men looking for wives, when in fact they were out for destruction instead.

It was pain that had brought them together and pain that kept them together. He would never forget that night out on the bridge when the Duke of Talbot had stared at the swirling Thames.

They had all been out drinking, hoping to alleviate their pain with the usual trappings of society, the trappings that were supposed to make people feel better, but they never did.

In fact, they often made them feel worse in Hartmore's opinion. And as Talbot had stared out into dark waters and looked as if he was about to throw himself over into the rushing current, he had watched as the Duke of Wildwood had rushed forward and pulled their friend back.

In that moment, they had all vowed: vowed not to stop until they could end their pain and make the past right.

Truebridge crossed over to him. "You look in worse hell than before, Hartmore."

"I never should have talked to the young woman out in the garden. It was a mistake."

"Mistakes are made all the time," Talbot piped up.

"Not by me," Hartmore replied.

"Bully for you then. How marvelous," Talbot retorted. "But she has clearly affected you."

He scowled at the duke who was perhaps the most dangerous and volatile of all of them.

"Wildwood seems on edge," Truebridge whispered, then glanced carefully at Talbot. "That one over there looks like he could do murder at any moment. And who knows if Glenfoyle will arrive this night—"

And at that moment, Wildwood threw the door open and strolled inside.

Hartmore looked to Wildwood.

Something had happened.

He could tell just by looking at Wildwood's face, and he needed to know what it was. But he had a feeling. Much like himself, it looked as if Wildwood had encountered someone or something that had shaken him and

his resolve. But none of them could afford to have their resolve shaken, not for anything.

And so he crossed to his friend, ready to make certain they would not stop, that they would not back off this path, and that all would be done just as it should. Wildwood gave him a long, hard stare and, for a second, Hartmore considered retreat. But he'd come too far for that.

There was only forward now.

CHAPTER 6

Andrew headed down towards the chamber off the foyer which led into the grand ballroom. He was supposed to meet the other dukes there for their entrance, but as he strode through the dark corridor lit with sconces and flickering with gleaming light, he heard someone, their breath shuddering.

He felt his own breathing hitch, slowed his pace, and called out, "Hello?"

"Leave me be," the voice rushed, taut and desperate at being caught.

But Andrew found he could not leave whoever it was alone. They were in distress. And he could not bear to leave anyone in distress. Not after Charlie.

He approached the young man carefully. "Please, I promise I mean you no harm. I wish to be of aid to you."

"I do not need aid," the male voice said, gruff and low but young. Young, he realized.

"I understand," Andrew said, hoping to appease the person who was in pain, "but I'm still going to come and ascertain if you are well."

And so he did.

He took those remaining steps across the ornate Axminster carpet and looked into the alcove, a beautiful little space that overlooked the garden which spilled down to the fountains at the front of the house.

There were curtains, but they had been pulled back from the small, curved space to allow guests to find a moment's peace to appreciate the landscape.

The candelabra danced with light, throwing shadows about, and Andrew spotted the young man who was standing there in his evening attire, shaking.

"Mr. Clayton," he said softly, shocked.

Clayton's eyes snapped to his. His pupils were large, as if he had been startled, as if something was coming for him.

"Tell me what is wrong," Andrew urged, holding still, not wishing to cause Clayton more alarm. "Has something happened? Is your mother or father—"

"No," Mr. Clayton stated quickly. Clayton was twenty-four years old and

had come back from the Continent after fighting against Napoleon's army. He'd been decorated and mentioned in dispatches many times.

At present, his bronzed hands were shaking.

His older brother was the Earl of Dumphries, a powerful and good man.

"Tell me, what is it?" Andrew asked. "What can I do for you?"

Clayton gave a sharp shake of his head, and his hair flicked against his forehead. "Forgive me, Your Grace. I do not know what is happening to me, but it's been happening more and more as of late."

"It is all right," he said, even though he knew in this moment that it did not feel all right to the young man before him at all. The young man's dark hair gleamed obsidian in the candlelight as it tumbled over his visage.

His eyes were twin orbs of terror between the errant locks. His face was gaunt and pale even though he had clearly seen hours underneath the sun. His entire posture was rigid as if he wished to run, run as far as he could and as fast as he could, but clearly he could not, for he had to be at this house party and was supposed to make entrance to the ball at any time.

"The crowd," Clayton choked, his gaze darting now. "Everyone crushed together. It was simply too much."

"I understand," he said gently. "I sometimes cannot bear it."

"No, this is different," he insisted. "I've never felt anything like this in my life. It's akin to how I feel before a battle. But I can control that. This... This is altogether different. It's hell."

"Come, come," Andrew coaxed, trying not to sound condescending. "Come sit with me."

"I cannot sit," Clayton protested.

"It is all right," Andrew said again, determined to simply keep talking, even if he had to repeat himself. He walked up to one of the windows, grabbed the black iron handle, and shoved it open.

"Get some air," he suggested. "Cool air will help."

Clayton looked at him as if he was mad, but then he did as he was told, turning to the window and sticking his head out into the evening air.

"Drink in a good breath," Andrew instructed.

He, too, had known shuddering moments in the last months since his brother's death. He wished he had understood that slowing his breathing, slowing down, slowing his mind would've helped his younger brother, but now he understood it did, and perhaps he could help Clayton in this moment

too.

Clayton's hands gripped the carved window frame, the granite causing his knuckles to whiten as he pressed his fingers into the stone.

Clayton sucked in a breath through his nose and then let it out his mouth.

"Good," Andrew said. "Now again."

He did it again.

"You are safe here, Clayton. Nothing is coming for you."

"I can't explain it," Clayton said, frantic, though less so than a moment before. "It's as if I am back there, as if I am in Spain right now and I can feel the earth pumping beneath my feet from the thousands of soldiers, the cannon...the shot...the horses. I can smell the gunpowder."

"Perhaps it is all the people in the ballroom on the floor," Andrew suggested.

"Perhaps," Clayton said, closing his eyes to the cool evening at the window. "But I do not know what to do with this."

Andrew swallowed, wishing there was some magic elixir to save those in such need. "I will stay with you until you are well again."

"No, you have duties to do," Clayton countered swiftly. "Surely, you are expected by the Duke of Wildwood. I know you are an important guest."

"You are important, Clayton," Andrew said firmly.

"I am not," Clayton rushed, beginning to shake again. "I am but a lieutenant and—"

"Clayton," he cut in firmly, "you are a glorious person. I could never do what you have done to keep this country safe. And now I honor you. You are strong and brave and true, and in this moment it is all right to take my aid. You are experiencing the effects of war. Men have always been thus, even medieval knights. Men come back, but they don't speak of it, do they?"

He had been reading more and more on the subject since his brother had died. No one really liked to discuss the effects of war. They saw it as a weakness somehow, but as far as Andrew could tell, all the way back to the War of the Roses, men had come home from war shaking, unable to bear the traumas of it, yet were told to get on with their lives.

Men like Donaldson made it worse, asking young men to go far beyond the duties that they were expected to perform, to watch or carry out harrowing things that broke their minds and broke their bodies.

"May I put my hand on you?" Andrew asked.

Clayton gave a slow nod. "I suppose."

Slowly, he put his hand on the man's shoulder and pressed. "You are here with me, Clayton, in England in the north of the country. There is a ball. There is dancing. Now look at me."

And Clayton did. Their gazes met.

"Draw in a breath," Andrew said.

And he did.

Over the last months, he had read a great deal about different approaches all over the world about the mind and the body and melancholia, attempting to find some sort of course, anything that would help him not to feel the grief that had so rocked him over the last months.

He wished he had known some of the things he knew now to help his brother. He had discovered ancient writings from the East that helped him come back from the abyss. And he knew, even though he was fighting for revenge, that simply being present in the moment could help one survive the darkest of times.

And Clayton, as they locked gazes, slowed his breathing. And slowly, he came back from battle and found himself in the hall outside a ballroom.

The fresh air definitely seemed to help, as did Andrew's hand on his shoulder.

"It'll pass, Clayton. It'll pass," he promised. "It will not last. It may come back like waves upon the shore. But each wave does end, and you shall have a reprieve."

He wished he could have promised his brother such things. He had tried, but he had not truly known how to help Charlie. Perhaps he could help Clayton. He certainly wasn't going to leave him until he had made certain the young man was all right for the evening.

"I don't know what to do," Clayton said, his voice breaking. "I've never experienced anything like that, and it is happening more and more often."

"Well, you must talk with me every day then," he said.

Clayton laughed. "And how are we to do that?"

"You will write to me," Andrew said earnestly. "When we cannot visit with each other, you will write to me every day. You will tell me exactly what you are thinking, and I will write back, and we shall help each other."

"I help you?" Clayton laughed. "The Duke of Hartmore?"

"Indeed," Andrew said most seriously. "I may be a duke and a man of

power, but I have felt akin to what you have in this moment.”

“How is that possible?” Clayton demanded.

He hesitated, then sucked in a long breath and explained, “Understand that what you see before you is a man who hides his emotions. After my brother’s death, I was destroyed, and even now there are moments when I cannot move, when I can scarcely think. When I am horrified by my feelings. I feel as if the floor is opening beneath me, and I shall be swallowed up by it.”

“That is how I feel too,” Clayton breathed.

“It is as if my heart is thundering like the horses at New Market,” he confessed. “And I do not know how to stop it.”

Clayton gasped. “That is exactly how I feel too.”

He squeezed the man’s shoulder. “There, you see, and just speaking of it has helped us. Has it not?”

Clayton gave a slow nod.

“Good man, good. Now let’s just stay together. Let us stay together.”

And in that moment, Andrew knew that togetherness would help Clayton and himself, but he could not give up the path he was on.

Not yet.

So, now he was silent as he and Clayton breathed together and took in the evening air. He would go soon. He would still meet with the dukes. He would still make his entrance, but at least he could be here with Clayton right now. He could be with a young man who needed help, as he could no longer be with his brother.



It was a fact that Mary’s father was always abandoning her. She had gotten quite used to attending such affairs with her father, who was also supposed to act as her chaperone. She was also quite used to being left alone.

It did make things awkward, for she did not know a great many people. And as she stood in the center of ladies, she was not surprised her father had gone off with a lord to discuss who knew what in an attempt to further what he always hoped—his desire to find a title of his own.

He was always trying to expand his influence and sought attention from those with power. It drove her a bit mad, but he was so self-possessed about

it, and she could not help but admire that part of him.

Self-possession was an admirable thing, except that he was absolutely ruthless and completely selfish. That part of him? She loathed.

She swung her gaze about the room attached to the ballroom.

It was hot.

The crush of people was packed in tightly. The ladies were dressed to the heights of ton ideals. Their silken gowns skimmed their bodies. Their jewels gleamed on their throats, wrists, necks, and locks in the evening. Even their gowns shone, jewels weighing down the fabric like armor.

Their feathers and painted fans waved back and forth, beating at the warm air. Cologne and perfumes were wafting together. It was almost unbearable, and she needed a moment to collect herself.

For that time in the garden with the duke? It had been most shocking. She had not expected to like the duke so well. She had not expected him to be so kind as to seek out someone who needed help.

And so she let herself drift to the edge of the room where everyone was waiting to gain admittance to the ballroom, and she found herself standing at the edge of a hall.

It beckoned to her spirit, for it was cool and dark. She walked into it slowly, trying to steady herself, to draw her reserves so she would be able to do what needed to be done to pursue the Duke of Hartmore. Now that she knew who he was, now that she knew he had a heart that could be worked, she felt ill.

She swallowed, loathing herself for a moment, and as she walked down the hall silently, her slippers easily skimming the Axminster, she tried to get her thoughts in line.

But as she did so, she heard voices and startled. Then she slipped into the shadows of the hall.

She knew one of those voices...

There was an alcove just ahead, and she realized there were two men in it speaking together. One was most definitely the duke, for she would now recognize his rich tones anywhere.

As she neared, she kept very careful and spotted the Duke of Hartmore, beautiful beyond compare in his full evening kit. He was speaking intently to a young man who appeared in quite a state.

Hartmore's hand was upon the younger man's shoulder.

“It’ll be all right,” the duke said. “I will not leave you.”

The young man looked up at him. “I’m so sorry, Your Grace. I do not mean to be a burden.”

“A burden?” the duke countered, his voice full of compassion. “How could you ever be a burden? You are a worthy young man. We are lucky to have you. The entire world and certainly the British army and all the company are lucky that you are here. Think of it. You are indeed lucky to be here. You must treasure that—”

“Exactly,” Clayton rushed. “Why are all the others gone and I am here?”

“There is no sense to it,” the duke said, his words heavy. “We must simply let that go. We will go mad if we try to make sense of it. Some of us are here and others have been taken, and so we must live our best lives to honor them. We must live fully, Clayton.”

Clayton looked at the duke, his eyes round with fear. And then he softened. “Thank you,” he said. “I feel so guilty sometimes.”

The duke nodded. “As do I,” he said.

“You?” Clayton gasped.

The duke was silent for a long moment, his pain palpable. “I always wish that I could have done more for my brother.”

Nothing was said then.

And her heart sank.

How could she do what she was supposed to do to such a good man?

And Mary found herself quietly whipping around, rushing away.

The Duke of Hartmore was a better man than she ever could have imagined or dared believe. He was true and kind. And whenever he came upon a person who was in trouble, he helped them.

Her heart twisted with sorrow and anger.

She had never known anything like it in her whole life, and she was going to break that goodness if she was not careful. And she wondered if she was truly capable of such a thing. She had thought she was... But now? Now the reality of it felt like a cliff, a cliff that was crumbling out from under her, and she feared she was about to fall to the jagged rocks below.

CHAPTER 7

“*You* look beautiful,” her father said.

It was not a compliment.

Mary was well aware of this. Mary knew her father was not given to such flights of fancy. No, for him it was a statement of fact. She had done all she could to make certain she looked as attractive as possible for this ball. Not necessarily because she was certain doing so would achieve the result she had in mind—to once again catch the notice of the Duke of Hartmore—but so her father would see that she was actively doing everything she could to pursue the duke.

“Thank you, Papa,” she said simply.

Her father wore his uniform. It was beautiful, sparkling with gold and medals. His hair had been curled and was done in the perfect present style. It shone silver in the candlelight. His face was hard and weathered, as if he had seen the deaths of thousands of men, which he had. He did not seem to feel the need, as so many did in this company, to smile or bow his head, bounce on his toes, and do his very best to fit in.

No, her father was himself, and he was bold. It was the only thing she admired about him, for he, himself, was not to be admired. But the self-possession? She wished she could have it, but he had made certain almost from the time of her birth that she was in his service and not her own.

How she looked forward to the day when that would change.

At present, they were surrounded. The ballroom was a crush of people packed in like sardines into a barrel. Everyone gazed towards the perfectly symmetrical entryway waiting for the Duke of Wildwood and his friends to enter.

Not a single one of the dukes had come in yet, and everyone knew they were somewhere in the house. After all, this was what this party was for, was it not?

Most of the mamas were convinced this was some sort of bride ball where the dukes had come, all of them, to find *the one*. The one they would elevate

to duchess.

What better way to do it than to have a vast house party with the most important people in the ton, where the dukes could come and survey how the young ladies might match up against each other?

She rather hoped that was not the case, for it painted the dukes as perhaps efficient but shallow. And Hartmore did not seem the shallow sort, at least not from their conversation in the garden. And not from what she had witnessed in the hall.

She was still reeling from the care he had shown her. And the care he'd shown that young man.

He had been more caring, more interested in her person, than her father had been in his entire time with her. The only people who had showed her such care had been Jack and her mother, but Hartmore had evoked a singular feeling in her, one which had scared her, for she did not want it to end.

She wanted it to continue. And that felt dangerous, for when one needed something, well, that's when they were vulnerable, for it could easily be taken away.

Still, she could not erase the image of him by that young man, simply being with him, guiding him through his fear and despair.

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly. She felt raw, as if something was coming to the surface she did not understand.

She lifted her chin, drawing in a breath, studying the people who were gossiping behind their fans, waving handkerchiefs, and drinking punch.

She had to keep her head.

Many of the gentlemen had gone off into another room. The clink of billiard balls was no doubt filling that space, as was the smoke of tobacco and the scent of brandy. She couldn't blame them for escaping the ballroom.

This large room with its gleaming mirrors and frescoed ceiling was exceptionally warm. The windows had been opened out to the garden and the scent of flowers drifted in, combating the perfumes of so many ladies and colognes of the gentlemen.

Just as she felt that she was going to have to tell her papa that she needed to take a turn about the room and move towards the open windows so she did not glow with moisture and could get away from the crush of people for a moment, the doors swung open.

And the dukes strode in.

It was a coup of power.

Those men took the ballroom as if they were charging a battlefield or conquering a court. They were beautiful, strong, capable, the most powerful men of England, and the entire room fell hushed as they gazed upon the perfectly dressed gentleman in their evening attire of breeches, exquisite coats, cravats, and simple jewels.

They were, quite simply, singular. Unlike anyone else, for since birth they had been held apart.

The Duke of Wildwood said something, but she could not hear it, for her gaze was trained on Hartmore and his hair, which seemed to gleam like ebony in the sparkling candlelight shimmering from the chandeliers.

His face was hard. And yet there was a beauty to it. She wondered if it had always been thus, or if it had been boyish once upon a time. She rather thought it had, but the weight of the world seemed to have come down upon his shoulders since his brother's death.

Though she couldn't be certain, that seemed true to her.

And her heart, her dratted heart, which usually was carefully kept, ached for him. She wondered if the line of his lips had tilted in smiles more, if he had given into laughter before the loss of his little brother.

If so, she could sympathize. She had not felt so crushed before her own mother's death. And she wished that her father had not had the charge of the Duke of Hartmore's brother.

A wave of guilt crashed over her as she realized that if she forced this man to marry her, he would be connected to the very man who had been in charge of his little brother. No one knew for certain what had happened to the duke's brother except that he had drowned.

There was a whisper that occasionally traveled through society that he had taken his own life. But those words were usually quickly squelched, for no one wanted to speak such a thing about a relative of the duke.

Her stomach twisted. War was so cruel. She knew Napoleon needed to be stopped, but her father... Her father loved the cruelty of war and the power it gave him.

"You look sour," her father said. "Whatever you are thinking, eradicate it or cover it up."

She winced. "Yes, Papa," she said quickly and swallowed.

She smoothed her gloved hands along the front of her pale silk gown. She

could not think dark thoughts, for they would show on her face if she was not careful, or at least she had to make certain she was wearing the mask she had perfected so well over the years.

