

VAUXHALL VOICES

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and blue eyes stands in a garden at night. She is wearing a long, flowing blue dress with a white square neckline and short puffed sleeves. The garden is illuminated by a large, full moon in the sky, and there are stone columns and a fountain in the background. The overall mood is romantic and mysterious.

MIDNIGHT
LOVE
SONG

ANABELLE BRYANT

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*For historical romance readers everywhere,
most especially you.*

PROLOGUE

Dante closed his eyes and inhaled the familiar scent of burning sage and fresh rosemary. For as long as he could remember, the best way for him to see things clearly was to drench himself in darkness.

It was well past midnight, and everyone had already left this section of Vauxhall Gardens, anxious to congregate near the live music and supper boxes before the entertainment grounds closed and the gates were locked for the evening. As if to prove his assumption, he looked toward the entrance of the tent where the world outside was quiet.

Still, he waited unhurried, as he touched one candle to the next and brought each wick to flame. He knew with certainty, by the innate sense and inexplicable skill he possessed, that someone would arrive. An important someone. Someone who desperately needed him to foretell their fate beyond the casual reassurances offered from a friend. Someone who needed the lifeline Dante was prepared to supply.

It was unusual to see a customer after hours. However, the day had been filled with a steady stream of visitors. A highborn lady who wanted confirmation of her suitor's devotion. An older gentleman who questioned the years he had left and the sincerity of his heir. Two buffoonish young bucks who sought an undetectable way to cheat at the gambling tables.

Each customer left the tent satisfied even though they'd departed with a discordant understanding of what had happened after they'd entered and experienced Dante's

intuitive ability to sense their hidden emotions. Because of their shocked reactions, Dante always shared the images he saw within his mind's eye in a straight forward, tactful manner.

Nevertheless, it was no simple task to prepare someone for death. To tell a woman she would never carry a child. To warn a young debutante her intended was more interested in her dowry than her affection. No one lived a charmed life, and he strove for honesty and eloquence regardless of a person's station, because not all his customers were nobles. Most were ordinary people enjoying an outing at Vauxhall. Some curious, others seeking novel entertainment, all of them mysteriously changed by the experience.

Now, he returned his gaze to the opening between the tent flaps, where a narrow triangle allowed him a glimpse of the night sky. The lighted moon was nearly full, bloated with roundness, as if it, too, waited for a sign. Scientists called it a Gibbous moon, but anyone familiar with fortune-telling and second sight knew that particular phase represented the womb of potential. A time in the celestial cycle when vital transformation and unexpected activity occurred.

When true change was possible.

He was still considering this phenomenon when a haloed silhouette interrupted his sightline.

“Excuse me.”

Dante nodded in greeting and the stranger entered, pulled forward by the allure of invisible promises and the temptation of grasping control of an impossible situation.

“I don't have an appointment.” A note of uncertainty accompanied the statement.

“I expected you,” he said, and indicated the chair on the other side of the wooden table with a subtle gesture. Dante claimed the opposite seat and waited. So much of divinity was contingent upon patience and acceptance.

“I don't know what I'm doing here or if you can help me, but...”

The words faded away, disappearing like the wisps of smoke that danced above the wax candles.

“You would like a reading.” Dante extended his bare hand, palm side exposed, his own map of identity displayed in patterned lines and whirling prints. Would his invitation be accepted?

The stranger stared at Dante’s palm with eyes widened and the slightest crease in an otherwise smooth brow. Dante had anticipated this hesitation, and yet if he could connect, hand in hand, skin to skin, his ability to discover truth and foretell the future would become more reliable. How disappointing the courage needed to join their fingers wasn’t present. After another breath, Dante withdrew his hand. “To the cards, then.”

He picked up his deck of tarot cards and waited for some acknowledgement to proceed, which came in an almost imperceptible nod. He sensed nervousness, uncertainty, and the subtle presence of unfulfilled longing in that hesitation.

“I cannot solve your problems.” He stated, his voice matter-of-fact. “Nor can I tell you what course of action to take.” He always began with a clarification of the information that would be shared. Most people weren’t familiar with tarot card reading, palmistry, or other divination arts. “It is my hope you’ll leave with clarity concerning the reason that prompted you to visit me.”

“And you will predict my future?”

“No.” Dante replied succinctly. “The future is fluid. No one can foretell what will happen with any amount of surety. You have the ability to change your mind, cause events to happen, or prevent them, which would thereby shift the result. But the cards will offer possible outcomes. They will identify influences and that information is helpful.”

“I understand.”

Dante shuffled the deck and placed it at the center of the table. He drew the top three cards and arranged them in a horizontal line. “We will begin with The Three Fates. These cards represent your past, present, and future.”

“Go ahead.” The words were little more than a whisper.

A sense of foreboding crowded in among the other emotions in the room, and as Dante reached toward the first card, he wondered what this late-night visitor feared so fervently that not even an exhale escaped.