And in that moment, the Duke of Hartmore looked towards her. There was a strange look of appreciation. His lips did turn in the slightest of smiles, but then his gaze drifted slightly to the left and he spotted her father.

That tilt of his lips disappeared, and something darkened his gaze. And she knew with a chill in her heart that he did not like her father. That her father had good reason to wish to change how the duke thought of him, that he had lost any of the favor he might have hoped for. With the cold look of rage that flashed through his eyes, she understood why she was to be put forward to try to win her father's favor back.

But it was going to be quite the climb, she realized. For he truly had not known who she was when they were out in the garden. And now, knowing whose daughter she was, she had a terrible feeling that instead of coming over to ask her to dance as he said he would, he was going to turn on his heel and leave her to the proverbial wolves.

But she should have known better, for he was not like her father.

Clearly, Hartmore was a man of honor, a man of goodness.

"You will please him," her father said sotto voce. "He already has a strong opinion of me. You will soften it. You will show him that I actually took care of his brother, that I did everything I could for him. Do you understand?"

She gave a slight nod, and much to her astonishment, the Duke of Hartmore began to cross to them. His body was big and strong, cutting easily through the company.

People stared at him. Fans waved frantically. Mamas batted their lashes. Curls danced as ladies giggled and hoped he would stop before them and ask them to dance.

And before he could reach them, a bold mama—her gown swishing about her legs, sausage curls bobbing, and voice trilling—thrust her poor young daughter forward.

The young lady was slender, pale, and clearly mortified. She was dressed fussily in too much lace, and she looked a bit like a cake that had spent time with a decorator who did not know when to stop.

The girl shrank back.

Rather than brushing them off with frustration, the duke turned towards the young lady and smiled kindly at her. He paid little attention to the mother, but inclined his head and said something to the girl.

The young lady's eyes brightened, and the curve of her shoulders eased a bit.

With an assuring smile, the duke took up her dance card and put his name down. Then he bowed and cut around the mother, leaving her grinning.

The daughter looked relieved and not quite so horrified after his kindness. Hartmore resumed his singular focus on Mary as he strode up to them.

Good lord, how did he do that? How did he so easily show the world kindness when the world was so unkind?

Her mouth dried and she felt sick. How could she take advantage of such a man?

But she knew her father was carefully watching her and so she smiled brightly.

The duke inclined his head ever so slightly to her, put one hand behind his back, then extended the other in her direction. "I do not have the pleasure of your acquaintance," he said. "Colonel Donaldson, am I to understand this is your daughter?"

Colonel Donaldson inclined his own head. "Why, yes, Your Grace. And I am so glad you remember me. We only had that brief interaction."

A muscle tightened in the Duke of Hartmore's jaw. "Yes, I was not at my best. The death of my brother, you see?"

"Of course, of course. Grief is a strong emotion, and I admire passion in a man and loyalty to family," her father said swiftly. "I am loyal to my daughter. I love her dearly. And I would have done the same."

"Thank you," Hartmore said. But there was a note to his voice which made her think he did not feel his words and that he doubted her father's sincerity.

She was shocked. Her father was good at tricking everyone into believing what he wished them to believe, but perhaps Hartmore was not like everyone else.

"May I have this dance, Miss..."

"Mary Donaldson," she offered, gazing up at him through her lashes, more for her father's benefit than anything else. She had to be seen as pursuing this goal.

“May I have this dance, Miss Donaldson?” the duke inquired.

She turned her gaze to her father as if it wasn't already a foregone conclusion she would say yes.

“Of course, you must dance with the duke,” her father said grandly.

And so she gave the duke a slight curtsy, then slipped her gloved fingers into his large palm.

That touch... Somehow, it rippled through her, a bright dash of emotion that she could not identify. And it felt so wonderful it actually frightened her. For she was not accustomed to good things lasting.

Hartmore crossed the room with her, leading her out towards the polished floor. The Duke of Wildwood had already selected a young lady and was opening the dancing.

No one else had yet dared to step onto the dance floor. But quickly, the other dukes began escorting their partners onto the gleaming wood in the large open space. The music filled the air. It was delicious and beautiful.

A waltz.

And before she knew what was happening, Hartmore was guiding her about the room. His steps were not nearly as elegant as she thought they might be. In fact, they were rather harsh, angular.

His body was rigid.

“Miss Mary Donaldson, is it?” he said tightly.

She gave a nod, uncertain what was to come next. “Yes.”

“I see.” He looked as if he was trying to make sense of her. As if she was a flower he had admired, but which had suddenly produced thistles. “So we were not acquainted in the garden, but not so very far apart.”

“Forgive me,” she said, her heart racing. She was not sure what to say or do. For she actually liked him and wished deep in her heart he might like her too. But was that even possible given how he had looked at her father? “I should have given you my name in the garden.”

That muscle in his jaw tightened. “As should I,” he stated. “You had no idea who I was. Do you even know about my brother?” he asked softly.

“I do,” she whispered. “My father...”

Good God, she knew what she was supposed to say. That her father was terribly grieved by his death. “My father was his commanding officer,” she said.

He gazed down at her. “That is correct. He died. The war took him. There

is no argument about it.”

She was shocked by his admission. Was he truly intimating that his brother’s death had not been an accident? She admired his honesty, but it only made her heart bleed anew.

“It is a tragedy,” she said softly. “All those young men lost.”

His eyes narrowed. “Do you truly think so? I don’t think your father does.”

She gasped. “You blame him.”

“He is a military man, and he has a clear line of duty in which he believes the ends justify the means.”

Those cold hard words... They were not a direct answer to her own statement. But she was certain he was revealing more to her than he’d likely intended. She did not know why. But his honesty was refreshing and a touch frightening, for she did not know where it might lead.

“And you don’t?” she queried. She did not either. But she’d never dared to venture such a thing to her father.

“I don’t,” he said. “I believe that there should be rules even in war.”

She was silent then. And in moment, she was fairly certain she was never going to be able to convince him to ask her to be his wife. Unless, of course, she played for his sympathy, which felt like a far more dire act, a worse manipulation than anything else.

“I agree with you,” she dared to whisper.

“Is that why you were sad in the garden?” he said.

“What?” she gasped.

His eyes narrowed slightly, but there was that kindness again as he assessed her. “Your father is not a kind man, is he?”

She swallowed. She could tell the truth. It was, she realized, the best choice with him. Perhaps not the whole truth, but at least some of it. “No, he is not,” she confessed for the first time in her life. The words felt momentous, for she had never, ever spoken them to anyone but her brother.

And as she spoke them, she felt both a wave of shame and relief course through her.

She’d been alone for so long. So very alone, and she felt her body begin to tremble at the sheer strangeness of someone caring enough to ask her about her life.

His hardness softened and his gaze searched her features. “Is he unkind to

you?” he asked.

“Yes, he is unkind to me,” she admitted, the words like poison being drawn out of her. And then, oh God... Then she began to shake. “Forgive me,” she said. “I cannot—”

“What?” he asked softly.

She shook her head as tears suddenly filled her eyes. The emotion, which she never allowed anyone to see, horrified her. For she felt as if she was rattling out of control. “I cannot tolerate your kindness.”

“Why?” he breathed, his dark eyes widening with both a mixture of sympathy and surprise.

“Because I am not kind,” she returned, hating herself. Hating that she’d ever considered misusing him.

“I don’t think that’s true. The young woman I met out in the garden—she is kind,” he breathed softly.

“She was only kind because she was by herself,” she said softly, determined not to let the tears fall. Or tell him that even then, she had not truly been herself. “I was alone.”

His hand tightened about hers as he turned her in a weaving arc. “I don’t understand.”

“Nor can you,” she said. “I am so very sorry about your brother,” she said. “So very sorry indeed.”

And she meant it with every fiber of her being. “Only I find...”

And with that, the music ended, and she was never more grateful for anything in her entire life.

She slipped her hand from his and rushed away. She could not bear it. She could not bear what she was supposed to do. Not to a man who was so kind. Surely she could not do it. Her heart cried out within her as she realized her future would be a brutal one, and she dashed through the company, knowing she would face the anger of her father later.

But she did not care.

Not in this moment, not when the reality of it all struck her hard. The Duke of Hartmore was a good man who felt the loss of his brother brutally. And he was not a liar. He was not dishonest.

No, he was a beautiful soul. And she did not think she could hurt him more than her family already had.

CHAPTER 8

Well, that seemed to go particularly well,” the Duke of Truebridge drawled, standing on the edge of the ballroom next to Andrew.

Andrew ground his teeth, the memory of the young lady fleeing from him burning through his vision. “I apparently managed to horrify her with the truth and drove her off. I don’t know what the bloody hell I’m doing. Or what possessed me.”

“Clearly not,” Truebridge intoned. He quirked a brow. “Weren’t you supposed to seduce her, not terrify her?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I was supposed to do,” he sighed. “But I had no idea that I am apparently a fool.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Truebridge allowed, surveying the room, trying to look as if he didn’t give a damn. Likely he succeeded to those who did not know him, but his feelings seemed to crackle beneath his facade. “You’ve always been too inclined towards honesty, and I think in this particular case, well, perhaps it might not be such a bad thing.”

Andrew swung his gaze to Truebridge, tempted to throttle his friend. “What the bloody hell are you talking about? Of course it’s a bad thing.”

“It is not,” Truebridge countered, pursing his lips as if he was some harbinger of wisdom. “I think you might have just created an opening of vulnerability there.”

“I’m supposed to misuse her vulnerability?” he growled, outrage crashing through him as he whipped towards his friend.

“Do you want revenge or not?” Truebridge asked with a shrug.

“And you?” Andrew challenged, hoping to change the focus. “How is your revenge going?”

“My revenge is going apace,” Truebridge said, though he suddenly looked as if he was ill at ease. Then he rushed, “Look, focus on yourself. I have concerns for you at present.”

Hartmore swung his attention to Donaldson, who stood across the ballroom. Donaldson was staring at where his daughter had made her swift

exit, and he appeared as if he was chewing glass.

“I’ve managed to make him angry,” Andrew stated, not entirely certain what he was feeling.

“Yes,” Truebridge mused. “Now the question is whether that anger is directed at you or at his daughter?”

Andrew stiffened.

That had not been something he’d truly allowed himself to consider in his pursuit to blunt his own pain. Perhaps Donaldson was not a man to be trusted with his family, just as he should not be trusted with soldiers.

Concern pierced him as suddenly he understood that taking care of Mary Donaldson with a cottage and some funds might be the least of her worries. Or his.

“I’ll be back,” he said quickly and headed out into the darkened hall without another word for Truebridge.

He headed out into the shadows of the long gallery that stretched along the castle, wishing he could kick himself. Nothing would be productive from that though.

Where had she gone?

The question pulsed through him with ever-growing urgency. The reality of what he was doing, and its unseen ramifications, was hitting him.

And he did not like how it felt.

And then he instantly knew where she had gone. Andrew slipped out one of the side doors into the silvery moonlight and headed out to where the gardens were. He wound his way through the manicured bits into the wilder parts where willow trees danced, oak trees filled the air, and the wildflowers covered the carpet of the ground.

Small blue and white flowers dotted the shadowy places.

And there she was, like a maiden from a myth, kneeling down on the forest floor and looking at the flowers as if they could somehow transform her.

“You really shouldn’t be out here alone,” he said softly.

She jumped and whipped around.

“No, I shouldn’t, but nor should you be here with me,” she whispered, her voice a silvery note in the night. “You don’t want to be stuck marrying me, do you?”

He laughed softly. “I don’t have to marry you if I get caught with you.”

She paled. “Oh, I see. Just ruination then?”

He ground his teeth together. She’d hit the nail on the proverbial head. Right now, all he needed was someone to come along and find them in the dark woods, and her ruination would be complete... Even though nothing would’ve happened.

That was how society was.

He swallowed.

She was strong, very strong. That was evident to him, though she was as pale as a ghost with her cloud of dark hair.

She had no doubt endured years of difficulty with Donaldson as her father. And yet there was a fragility to her in this moment out here in the silvery moonlight underneath the trees.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I was cruel to you in there.”

“No you weren’t,” she said flatly.

He shook his head, feeling upended as all his plans seem to whoosh away. “Wasn’t I? Challenging you like that? Pointing out that your father was...”

“Exactly who he is,” she rushed. Her face tensed. “If you only knew.”

“Knew what?” he queried, taking a step towards her.

She licked lips and looked away. “I think you are too good, Your Grace.”

His breath caught in his throat. Was she so starved for kindness? “What makes you say that?”

“You see me as a person, don’t you?” she blurted. “Like an *actual living* being. It’s why you came out to the garden. You saw someone who was sad, and you actually took the time to make certain I was all right. And then you came and asked me to dance, despite the fact it’s clear you loathe my father.”

“Is it so very obvious?” he queried, daring to take another step, even as his damned heart began to ache for her. How could it not, for with every moment, it became clear to him that she had known so little love.

While he had known so much. Despite his brutal loss.

“Perhaps not to everyone,” she whispered. “But I could see the emotion flit across your face before you hid it.”

“I’m quite transparent to you, it seems,” he replied, struggling to understand what was happening between them. For it felt as if they were both stripping off masks, baring themselves.

“So it seems,” she agreed, a melancholy smile softening her features. “You came anyway to ask me to dance because you said that you would.”

Why?”

“I am a man of my word, Miss Mary,” he said honestly. Though he did not share that he had a plan for her. And it wasn’t an honorable one. Which was now grating at him. Grating at him in a way that was becoming clear he could not tolerate. How had he let himself think he could ruin her life?

“I see that,” she said, tilting her back, the pale line of her throat exposed. “But perhaps you should not be.”

“Perhaps I will not always do good,” he ventured, his throat tightening.

“I’m sorry for that possibility,” she said, her voice deep with emotion. She closed her eyes for a long moment. “And I don’t want to bring you into...”

“Into what?” he demanded, feeling ill at ease all of a sudden.

Her fingers trailed over the pale flowers and then traced over the silky green leaves. “My father is not a good man, and I am here with a specific purpose.”

“What purpose?” he said, dread pooling in his belly.

She lifted her gaze to his. “I am supposed to...”

“Yes,” he prompted, his muscles tightening.

She bit her lower lip as regret darkened her face. “You must understand I have a little brother named Jack, and I love him dearly. I want him to be happy, and I want him to be safe.”

He tensed. This was changing the tone of conversation. “Is he not safe?”

“With my father?” she laughed, a harsh note in the quiet forest. “You already know the answer to that, I think. He is not kind. He wasn’t kind to your brother. To me. Or to Jack. He is the *opposite* of kind.”

“Mary,” he said, eschewing all formality as he asked firmly, “are you not safe?”

Even knowing how power-hungry Donaldson was, it had never occurred to him in his quest for revenge and his plan to use her that Donaldson would misuse his *family*. But why not? If the man saw boys on a battlefield as tools, why not his own family too?

Her brow furrowed. “I had a plan before I met you.”

“Oh?” he said softly. “Unburden yourself.”

Her shoulders sank as if it was indeed a burden. But then she sucked in a shuddering breath and explained, “When my father told me what I must do, I thought I could do it. I could manipulate you as he wished, for I did not

consider you, the person. After all, the alternative is rather terrifying.”

“You’re going to manipulate me?” he queried, feeling a wave of guilt because that was exactly what he intended to do to her.

“Yes,” she rasped as if the admission caused her great pain. “My father wanted me to win you over, to convince you that I would be a good candidate...”

He blinked as she let the words trail off.

“To take as my wife?” he exclaimed with shock, for it had never occurred to him. Donaldson was a bold man with a grand imagination.

She gave a tight nod.

He blew out an aggravated breath. “I had no intention and never would have any intention of marrying you, Mary, because of who your father is,” he said softly. “I had a very different intention, you see.”

She blinked as his words fell over her. “What?” she asked as if she did not know if she truly wished him to confess. As if his reply might break her.

“Your father?” he began, hating what he was about to admit. Wondering if he could ever forgive himself for choosing such a twisted path. Even if only for a short time. “You’re right. I do hate him. And I admire you right now for daring to tell me some truth about what is going on. It must take a great deal of courage, especially since it is clear to me you love your little brother.”

“More than the world,” she said, her voice rough with fear and love. “You see, my mother died under my father’s keeping. I think he made her sick with all his cruelty. And he certainly didn’t care enough to make certain there were good doctors to take care of her, and he didn’t listen to the surgeons when they said that they should operate. No, he did not care about her. And the truth is, he only sees my brother and I as pieces on a board to move about to gain his power.”

“I understand that now,” he said softly, feeling the weight of her position. “And he truly wanted you to try to convince me to marry you?”

She let out a sad laugh. “Exactly so.”

“And you thought you could do it?” he queried gently. She was beautiful, and captivating, and in other circumstances...

“I thought I *had* to do it,” she gritted. “But I am not like my father, nor am I willing to be.” She squared her shoulders as if this small action might keep her strong in her resolve to abandon her father’s plan. “Perhaps I

thought I could do it until you came out to the garden, until I saw the way you were so good to others. And then when you crossed the ballroom to come and ask me to dance, despite the fact I could see how much you despise him, I could not have done it." Her face creased with sorrow, and she rushed, "But you are too good, Your Grace."

He rushed to her, taking her hands in his, for her pain was too great to bear. It reminded him of his own pain, and he longed to ease hers as he replied fervently, "I don't think you could have done it, Mary. For though you don't seem to have a great opinion of yourself, I can see that you are nothing like your father." He squeezed her hands and locked gazes with her as he reiterated with all his feeling, "Not at all."

"And what am I to do?" she protested. "He says that I must convince you to marry me, to gain favor with you somehow. Otherwise, he will make my life horrible, and Jack's. Don't you understand? You see, I thought if I did convince you to marry me, I would be free. That I could be your duchess. I would be the best duchess in the whole world to you. And Jack would never have to worry about our Papa's cruelty crushing us."

The power and flood of her fears poured over him, scouring him. "So, you want your freedom from him, is it?"

She nodded, but she looked grim. "I do. But I can never be free from him. I have no money. I have no power, and I am not yet of age. There is no way to escape a man like him, nor can Jack, and I cannot leave my brother to his keeping. My brother can barely endure under him when he is home from the Continent. Jack's gentle spirit will be crushed if I leave him without something put into place to care for him."

Before he could think, he said, "Perhaps then, Mary, we do not need to manipulate each other because I'm going to be honest with you too."

"I don't understand?"

"I did not know you were the daughter of the man I hate with all my being when I saw you in the garden," he began. "I'd like to think I still would've gone out to see if you were all right and offer you comfort. You looked so bloody sad, so broken by the world. But I don't know if I would've done. You see, I cannot forgive your father for what he did to my brother, to my family. And I want revenge."