“The Magician.” The first card lay revealed, the ink drawing clearly exposed in the flickering candlelight. “The Magician is a symbol of resourcefulness and determination. It represents willpower and endurance. This card suggests you’ve met the difficult challenges of your past with unfaltering strength.”

“It hasn’t been easy.” A soft huff chased these words.

“This card also represents disparate, intangible feelings, and unsettled issues.” Dante explained. “Since it offers a glimpse into the past, it reminds that no satisfaction can be found if disharmony is left unresolved.”

“It’s impossible to change the past.” The customer’s words had a bitter edge.

“That is true, but only a fool would ignore its lessons.” Dante replied. “Shall I proceed?”

Again, there was the slightest nod.

He turned the second card with a precise flick of his fingers. The picture showed a black-and-white drawing of the full moon with a field of stars behind it. A fanciful border of swirling leaves and gusty wind created a frame along the card’s edges.

“That’s quite beautiful.”

“And yet dangerous.” Dante said evenly. “The Moon represents the subconscious and an individual’s shadow side. It can signify something you’ve hidden or a concealed truth you’ve kept from yourself and others. It suggests betrayal and the existence of a veil of deception.”

Several beats of silence followed and Dante waited. He noticed the nervous tap of a boot heel beneath the table. Then unexpectedly, the stranger stood.

“I’ve changed my mind.” A coin-filled purse dropped down atop the last card keeping its face hidden. “I have to go.”

“Are you certain you wouldn’t like me to continue? The last card depicts your future fate, and it will offer you valuable insight.”

“No, I’ve heard enough. Thank you for your time.”

“I can read your palm or brew tea and consult the leaves.” But Dante’s words went unheard as the tent flap fell back into place. Left alone inside the tent, he drew a deep breath and revealed the final card. The Hanged Man stared back at him.

“It is better you didn’t stay.” Dante said to no one. “Soon something will turn your world upside down. I hope you are prepared.”

THE STARS HAVE ALIGNED IN
YOUR FAVOR.

“A ha!” Graham Milford entered his father’s study, a laugh chasing his exuberant exclamation. “I knew you’d be in here stargazing and otherwise avoiding the gathering in the ballroom.”

“Are you suggesting I’m that predictable?” Evelyn Osbourne didn’t turn from the window. She’d expected Graham to find her sooner, not later.

“It’s more that I know you implicitly, dear cousin,” Graham replied, as he strode farther into the room.

“Or so you believe.”

“Dare you think differently? By personality, you are my twin,” he said with confidence. “However, that’s not why I was certain you’d be in here.”

“I suppose it’s that we grew up in each other’s pocket, thicker than thieves, and thereby became incredibly like-minded, so you’re here, like me, seeking an escape.” Still facing the window, Evelyn smiled, idly wondering if from where Graham stood, he could see her reflection in the glass. “Nevertheless, that isn’t to say you know everything about me. Our youth is long past.”

“Birdie,” he objected, using the nickname he’d given her during their shared childhood, a remembrance of when they’d spent summer days running about the countryside chasing butterflies, the breeze in her hair, a song on her lips. “You make twenty-seven years sound like a death sentence, one foot

in the grave and all that.” He dropped onto the overstuffed sofa beside the hearth.

“That’s not true. Proof that your suggestion is absurd exists only a few rooms down the hall, where at the ripe age of thirty-four, your brother is bravely embracing a new beginning among a roomful of convivial guests.” She turned and offered him a smirk of satisfaction.

“But *you’re* not enjoying the party. You disappeared as soon as the first toast was completed.”

“You know I can’t abide romantic foolishness.” She sighed, quick to amend her comment for fear it had sounded insulting. “In spite of that, I *am* pleased for your brother and wish him the very best in his marriage.”

She gestured in the air, her fingers fluttering in a circular motion, assured Graham would understand everything she hadn’t said, because in truth, her bond with her cousin was the closest thing she had to a sibling and best friend. She treasured their banter and inane conversations, their loyal and steadfast companionship through a history of assorted situations, both joyful and unfortunate.

The mood in the room shifted, and when she met Graham’s eyes, she knew he was going to say something more serious.

“You shouldn’t allow your father’s philandering to ruin your perception of personal relationships.”

“That’s easier said than done.” She huffed dismissively. “Your parents have been happily wed for decades, and you’re surrounded by family members who’ve maintained respectful, loving marriages. By contrast, my only relative, my father, broke his vows repeatedly and deceived my mother up until her death. He actually visited one of his mistresses the same afternoon as my mother’s funeral. I doubt he sought spiritual consolation.”

“I’m sure that couldn’t have been easy,” Graham agreed with candor.

She had no doubt Graham was knowledgeable of his uncle’s disgraceful behavior and the painful humiliation it

caused her. Months before, Graham was the person who'd told her how a gentleman's indiscretion was referred to as an *Osbourne* in a running joke at the club. He protected her that way, preparing her for the newest gossip in hopes of sparing her further embarrassment.

"Forgive me if my enthusiasm for devoted affection seems deficient," she said blithely, "but you weren't forced to silently tolerate the backward glances and poorly concealed whispers year after year."