Her eyes widened, astonished at his clarity of speech.

"I want to destroy him," he growled.

She gasped.

“Does that shock you so very much?”

“I’m sure he has enemies everywhere,” she admitted.

He cocked his head to the side. “He says he’s loyal to you.”

“He’s not,” she said, her lip curling. “He’s loyal only to himself.”

“That is what I thought,” he said, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand. “And you? Are you loyal to him?”

She considered this for a long moment then said, “I am not loyal to someone who would crush me. I do not have the affection of a daughter for a father because he has never taught me affection. I care only about Jack. He is the reason I was willing to...”

Her words died off, and she studied him as if she feared what lay ahead, for she had no plan, no security, no friends.

But she was mistaken.

“Just like I am willing to manipulate and hurt for my brother, for my mother,” he continued, understanding her now.

She gave a nod. “I’m glad you can see why I felt I had to try with you. But I could not lie. Not now. Not here. You are so—”

“I think, Mary, you must understand my intention was to ruin you,” he cut in, determined that she should understand the whole of him so that she had no illusions.

She stared at him, then began to laugh once again without humor. “So, this would’ve been a great muddle. Ruin? My God, my father truly scarred you.”

“Indeed,” he agreed. “But like you, I find I cannot give into that sort of behavior. Though I planned to set you up in the country later, I wanted your reputation quite damaged to shame your father. It is small of me.” He hesitated. “Do you think me so good now?”

“I don’t know what to think,” she said honestly. “So what are we to do then? The party has not even truly begun, and yet here we are bearing our souls, changing our...”

“Plans,” he said firmly. “Mary, we do not need to be adversaries. We both have a similar goal. You want to free your brother, and I want to avenge mine. So let us,” he said softly, daring to hope, “be allies instead.”

CHAPTER 9

The revelations spilling from each other's lips as they stood amidst the flowers of the moonlight forest floor nearly undid Mary. In all her life, she had not been able to speak so honestly with anyone, not even her dear brother Jack, because she had felt the need to protect him.

All her life, she'd had to protect him, keep him safe, keep him loved, and so she could not always share her thoughts and her fears. But here now with the Duke of Hartmore, she was holding nothing back and nor was he.

She could tell. And she felt the power of that course through her.

"Do you always tell the truth?" she asked softly after his shocking proposal.

"Always," he said. His strong face bore the shadow of his recent loss as he admitted, "It wasn't until anger and grief filled my heart that I considered doing anything else. But I find I cannot lie to you because you are a victim in all of this too, aren't you?"

She swallowed before she countered, "I hate thinking of myself like that, as if I'm a victim of life, a bit of flotsam and jetsam, tossed upon the sea. A piece of driftwood."

His eyes widened as if he echoed her pain. Her confusion.

"I want to be more than that," she said firmly. "I want to be the mistress of my own life, steering myself towards action, towards choice. I don't want to just keep up with whatever it is given to me."

"Then choose now," he urged.

"To be your ally?" she queried, uncertainty lacing her tone.

He gave a nod of his head.

She looked away, her hands gripping his now with an intense ferocity. "How do I know that you won't change your mind, that you won't throw me aside?"

"I suppose," he confessed, seeming to hate that she had to feel such fear and it was clear from the way his body tensed that he wished he could immediately alleviate it, "you can't know for certain. You are going to have

to have faith in this.”

“Faith?” she echoed, her gaze shooting back to his. “I have my entire life to show me that faith can be a very dangerous thing indeed.”

“Perhaps, but this is what you have been waiting for. And you have already shown me your cards, so to speak.”

A strangled note of frustration escaped her lips. “So I have. You are a victim in all of this too. Both of us wounded by the same man in life. Perhaps that is why I can have faith in you.”

He pulled her slightly closer until her skirts danced over his boots, as if somehow, through nearness, he could will her to believe him. “We are both victims of your father’s cruelty, of his inability to see people as souls and hearts and connected to others instead of as pawns.”

She nodded. “He cares only for his own progress. He would hurt thousands to get one step ahead.”

“Then work with me,” he urged again.

She bit her lower lip and felt herself transform as if she was leaping into a void. “Let us make a vow on it. But you must understand the sort of danger that I’m putting myself in. I am abandoning my father without any sort of promise of real help.”

“I promise I will help you,” he said without hesitation. He cocked his head to the side and looked as if he longed to pull her to his heart and comfort her. He did not. “It had always been my intention to help you even after I ruined you.”

“Oh?” she said, her brows rising. “How?”

He groaned. “Forgive me. But I was going to buy you a house wherever you wanted and set you up for the rest of your life.”

“Do you think I would be content in a small cottage somewhere?” she dared to tease, though she was certain that he meant what he said.

“Forgive me,” he began. “It was arrogant and callous—”

“A small cottage suits me fine and would my brother too,” she cut in, wanting to assure him she did not feel ill will towards him.

“I will do all I can to protect your brother and you,” he said.

“That is all that matters to me,” she affirmed. Then, as the truth hit her, she added, “And I want him to be proud of me too.”

And that was a significant truth in all of this.

She could not forget her brother’s face when her father had made the

proposal that she seduce the duke.

Her brother had not wanted her to do it. He'd all but appealed to her with his gaze. And she realized now that even if she'd kept him safe, she would not be able to bear his disappointment in her.

She wanted him to be able to believe there was good in the world, that at least one person he loved was good.

"Then we will be allies," she agreed.

He squeezed his hands gently around hers and let out a relieved breath. "You are remarkable," he said.

She laughed, only this time she felt a touch of warmth. "Why? Because I have been a fool and told you my plans?"

"No," he countered. "Because you have endured so much and yet you have not been warped by him."

"Oh, I have been warped," she corrected quickly. "Make no mistake. I have been twisted under his tutelage, but I still believe that good can be done. For my brother."

"Then we will ensure it," he agreed.

Then, much to her astonishment, he gently lifted his hand and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. He turned to look at the flowers on the forest floor and bent.

"Do not pick one," she rushed, bending down beside him.

"No?" he queried, surprised by her vehemence.

"No." She placed her hand over his as it lingered over the flowers. "I suppose it's all right to pick hothouse flowers. Or flowers that are about to meet their end. But these are fully alive. Do not cut them down now in the moment of glory to give one to me as a promise. Let us promise over their beautiful living petals instead."

"You are most strange," he mused, though he seemed to admire that strangeness.

"Perhaps I am."

His gaze turned to her lips. "I do not know why, but I am drawn to you, Mary."

She lifted her gaze to his. "And I to you."

"I wanted to ruin you," he said. "But now I find..."

"What?" she whispered.

"I want to kiss you, for you."

“Is this some elaborate plot to ruin me?” she drawled, her heart skipping rapidly.

“No, I promise it isn’t,” he rushed, his hand enfolding hers. “But I find...”

And with that, she kissed him.

She did not know why except that she felt the need reverberating through her body to do so. It wasn’t reasonable or logical. It was a force greater than her thinking or herself.

And she felt certain he felt it too.

Her lips touched his and together they knelt gently in the greenery of the forest floor. His mouth roved over hers, kissing, teasing, giving.

She had never been kissed before. She’d assumed it would be ragged and rough. The man taking all, a lady giving. But this was not how it was, not a bit of it. His hand slipped over her shoulders, slipping into her hair, gently tilting her face to meet his.

His lips were soft, gentle, full of promise. Her body began to shake with the pleasure of it. She allowed him to kiss her. Mary brought her hands up to his shoulders, resting them on his carved muscles.

This felt as if somehow it was part of their vow, solidifying their union to be one, to work together. And yet it was terrifying, for she did not truly know him or understand him except for the fact it felt like her *soul* knew his soul. As if they were coming together to fight the worst of the world, and in this they could unite in anything and do anything together.

And so, she gave into the power and softness of his kiss. His tongue touched the line of her mouth and she opened to him, like the flowers on the forest floor, blooming.

She was astonished by the beauty of it, the magic of it. She had thought magic was dead, but here under the trees, amidst the flowers, with his mouth upon hers, she knew that magic was very much alive. That magic was flowing through them, from her body to his and his to hers again, and she never wanted it to end.

She wanted the house party to vanish, for all of the pain, for all of the past, for all of the memories, for all of his suffering to slip away and that there would be nothing but love in this world.

And for the first time, his kiss, his lips upon hers, made her think that love was real, that it could be possible.

He pulled back and all her fancies fell away.

“Whatever was that?” she whispered.

“I do not know,” he marveled. “But I wanted it.”

“As did I,” she confessed.

“Is that why you kissed me?” he rasped. “Because I said I wanted it?”

She shook her head and explained simply, “Because something inside me told me to do so. It was the quietest, most pure voice I’ve ever heard, and I could not disobey it.”

Wonder crossed his face then. “Oh Mary, you are such a beautiful soul. I am glad I did not try to keep lying to you.”

“And I to you,” she said, but then the ease in her body vanished as memories slipped back to the surface. “But I’m afraid.”

“Why?” he whispered. “Now that we are to be friends, I will protect you.”

“I do not know if you can protect me from this,” she pointed out. “I do not know if simply telling the truth and being honest will save us from the darkness of my father. He is brutal and he knows how...”

Hartmore lifted his hands and cupped her face. “I will protect you from him,” he said. “I will keep you safe.”

But she wanted to tell him that he could not. No one could. The world was far too unpredictable for that. But she kept her mouth shut, for she did not want what was left of the magic to slip away.

Instead, she gave him a shaky smile. “What shall we do first?”

And then he began to smile too. “I have an idea.”

CHAPTER 10

A combination of fear and elation charged through Mary as she headed back towards the house, away from the forest. What had she done?

What was she *doing*?

Dear God in heaven, she did not know what to think of her own actions. She felt as if she was flying! But the very fact she was soaring so high over the earth made her certain she was about to plummet at any moment and crash back to the ground, her body broken.

But she had made a deal with the Duke of Hartmore.

She was either brilliant or a complete fool. She did not know which. She could not give it too much thought, and she could not go back on it. For now he knew what her father wanted to do, what she had planned to do and, strangely, she found herself greatly relieved they had confessed to each other.

For she would've spent the entirety of the house party attempting to make him fall in love with her, to ask him to marry her, when all along his plan had been to ruin her.

Goodness! How she would've been playing into his hands. But he was no villain.

Now, they would be playing her father and that was a much better game, and yet it was a dangerous one, at least for her. She had to pray the Duke of Hartmore would be able to do as he said, or that she could learn to protect herself.

But she was done being her father's tool, his puppet on a string. And she was so grateful she had come to this house party. For here, the duke had given her a new path.

She was terrified. It was true.

Her body hummed with it. But now she knew she could stand on her own two feet and be her own person. This scheme of her father's had pushed her too far, and here she'd learned she could choose differently. When she had stood at the fork in the road of becoming like her father or doing the right thing, she'd known she had to do the right thing.

Luckily, she was not alone. No, she had an ally!

And so as she slipped into the side of the castle and headed through the dark halls to go up to her room to refresh herself, she was not prepared for the hand that snaked out of the shadows and seized her, yanking her into the darkness. That rigid hand slammed her up against the wall.

Her head crashed into the wood, and for a moment she saw stars and could not breathe.

They were far away from the ballroom.

This part of the castle was quiet, all but for her devilish papa.

A moan at last slipped past her lips.

His hard eyes bore into hers like two rivets. “Are you out there being seduced or are you seducing?” he demanded harshly. “And either way, you best be prepared for a ring to follow.”

She grabbed onto his wrist, feeling frantic. Here she was crashing to the earth, but she would not give way. “The Duke of Hartmore is an honorable man, Papa. He would not leave me to ruin.”

“So you say,” he bit out, “but I’m sure he does not like an easy young lady.”

“Oh, I do not plan on being easy, Papa,” she rushed. “As a matter of fact, there will be quite a dance between us. I promise you that.”

His father’s grip eased slightly. “Did he follow you out there?”

“Yes, Papa. He did. And he kissed me,” she said honestly.

“Damnation, girl, you are playing with dangerous fire. One wrong move and—”

“If we are caught together, he’ll have to marry me,” she pointed out.

He contemplated this. “It is not how I want it done, but if that is how it is done, it will be enough. As you say, everything I’ve heard suggests that Hartmore is an honorable man. He would marry you if he had to, but it would be a scandal. And I don’t like scandal touching my name.”

His fingers dug into her arm.

How she wanted to laugh.

He did not like scandal attached to his name? Did he not care about all the deaths of the young men who could not bear his cruelty? No, he did not.

Nor did he care about the rumors of his brutality.

Those rumors simply made him appear more powerful, stronger to all around him. A man to be reckoned with, a great general, a great soldier. Or so

he thought.

“Papa, I promise you I have this in hand,” she stated, meeting his gaze, unflinching.

“Good,” he said, lowering his hand and tugging his gold braided coat back into place. “Now get back to your room. I want you to look fresh in the morning for the outing. There is a hunting party, and you shall be in it.”

“Papa, I would prefer—”

He cocked his head to the side and asked in a deadly quiet tone, “Did I ask you if you wanted to go?”

“No,” she said firmly, even as her belly coiled with unease.

He looked her up and down. “You look well on a horse, and I want him to see you riding. It’ll give him ideas of passion.”

Her lip curled at her father’s mind.

“Oh, don’t play the little miss with me,” he spat. “If you were out there and led him out there into the shadows, and he kissed you, you are clearly willing to play that game. I did not realize that you had it in you. I thought perhaps you were closer to wilting wallflower than a siren, my dear. But I’m pleased to know you have grit, just as long as you are not a fool. You are not a fool, are you?”

“No,” she said, but in her heart of hearts, she did not know.

CHAPTER II

“Och, that seemed to go most strangely,” the Duke of Glenfoyle said as he entered the chamber designated for their private entertainment and subterfuge.

The room was silent except for the crackle of the fireplace. As soon as Andrew had left Mary, he had come here and waited. Soon, the others would join them to discuss how the events of the night had gone and what steps to take next.

Andrew whipped around and spotted the handsome devil from the north. “There you are. What kept you this evening?”

Glenfoyle’s amber eyes flickered with emotion. “Events.”

“Well, that’s rather vague,” Andrew drawled.

Glenfoyle gave a shrug. It was a deceptive gesture of uncaring, though Glenfoyle was not apathetic. His dark hair teased over his cheekbones, looking playful. The Scot was anything but playful.

He was a duke who’d seen the worst in the world, the cruelty of the Crown, and the pain of his people as they had done everything they could through the last generations to recover from a rebellion that annihilated an entire way of life.

Glenfoyle narrowed his eyes. “What were you doing out there?”

Andrew cleared his throat. “I was seducing Mary Donaldson,” he said softly, but it wasn’t true, and he didn’t know why he couldn’t be honest with Glenfoyle. He was on a new path. One in which he could not discern the end.

He didn’t want to tell the other dukes that he had deviated from the plan because he didn’t want to weaken their resolve, and he didn’t want them to think that he might ruin it for all of them.

The truth was his arrangement with Mary was better. Truly.

Glenfoyle arched a brow. “You don’t lie well, Hartmore. You never have, and I think you shouldn’t try with me.”

Andrew ground out a sigh. “I’m doing what needs to be done.”

“Good mon,” Glenfoyle said firmly. “But the way you were looking at

that lady... I think you have feelings for her already.”

He snorted. “I’ve known her for but a few hours.”

Glenfoyle tsked. “It doesn’t matter, and I think we’re about to find that the best laid plans often go strange twisting ways. I know Bedford said that if we marked everything out, we’d win. But humans don’t like to do predictable things.”

“Daniel Bedford is a brilliant man from London who knows how to run the city,” Andrew allowed, “but despite what Wildwood thinks, he cannot anticipate the whims of the ton entirely. None of us can.”

Glenfoyle ground his teeth. “Wildwood looks on edge. That damn young woman of his... I’m not certain that he’s going to be able to avenge his sister as he hoped.”

“He will,” Andrew growled. “It just might not be in the way we thought.”

Glenfoyle gave a nod. “How do we trust it, mon? How do we have faith that it will all work out?”

Hadn’t he just asked Mary to have faith? Were they all to experience a crisis of doubt?

He feared it was so.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I have to have that sort of faith. As a matter of fact, I think it’s going to be better than I thought it was.” He hesitated, then declared, “Maybe I’m going to save someone.”

“Save?” Glenfoyle echoed. “What the devil are you talking about? The daughter? Oh, Hartmore...your name is painfully accurate. I think you have more heart than all of us combined. I worry for you.”

He scowled, not sure if it was a compliment or an insult. And yet he knew that the only reason for Glenfoyle’s cynicism was his pain. “I’m going to save her from a monster.”

“I never saw you as a knight on a horse.” Then Glenfoyle laughed, a rich sound. “Actually, I can. When I look a little bit more closely, your armor is shining brightly under the stars.”

“And you, Glenfoyle?” Andrew asked. “You haven’t ever wanted to save anyone?”

Glenfoyle hesitated, looking to where the fire crackled, where they were supposed to reunite to discuss the day’s events. “My armor is long gone,” he said. “I threw it away. I have no desire to ride to the rescue of anyone but myself.”

“You sound like Talbot when you speak like that,” warned Andrew.

“Talbot?” Glenfoyle shook his dark head and turned towards the fire as if it could warm his heart, which had long gone cold. “No. Talbot cares about everything. He’d have us think not. But deep in his soul? He’s the most wounded of us all. The one who loves the most.”

He considered that perhaps Glenfoyle was correct.

Perhaps Talbot was also the most dangerous because he had loved the most deeply and lost the most darkly and nearly thrown himself over the edge.

Andrew couldn’t risk that himself, falling over the edge. It would break his mother. And now he had made a vow to protect Donaldson’s daughter and her brother.

It seemed a great irony that his brother had died and now he was protecting Donaldson’s children. But he understood a man like that could lay waste to all those around them and make victims of even the people he was supposed to protect.

There was a darker element to his honor too, if he was honest. Something which gave him pause. But he couldn’t deny the dark blanket of pain and anger still wrapped him tightly.

The truth was he was also ready to step in because he had a significant feeling that if Donaldson knew he was protecting Mary and Jack, the colonel would be furious.

And Andrew was happy to make the man pay any way he could. But there was another truth, the light to the darkness enfolding him.

He could not bear the idea of that young woman crushed beneath her father’s boot. He could not bear the idea of anyone else being crushed, and perhaps his vengeance was going to have to grow larger than he thought if it was to keep them all safe.

CHAPTER 12

*A*ndrew did not love to hunt, but he did love horses.

There was something about charging out atop one of the beasts that made one feel utterly and completely alive. And especially since his brother's death, he had felt the need to feel alive.

There had been many times when all he had wanted to do was stay in his study, close the windows, shut the thick curtains, and allow himself to be wracked with grief—to do nothing but drink brandy, and sleep, and feel sorry for himself. But those? Those were dangerous things indeed.

He had shoved aside the brandy bottle and refused to touch it, for it did not numb. No, it did far worse things. It exacerbated the sorrow and the pain and made him all but wish to howl at the injustice of his young brother's death.

The darkness of his rooms had nearly undone his mind, and it had only been the fact he needed to be there for his mother that had pulled him out of it and made him realize he could not give away to such trappings of grief.

And so instead, he had thrown himself into other things. His stallion, Orion, had been his relief and recourse. They had ridden out together every day in all sorts of weather. And now, here at the Duke of Wildwood's vast estates as they milled out in front of the house, all the riders circling as they waited for the Master of the Hounds to take up the hunt, he found himself wondering if perhaps he should just go on a ride on his own. He'd always felt particularly sorry for the fox.

He understood there was usually a reason for the hunt, that there was a purpose. It wasn't just some mad blood sport as some liked to engage in.

Wildwood would never allow such a thing, not on his estates. Foxes could be vicious creatures, killing birds and eating eggs, and if there were too many foxes in an area, it could be quite difficult and dangerous for other animals.

Still, he had to confess he was on the side of the fox, not the hounds, even though it was in the nature of the hounds to hunt the fox.

Truthfully, the nature of the world was a most confusing thing to him. He wanted peace, he longed for love, he wished there was no suffering, and yet it seemed every day, every month, every season, every year, every turn of the globe was an opportunity to see suffering.

He supposed there was the opportunity to see glory too, for as he looked out towards the forests and the fields, they were beautiful. He lifted his gaze to the crystal blue sky where white clouds danced across it, and he felt a moment's awe at the beauty before him. It was the only thing that got him through.

Orion, as if sensing his emotions, pawed his hooves on the graveled drive.

"Steady there, Orion," he soothed. "All will be well. I'm going to be well," he said.

Orion tossed his dark head and his black mane danced. The horse whickered, and he stroked the stallion's neck.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

He tensed, and Orion danced a bit.

Colonel Donaldson's voice called through the crowd as he rode towards Andrew.

"Does not my daughter look fine upon a horse?"

Andrew swung his gaze to Mary. She did indeed look fine upon a horse. Her scarlet habit clung to her form beautifully. The skirt spilled over her own mare, a stunning and tall white horse with a soft gray muzzle and eyes that were dark and liquid.

The mare moved with bottled energy, as if she might bolt easily for the fun of it.

But Mary seemed to hold the reins with great ease and kept the mare in check as if it were second nature.

"She does indeed," Andrew agreed. "She looks as if she has been atop a horse her entire life."

"I had her up in the saddle when she was two years old," Donaldson said proudly.

"Truly?" he asked. This wouldn't have surprised him if Donaldson was speaking of a son, but somehow he realized Donaldson was demanding in a way others were not. He wondered if the saddle had been upon a pony. He rather doubted it. No easy starts for Donaldson's children.

"As a soldier's daughter," Mary said, "my papa thought it very wise for

me to be acquainted with animals and not to be afraid.”

“I see,” Andrew said, and he wondered if it had been love that had made Donaldson thrust his daughter into the breech, or something else entirely. He had a strong and dark suspicion Donaldson loved to see how far he could push people, and Andrew wondered how far Mary had been pushed.

And from the look on her face, he had a suspicion Donaldson had been pushing her already this morning. No doubt hoping to make certain Mary made headway in his quest for an allegiance with Andrew.

Well, he was going to at least give some indication that it was going well. After all, they had a plan. And they had to lull Donaldson along.

Mary easily maneuvered her mare towards him. “Are you ready, Your Grace, for the hunt?”

“Indeed, I am,” he said, “though I have considered going off on my own.”

“Do not deny us the pleasure of your company, Your Grace. It would be a great tragedy for all.”

“Indeed, Your Grace! You should not wish to miss it.” Donaldson laughed, clearly eager to see the fox run to ground. “It’ll be a wonderful thing to do,” he said, full of excitement and energy. “Just the way to start the day and build an appetite.”

An appetite for what? Andrew wanted to ask, but he did not.

And at that moment, the Master of the Hounds called up the dogs, and all the riders began to trot along the drive, down through the fields.

Quickly, the hounds had taken up the scent.

Without hesitation, they all leapt forward.

His stallion came alive as the other horses rushed forward, his muscles rippling. Andrew felt that energy underneath him and could not deny how much he loved it.

Mary easily kept pace with him, and he was rather surprised.

Orion was a bit of a beast of an animal, and he had expected to have to hold the stallion back so Mary could ride side by side, but he did not.

Mary easily held her reins.

And though she was sitting in the precarious side-saddle position, nothing seemed to stop her as they charged across the fields, over the streams, and high over hedgerows. She took the jumps easily without a single exclamation or look, as if it was a challenge.

He kept glancing over at her to make sure she was well. Her father had

drifted back, clearly wishing them to spend time together, and yet he could feel the man's gaze upon his back...like a prickling thorn.

"Are you well?" he called.

"Yes," she said, her voice barely audible over the pounding hooves. "Though my father will not like it if we do not appear as if there is a chase between us."

"Like the fox and the hounds," he offered.

"Oh dear, does that make me the fox?" she said with a sharp smile. "I hope that's not true. The fox never has a good end."

"That's not exactly correct," he said and gave her an arch of his brow. "Sometimes the fox gets away."

"Well, we shall have to pray for that then in my case," she shouted back, leaning down towards her mare's neck.

"Well, we're not going to leave it to prayer," he called. "We're going to leave it to manipulation. Now come with me," he commanded.

And with that, he raced away from the field towards the edge of the woods. She dashed after him, her horse thundering away. She glanced back over her shoulder as did he.

Donaldson was lingering back, staying with the crowd, and there was a smile upon his face.

"We will not get too far away," Andrew assured as the air calmed of drumming hooves. "We don't want to cause suspicion, but this will look as if I've asked you to have a moment alone. A little bit of conversation."

They charged quickly around, the two of them whispering through the oak trees. The horses weaved through the root systems easily.

And then she let out an exclamation. "I do not know if I have the nerve for this," she said.

"What do you mean?" he called.

"The panic of it. My father..." Her expression tightened. "If he finds out, I will indeed be bloodied like the fox."

"Then we won't let him find out," he returned.

"He's incredibly smart," she stated.

"As are you, Mary." He willed her to feel his strength and purpose. "As am I."

"What are you hoping for in all of this?" she demanded.

"Never you fear," he said, unwilling to bear his soul entirely and the

gaping wound that lingered there. “Now, we will give a great show of our affection and our coming union. But you will also, as you know, have to make it appear as though I am working for it. So race out from the trees now, and I will chase after you.”

She gave him a quick nod and a salute with her gloved hand. “Whatever you say.”

And with that, she urged her mare on with a gentle nicker, and the mare, thrilled at the chance to run, jumped to life.

She did not need violence or coercion to urge her horse to high speeds. No. The mare charged out under her care as if there was a magic between them, and he found himself in awe at how easily she guided the animal.

Horses, to him, were miraculous creatures. They sensed humans’ characters far better than other humans did. Mary, he knew, was a troubled soul. A beautiful one, one in turmoil. And with every passing moment, he found his admiration grow for her.

He wanted to take her into his arms. He wanted to take her away from all of this. He wanted to slip away from the world with her to find peace and love.

Had he just thought that? *Love?*

What was he thinking?

But the truth was, with her, he had felt the magic that he had insisted existed. It wasn’t just science and numbers and equations and understanding the way the universe worked. No, it was stardust and moonlight and oak trees reaching out to each other, streams traveling to the ocean, oceans connecting to continents.

What was happening between them was bigger, and he did not know why or how. He’d only known that when he was in her presence, he felt the world in a way he never had before.

Before, he had felt separate, apart, but with her he understood that he was one with the world, all of it, including her, and he never wanted to be separated from her again.

But it was also terrifying because that feeling was exactly the opposite of revenge.

Love had no place in revenge, and yet with every moment as he followed her out from the forest, he watched her riding habit flicker in the wind, its red a crimson just like the bloodying of the fox she feared.

And in that instant, he prayed they would be able to pull this together,
that they would be able to have peace and love one day.
But vengeance first.

CHAPTER 13

The note was utter madness.

Perhaps he did not know what he was truly about. It had been slipped into her palm by one of the chambermaids as she was preparing to go down for the evening.

It said simply, "Meet me in the wisteria folly," and there had been scribbled directions.

She knew exactly who it was from.

Of course it was from Hartmore, but she could not believe he was asking her to meet him in secret. Still, she could not resist, and so she had left her father to his card playing with several of the other great lords who were in the house, including the Duke of Truebridge and the Duke of Glenfoyle.

Her father seemed thrilled at being in the midst of such power. She had given her father a quick smile to which he had paid no mind and departed swiftly out of the castle.

The light was falling, and the land was bathed in a beautiful purple hue. How she adored it. And as she headed out across one of the many raked gravel paths, a diaphanous butterfly slipped across the scope of her vision.

And as she witnessed it drifting over the air, its flight a silent dance of beauty, she felt a moment's peace.

Perhaps in all her fear, this was exactly what she was supposed to be doing. She felt as if her mother, who had also dearly loved the winged creatures, was reaching out from the beyond to tell her to keep going, to not give up, to trust the Duke of Hartmore, that this was her path.

But all reason told her this was utter madness, that she was truly risking her life.

Even so, she raced out through the groomed hedges until she found the hidden away folly. Wisteria did indeed bloom all along the outcroppings of the miniature round tower open to the heavens. She slipped into the cool space that opened to a small garden.

Moss grew on the rocks. Water slipped down the stones.

It was a fountain she knew, quite artificial, and yet it was utterly beautiful. As were the flowers growing all about. Flowers that adored moss and moisture, their white petals blooming. She let herself drink in the scent.

It was so earthy and rich.

“I thought you might like a moment away from the house and your father.”

She whipped around, shocked to see him sitting on a bench in the shadows.

“You’re quite right,” she said. “But this is far too risky, Your Grace.”

He was silent for a moment, then leaned forward, bracing his forearms along his powerful thighs. “You must call me Andrew since we are to be friends.”

“Friends?” she queried. “Is that the next step beyond partners?”

“I think so,” he rumbled. “Yes.”

“This is very beautiful,” she said, “but what if my father followed us or sent someone to follow us?”

“Well,” he replied, “I suppose that would simply move the timeline of our schedule up, wouldn’t it?”

“I’d be ruined then,” she said. “Wouldn’t I?”

“We would then have to push your father into a position in which I would be able to take my revenge upon him and you would be free.”

She swallowed. “Yes, I understand, but it is hard for me to trust that it is all going to work out. That you will be able to take care of me and my brother.”

“I understand your sense of fear,” he said gently. “All your life you have been in his command, but I am ultimately a far more powerful man than he.”

“Then why have you not been able to stop him before?” she dared to ask.

He winced. “Because your father is so victorious on the Continent. He is vitally important to Wellington, and the government understands he is one of the few men who have been able to truly flummox Napoleon. That is hard to let go of.”

“I see,” she said, regret lacing through her. She understood she was unimportant in the great game of men and wars, but it was still painful that her father couldn’t be easily stopped. “So then how can you be so certain now?”

“Well, if he directly crosses me in public, that is a different thing indeed.”

His face darkened. "I could not truly prove he was the reason for my brother's death. That is a gray area. People don't really like to talk about how young men are affected by their commanding officers, though everyone seems to know the truth of it in their hearts. Some are more brutal than others and just tell men to get on with it."

"But you are not like that," she said softly.

His mouth tightened. "No, I am not."

"Like what you did with Mr. Clayton," she suggested.

He narrowed his gaze. "How do you know about that?"

She stepped forward, fidgeting with the folds of her gown, wondering if she had just made a grievous error. "If you must know, I caught you talking to him."

"Caught me?" he echoed, his brow furrowing with surprise. "You make it sound as if I was doing something nefarious."

"Not at all," she rushed, crossing towards him. "It is one of the things that made me admire you so well. How I knew you were a good man. You care about others beyond yourself."

He tensed. "If I could make that my lifelong goal, to save but one more young man from the brutality of his mind and the memories of war, I would do it."

Her slippered feet skimmed over the stones laid in beautiful patterns as she stopped before him. "Then that's what you should do," she urged passionately. "I do not know if revenge against my father is going to give you what you want, but perhaps if you started helping more men like Mr. Clayton —"

He sat up straighter. "I will not be giving up my revenge. I need it," he said. "And you need it too."

She nodded, daunted by his intensity. "I suppose so."

"You need to get away from him," he continued. "And we need to stop him from hurting more people. Otherwise, the numbers of young men that I would have to help would be legion."

"Will they not be legion in any case?" she said softly.

He began to contradict her but then let out a long sigh and drove his hand through his hair. "Forgive me, Mary. I did not bring you here to argue."

"No," she said. "You brought me here for a moment's peace."

"So let us be of an accord," he said, and he held his hand out to her.

“Come and sit beside me.”

Relieved, she did so. She lowered herself to sit on the bench beside him.

“Look up,” he said.

And she did.

Flowers bloomed along the folly walls, twisting along the top of the artificial tower. Trees on the outside had wound their way up and purple flowers spilled over, bathing them in their scent.

The sun had fully set now. Purple light had given way to a dark hue, bathing them in intimate shadows.

In this part of the world, there were so few torchlights or lanterns that the stars began to sparkle and shine with vivacity.

And here in the folly with the sound of water, the wisteria and the starlight above, she felt the pain, the fear beginning to slip from her body.

He took her hand and wound it in his. “I almost sent you a posy,” he said. “But then I realized how ridiculous and boring that was. You don’t want picked flowers. This is where you belong,” he said.

“Is this how you see me?” she breathed.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes still upon the stars. “In a garden with the flowers.”

“I would like one day...” she began softly.

“Yes?” he prompted.

“To be where the wildflowers grow and the forests thrive and not where man has completely shaped things to his will, for I think that is not how we are meant to be,” she professed, her soul full of longing. “We are meant to be free.”

He stared at her. “You are a wonder. Did you know that, Mary?”

“No, I am not,” she scoffed. “I am trouble and odd. That is what my father has always told me.”

“You might be odd, but in the best sort of way.” He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek.

His gaze searched over her face, and it felt as if the world hummed only for them. That together there was no suffering. Nothing but this feeling, tracing back and forth, intertwining them.

She swallowed as she saw desire spark in his eyes, and she felt herself, unbidden, lean towards him. Quite instinctually, her lips parted, and she wanted to forget all the world beyond these walls.

That desire sparked to a fire in his gaze and as she leaned into him, he lowered his face, his gaze softening. He kissed her then, his mouth touching hers with a whisper.

And then he pulled back. "Forgive me," he said, his voice rough with passion. "I did not bring you here to seduce you or kiss you."

"I wish you to kiss me again," she said simply, honestly. "For when I am kissing you, I can think of nothing else. There is just you and me and the pleasure between us. It is the greatest peace I have ever known."

"Just peace?" he teased.

"And something else," she confessed, blushing. "You make me feel alive, Andrew," she ventured.

"And you me," he said, his fingers gently tracing along her jawline. "In all the pain and all the sorrow, being with you has been the only time that I have ever felt..."

"What?" she breathed.

"As if one day I might actually be free from that pain."

"Then kiss me," she said. "Kiss me again."

Without further urging, he did as she asked.

He lowered his mouth to hers and slowly, teasingly, they kissed each other. It was most strange, for she was still learning to do it, but he did not seem demanding or impatient.

No, he was temptation instead, lulling her with his soft kisses which grew hot and delicious.

She lifted her hands to his shoulders and allowed herself to rest against him. Their kisses teased back and forth, gentle, wonderful, wondrous until her body felt completely liquid and awakened, at one with his.

Their breathing met and matched. And for one beautiful long moment, she did not truly know where she ended and he began.

He tilted her head back and slowly kissed the line of her throat, pressing his lips to her pulse, and then he kissed lower and lower, his hands roving over her back.

"I want you so much," he said.

"I don't truly understand," she said. "I know what happens between a man and a woman, and I want you too, but it seems terribly risky. Don't you think? Given the fact that you are not going to marry me?"

"I would not hurt you for the world," he said, but there was a hitch in his

voice.

And she knew he had just made a promise they both knew he could not keep. For his path was a dark one. And she only prayed it would not end in tragedy.

He was still her best chance at freedom though. For he did care for her. She knew it in her soul.

“And yet,” she murmured, “I have never felt anything like this in my whole life.”

“What if,” he said, “I never let you go, Mary?”

“You’re going to ask me to marry you?” she laughed.

“No. I don’t know,” he rushed. Then he blinked as if he couldn’t comprehend himself. “I feel...”

“What?” she asked as she slipped her palm to his hard jaw.

“You have confounded me,” he confessed. “Or perhaps it is I who have confounded myself with two opposing desires.”

“And what are those desires?” she queried.

“My desire for you and my desire to destroy your father.”

She winced. “He’ll always be between us,” she said softly. “My father.”

Before he could reply, there was a crack of wood. They jumped apart.

“Who is it?” she whispered. “If my father has sent someone, then you must be prepared.”

“Who the bloody hell is in there?” a voice boomed.

“Bloody hell, Talbot,” Andrew growled.

And with that, the Duke of Talbot stepped into the arched way. “Oh, forgive me. I had no idea seduction was apace.”

She coughed. “Oh dear,” she said. “We have...”

“Don’t worry about Talbot,” Andrew said swiftly. “He’s not going to tell, are you?”

“Not if you don’t want me to,” Talbot said with a wink. “I thought that you...”

Andrew gave a quick shake of his head, and she wondered what was going on between the two.

“You two are friends?” she asked, not able to discern the strange current beneath the conversation.

“Yes,” Talbot said boldly, though his joviality did not meet his hard gaze. “Friends. That is the word for it.”

And then there was another voice. “Are you coming or am I going by myself, Your Grace?”

Talbot looked over his shoulder. “Demands, demands,” he tsked.

The young lady laughed, a rich, bright sound.

Who was that? she wondered to herself. Who would make so bold to be out with Talbot?

“Oh God,” Andrew groaned softly. “Are you dallying with...”

Talbot’s eyebrows rose. “Dallying? Never accuse me of such a thing, old boy. I have my path just as you have yours. No judgment.”