"No." His empathy was sincere. "Considering all that, I'm amazed you're salvaged any sense of romance."

"I'm not sure I have, and that's rather sad, isn't it?"

"Good thing I'm always poised to provide an amusing distraction."

She settled next to him on the sofa and bumped her shoulder into his in a familiar gesture that expressed understanding and affection. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'll never have to find out," he replied automatically.

They sat in silence, the distant strains of orchestra music and lively, conversational reverie pleasant to hear in the background.

"Although," she began after a time, "it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black for you to question my disinterest in romantic entanglements."

"Entanglements," Graham repeated, drawing out the syllables with mischief in his tone. "An interesting word choice. One that conjures images of arms and legs and silken bedsheets."

"You're hopeless."

"Maybe," he conceded. "Probably."

The unspoken truth in her cousin's offhanded comment cut too close to the bone. She wouldn't object to being loved by a handsome beau. When she allowed herself to consider it, she knew she'd welcome the adoring attention of a suitor, but the

necessary process to advance to that point made her feel queasy.

Panicked.

Hopeless in a different manner altogether.

Because what honorable gentleman from a respected heritage would ever seek a familial connection with her father? The overflow stained one's character by association.

To spare herself from the inevitable pain over the years, she'd built strong walls around her heart. *Impenetrable walls*. Only a fool would put all that hard work to waste, and Evelyn was anything but a fool.

"We can be alone together," Graham teased, unaware of her inner turmoil.

"That's hypocritical for you to suggest," she replied quickly. "With or without me, you're never alone."

"What does that mean?"

"Only that you've kept your special someone a secret, and I'd very much like to meet Avery and get to know her, but you refuse to allow it."

Evelyn didn't mention how much it hurt that Graham excluded her from such a significant part of his life. She believed they told each other everything, whether important or frivolous. From an early age, their unadulterated honesty and shared trust was so much a part of their friendship, she wouldn't dare conceal relevant ideas or difficult decisions. To that end, Graham didn't ordinarily behave in a secretive manner, but when it came to matters of the heart, he kept his affairs completely private.

Regardless of this choice, Evelyn was there to help him through the emotional distress when one of his relationships ended. Although she felt like an afterthought, available to pick up the pieces of his broken heart, but not enjoy the happier moments beforehand. It was one of the few riddles that existed between them and another reason she avoided love at all costs. Romance often ended in heartache.

“It’s better that way,” Graham mused. “That I don’t involve you in my fickle affairs.”

“Better for you,” she replied, “but not me. How will I ever be able to torture you with embarrassing stories from the past if you don’t allow me to spend time with Avery?”

When Graham didn’t reply she changed the subject, unwilling to press when he clearly didn’t want to discuss it. “Do you ever wish you could be someone else?”

“At least once a day,” he replied, his smile sliding back into place.

“No, I’m serious,” she said, even though her own smile escaped.

“Is that what you were doing over there near the windows? Making wishes?”

“No, not exactly.” She shook her head, the sway of her long dark ringlets echoing the gesture. “I was searching for Cassiopeia. I thought it fitting for this evening, given Cassiopeia and her king are the only husband and wife couple depicted in the night sky. If I located the constellation, I intended to make a wish for your brother’s future happiness, but then you interrupted me.”

“Poor timing on my part.”

“Poor timing, yet no harm was done. Without your father’s telescope there was little chance I’d locate the correct stars,” she admitted, enjoying their lighthearted banter more than their earlier conversation. “If the skies are clear tomorrow evening, perhaps I’ll return and shut myself up in Uncle’s conservatory for a few hours.”

“Graham? Evelyn?” Her cousin Kate entered, striding purposefully toward where they relaxed on the sofa, an expression of dubious relief etched across her face. “I should have known if I found one of you, I’d find the other.”

“Am I in trouble? Or are you simply in a state because you’re missing me, dear sister?” Graham asked.

“Neither.” A wide grin bloomed across Kate’s face. “I wished to speak to Evelyn, but in case you both need a reminder, tonight’s party is being held in the ballroom.”

“That’s why we’re in here,” Graham murmured.

“I hope you haven’t spent too long looking for me,” Evelyn said.

“You’re a right troublemaker, Evelyn. Everyone knows that,” Graham added.

She swatted his shoulder in response to the remark. Graham was the daredevil, rabblrouser, and jester of the family, always at the ready to stir up chaos with his antics. How like him to mislabel her as an instigator. With that, she stood up, smoothed her gown, and readied herself to return to the party.

“An acquaintance of the groom-to-be has asked for an introduction,” Kate explained.

“He wants to meet me?”

“Interesting.” Graham stood and tugged at his waistcoat in an effort to straighten his attire.

“He heard you sing at church during mass three weeks ago when the banns were announced for Thomas’ wedding, and he’s here this evening for the engagement celebration.”

“And he remembered my singing?” Evelyn couldn’t keep the bewilderment from her voice. She’d only sung one hymn at the request of her aunt and uncle.

“Oh yes.” Kate nodded. “He inquired whether you’d be here as soon as he arrived.”