Andrew gave a nod.

No judgment, she mused, feeling uneasy. What did that mean exactly? What were these two fellows up to?

And then the Duke of Talbot slipped back into the dark. Leaving her questions unanswered, and her heart...

Her heart, after that kiss, was very much in danger.

CHAPTER 14

Colonel Donaldson looked like a man who had placed a bad bet and no longer had hope his horse was going to win.

Or at least he was damned uncertain.

This was exactly what he and Mary were working for—the man beginning to be off foot—and yet Andrew felt a moment's pause.

Ruin was clearly not the way forward. But shame was still the plan. His original plan had not been enough. He wanted Donaldson to be provoked to such extreme reaction that he would explode at Andrew in public and make some faux pas. Something in which he could go and attack Donaldson in turn, and then he would be able to prove Donaldson should not be in command, that he should be shamed out of England. After all, attacking a duke was no small matter.

He did not think Donaldson would call him out. No, he was expecting the sort of outburst his brother Charlie talked about. That was what he wanted to provoke. And then no one would be able to gainsay him.

Still, it was a large risk. If Donaldson did attack him, he was a good soldier and, well, it would be no easy thing.

And it couldn't just be because he had ruined his daughter, for many would feel that was justified.

No, he was going to have to push him and push him, and Mary was going to help him to do it. They were going to set him on edge together.

Donaldson's self-worth was the answer. He had to make the colonel feel less than, as if he and his daughter were ultimately unworthy to lick a duke's boots.

But first, he had to make Donaldson feel confident, so that when he did yank the proverbial rug out, the colonel would fall hard.

So as he and Mary sat in a boat bobbing on the lake, he rowed them about, making it look as if they were having a lovely time pleasure-seeking.

She tried to relax, leaning back against thick, embroidered cushions. "He's watching, you know."

“Your father? I hope so,” he said.

“I don’t like this,” she said, her entire body tense. “There has to be a better way forward than all of this.”

“It’s all we can do,” he said, hating that she seemed so uneasy, though she was trying to hide it. “I’m not about to call him out. He’d kill me at ten paces with a lead ball.”

She groaned. “It’s true. He’s an excellent marksman.”

“Perhaps with a sword,” he said. “If all this is too much—”

“Don’t chance it,” she hissed. “He’s very good. He rides at the front of his armies, not at the rear.”

“It is a strange thing that death has claimed so many, but not him,” he ground out.

“I do not understand it myself,” she said. “I still don’t really understand what you’re hoping to achieve,” she said. “You ruining me made more sense because then he would be furious and scandalized, and everyone would be appalled by his management of his family. Perhaps you should stick to that line, and then you can buy me a small cottage in Devon. I shall be happy there, as you said.”

“Will your father leave you alone?” he asked, hating to point out a hard truth.

“No, but you could hide me,” she suggested, clearly growing desperate.

He could, though there were no guarantees that Donaldson would not eventually find her, but the truth was he wanted more. He wanted Donaldson to physically suffer. He wanted to feel it. He wanted to witness the agony He wanted...

Damnation.

He did not know what he wanted now, and the truth was it was because of Mary. He felt off foot and he knew the Duke of Wildwood felt the same in his own pursuit of revenge.

Andrew glanced across the large, man-made lake.

The Duke of Wildwood was rowing his young lady about the pond as well, trying to avoid a man on the shore, the object of the Duke of Wildwood’s revenge.

It had all become completely tangled.

When all of this had begun, Daniel Bedford, lord of the underworld of East London, had made it sound so simple, so easy, as if humans weren’t

strange beasts who could change their minds in an instant and act the fools.

They had planned for many contingencies, but they had not planned for love.

That was the problem.

Love was the wrong word, surely.

But as he looked to Mary, he felt his heart do the strangest thing. “Bloody hell,” he growled underneath his breath.

“What?” she asked, her eyes widening with alarm.

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do,” she said. “Out with it.”

He turned the oars and tried to appear nonchalant, though the air was fairly crackling with his unruly emotions. “I admire you for being so bold in your speech with me.”

“Would you have me act the wilting wallflower?” she said, leaning back again in the boat, trying to look as if she was lounging.

“No,” he growled. “I like you just the way you are.”

“Truly?” she breathed, surprised. “I think you’re the first person besides my brother to have ever done so.”

He locked gazes with her, unsure of the wisdom of his imminent confession. “Your brother sounds like a young man of excellent sense, and I hope one day I shall meet him. But yes, Mary... I like you very well indeed and would not change a thing.”

The silence between them swelled and filled with unspoken emotion.

“Right then,” she said suddenly. “I’m ready to begin our plans if you are. We must keep my father where we want him.”

He laughed, though he wished—oh how he wished—either of them could have the courage to say what was growing between them. “Let’s start our row then.”

“If we must,” she said. “Let’s have a bit of fun.”

“Have at it, Mary,” he said, winking.

“Right then,” she said, clearing her throat. “Your Grace, do not be absurd,” she called loudly. “Percy Shelley is an infinitely better poet than Lord Byron.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” he called back as people immediately began to turn and stare. “Byron is the greatest poet of the day.”

And they carried on in swift banter, volleying back and forth.

It was easy to do because they both did completely disagree on the poets. He adored Byron, and she adored Shelley. Though she had said earlier that his wife, Mary Shelley, was an infinitely better writer than all of them combined, and he did not disagree with her. He had read some of the treatises of Mary Shelley.

Just then, as he had warned her he would do, he began rocking the boat, but ever so slightly so no one might guess.

“Your taste in poets is foul,” he stated. “I have had Byron to dinner—”

“And did you enjoy the potatoes and vinegar?” she challenged.

He had to choke on a laugh, for Byron did indeed insist on eating potatoes and vinegar wherever he went.

And to some, poetry might seem an odd argument, but to the heights of certain parts of the ton? It was not. Some society lived and died on verse and prose.

“Better potatoes and vinegar than that tripe Shelley puts out!” he returned, trying not to grin. “The man has no soul.”

Her eyes shone with mirth before she folded her arms across her chest. “I think,” she proclaimed with a huff, “I should like to go back to shore.”

Everyone was staring at them now.

Obviously, who would believe a young lady would speak to a duke like that?

And then she stood up. “Take me back immediately. For next you shall argue that Marlowe is superior to Shakespeare!”

“Because he is!” he countered loudly. “Shakespeare produced plebeian drivel.”

She let out a gasp of horror which felt shockingly real, and with that, he seized the moment and subtly rocked the boat. With her standing, they went over into the water.

The lake was cold.

It swallowed them up.

And as knives of ice dashed through him, he wondered if his plan was far too mad. He wanted everyone to think that somehow they had been thrown into the water together by their passion, by an argument, by some sort of misunderstanding because those were the kinds of things that led to shocking ends.

But now that he was in the water with her, grabbing for her as her skirts

pulled her down, he felt certain he was an absolute madman.

He grabbed her, pulling her up to the surface quickly. She sputtered water.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered in his ear. “I’m quite a good swimmer, but I’m going to appear as if I’m flailing.”

“Good job, you,” he said, taken with her determination to see this thing through.

She had already assured him she was up to the task, otherwise he never would’ve suggested it.

They began beating their way to the shore, arguing about *Doctor Faustus* versus *Hamlet*.

The Duke of Wildwood looked most alarmed, and he began to stride forward to offer his help, but Andrew gave a quick shake of his head, indicating he needed no help.

As they headed towards the weeds at the shore of the lake, where many mamas and older gentlemen watched the amusements, she clung to him.

“I’m going to storm off from you,” she said, “as soon as we get up to the shore. But first, I’m going to cling to you. Do you understand?”

He gave a nod.

“Everyone will stare. It’ll be magnificent,” she said, “and my father will not know if we are about to get married or if we’re going to break it off forever, but I need you to come to my aid. Because he could be angry.”

“What?” he said.

“He could be very angry,” she said, her voice darkening.

“Well, we want him to be angry,” he reminded.

Her mouth turned. “Yes, but I mean very angry.”

And then his blood chilled. “You mean violent?” he said.

Her face paled.

“Why did you not say something before?” he demanded in a low whisper.

“Because I want to help you. We are partners, remember? And you are going to set me free.” She gripped his waist, staring up into his eyes as she vowed, “Anything is worth the cost.”

Her words laced through him, and he wanted to kick himself. When he had asked her if she was safe, if her brother was safe, he had not understood. She did not mean shouting. She did not mean emotional harm.

She had truly meant she was not safe.

And then his gaze lowered to her pale arm which was now visible beneath the see-through fabric of her soaked, filmy muslin gown. There he spotted four bruises in the shape of fingerprints pressed there.

“Did he do that to you?” he rasped.

For a moment, shame crossed her face.

“It is not your fault,” he said. “He is a monster.”

“Yes, he is, and he is my father, and he has the right to do to me whatever he wishes. So make this moment worth it.”

With that, he helped her out of the lake.

She did indeed cling to him, water sluicing down her gown, and he felt every curve of her body as she tilted her head back and met his gaze.

Her wet hair tumbled down her back and over his hands.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she proclaimed, “but I have had enough for one day.”

Then she stormed off, and he followed her with his gaze, rooted to the spot, admiring her, admiring the lengths that she was willing to go to set herself and her brother free. And do the right thing.

She could have tried to rope him in, to trick him, but instead she had told him the truth about her father’s plans. Now he understood that it meant potentially physical consequences to her.

In that moment, he knew.

He did not just want revenge or to shame Donaldson. He wanted to ensure quite certainly that Donaldson could never hurt anyone ever again, and he was willing to go to any length it took.

The colonel rushed up to him. “Your Grace, I am so sorry for her behavior. She must be...”

“Oh no, she’s a feisty filly, Donaldson,” Andrew cut in swiftly. Then he said grandly, “And one has to admire a feisty filly. Nobody likes the boring ones.”

Donaldson’s silvery eyebrows pricked up. “You do not disapprove?”

He gave the man a grin as if it was his favorite thing to break in a new horse that resisted the bit. For he knew that was something Donaldson would understand. And though it made him ill, he drawled, “How could I disapprove of a creature like that? She’d make fine, strong sons, that one.”

Donaldson’s entire stance changed, and Andrew felt relief. He’d saved her for a little longer. He’d saved her from any physical altercation with her

father from this event, and that was all that mattered.

“Care for a bout of practice, Donaldson,” he said suddenly, his mind turning to new paths.

“Practice, Your Grace?” Donaldson asked, eager but confused as to Andrew’s meaning.

“I’m a bit rusty with rapiers, but I do enjoy a good bout. Care to meet me up at the house? We can have a go at it. I hear you’re quite good. Your daughter sang your praises.”

Donaldson laughed with pleasure, delighted. “Oh, I would be honored, Your Grace.”

“Good. Let me change my clothes and then we shall meet.”

Andrew turned and headed towards the house, barely able to contain the dark feelings burning within him.

CHAPTER 15

*M*ary did not go up to the castle.

Everything felt far too volatile to do something like that, and she did not want her father to be able to immediately find her if he was in a rage. She only prayed the duke had diffused him.

She rather thought he could.

He was extremely skilled with people. She wished she had that sort of skill. For his skills came from a place of kindness and care and understanding.

Perhaps one day she could come from such a place and not fear. Perhaps if she had his sort of power, but she was never going to have that sort of power. No, she was going to slip away with her brother Jack into the countryside and never be seen again.

She would dig in the earth, plant flowers, watch them grow, and watch her brother grow too. And she'd love every moment of it. Except part of her hated the idea of being separated from the duke. He had planted himself in her heart like a tree with its roots down into the earth, and she did not want to let that strength go.

No. She wanted to twine with him, grow with him, feel stronger with him, and yet she knew she could not. He would never forget who her father was. He would never be able to love her or accept her fully, knowing the blood that ran through her veins.

Mary slipped in through the gardens, looking for joy there, looking for a moment's repose. Though the truth was the most repose she had felt in years was with the duke. Still, this was better than nothing. Gardens had been her refuge for years. The plants, the butterflies, the insects, the sun overhead on rare clear days in England. And as she wound her way through what appeared to be a rose garden, she came to a bower and heard a giggle.

She paused.

That sound was remarkably familiar.

Another laugh tumbled through the air.

“Hello,” she called.

The laughter stopped.

“Hello,” that voice called. “Do come sit beside me?”

She blinked and crept round the bower and peered inward. The scent of pink roses filled the air and she spotted the young lady there. Her hair was wild, beautiful, curling, tumbling about a heart-shaped face. She was rather short and a bit plump and looked incredibly happy about life. She had a book, now closed, on her lap.

“Do I know you?” Mary said. “I think I know your...” And then she hesitated.

The girl gave her a wicked grin. “You’ll recognize my voice from the forest, I suppose. You seem to like to go off on your own just like I do.”

Mary let out a shocked laugh. “Oh my goodness. You are rather bold to admit it.”

“You are rather bold too, even if you don’t admit it,” the girl said, waggling her brows. “Now come sit beside me and we shall become friends.”

“Just like that?” Mary queried, disbelief her first reaction.

“Just like that,” the young lady assured with a bright smile as if life had not pummeled her. “And why not? Are you a gossip?” the girl asked.

“No,” Mary replied swiftly.

The young lady cocked her head to the side, causing her curls to dance over her shoulder. “Are you cruel?”

“No,” Mary replied, though this might have nuance. She did not feel the need to explain the interlude with Andrew and the complexities of her recent life.

The young woman pursed her pink lips and leaned forward. “Do you like to read about sermons?”

“No,” Mary said, her lips twitching. “Not generally speaking.”

The girl beamed. “There you see! We can easily be friends. Come and sit by me.”

Friends. She had not had the opportunity to develop female friendships, but she did as the young lady instructed and sat down upon the carved stone bench.

“My name is Agatha, and I am here with my cousin, Virginia. We are both supposed to find excellent matches.” She sighed, not an exhausted sound, but a resigned one. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with me

personally, but I think that my cousin is going to marry the Duke of Wildwood.”

Mary choked. “I beg your pardon.”

Agatha laughed merrily again, as if life was nothing but a series of fortunate happenstances. “Did you not see how cozy they were on the lake today?”

“That is your cousin?” Mary exclaimed.

“Indeed.” Agatha leaned forward and whispered sotto voce, “She’s a lovely creature, a wonderful artist, and doesn’t realize how magnificent she is.” Then Agatha tsked. “I do hope the Duke of Wildwood isn’t a fool and snatches her up immediately.”

“That’s a rather kind wish,” Mary observed, surprised how generous Agatha was, for she could not detect a hint of jealousy. “Do you not wish a duke of your own or are you after the Duke of Talbot?”

Agatha rolled her eyes. “I like him very well, but I don’t know. He seems most reticent to the idea of love.”

Mary gaped. “And yet you were out in the forest with him.”

She had only gone on such adventures because she was in a quite precarious position. Her father was literally making her do it.

“Well, you see, my family is not like other families,” Agatha explained factually.

“Clearly not,” Mary agreed. She nibbled her lower lip before asking, “Do they know what you’re up to?”

Agatha nodded. “You must understand my grandmama is quite the most outrageous creature, and I absolutely adore her. She’s had quite the life, don’t you know, and frankly, while I am here to make a magnificent match, my grandmother would not mind if I simply had a lovely time with a duke.”

Most undignified, Mary’s mouth dropped open in cod fish fashion. “You mean—”

“I mean,” Agatha said brightly, “some families do not care a whit about scandal. And our family has had so much, and we have so much money and so much power that well...” She shrugged and then stated, “We largely do what we please. And if things go wrong, we simply run off to Naples. As one does.”

Mary blinked, for she had never once considered such a life. “I’ve never contemplated going to Naples.”

“You should,” Agatha said. “The climate is much better than England.”

“Do they have good flowers?” she asked, not quite sure what else to say.

“Oh, absolutely.” Agatha drew in a long breath as if it about to launch into a treatise. “I went to Naples several times as a young girl. My mother got into great trouble, you know. She loved my father dearly, but he was always philandering. They had the strangest of relationships, and so she decided that she would start doing such a thing with a gentleman far younger than she. It made my childhood very confusing. And of course my mother was not in the best of health. So we spent several years traveling all up and down the boot of Italy, but we spent many years at the court of Naples. Very interesting place. Lots of scandal. Loved every moment of it, but I’m not entirely certain I would recommend my mother’s life to anyone. She was a fantastic creature.”

Agatha grinned then. “Well, perhaps I would recommend it,” she said.

And for a moment Mary realized the young lady, whether she realized it or not, was almost certainly pursuing her mother’s life.

She wondered if it was the strange turn of fortune that everyone simply repeated their parents’ lives. Well, she was determined not to repeat either her father’s or her mother’s. She would not be a victim, nor would she be an abuser. Somehow, she had to find a happy balance. She hoped the duke would help her find it.

“Are you in love with the Duke of Hartmore?” Agatha asked as if she was asking if she preferred marzipan or chocolate.

“Hartmore?” she gasped. She swallowed. Her insides spun and she said quickly, “I hardly know him.”

“Clearly that does not matter,” Agatha observed sagely. “You’ve seen the way my cousin is with the Duke of Wildwood. And if I am completely honest, I do have quite a soft spot for Talbot, even if he shall never return it with me. I don’t think the amount of time one knows someone matters much. I looked at Talbot, and I knew.”

“What did you know?” she asked, truly curious.

Agatha’s gaze softened as she drifted on the memory of meeting the Duke of Talbot. “I looked at him and knew I had to spend more time with him, all my time. And he’s a positively delicious fellow, you know. I feel the most undeniable tingling in his presence.”

“I see,” Mary breathed.

“And didn’t you feel the same way when you looked at your duke?” Agatha asked.

“My duke?” Mary queried, deliberately evasive.

Agatha narrowed her eyes. “I think you should tell him. It’s very clear to me that you love him.”

“What?” Mary gasped. “How?”

Agatha lifted a hand and waved it at Mary. “I can see it on your face as we are speaking. You are glowing and yet look as if you are pining at once when we mention him. You love him.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Mary said.

“I’m not being absurd,” Agatha returned, unburdened. “You were in a folly with him, weren’t you? And it is clear to me he makes you feel a great deal... Including uncertainty. What is that all about?”

Mary let out a surprised laugh “You cannot expect me to share my entire life story with you under this rose bower.”

“Is there anyone better to share it with?” Agatha asked.

Mary thought on this. She’d never met anyone like Agatha. But she was certain the young lady was completely earnest and so dared, “The duke and I have an arrangement.”

“Ooh, an arrangement,” Agatha enthused, her cheeks pinking with delight. “How absolutely marvelous. Do tell.”

“No, no, not that sort of arrangement,” Mary rushed. “And you see, I feel...”

Her hands began to shake, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Oh, my dear,” Agatha said, putting aside her book before grasping Mary’s hands. “You are in a great deal of distress and clearly you have no one to tell. Where is your mother, your sister, your cousin, anyone?”

“I do not have anyone to tell,” she rasped, which only made the tears far more likely to fall. She blinked rapidly.

Agatha leaned in. “How awful for you. My cousin and I, we tell each other almost everything, and our grandmama. I’m very lucky in my family. And it seems you are most unlucky in yours. You have no one?”

“My father,” she said, though the admission felt like barbs on her tongue. “But my father is the source of most of my problems.”

“Oh dear. I am so sorry,” Agatha said quite sincerely.

“Please don’t,” she all but begged. “You’re making it worse.”

“Why?” Agatha said, her eyes rounding with horror that she might have caused more sorrow.

“Your sympathy,” Mary whispered. “It is painful to me.”

“Oh,” the girl said, pulling her close.

Mary longed to resist and yet she found she could not. There was something compelling about the young lady, as if she always got her way.

“Now you listen to me,” Agatha said firmly, “this might sound mad, but that is the nature of my family. We are bold, passionate, and impulsive. And very loving. I’m going to be your friend. My family is going to be your family. I’m adopting you here and now, and there’s nothing you can say about it. You’ve been alone far too long.”

“You can’t do that,” Mary protested as hot tears slipped down her cheeks.

“Why not?” Agatha sallied. “Who’s stopping me?”

“I don’t know,” Mary exclaimed.

Agatha gave her a kind, knowing look. “You are the only one stopping it,” she said. “And it seems to me you are also the only one stopping this thing with the Duke of Hartmore. Is he being a bit of a fool? Men often are, you know, when it comes to matters of the heart. Ladies need to take things into their own hands. Seize your life, my dear. You look very capable to me.”

She was capable. She knew it. “You don’t understand. He hates my father and...”

“Well, is he going to marry your father?” Agatha asked simply.

“No,” she replied, struggling with how simple Agatha made it all sound.

It was far from simple, surely!

“Listen, we cannot help our families,” Agatha said easily. “And I’m sure there are people in his family he’s not particularly proud of, things that have been done, things that have been said. Every family has at least one.” For the first time, Agatha scowled and declared with great force, “We cannot help it, nor should we be made to pay for the sins of our families. I’m sure the Duke of Hartmore is a good man. He’s friends with all the right people. So allow yourself to be bold. And if you want him, my dear, go and get him.”

“What you are suggesting is wild,” Mary bit out, her whole body shaking as emotion seemed to tumble out of her with this strange new friend.

Agatha stood. “Now, I want you to come with me. You are going to meet my cousin and my grandmother, and all will be well with the world. Although my cousin is rather preoccupied, so it might just be my

grandmother you'll meet."

"I don't know if I should," she returned, wary of dragging anyone into her difficulties. "What if I got everyone into trouble?"

"How marvelous," Agatha said with a grin. "I do love a bit of trouble, and no one is better at negotiating trouble than my grandmother. Come along then. Let's make mischief."

And with that, Mary found herself being led back to the house and she wondered, if by chance, she had truly, at long last, found a friend.

She did not know what to do or what to say, and so she simply followed Agatha's lead, hoping beyond hope that this house party, which had seemed to be her doom, was going to be her salvation.

CHAPTER 16

The rapiers clanged.

While they were practice blades—neither he nor Donaldson being complete fools—he knew immediately that Donaldson was better. Significantly so.

The main difference between Andrew's fighting and Donaldson's was that Donaldson was a battle-hardened man, and all of Andrew's practice had been just that, practice. He had not needed to fight a man for his life. And in this particular instance, it was clear, despite Andrew's skill, that if it was to come to it, Donaldson would be able to beat him to the ground.

Still, they were fencing with rules. This was not a battlefield. This was the long gallery of the Duke of Wildwood's house, and a crowd had gathered to watch on either side of the dueling strip they had made.

Back and forth, thrust and parry, pivot and turn, beat for beat, he and Donaldson worked the long gallery up and down. Sweat beaded Donaldson's face, as it did Andrew's.

Andrew held the rapier with a firm grip, but not too tightly. He tried to keep his body relaxed as he turned and whirled. Donaldson's strong arm caused the blade to reverberate, shaking Andrew's bones, but he was not giving in.

They twisted fast, moving quickly. The crowd let out cries of surprise and astonishment, clearly enjoying the spectacle of a man who was glorious on the battlefield sparring for amusement with a duke.

Glenfoyle, Talbot, and Truebridge were watching as well.

Ladies were giggling and gasping at the sight of the two strong men. They were a perfect pair in the sense that Donaldson was older, silver-haired, still strong, still powerful and charming to most, and Andrew was young, a duke, someone with power, but not a warrior.

This was the perfect example of how younger sons were sent to war and older sons were sent to Parliament to rule the country. Only in this case, Donaldson had been the younger son.

Donaldson thrust forward and the blade came precariously close to his Andrew's heart. He then beat that blade away, striding forward, making sure he could keep Donaldson on the retreat.

And for one brief second, he allowed himself to think of his brother, to flow seamlessly and allow all his anger to unleash.

With a quick pivot and turn, he thrust the blade forward. It stopped but a breath from Donaldson's solar plexus. Donaldson's eyes widened as he realized how very close he could have come to death, even with practice blades, in this friendly bout.

Something hard went over the colonel's face. An emotion Andrew could not quite read. But in that instant, he knew he had made a mistake with this idea of sparring. He forced himself to have a playful grin and then backed away.

He gave Donaldson a grand bow and salute.

"Everyone applaud for the colonel. You must know if we were in a real battle, I would've died within the first ten seconds."

Donaldson let out a laugh as well, but there was something tense to it only Andrew could hear.

"Some of us thrive in the gallery, some of us thrive out of it, Your Grace," Donaldson replied politely. "And I am happy to participate here with you in your milieu, if not mine."

"I am deeply grateful to you, Donaldson," Andrew replied, keeping his rapier low, edge out, "for doing the work that needs to be done on foreign soil, whilst I do mine here. And I hope you practice with the same sort of dignity and kind intention I do."

Donaldson cocked his head to the side. "Dignity and intent, Your Grace, are reserved for England. In my experience, even Parliament is not particularly kind nor dignified. No, a firmer hand is needed abroad."

"Yes, so I have heard," Andrew ventured, anger beginning to simmer within him.

He noticed Truebridge tense at his tone. Donaldson's eyes did the strangest flicker, but then Donaldson bowed.

"I must go and refresh myself, Your Grace," the colonel said. "Thank you for the opportunity to practice with you."

And with that, Donaldson turned on his booted heel and strode out of the room to the sound of applause.

“Well done, Colonel Donaldson. Well done,” Truebridge called as he and Glenfoyle came up to Andrew.

“What the bloody hell are you doing, man?” Glenfoyle gritted as the crowd dispersed.

Truebridge shook his head. “That was a mistake.”

“I know that now,” he replied. He closed his eyes for a long moment, furious with himself for accidentally exposing his true feelings, even for a breath. “Do you think he realizes how much I hate him?”

“Do you think he realizes you would’ve skewered him if you had the chance?” Truebridge taunted before he scowled. “I don’t know. It’s impossible to tell. But you certainly startled him. He wasn’t expecting you to have that sort of skill.”

Glenfoyle clapped him on the back. “It’s too late to go back now, mon. You made the choice you made. We can only hope.”

“I suppose, that’s true,” Andrew said. He handed his rapier off to a waiting footman and headed out of the hall. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“There’s nothing to be done. We go forward,” Glenfoyle said.

“That’s all we can do,” Truebridge added.

But to Andrew? It did not feel like enough. Not even close.

CHAPTER 17

*M*ary waited until her father was snoring.

The sonorous sound filled the chamber next to hers. Quietly, she carefully opened the door on its well-oiled hinges. She peered into the dark room. He had come upstairs after playing cards well into the night. The scent of brandy was in the air. He had stumbled to bed and gone to sleep.

She had waited several minutes to ascertain he was well indeed in deep slumber. She closed the door then, making certain to be soundless. And then she crossed her own beautiful chamber, bathed only in the soft glow of the moonlight, and headed out into the dark hall.

She paused, her breath catching in her throat. For she was doing something most risky. Something she had decided she wanted to do. What she needed to do. Her life was going to be completely upturned, and she wanted to have one thing for herself.

One memory to hold close when she'd sacrificed everything else. And so she slipped down the hall silently. Oh, so carefully.

Mary listened for the sounds of anyone else. She traced down the hallway and passed a doorway, hearing the sounds of giggling inside. She felt her own cheeks flush. She had heard house parties could be a place of liaisons and transgressions.

It seemed to be true.

She wondered how many people had assignations this night that had been agreed upon earlier throughout the day? How many lovers were meeting? She had ascertained the location of the Duke of Hartmore's rooms through a chambermaid and a well-placed coin.

The maid had been the soul of discretion. She had not smiled or smirked but had simply given her the information and discreetly guided her along the path earlier that day when most were downstairs for their repast.

And now, as she turned down another hall, she paused at last at the duke's door. Was he even there? Did she truly dare do this? She did. Oh, indeed she did.

And she did not wish to linger another moment, for she also did not wish to be discovered. So she knocked ever so lightly upon the door. There was a long pause, and then steps. It was very late. She wondered if he had been sleeping.

Andrew opened the door and met her gaze. His hair was wild about his face. His eyes were hooded, as if he had been thinking of something sensual or he had been lost in dreams. He was dressed in a long dressing gown wrapped about his frame, which made her wonder if he wore anything at all beneath it.

His eyes widened at the sight of her, and his sensual lips parted. "Mary," he whispered. "What are you doing here? Has something happened?"

"Yes," she whispered, "please let me in."

He opened the door, looked from right to left, and then stepped back. She slipped in through the narrow opening and headed into his chamber. It, too, was a beautiful room, though far more masculine than her own. She crossed to the banked fire.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Her heart pounded wildly against her ribs as she drew up her courage. "I've come to be with you," she stated quite firmly, lifting her chin and squaring her shoulders.

"To be with me? You have something to discuss."

"No," she replied, her body tingling with anticipation and fear that he might turn her away. "I want to be with you in truth."

"To ruin you?" he asked, his voice catching as his eyes widened. "You can't possibly mean it. Go back to your rooms."

"I do mean it," she countered, refusing to give up so easily. "I want you to show me what ruination is all about. Because I have never felt as I do before. And I have only felt thus with you. Who knows if I shall ever have such a chance again."

"Mary," he began.

But before he could make a case against her, she rushed, "I am going to go to the country and live in a cottage with my brother. I shall have to maintain an exquisite reputation to care for him and not draw notice." She gestured between them. "This will be my one opportunity to be bold, to do something for myself. Please," she said. "Please show me."

"You truly wish it," he breathed.

“Oh yes,” she said, daring to hope he was going to let her stay. “Your kiss has taught me that. The way we have been together. Don’t you wish it too?”

“Oh,” he sighed as if tortured, “I have thought of nothing else this evening.”

“In truth?” she queried.

He drove a hand through his already wild hair. “I have tossed and turned in that bed, trying to sleep, but I could not. I thought only of you, Mary, if I’m honest. I was about to ease my own suffering when you knocked upon the door.”

She pursed her lips, rather pleased he’d been thinking of her so intently. “I don’t even know what that means.”

Another groan slipped past his lips. “All the more reason for me to send you on your way.”

“Please do not. I will have so little in the future when I have to go and look after my brother.” She paused and said most seriously, “Give this to me, Andrew. It is the least you can do.”

He stared at her, weighing her words carefully. “This is what you truly want?”

“More than anything,” she said.

He crossed to her then without a word and gently took her in his arms. “Then we shall do this,” he said, “and not look back. We shall enjoy this time that we have together. As partners in all things.”

It was exactly what she hoped to hear.

She had not been able to think of anything else since he kissed her at the folly. She had decided then she wanted to know what happened after such a kiss and that he was the one who should teach her. She was glad he was acquiescing to her wishes. To her desires.

“I do not know what to do,” she confessed honestly.

“I will show you,” he murmured.

He turned her ever so slowly, so that her shoulders were to him, and he took care with the ribbons at the back of her gown. He pulled the strings carefully, then did the pins at the front of her gown.

The fabric slipped to the floor.

She stood before him in her chemise and stays. He easily pulled the ribbons from the stays and let them drop to the floor to meet her gown.

He gazed down at her, his eyes dark with passion. “You are so

wonderful,” he said.

“As are you,” she replied.

He smiled. “What a lovely thing to say.”

“It is only the truth,” she returned.

Then he began to trace his fingertips over her body through the thin chemise, and somehow that felt more scandalous than if he had been touching her bare skin. He traced her ribs, her hips, her waist, and then over her breasts. She gasped as her nipples hardened and he lowered his hands, tracing down her thighs to where the fabric skimmed just above her knees.

He studied her face, watching her for signs she wished him to stop, but she would give him no such signs. She wished this with all her heart. He lowered his mouth to hers then and his hand slipped up underneath her chemise.

“Part your legs for me,” he whispered against her lips.

She was shocked by the request, but she did exactly as he wished.

Her blood began to hum with need.

His hands... Oh his hands! They dragged up her thighs, firm yet gentle, teasing. And then oh... His hand went to her most secret place, a place she rarely touched herself. But she had never been encouraged to do so.

And his boldness startled her.

He was gentle. His fingers stroked through the soft skin there, and she was amazed by how delicious it felt. He continued to kiss her lips, turning her body into liquid desire.

His fingers teased the folds between her thighs. And she was stunned to find they were slick and silken under his touch. He did not stop as he circled and stroked and then slid his fingers deep within her.

She tensed against him then.

“Relax against me,” he murmured. “If you do not like it, I promise to stop.”

But she did like it. Liked it very well. So well she rocked her hips against his hand.

“That’s it love,” he said. “Enjoy.”

And he stroked deeper, unrelenting, until she found herself gasping against his mouth, straining for something she barely understood, desperate for pleasure.

At last his fingers seem to wring the most delicious ripples of bliss

through her body. She tightened in his hold, astonished at the feeling that possessed her. For it was the most intense she had felt in her entire life, and she did not wish it to end.

He picked her up in his arms, carried her to the bed, and eased her upon it. He whipped her chemise easily over her head. His eyes devoured the sight of her body. He bent then and took a nipple into his mouth, kissing each in turn, teasing them with his tongue.

She moaned softly and arched her back, lost in pleasure. He parted her thighs and pulled his own dressing gown off. He was naked in the shadows, his beautiful body chiseled and warm under her touch.

“I’m going to take you now, Mary,” he said.

“Do not wait,” she urged.

An emotion she could not quite name softened his features, and he gazed at her for a long moment before he parted her thighs and she felt the hard evidence of his sex at her core.

He stroked the head of it up and down her slick folds and she found herself arching, eager for his entry. He braced himself on his forearms, gazed down into her eyes, and thrust forward.

She bit back a yelp of alarm, for it was no easy entry.

“I’m sorry,” he gritted, his muscles tense with an effort to go slow.

“Do not be sorry,” she returned, her voice tight. “It is...”

“It is very tight.”

“Yes,” she replied, struggling for a moment.

But then he slowed, rocking back and forth. Andrew kissed her deeply, passionately. He stroked all along her body, teasing her breasts with his fingertips, then her ribs, and then he lowered his hand between them, finding that special spot.

And as she began to ease and relax against him, he thrust again. This time her body allowed him to enter without protest. She let out a sigh of surprise at the exquisite feel of being so full. She had not experienced anything like it in her life.

And then, oh then, his body began to move against hers, his hips rolling as if it was the most natural thing in the world and she supposed it was.

His pleasure seemed to mount, his breath growing more harsh against her ear.

His body moved with hers, intensely, wildly, as if he too was searching

for something.

She loved the feel of it, the feel of him, that he was almost out of control. Out of control for her. And yet she felt completely safe in his embrace.

Mary wrapped her arms about him.

And together, they reached forward towards the stars.

As wave after wave of indescribable bliss washed over her, she held onto him tightly, and then he called out her name.

Andrew pulled out quickly, and she felt his hot desire spill against her stomach.

Slowly, he lowered himself as his passion eased.

They laid together then, their rough breath mingling, and she was so proud of herself that this was what she had chosen.

For despite all the fear that had surrounded her, she had chosen him instead.

CHAPTER 18

Each day of the house party was most strange now.

Andrew did not know how they were surviving it, or how it would end. And he certainly did not know how the nights had become the center of their world. The days were an act, showing the world one thing, but the nights of the house party were the truth between them.

Each night, as soon as Mary's father was asleep, she came to him, slipping through the door and the darkness, and he took her to his bed.

They lay in it naked, twining their hands, staring up at the canopy, sometimes saying nothing, sometimes only enjoying the heat of their bodies pressed against each other.

He loved to stroke his fingertips up and down her arms. He loved the way she gasped at the feel of his gentle touch. And he loved the way she studied him as he simply held her, as if she could not believe he wished to hold her for the sake of holding her alone.

Oh, he would make love to her every moment if he could.

But holding her, watching her, studying her face, the emotions that played there? It filled him up with such pleasure and such satisfaction, he could not describe it. He felt as if she was an anchor in all the chaos of the house party, in the emotions that had embroiled him over the recent months.

The nights now? Oh, they made him feel as if he had come back to himself, a self he'd never even known existed. But he felt more real, more true with her than he ever had in his life.

And so as he held her in the crook of his arm as she rested against his chest, he looked down and whispered, "What is your favorite flower in the garden, Mary?"

She snuggled closer to him, as if she could not get close enough, then mused, "My favorite flower? If I'm quite honest, it would have to be the snowdrop. For they dare to pop up even in winter's gloom. And I adore how they fight through the cold to bring such joy to the world. And then pansies and bluebells."

He drew in a slow breath, touched with awe. “You like the little flowers? Not the bold roses.”

She considered this, then replied easily, “Oh, the bold roses are beautiful enough, but I like the wildflowers.”

He stroked his hand gently through her hair, full of emotions as he took in her words. “I am not surprised you care for the more wild things.”

She beamed at him. “A groomed garden is well and good. But when you go out for walks, and you see the crocuses and the daffodils, the snow drops the bluebells, the honeysuckle. And all the wild things growing along the banks?” She paused, her brow furrowing as if it was incredibly important she explain herself. “My heart leaps because I know there is perfection in this world. Perfection without striving.”