“The plot thickens,” Graham quipped; his thick brows arched high. “Although I’m not surprised someone was taken by your lovely singing, Evelyn. You have the voice of an angel and the face of a goddess. Now, who is this mystery man?”

“I don’t know very much,” Kate answered. “His name is Mr. Barrett, and he and his wife met Thomas through a mutual friend at the theater. Perhaps they run in the same set.”

“So, he isn’t a bachelor?” Graham asked, sounding deflated.

“Stop that.” Evelyn glared at him and then reclaiming her smile, shifted her attention to Kate. “Lead the way. I’d very much like to meet Mr. Barrett if he’s gone through the trouble of seeking me out.”

Evelyn followed Kate, hoping Graham’s teasing was at an end for the evening. As they entered the ballroom, it appeared at least the toasts and poetic tributes had finished. The orchestra played a lively tune, while pockets of guests drank champagne and leaned close to be heard over the music. Evelyn kept a watchful eye for her father, wanting to avoid him if possible. Luckily, he was nowhere to be seen.

Having delivered Evelyn and Graham to the Barretts, Kate stepped away and vanished into the crowd before Evelyn could thank her. The elegant couple appeared rather innocuous and was composed of a tall, trim man with a bright-eyed woman at his elbow.

Introductions were made swiftly, and curious to the reason Mr. Barrett wished to speak to her, Evelyn inquired immediately, “It was mentioned that you’ve asked about my singing. Is that correct?”

She sincerely hoped Mr. Barrett didn’t request she perform at his upcoming family function or dinner party. While she was aware she possessed some talent and had trained for several years with various vocal instructors, singing was something that brought her personal joy. She had no desire to stand before an audience, subject to speculation, a vulnerable target at center stage.

Mr. Barrett cleared his throat. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Lady Osbourne. Once I listened to you sing at the mass for your cousin, I knew I needed to speak to you.”

Evelyn waited, unsure what Mr. Barrett implied.

“If you’re not aware,” he continued, “I’m the owner of Vauxhall Gardens, the entertainment property on the south

bank of the Thames. Currently, I'm reorganizing the attractions."

"Wasn't there a horrible fire there recently?" Graham asked.

"Yes, and thankfully no one perished, but it was a devastating loss all the same," Mrs. Barrett chimed in. "My parents owned the property then, but they've since retired. My husband is the proprietor now."

"The resulting damage left by the fire has instigated a grand restoration of the grounds, and after weeks of tireless planning and hard work, everything is in place for future success." Mr. Barrett explained.

"That's wonderful," Evelyn replied, still unsure of the man's intentions.

"Well, almost everything," Mrs. Barrett amended with a slight smile.

"Originally, I had hired the acclaimed Italian opera singer Signora Modalla for a premiere engagement, but the commitment did not come to fruition. A month ago, she eloped with her piano player, and the two haven't been seen since."

Graham laughed, disguising his chuckle as a cough as soon as he realized the Barretts found no humor in the situation.

"And what does all of this have to do with me?" Evelyn asked, a sense of trepidation creeping up her throat.

"Once I heard you sing, I realized I'd experienced no loss by the Signora's absence. Your voice moved me to tears. Every note stirred a new emotion. Visitors will flock to Vauxhall for such a memorable experience," Mr. Barrett replied passionately.

Evelyn shook her head to discourage the suggestion. "I'm so sorry, but I don't perform. Not on a stage, at least."

"We can have any type of platform built for you," Mrs. Barrett added quickly.

“I don’t sing in public. Not really.” Evelyn tried to correct the misconception.

“We’re sorry to hear that.” Mr. Barrett frowned. “We thought with certainty you were a professional singer.”

A breath of relief swept through Evelyn at hearing Mr. Barrett’s remarks, hoping the matter would now be put to rest.

“Are you classically trained?” Mrs. Barrett asked next.

“I’ve had a few lessons through my—”

“Evelyn has studied with the finest voice tutors in England,” Graham boasted. “She even sang for King George.”

Mrs. Barrett gasped. “An honor like that would look wonderful on an advertisement.”

“I was ten years old, Graham,” Evelyn gritted out through clenched teeth. “And part of England’s Royal Children’s Choir.”

“Seems like only yesterday,” Graham commented beside her.

“Of course, with such a gift, your hesitant consideration is understandable,” Mr. Barrett said, a bright twinkle alive in his eyes. “You’d be compensated generously and able to dictate how many shows per evening you’d like to perform. We’re just happy to have you grace our stage.”

“I would think only two shows a week,” Graham interjected. “The best way to keep people coming back to Vauxhall is to have them hungry for a performance. You need to create demand. If visitors miss the show, they’ll want to return, and if they hear Evelyn sing, they’ll still want to return. It’s a winning proposition for everyone.”

“Wait. What?” Evelyn spun to face Graham with her eyes flared wide.

“It’s a sensible suggestion.” He held up both palms as if innocent of any wrongdoing.

Drawing a deep breath, Evelyn returned her attention to the Barrett’s. “I’m sorry, but I think we have a

misunderstanding. In fact, I *know* we do,” she explained as a spiral of ill-ease weaved through her ribs.

“Allow me a moment.” Graham clasped Evelyn’s arm and tugged her aside.

Wriggling in an attempt to free herself, she nearly collided with a footman who moved by with a tray of champagne. She made a grab for a glass and missed. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Won’t it be fun?” Graham asked, wagging his brows. “I can be your helper, reassuring and supporting you, but kept in the background. Something like a manager.”

“I’m not going to hie off to Vauxhall and sing on stage. The last thing I want is to draw attention to myself. Think of the gossip it would stir up.”

“Think of the experience,” Graham countered, more gravity in his voice now. “I have a good feeling about this.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“But you will,” he insisted.

“I doubt it.” She wrapped her arm around her middle and drew a deep breath.

“Consider all the new people you’ll meet.”

“I have plenty of friends. Besides, how would I meet new people if I’m on a stage by myself?” She narrowed her eyes at him to emphasize her point.

“Details.” He waved his hand. “These are just minor details.”

“For years I’ve avoided calling attention to myself because the name Osbourne automatically conjures my father’s sullied reputation and his blatant disregard for etiquette and decorum,” she shook her head, looking back over her shoulder to where the Barretts waited patiently. “I’m trying desperately to keep my reputation intact. Why would I ever give the tongue-wags something scandalous to talk about?”

“Because instead of associating the name Osbourne with clandestine indiscretions, bawdy ladybirds, and drunken foolishness, you’ll be able to show the world you’re more than your father’s daughter. That you’re a unique person, talented and beautiful, someone beyond reproach. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?”

“Yes.” She exhaled slowly, struggling with the mix of emotions whirling inside her. “But, Graham...”

“This is your chance to prove everyone wrong,” he persisted; his words resolute. “All you need do is trust yourself.”

FATE IS OFTEN DECIDED BY CIRCUMSTANCE.

Malcolm Walker tied off his boat and secured the rope before he checked to see if any of the other watermen needed a hand. The Thames was choppy this morning and rowing practice hadn't gone well. If he wasn't such a seasoned oarsman, he might have fallen overboard, just like Kincaid, who was currently wringing out his soggy shirt amid jeers from the ten men standing on the riverbank.

As a group of twelve, Malcolm and the other rowers practiced nearly every morning before they continued on with their individual pursuits. One of the new attractions at Vauxhall Gardens included an exhibition of boat races, with a rowing competition for watermen and sailing match for more dignified gentlemen. Malcom knew to which group he belonged, and between the prize money and the wagering promised to take place, he intended to put his brawn to good use and walk away with a pocketful of winnings each week. If he saved most of the money, it would be enough for him to move on to his next destination, wherever that might be.

“Mac.”

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw his friend Cosmo, and signaled with a slight cant of the chin. Cosmo was only a year younger, and together they'd formed a solid bond, sharing the lead position as the two fastest rowers. Cosmo proved himself to be a strong athlete and likable fellow, sensible and yet good-humored. He was a family man with five children and another babe on the way, always looking for additional ways to earn money to support his large brood.

Having lived all over the Continent in myriad circumstances, Malcolm considered himself a reliable judge of character and Cosmo to be a loyal comrade.

“Do you have time to walk with me?” Cosmo asked, his voice only loud enough to be heard within their conversation.

Malcolm nodded and fell in step beside his friend as they moved along the winding dirt path that aligned with the river. The other rowers were already rushing off, climbing the flight of stairs toward the entertainment grounds above them. Cosmo waited until they’d progressed out of hearing range before he spoke again.

“I have an opportunity for us.”

“For you and me?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes, for us,” Cosmo repeated. “A chance to make a lot of money in a short amount of time.”

This caught Malcolm’s interest. When you called no particular city your home, kept no permanent dwelling, and moved from place to place with a sense of temporary idleness, any opportunity to pad your pocket was worth careful consideration. “What do we need to do?”

“Make a few deliveries.”

Cosmo’s answer was too simplistic. Malcolm had learned the hard way not to act without caution. “Why would someone pay extra to have us deliver packages when any messenger can do the same for less?”

“I haven’t the foggiest. I didn’t think to ask,” Cosmo said, his expression amused.

“How did you come by this opportunity?” Malcolm stopped walking. It seemed unlike his friend to consider an endeavor without knowing all that was involved.

“I met a man near the docks. I’d gone down to Black Friars to see if I could pick up extra work offloading crates and he was there. Maybe he was waiting for a ship. I don’t know. We struck up a conversation and when he learned I needed work, he offered me the job.”

“What was his name?”

“Blast, Mac, you have so many questions,” Cosmo complained. “He said it was a two-man job and I thought of you straightaway because we work well together and we’re fast.”

“And all we need to do is deliver something?”

“That’s right, although the exchange must take place at night.”

Malcolm scowled, dissatisfied with Cosmo’s answer.

“And we’ll have to use the boat.”

“The boat?” Malcolm’s frown deepened. “Why?”