He let his hand rest upon her back and blinked, astonished. “I have never heard anything like that in my whole life.”

“Have you never considered how nature just simply is?” she mused.

“No, I have not,” he said honestly. “Tell me more.”

“Well,” she continued, clearly pleased he was curious. “Nature doesn’t need a great deal of tending or forcing. The flowers bloom and die. The leaves fall from the trees, then come back. The wind carries the seeds upon it. The rain waters the earth and makes things grow. Everything is just as it should be. Without trying.”

“You are a marvel,” he whispered, his heart doing the strangest thing, here, alone with her. “I wish I could stop trying,” he said softly.

“Then you must,” she said.

“But how can I?” he protested. “We are not plants. We are humans.”

She laughed softly, almost sadly. “How true, and I do think our minds often get the very best of us and keep us from being what we are meant to be.”

There were no more profound words spoken, he thought, as he pulled her tighter against him, as if he could make them one.

How he wished that he could protect her from the machinations of humans, from the cruelty of the mind. And he wondered what would become of them in the short days ahead.

He only hoped she would bloom like the flowers that she loved so well. And though she insisted she loved the wildflowers that did not need to be taken care of, he would tend to her as best he could and make sure nothing

came to crush her.

So that she could grow wild, beautiful, and free.



During the day, Mary found herself in the company of the duke seldom. For some reason, her father kept moving her from room to room. She had to go wherever he wished, and he watched them both carefully with a smile upon his lips.

But there was something strange about him now. Thankfully, she found herself often in the company of Agatha and her grandmother. For which she was relieved.

Hartmore did pursue her and asked her to dance often when they held smaller dances in the evening.

They did spend moments together, but it was difficult to be alone with Andrew. Except for their evenings, when all were kept to their chambers.

This was, of course, part of the challenge.

Surely, her father wanted to make it difficult for the duke to get to her, to make her seem rare and sought after and not easily won.

But her father was also growing more and more tense as time went by. She did not know what to do or say, and she had to be careful in the manipulation of him.

And so, despite the risk, she managed to find Hartmore alone in his room whilst her father was dressing.

“Something is wrong,” she said softly.

“Yes, I can feel it too,” he agreed, his face grim.

“I think my father suspects,” she whispered as she crossed further into the chamber. The chamber she had begun to know well, the chamber she wished she never had to leave. For she felt safe there.

“Suspects that there is something suspicious between us?”

“Suspects that you are not all that you seem,” she affirmed softly. “And I have concerns that he’s going to act upon it.”

“He can’t possibly do anything to me at this house party,” Andrew replied, taking her hands in his. “But Mary,” he said, “I think you’re right. I think you should go. I don’t think this is a game we can play anymore. Your father is a dangerous man, and I am worried now that...”

“You are worried for me?” she asked, both relieved and horrified. Relieved because she had not been certain how he felt. But horrified because his plans were being foiled.

“Indeed I am.”

Her heart swirled at this. His revenge had seemed to matter so much, but now he seemed to be pulling back from that.

“I could not bear it if something happened to you,” he whispered, pulling her into his arms. “You must understand that. I could not bear it if we were separated either, if I’m honest with you.” He gazed down into her eyes. “You have made me believe and hope again, Mary,” he said, “but your father...”

“I know,” she said, though she could barely get the words out. “When you look at me, you must see him.”

“I do,” he confessed honestly, “but that doesn’t matter, Mary. What matters now is your freedom and your brother’s freedom. My own brother is dead. I can do little for him. But you? We must get you away and soon.”

“I have only just begun to know you,” she whispered. “I cannot imagine not seeing you again.”

“I don’t want to let you go either, Mary,” he breathed. “But for your safety, I’m going to send you away. I’m arranging for a man to take you down to Cornwall. You will collect your brother on the way in secret, and then your father cannot touch you again. I will deal with him.”

“I don’t want to go away from you,” she lamented. “But I must protect Jack. And I feel like Father is on the verge of exploding. Something truly is amiss with him.”

“I agree with you. Now, trust me,” he said gently, gazing down at her with eyes full of emotion. He lifted his hand, cupped her cheek, and lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was sweet, soft, kind, full of passion. Then he lifted his head. “Tomorrow night, when the fireworks begin, be ready to run, Mary. That’s when I will get you away. I would do it sooner, but it’s not possible to have everything arranged in time.”

She gave a nod. “I will be ready,” she said.

“I will have your father distracted,” he promised, his arms enfolding her with the protection she longed to know. Protection she’d never known until him. “Never fear about that. I will make sure someone irresistible offers him an opportunity to play cards. I can see that he loves power, and he won’t be

able to turn that down.”

She blew out a shaking breath. “I shall be ready.”

“In the meantime,” he said, “it seems you have made friends with Lady Agatha and her grandmama.”

“I have,” she said, her heart aching as she realized she would be losing the only friends she’d ever known. To evade her father, she’d truly have to disappear.

“Stay with them as much as possible,” he said.

“And you?” she said. “Will you be with me?”

His face hardened and his hand pressed into her back. “We must try not to infuriate your father unless...”

“What?” she whispered.

“I could announce our marriage to him,” he stated.

She gasped, shocked at his words. “Do not say things you do not mean. I do not like that ruse.”

“What if it wasn’t a ruse?” he offered.

She tried to make sense of this strange new idea. Surely, given his loathing for her father, he could not mean it. “Explain yourself?”

“If I actually married you, Mary, I could protect you and your brother.”

“You mean we go from your ruse of ruining me to my ruse of getting you to marry me?” she scoffed.

His face darkened. “I want to be able to take care of you and keep you safe.”

“Oh, I cannot do that to you,” she groaned, though she longed to be with him. To know his love. But the consequences were unbearable. “I cannot have you linked to him for the rest of your life.”

“But, Mary,” he said, “even if I hide you, he might find you and then—”

“No,” she cut in swiftly. “I will not do that to you.”

And she couldn’t. She couldn’t hurt him like that, to make him see her father over and over again, to have her father triumphant over him.

“I love you,” she said, suddenly unable to stop herself. “I’ve never felt this emotion before. And so I know what it is. And because I love you, I cannot hurt you thus, Andrew. Please don’t ask it of me. Please protect me in other ways, any way but that. We cannot let him win.”

“Perhaps we can both win,” he said softly.

She shook her head. He had not said he loved her in turn, and the ache of

it was almost too much to bear. “No,” she insisted. “In this, there will only be one winner, and it cannot be him.”

CHAPTER 19

“You are lying to us, aren’t you?” the Duke of Wildwood said softly.

Andrew backed up and collided into the billiards table. “What the bloody hell are you talking about?” he said.

Glenfoyle cocked his head to the side. “Och, mon. Don’t.”

Talbot tsked. “Considering all we know about each other, don’t think you can run a game on us, old boy.”

Daniel Bedford stood in the corner of the room. “We understand you want to protect us, but you need to understand your lies are actually a danger to us. Come on now. You are hiding something, and you don’t need to.”

“What do you know of this, Bedford? Everything you planned seems to be going amiss,” Andrew challenged.

Bedford let out a slow laugh. “You’re not mistaken on that one, and I apologize to you for it. You all are far more unpredictable than any of the people in the East End, and I never thought that would’ve been possible. You all seem insistent on falling in love,” Bedford said, flummoxed.

Wildwood groaned. “Don’t say it.”

“Why not?” Glenfoyle put in. “It seems to be true.”

Talbot said nothing.

“And you, Andrew,” Truebridge challenged, “what is going on with your little revenge project?”

“Come on now, mon,” Glenfoyle urged. “Tell us the truth. You’ve been trying to keep it from us for days, but we can see it on your face.”

“I’m in love with her,” Andrew blurted. And he immediately felt intense relief for having confessed. Confessed to something he had not fully admitted to himself until just this moment.

“With Mary?” Wildwood gasped. “His daughter, the one you’re supposed to ruin?”

He gave a tight nod. Truebridge clapped him on the back. “Good. Here’s a beginning. Admitting it.”

Wildwood let out a note of distress. “Why would you hide this from us?”

“Because you all have so much going on,” Andrew explained, “and this was not the plan. I’m supposed to ruin her and push her father into a corner, but it’s not going the way it was supposed to. She came and confessed her goal here at this party to me, which was to convince me to marry her.”

Truebridge blinked, then folded his arms over his chest. “Have you asked her to marry you?”

He winced. “Yes.”

“Are you sure she’s not playing you along for a fool?” Glenfoyle asked.

Talbot let out a laugh. “That one? No. She’s honest as they come, though I’m sure she could lead us all in a merry dance if she had to. She has a good heart. I can tell.”

Andrew looked to Talbot, grateful that this duke could see Mary for who she was, even if the others might be more suspicious.

“Then what is the problem?” Wildwood said. “Surely, she said yes.”

“She said no,” Andrew stated, feeling sick as he said it.

“No?” Glenfoyle repeated, arching a brow as he looked around the room skeptically. “Why the devil would she say no?”

“She wants to protect me,” he admitted.

“Oh God,” Talbot groaned. “Must we all save ourselves from each other, our noble victimhood?”

“She doesn’t want to be a victim,” Andrew protested.

“Yes, she does,” Truebridge bit out. “If she won’t marry you to protect you, she absolutely is choosing to be a victim. She might think she’s choosing action in this, but she’s not, because if you think her father won’t retaliate then—”

“Dear God. It’s true, isn’t it?” Andrew tensed as fear crashed through him.

“He’s going to do something for sure,” Wildwood affirmed without mercy. “But what I want to know is, after all the encouraging you have given to me, to all of us, why would you deny yourself now? Why are you holding back with her? Seize her. Show her that you love her. Make it plain.”

“What would you have me do?” he ground out. “Kidnap her? Marry her immediately?”

“Scotland is not so very far away,” Glenfoyle said with a shrug.

He let out a laugh, but then he realized Glenfoyle meant it.

“You could be there in no time, truly,” Glenfoyle continued. “There has

been many a marriage made that way.”

“Before her father can find out?” he stated, looking for clarification, hardly able to believe they were considering this.

“Exactly,” Truebridge said with a growing smile. “Go, take her, marry her. Brook no victim-like protestation. Make her see. You love her.”

“You all are encouraging me to steal her, run away from here, and coerce her into marriage.” He blew out a breath. “That is illegal.”

“Is it though, in the end?” Talbot asked. “Gray areas, my friend. Gray areas. Because it sounds as if she truly wishes to marry you but won’t because she’s afraid of hurting you, and she does not realize you are the great Duke of Hartmore, and her father isn’t going to murder you outright. Not unless he wishes to hang for it. And then there is the fact you love her in turn. You wouldn’t actually force a girl to marry against her will. We all know that.”

“You all make an interesting proposition,” he said softly as a memory of Charlie surfaced before him. “But my revenge,” he said.

Wildwood strode up to him and took his arms in his grasp. “Revenge is important, but would your brother want you to give her up to avenge his death?”

“No,” he said, a shuddering breath tearing from him, thinking of what Charlie would think. “But the pain of it.”

Wildwood squeezed his arms. “The pain is deep, and you can still hurt Donaldson because it sounds like he’s making his daughter’s life hell. But do not let her go in the process.”

Andrew looked about at the men who had stood by him over the last months, getting him through the darkness, each of them a light to the other so that they did not stumble in the shadows.

“All right then,” Andrew agreed. “Before the fireworks. I was going to send her away, but I don’t think she’ll be safe even then. Her father’s a clever man.”

“Good. Have the coach readied,” Wildwood said firmly. “We shall all keep Donaldson distracted, and then you two will be free to do whatever you please. Donaldson won’t be able to say a thing.”

“But what about her brother, Jack?” Andrew demanded. “She is terrified for him, and I promised to protect him.”

“I’m sure we will find a way to get her brother away from him.”

Glenfoyle gave a slow smile. "I'm sure we could make certain the man is commissioned elsewhere forever. And then Jack would go and live with you. Surely Donaldson would be pleased to have a duke raising his son."

Could it work? He folded his hands into fists, digging his nails into the flesh. "You make a fine point, but to possibly put him back on the Continent in charge of so many men?"

"Yes," Wildwood said, pained, "that is a downside of all this."

"Am I admitting defeat?"

Bedford took a step forward. "There is no defeat. Not yet. A solution will arise. Of that I am certain. We will bring Donaldson down somehow. But your priority now is the woman you love."

He only wished he could be so sure, but he looked to each man.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for not letting me fail. And you Wildwood, are you going to find love in all of this? As I have urged you throughout this week."

Wildwood's face hardened. "I do not know what is to come. But you have all taught me so much in the last days. All I know is, I cannot keep going as I was. I have to change. I have to grow if I am to survive this."

"Here's to growing and changing then," Andrew said. "Here's to a future that is not full of darkness."

Glenfoyle and Truebridge gave a hearty "Hear! Hear!"

But Talbot was silent.

"You say nothing?" Andrew queried.

Talbot locked gazes with him, then said solemnly, "We cannot know the future, but we cannot stay stuck in the present. Time does not wait for us, old boy. You must march on, and you must do the best that you can."

And with that powerful warning and blessing, Andrew gave a nod. "Right then. When will the fireworks start?"

Wildwood looked to the windows. "Not that long. As soon as it is truly dark. Now I must be out. I have my own things to arrange. And you three?"

The others nodded.

"We shall keep things under control," said Truebridge.

"At least a few of us will get the plan that we started with," Glenfoyle ground out.

"We think," Talbot drawled.

Glenfoyle rolled his eyes. "Always the optimist, aren't you, Talbot?"

Talbot gave a sardonic grin and bow.

With that, Andrew strode out into the hall, wondering what fate awaited him. He knew that life promised no happy endings.

He had to find her. He had to get her away. It was shocking to realize that after all this, after all he'd fought for, he was going to let go of his revenge of destroying Donaldson because he had found something different, better.

He had found love, and he had a strong feeling Charlie would approve. He would not stop trying to bring Donaldson down. But now the goal was very different indeed.

The goal was her.

The goal was saving her heart, her brother, and not just destroying.

Creation was always going to be more important than destruction.

And for a moment, he caught himself smiling because after months and months of despair, hope whispered to him. And he was so grateful to his friends for pointing out that he could make a difference, that he could change his path, that revenge could have many faces.

And one of those faces was finding love.

CHAPTER 20

“Do you know what one of the great skills of being an excellent military leader is?”

Mary’s pulse leapt in her neck, and her entire body felt as if she had been lit aflame as her father crossed behind her.

Her father’s voice was particularly strong this evening, and yet it was also frighteningly quiet.

She let her fingers trail over the simple necklace at her throat as they lingered near the granite steps of the castle, ready to head to the gardens where the evening’s entertainments would begin.

The sun had slipped behind the horizon, and the sky was kissed with the final colors of the day.

Most everyone had already found their way to the gardens and fountains, and they were quite alone.

It promised to be a particularly wonderful night with fireworks, dancing, all sorts of music, singers, and dramas.

But now she feared the drama might be unfolding right here with her father in the solitude near the castle.

“I would imagine,” she said, trying to remain calm, “a certain sort of determination and self-belief.”

“Yes,” her father said, standing beside her in the cool evening air. “But there is something else, my dear. It is the ability to know when one’s troops are up to something, when the soldiers are unsatisfied, when they might balk, and then you have to show them discipline so they will march into the fire when you tell them to.”

Her father turned towards her, his entire stance carefree, and yet it was the sort of nonchalance that felt like a trap. “It’s important to know if they might not do as told. And my dear, I can tell which way an army will turn, or if they will run, or if they will drop the colors. I will tell you, my men have never run, turned, or dropped the colors, for they know if they did, the repercussions would be unbelievable.”

Bile swirled in her stomach and every instinct in her told her to run. Except there was nowhere to run to.

A chill went down her spine and she shivered. This felt very specific.

“Are you cold, my dear?”

She shook her head. “You have many wonderful skills, Papa.”

Her chest tightened as she struggled to breathe evenly, and she felt waves of apprehension creeping through her.

“I have been watching you for the last few days,” he mused before he reached out and snaked his hand into the hair coiled at her neck and tightened his grip. “I think you and the duke wanted me to believe something. You most of all. I never would’ve guessed that I had a traitor in my own house, my dear. But it seems you have forgotten who you should be loyal to, who your commanding officer actually is.”

Tears stung her eyes at the pain in her scalp, and yet she found herself hissing, “You are not my commanding officer. You are my father.”

“Yes, I am,” he ground out, a muscle ticking just under his right eye. “And perhaps you’ve seen too many plays or read too many novels and have forgotten what family actually is about. It is not about drivel. It is not about nonsense. It is about getting ahead of one’s future. That’s what family is for ___”

“No, it is not,” she cut in. “It is...”

“What?” he challenged as he bent towards her, stunned by her audacity.

She blew out a derisive breath, realizing that she was not going to let herself be pushed any longer. “I have now seen what family can be like. The love, the caring.”

“All possible through their security,” her father ground out. “And that’s what I wanted for you, for us.”

“You did not want simple security,” she snapped, refusing to listen to his justifications. She gave him a scathing look of disdain. “You wanted power.”

His eyes flared. “If you do not think the two are one and the same, then you are a fool.” And with that, he dropped his hand from her hair, grabbed her arm, and began pulling her away.

“Papa, let go,” she growled, the ferocity of her tone amazing them both. “I do not have to go with you.”

He whipped around. “You do have to go with me by law, by filial commitment.”

And his grip was so strong that she could not struggle.

She began to cry out, but he turned around and slammed a hand over her mouth.

“Now, my dear, you will cease this childish display. Or I shall make sure Jack is sent away to a new school. Or perhaps a naval ship would be just the thing for him. It will be a hell of a place for that soft boy, but he will learn the discipline he’s always needed. Do you understand me?” Her father intoned. “I know you have too much of a gentle spot for that boy. And if you were to have his care, he would turn into nothing more than a milquetoast. Perhaps I have been far too easy on him, but defy me now and you shall see what I’m truly capable of. Clearly, I should have been more disciplined with you.”

As his words raced through her brain, she clamped her mouth shut. She’d gone too far. She’d acted too soon, showing him defiance. For she did not have Jack.

All her boldness fizzled then, replaced by dread. Dread that she was about to lose it all.

She could say nothing to stop him. Not now.

She could not fight back, not at all.

And as he glared down at her, like a master who longed to kick a cur, she understood that she had lost.

Desperate, she glanced back to the castle. She could not even run to ask Andrew for help. She knew she’d been playing a dangerous game, living on the edge. But what a fool she’d been to believe she could trick her father, that Andrew could trick her father, because they were both good people, and her father was a villain motivated only by his own self-interest.