“Because the package needs be taken off shore to another vessel waiting for the delivery.”

“This whole thing sounds suspicious.” Malcolm didn’t want trouble with the night watch or worse, a Bow Street Runner, having had his share of that in the past. He’d started fresh, reinventing his life whenever he traveled to a new location, and wanted nothing to do with illegal activities.

“Why would you think that?” Cosmo asked, his face screwed into a grimace. “It sounds easy to me and it’s no farther out than our rowing practice. All we do is deliver the package and share the payment. A hundred pounds for each of us for only one night’s work.”

“I’m not interested.” Malcolm turned, at the ready to walk away.

“Wait.” Cosmo grabbed Malcolm’s shoulder. “We could do it once. Then if we don’t like it, we can stop. I need the money, more than I care to talk about, and I know you do as well. The river at night can be tricky, but the two of us together are a right match for it.”

“It’s not the bloody river or the boat,” Malcolm said, his patience wearing thin. “It’s the smuggling involved.”

“Smuggling?” Cosmo barked a laugh, although it faded away just as quickly. “I don’t think this job involves

smuggling.”

“It sounds like whoever needs this package, doesn’t want to be seen, and whoever is sending the package can’t deliver it himself because he doesn’t want to be caught with the contents,” Malcolm explained simplistically. “That’s basically the definition of smuggling.”

“But we don’t know for sure. It could be a lot of things,” Cosmo persisted. “And none of it would have anything to do with us. We’re just dropping off a package and leaving right after. Then we get paid. And like I mentioned, I really need the money. This opportunity came along at the right time.”

“What’s in the package we need to deliver?” Malcolm asked, understanding Cosmo’s persistence and trying to see reason.

“I didn’t ask.” Cosmo shrugged, unbothered by the murky details.

Was his friend too blinded by the promise of the payment to see things logically, or did he truly not realize how questionable the proposition sounded? Either way, it didn’t matter. Malcolm had no intention of getting involved in theft or contraband. Need or greed drove men to steal, and involvement often invited danger. Neither condition was desirable. Malcolm strove to live an uncomplicated life now.

“I have an idea,” Cosmo continued, an easy smile lighting his face. “We can open the package and see what we’re expected to deliver. Would that make you feel better?”

“I suppose it would depend on what we found inside,” Malcom answered, shaking his head, knowing nothing good could come of the situation. And yet the temptation of making such a large sum of money so easily forced him to pause and consider it. If he only made one delivery, what was the likelihood a problem would develop? When it came to smuggling, it was ongoing activity over an extended period of time that caught the attention of the law.

“There’s a chance whatever is in the package is nothing to worry over and we’ll be that much richer for only a few hours

work. Think about it, Mac. Two hundred pounds. More than our wages for the entire month. If you agree, we'll do it just this one time. But I need your help. I can't ask anyone else on the team because I don't trust them to keep quiet. If you're unwilling, then I lose out."

"I still don't like the sound of it."

"We have everything to gain," Cosmo went on unbothered.

"Only if we find out what we're delivering beforehand," Malcolm agreed reluctantly, unsure if he'd made the right decision. "And only tomorrow. I have better things to do with my time than row a boat across the Thames in the middle of the night."

"I knew you'd come around. Thank you. We're set then for tomorrow," Cosmo said. "You won't be sorry."

"I already am," Malcolm said, torn between helping his friend and avoiding the potential of unforeseen trouble. "And remember, it's just this once."

Malcolm left Cosmo near the river and backtracked to the stone stairs that led up to Vauxhall Gardens, climbing them with vigor while his mind worked through his conversation. Agreeing to make the delivery was probably unwise. He wanted to help his friend and would welcome the payment, but every aspect of Cosmo's description, from the stranger at the docks to the unlikely circumstances of the delivery, indicated an undercurrent of illegal activity.

Perhaps it wouldn't work out once they opened the package. If it contained anything even remotely suspect, he had no intention of following through. He'd hate to let Cosmo down, because he knew his friend needed the money, but Malcolm couldn't risk drawing notice from the law. This had to be an anomaly.

"Malcolm, may I have a word?"

Forced from his thoughts, Malcolm looked up to see Mr. Barrett, the owner and manager of Vauxhall Gardens, advancing gingerly across the walkway. Unlike other fairgrounds and carnivals where Malcolm had worked as a

carpenter, building stages and constructing show platforms, Mr. Barrett was directly involved in the daily goings-on. It could be a result of Barrett having taken over the entertainment site only recently, or it could be another reason. Malcolm didn't know. His interaction with the man since being hired a few months prior was limited. All the information he'd gleaned came from the other workers' casual comments during chance conversations. He knew the performers were a tightknit group and would likely welcome him without hesitation as they seemingly did with all newcomers, but Malcolm didn't have plans to stay at Vauxhall for very long. He kept to himself and that suited him fine.

"Yes, Mr. Barrett." Malcolm pushed his hands into his pockets. "Rowing practice just finished. Were you looking for me?"

"I was, actually." Barrett flashed a confident grin. "I'm going to need a new performance stage, something unique and special, unlike anything you've already have built. Knowing your skill with woodwork, I'd like you to start construction immediately. Any current tasks occupying your time can be finished by other builders. It's imperative that the stage be completed as quickly as possible."

"That's a contradiction, sir." Malcolm *was* talented when it came to construction and design, but to complete something as special as Mr. Barrett desired would take significant time.

Because it wasn't only the idea that demanded careful consideration. The specific type of wood and embellishments to trim the new stage would have to be ordered. He'd need a crew of reliable workers to follow his orders and complete the basic construction. Then the painting and decorative detail work would take place. It was definitely more complicated than Barrett made it sound, as if wishing for it to materialize in a few days could make it so.

"In what way?" Mr. Barrett asked, unaware of Malcolm's mental checklist.

"Even if I do as you say and work on this without delay, once I have the design, the project will take considerable time.

I'll need to order all the necessary supplies and assemble a crew.”

“I understand.” Mr. Barrett’s mouth twitched as if he considered his words carefully. “You should assign all the men you need to this project. Hire more if necessary. Order all the supplies and pay extra to have everything delivered in a rush.”

Malcolm hesitated. “If I do as you’re suggesting, construction will become very expensive.”

“I’m aware, but I’m prepared. The stage needs to impress at first sight.”

“Where would you like the stage built and what will it be used for?” Malcolm couldn’t fathom what all the fuss was about. Most of the attractions were spread out on the grounds, locations for everything from gymnasts and tightrope walkers, jugglers and musicians. There were even dancing water fountains and private grottoes. He couldn’t imagine what had Barrett in such a fluster.

“It will be situated along the east side of the supper boxes, in the clearing across from the orchestra.” Barrett’s eyes lit with excitement. “That way as people dine, they will be able to listen to the voice of an angel.”

Malcolm didn’t expect Barrett’s answer to be something as simplistic as a singer. There were all kinds of vocalists who wandered about the grounds and performed. Apparently, this singer was someone special. He’d heard about the opera prima donna who’d run off and left Barrett in the lurch.

“How long do you think it will take to complete the project?” Barrett asked.

“You said I can hire as many men as I need?”

“Absolutely.”

“Three weeks,” Malcolm said confidently. “We already have the lumber and supplies necessary for the basic structure and I’ll order whatever’s needed as soon as I design the façade.”

Barrett nodded, assumingly pleased. “Practices can be held in the Umbrella Room until the new stage is finished. I’ll need to consult the seamstresses about draperies. Once I know the song selections, scenery and props will have to be created...”

Barrett walked away, talking to himself and apparently finished with their conversation.

Malcolm set off for the main pavilion. It was still early and he’d worked up an appetite during practice. When he’d awakened this morning, it seemed like an ordinary day, and yet it wasn’t even ten o’clock and he’d already agreed to a dubious excursion for tomorrow evening and a challenging new project that would likely consume most all of his free time. Not that the extra wages wouldn’t be appreciated.

This early in the day the pavilion was still quiet, and he settled at a table in the corner with an apple, content to relax for a few minutes. His best ideas came to him when he wasn’t trying hard to think about them. Like when he was out on the water, doing nothing more than watching the clouds move, or when he borrowed a friend’s horse and went for a long ride. He often found inspiration being outdoors, working with his hands, and exerting himself. And while London was filled to overflowing with dandies in fancy clothes, he never had a yearning to mimic the lifestyle of a man of leisure, full knowing his muscles demanded exercise, his body strong and finely tuned.

A trio of young ladies entered the pavilion, all three casting a glance in his direction. He recognized them immediately although he only knew them in passing. Tessa was the tallest, and presented a marionette show near the arcade. She and her brother had worked here at Vauxhall before the fire closed the grounds for renovation. Daisy and Poppy were sisters who both entertained while costumed as sea nymphs near Neptune’s Fountain. He assumed their actual purpose was to look pretty and attract attention, but perhaps the sisters truly enjoyed the water because Malcolm had noticed how they often lingered near the shoreline where the rowing team congregated. He suspected either sister or both had a tender spot for Cosmo. He’d seen them with stars in

their eyes, admiring the boat Cosmo and he shared, pleased they hadn't settled their attention on him.

Malcolm preferred pleasure without commitment. Romantic relationships were complicated, and since he rarely stayed in one place for very long, it didn't make sense for him to start something he'd never be able to finish. Whenever loneliness crept in, it was easier to find willing company, and leave it at that. And if his loneliness wasn't completely resolved after a convenient tumble, he went for a long ride or chopped wood for an hour. Physical exertion worked wonders for diminishing unfulfilled longing. As an added benefit, he often landed upon one of his better ideas in the process.

With his thinking having come full circle, he stood, tossed the apple core into the trash bin, and strode past the ladies on his way out of the pavilion, oblivious to the breathy sighs he left behind.

3

YOUR HEART IS FULL OF WONDER AND YOUR SOUL IS FULL OF DREAMS.