And someone like that? Well, they would do anything to get what they wanted, to preserve their own existence.

“I will not be made a fool, girl. And I do not know what the Duke of Hartmore thinks he’s up to, or you. But I’m taking back control.”

And with that, he dragged her into the dark along the path. “You were going to meet him in private, were you not? Like the little harlot you are?”

His words smacked her as she realized she’d never had secrets from him. Not truly. Or if she had, he’d discovered them quickly.

And her father had lulled her into this present trap.

“Take me to where you were going to meet him,” he ordered.

“Why?”

He shook her. "Do not ask me questions Your role is to follow."

But she could not just do as he bid, surely? Especially when she took note of the silver dagger that flashed inside his coat when he jerked her forward.

"Before anything can happen that will call my standing into question, I am confronting your lover. And he will see who is truly in charge."

And as he yanked her down the path into the darkness, her hopes of freedom disappeared.



Andrew could not find her.

He searched the gardens and the folly and began to feel frantic.

Perhaps he was simply missing her by moments. Yes. That had to be it. Perhaps she was behind him or in the location he had just searched. He considered asking servants to begin looking for her. His concerns were growing so intensely, for she had never missed one of their meetings.

And to his distress, he had not seen Donaldson either. Suddenly, a wave of uncertainty crashed through him as if he had made some terrifying miscalculation.

Had he been too arrogant?

Yes.

The word seemed to echo through him—eternal, powerful, undeniable.

He had thought with the dukes behind him, with Daniel Bedford behind him, that he would be able to outwit a man like Donaldson, who was simply cruel.

But now as he strode through the garden, by the bower of roses, he began to feel a wave of unrelenting dread. Something was wrong. She was supposed to have met him almost thirty minutes ago.

Perhaps he should head back to the folly where they were meant to meet.

He was going to steal her away, but she was nowhere in sight.

The gravel crunched behind him, and he turned towards it, searching for her in the shadows, but it was not her.

Talbot and a young woman rushed through the darkness.

"She has been taken," the young lady cried out.

"What?" he demanded, his voice full of horror.

"Mary," she said. "She has been taken by her father. I saw them. He

dragged her along the path. I had asked her to meet me, and we were going to go down to the fireworks together, but she was not there. And I witnessed her being stolen away. He told her to take him to you.”

“Dear God,” he ground out. “Are you certain?”

“Very,” Talbot said. “And it seems as if Donaldson is intending a rapid flight. For I spoke with one of the footmen, who said he had been ordered to bring Donaldson’s coach around. Donaldson had already loaded their things into it. It seems he does not plan on coming back after he has met you. God knows what he plans to do with her.”

Andrew looked at the young woman. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you.”

For surely, he could return to their meeting place in time and sort this out. He had to. “Are you with me, Talbot?” he asked, looking to his friend.

“Always. Should we get the other dukes?”

“Yes. Get who you can and meet at the folly. You know the one,” he said.

Talbot paused and looked to the young lady. “You must go back to your cousin now, and make sure she is safe too. The night seems full of peril.”

The lady gave a quick nod and raced back up the path.

“This could be dangerous,” Hartmore said suddenly.

Talbot arched his brow. “I hope so.”

“I don’t want anyone to die tonight,” Hartmore growled out.

“No one has to die tonight,” Talbot assured. “But if you do not rescue her... Her fate will be hellish. Knowing what we do about that man, he will seek revenge against her for betraying him. You might not be able to find her again if you do not intercede. A man like that? I would not put it above him to thrust his daughter into a madhouse.”

The idea that she could be lost to him but living in some torturous prison stole over him, and rage tore through him. For Talbot was not mistaken. It would be an easy enough thing to do in their society. Finding a doctor or two to pay off would not be difficult. And asylums were corrupt. Many would look the other way to house a difficult young woman. Yes, a girl could disappear forever. Such things were easily done. And he had been a fool to be so arrogant in the face of a monster like her father.

And so he looked to Talbot. “Go. Get the others. Come armed.”

“You should be armed too,” Talbot pointed out, his eyes dark with alarm.

“I cannot wait. You know that.”

Talbot nodded, though he looked grim. “Find her. Protect her. And know

that you are not alone.”

With his friends? He had never been alone. And he needed Mary to know the same.

She was no longer alone.

And she would never be. But he needed to get to her in time to prove that.

Without another word, Talbot headed back towards the castle, and Andrew raced out into the night, into the forest, ready to do battle for the woman he loved.

CHAPTER 21

When Andrew arrived at the folly, there was no one there.

His breath was ragged to his own ears, and he let out a curse. The artificial stone tower with its wisteria seemed sinister now.

He stood, waiting in the shadows.

Why were they taking so long? Had she fought back? Had she tried to escape her father? Had she been harmed?

An image of her prostrate in the forest hit him, and he could not breathe.

He was going to take her away.

All would be well. They had to be. It did not matter that he knew how brutal the world was, how good people could be taken swiftly. He would not let himself believe that anything had happened to the woman he loved.

His friends were correct. Rescuing Mary was the only course. Nothing else mattered.

Not when Mary's safety was in such jeopardy.

But as he stood with the distant notes of the musicians singing in the air, each moment felt like an eternity.

When he heard the soft rustle of grass behind him, he startled towards it. He held himself rigid, determined to seem as if he did not know what had happened. For he wished to catch her father as unaware as possible.

She slipped towards him, moonlight dancing over her precious features.

Features that were written over his heart now.

Her face was tense, her eyes shining with fear. "I am so sorry," she said.

"Sorry for what?" he breathed, longing to enfold her in his arms, longing to protect her.

"This," Donaldson growled as he came out of the shadows. "You thought you could play me like a fool, like a spy. That's the sort of person you are, aren't you, Hartmore? You're like a spy. No honor, no dignity, just a facade about you."

Andrew tensed, relieved the man had emerged. Now the real danger could be faced "Do you dare to talk to me about honor and dignity when you grind

up young men like they are meat?”

“That is what young men do,” Donaldson pointed out mercilessly. “They die in battle and are ground up. And if they are not strong enough to take it, well then better the world lose them.”

A furious note slipped past his lips. He wanted to charge forward and rip Donaldson to pieces, but he couldn’t risk Mary’s safety, and he was unarmed.

“Are you well?” he said to Mary.

She gave a tight nod of her head. “I am well,” she said.

“But not for long,” Donaldson said tightly. “You too have been conspiring. Are you going to marry her?”

“I was going to take her away from you.”

“You can’t ever take her away from me.” Donaldson laughed cruelly. “She is my creature, Your Grace. She does my bidding.”

“Not anymore,” she bit out.

“Oh, my dear,” her father mocked. “I think you always will because you care too much for your brother. Because I have trained you from a child to do what I want.”

“Not anymore,” Hartmore countered, crossing to Mary, standing before her. “She has not been your creature this entire house party.”

“Has she been yours?” Donaldson spat. “Have you seduced her from one master to the next?”

He swallowed back a foul taste. “You are a disgusting creature yourself,” he snapped.

Donaldson strode forward. “You are trying to destroy me. Don’t think I haven’t heard about your distemper. I thought my daughter could smooth out your edges, that we could change things and find an accord. But it seems it’s not possible. I cannot have you going about trying to destroy my reputation and everything I’ve worked for,” the colonel said.

“I don’t have to do that,” Andrew replied, adjusting his stance, readying for an attack. “You’re doing that on your own.”

Wordlessly, Donaldson slipped a dagger out of his coat.

Mary tried to run forward, but Andrew stopped her, pushing her back behind him as she cried out, “Papa, you cannot. He is unarmed.”

But Donaldson did not listen. “This will end now,” he said.

Andrew realized he should have known it would end thus. He’d wanted to provoke a response, and Charlie had been clear about Donaldson’s

unpredictable temper.

But he'd never expected this.

Murder in the dark.

Of course, the colonel wasn't going to have an outburst in public. What a fool Andrew had been to think he could maneuver and manipulate a man like Donaldson.

Donaldson darted forward in the shadows, the silver blade glinting in the moonlight.

Andrew whipped away, yanked off his coat, and wrapped it about his arm, ready to defend himself.

Donaldson quirked his lip. "Not a total idiot then. You have some idea how to protect yourself."

"Dukes are expected to train even if we no longer go to war," he growled back.

He was ready to protect Mary to the last, but the idea Donaldson could be responsible for the death of his brother and himself? It galled him.

But he would not stop. He would not give in. Not for anything.

Because he was fighting for so much more than revenge. He was fighting for the woman he loved. That's what mattered now. Nothing else.

Donaldson charged forward, the blade flashing again. It came in fast and sharp and low.

Andrew twisted away, and his boot caught on a root from the wisteria tree. He tripped quickly to the ground.

Donaldson fell atop him, the blade raised high.

A burst of fireworks exploded in the air, the boom shaking all around them as loud as any cannon.

Donaldson's eyes flared, and he let out a grunt of pain as he collapsed atop Andrew.

Andrew lay still under the heavy, unmoving mass.

But then he realized blood was slipping from the man's coat, warm and acrid.

Wincing, Andrew shoved Donaldson aside and grabbed the blade from the man's still rigid grip.

"Grab it," he called out.

She rushed to it and picked it up with her shaking hands. "What happened? Where did the shot come from?"

He turned his gaze to the forest.

Then a voice came out of the shadows. "Are you well?"

The relief that crashed through him was immense. Talbot crossed out of the darkness as another burst of fireworks shot across the sky.

The night's festivities were now in full swing.

"Bloody hell, Talbot. Did you not go back to the castle?"

"I thought it prudent I follow you immediately. I managed to get a pistol from the gamekeeper and headed to the folly."

"Thank God for that," Andrew replied, feeling shaken. Feeling as if his entire life had almost been ripped away from him.

"It looks as if you have a bit of trash that needs taking out," Talbot drawled before turning his gaze to Mary. "Forgive me. That was terribly done of me. He is your father."

Mary's eyes were wide as she stared at her father's body with shock.

Andrew crossed to her swiftly and took her in his embrace. "My darling, I am so sorry."

She shook her head. "Do not be," she whispered. "For my brother and I are now free. We...are free."

Her gaze darted between the men. "I know it must sound terribly unnatural, but I am grateful. Grateful he will hurt no one else ever again."

And with that she threw her arms about Andrew and buried her face in his chest.

He was certain she had not let herself go in all her life. And so as she cried, he held her close and whispered, "You are safe, my love. And you will never be alone again."

And nothing would keep them apart. That he knew. For all of this had not been leading him to revenge, as he had been so sure. No, it had always been leading him to her.

CHAPTER 22

After the fireworks finished, their colors fading, the night was quite wild.

Donaldson was taken by footmen back to the house. The Duke of Wildwood was informed after his own rather shocking exchange with the Earl of Wexford.

And frankly, Andrew felt damned relieved that Wildwood's young woman, Virginia, had come to Wildwood's rooms in time, and that the events of the evening had allowed him to assist his friend.

He and Talbot had kept the interlude with Donaldson quiet. After all, the others had enough to face without knowing about one dead colonel.

With Wildwood's power and the fact he was the most powerful man in the area all would be taken care of with great ease.

So, as soon as Wildwood and Virginia were settled, he took Mary to his coach, and as he had planned, they raced to Gretna Green, whereupon they descended and married in the small chapel there.

They had not needed to marry in haste, but he had wanted it.

He did not wish to spend a moment longer than necessary as anything other than her husband.

And much to his infinite relief, she had felt the same.

They did not linger in Scotland.

Oh, no. They went immediately to collect her brother Jack and brought him to Andrew's estate by the sea.

His friends... Well, their plans had not gone as planned, but each of them had found a new path.

Each one was working towards love.

Wildwood had found love, thank God, and Andrew had too.

It was a far greater end than any revenge.

As he gazed down at his wife as they crossed over the threshold of his great house, he whispered, "I cannot fathom how lucky I am to have you."

"Nor I," she agreed, her hand winding about his.

"I never thought I'd find such love," he said.

“There are not adequate words, Andrew,” she replied as they stood on the marble flooring. “I have not known such peace in all my life. But more? I have not felt such wonder, nor felt so very full of love. And friends,” she breathed. “I never imagined I would have such friends. Please, can we invite Agatha to visit?”

“Oh, I think we should,” he agreed.

“All of them,” she added. “For without them, none of this ever could have happened.”

He pulled her against his body and tilted her chin up towards him. “I have spent so many months now in the pursuit of revenge. I think we should spend the next years in the pursuit of joy.”

“I could not agree more,” she declared.

Jack bounded from the coach and rushed up beside them. “Is this where I’m to live now?” he said.

“Yes, it is indeed,” Andrew assured, emotion welling deep inside him, realizing he was to have the care of the young man.

“Papa cannot hurt us now?” Jack’s eyes were wide, haunted by memories of his brutal father for a moment.

“No. And I will protect you now,” Andrew said, kneeling down beside Jack who, though not a small boy, was still vulnerable and afraid of a world with the sort of cruelty his father had shown him. “You shall always be with us now. You have a new family here.”

And at those words, his mother descended the staircase slowly, looking down upon them. She was still heavy with grief. But there was a light to her eyes. “She has made you happy. I can see it,” his mother said.

Mary tensed beside him. For she had told him how worried she was his mother would hate her.

“Mama,” he said gently. “I have brought my wife and her little brother to meet you.”

“And she and her brother have brought you peace and love—”

“I am so sorry about my father,” Mary rushed, her voice breaking.

His mother lifted her hand and said gently, “None of that matters. You were a victim too, and I can see what you have done for my son. You have transformed him. You have brought him from suffering to joy. And how could I do anything else but love you for that? You are both always welcome here. You are family.”

Tears sprung up in her eyes. “Thank heavens,” his mama declared, opening her arms wide. “Thank heavens you have found happiness again, Andrew. It shall give me hope. It’ll pull me through. And this house? It will be full of joy and laughter again.”

Mary rushed forward and took his mother’s outstretched hands in hers. “I will do all I can to make this house happy. It is my greatest wish that we all find joy.”

Andrew crossed up beside his wife, bringing Jack with him.

And then he pulled them all into an embrace before he said, “Pain is a great teacher. While it can destroy us, it can also create too. And out of all that suffering,” he said, “we shall make a new family, we shall find love, and we shall keep moving forward.”

Mary smiled up at him. “All because of you,” she said.

He looked down at her. “No, my love. All because of you. All because of your bravery. All because you had the courage to speak the truth.”

“Because you are kind,” she pointed out, “because you are good. You always have been, and you always will be.”

And as they stood together in each other’s embrace, the pain began to ebb away. Oh, it would always be there. But now they each had family, each had something to pull them forward into life and into love.

EPILOGUE

Five Years Later

*J*ack sat by the sea painting.

He had become quite a good painter, and Andrew was happy to pay for the many drawing masters and painters to come and teach the young man.

It was likely that Jack would be going to the Royal Academy of Arts to study even further.

He would be a great artist one day. Andrew was fairly certain. Something that never would have occurred if Jack's father had lived, if his father had had the keeping of him. Jack would have been destroyed under such tutelage. But now Jack was thriving, and so was Mary.

Mary walked beside him along the pebble beach, gazing out to the beautiful horizon where the waves crashed in, and the gulls soared overhead.

Their small son, who was but two years old, toddled beside them. Joyously, he ran ahead, chasing the birds as they tried to land along the shore.

"Charlie," Mary called and chased after him, laughing.

He watched his wife, his beautiful wife, pick up their son and twirl him in the sunlight.

Charlie's soft dark hair tumbled about his plump cheeks. They were red from the cold air and his eyes were bright with delight.

"Faster, faster, Mama!" Charlie cried.

And Mary did exactly as he requested, her rich laughter rippling through the salt air. The joy between them filled Andrew's heart with so much happiness and love. His life had taken a completely different course in the last five years than he ever expected.

His new foundation took up much of his time. Mr. Clayton had returned from war and come to assist him. They had locations all over England where young men could come talk about what happened to them on the Continent, places where they could speak to each other about the ravages of war, where they would not be judged.

He had houses built with kitchens so that those who were struggling

could find a bit of refuge.

And here, he and his family had found that at the edge of grief, there was hope.

At the edge of cruelty, there was love, and if they worked together, anything was possible.

The other dukes who had attended that long-ago house party often came to visit. They were important reminders of how love could change everything, how its presence could alter even the most broken of souls.

And Jack, who sat at the shoreline working on his painting, was free.

And Mary, who held their son as if he was the greatest gift in all the world, had shed all her fear.

And Andrew, as he strode along the shoreline? He could feel his brother's presence smiling down over them, protecting them from afar, and Andrew felt love. So much love.

He did not dare think how terrible and small his life would be without Mary in it.

Without her bravery. For she had been the one to tell him the truth so long ago, even though it had meant danger for her.

He was so grateful she had taken a chance with him.

And that he had seen who she truly was, and that she had trusted him with her soul.

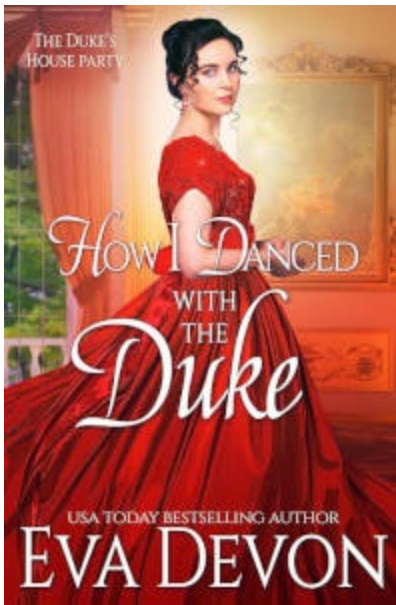
He would keep it carefully, forever. Protect it, help it grow, just as she would do for him, and together they would take care of Charlie.

As if she could sense him watching, Mary turned, beaming, and held out a hand. "Come my love! Join us!"

And Andrew did.

If you missed book 1 read

[How I Danced With The Duke](#)



A Duke Determined to Avenge. . .

The Duke of Wildwood has but one goal, vengeance. After seeing his sister destroyed by a wastrel, he will stop at nothing to hurt the man who ruined his sister. But when the house party he sets up, to undo the villain responsible for so much pain, begins to deviate from his plans, his frustration knows no end. . .

Then, there's one exceptionally irritating lady, who keeps popping up at the oddest times, book in hand, spectacles on nose. Wildwood has no time for her, or so he tells his heart, but she just might teach him that vengeance will never give him the peace he needs. Yet, with the wall around his heart, can Wildwood choose love?

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Book 3 will be releasing in November