“I can’t believe I’ve allowed you to talk me into this.” Evelyn muttered, as she settled on the bench of the coach. “I must be mad.”

“Something grand is going to come from this opportunity. I think it’s what you wanted. You just weren’t brave enough to make the leap,” Graham said with a Cheshire grin.

“So, you happily supplied the shove?”

“*Shove* is such an aggressive word,” he replied, amusement in his voice. “I prefer *nudge*.”

“Nudge. Yes.” She eyed him pointedly. “That’s exactly the right word.”

“This experience will build confidence and affirm your dignity, because you can’t allow your father to take that from you,” Graham said with sincerity.

“As long as this endeavor is a good one,” she countered.

“It will be.”

“At least one of us is sure of the outcome,” she said, mostly to herself because in truth, doubt was a constant companion. With her father’s less than desirable behavior, she always wondered what people were saying when she turned away. Or whether or not her friendships were sincere. And more recently, if she’d ever meet someone who would see past the undesirable conditions that colored most opinions.

“Besides, look at all this.” Graham waved at the assortment of boxes piled high beside each of them. “A

singing engagement is the perfect excuse to spend the morning shopping for new gowns and fripperies.”

“I don’t need an excuse,” she said mulishly. For all her father’s faults, money was never a concern. But oh, how she wished instead of financial security, she had a parent who generously supplied affection and attention, someone who demanded respect in his presence.

“Of course you do. You rarely do anything for yourself.”

Evelyn looked out the window and allowed Graham’s comment to settle. She couldn’t argue because he’d spoken the truth. Somehow, she’d lost her way. Lost herself. It was her father’s fault. *And her own*. She wasn’t a victim, even if at times she let Graham console her. Unfortunately, she didn’t have time to consider it further—her cousin too vociferous to allow a moment of quiet contemplation.

“Mr. Barrett is building a stage for you. An entire venue. Specifically for *you*.” He spiraled his finger in the air between them before holding it steady to point in her direction. “That’s how impressed he was with your voice and how successful he believes your performances will be.”

“How would you know that?” She wondered about Graham’s mention of a new stage, but his latter comment was equally as deserving of her inquiry.

“It’s my responsibility to know these things. I’m your manager.”

“You’re my cousin.”

“Yes.” He grinned wider. “That too.”

“It all seems a bit overwhelming,” she confessed, stark honesty in her words. “I hope I’ve made a wise decision.”

“You have, but knowing you might feel unsure, I think it’s a brilliant idea that we’re visiting today. Vauxhall is closed. Only the workers and performers will be there. You’ll be able to familiarize yourself with the area before practice tomorrow.”

“And that’s another thing,” she said, picking up on his remarks. “Why are formal practice sessions necessary? I already know how to sing. Mr. Barrett and I only need to discuss song selection, but aside from that—”

“It’s a good thing I’m here as cousin *and* manager.” Graham sighed and shook his head in disapproval. “You’re not performing one song and walking off stage. You’ll be part of a production. An entire program with you as the leading lady. There will be an orchestra, scenery, and props. I have some very specific ideas for your costume.”

“Costume?”

“It should be elegant and otherworldly. As if the gown was sewn from stardust. That’s it!” He slapped his palm flat against his thigh. “I know exactly what to suggest to Barrett. If you’re going to share your angelic voice with the masses, it should appear as if you’re a twinkling star in the midnight sky. Sparkles in your hair, at your throat, on your wrists.” He threw his arms wide as if tossing confetti in the air. “The entire stage must be painted dark blue, where you’ll stand amid hundreds of flickering lanterns, basking in their soft glow. Your gown will be gauzy, silky, and flowing. Pale blue or silver. Perfection!” Again, with the leg slap. “Pale blue with shimmering silver threading so when the light catches—”

“Graham!” She had to stop him. “Please stop. You’re getting carried away and quite frankly, you’re making me regret I ever agreed to any of this in the first place.”

He schooled his features, all at once contrite. “Yes, of course. You’re right. I was definitely getting ahead of myself.”

The glint in his eyes told her he thought otherwise. She knew him far too well.

“Let’s go slowly, one step at a time,” she said into the continued quiet. “Today, we’ll visit the entertainment grounds and meet some of the people there.”

“I think you’ll like it more than you realize,” Graham said, taking up the change in subject. “It’s a wonderful place. Somewhere you can pretend to be anyone you wish, because

you don't have to be yourself at Vauxhall if you don't want to be."

"Well, that will certainly serve me well. My father has made it impossible to be happy as Evelyn Osbourne."

"Oh, don't say that, Birdie," Graham replied in a more serious tone. "You are lovely in every way. You shouldn't have to suffer for your father's lack of..." Graham faltered, as if searching for an appropriate description.

"Everything, Graham. His lack of everything."

"Oh, look," Graham said, waving away her words with his hand as if he held a magic wand. "There by the water. The rowers are out."

She aligned her face beside his as they peered out the carriage's square window. A few narrow skiffs were gliding across the water, slicing forward, two men at the oars in each.

"Vauxhall has a rowing and sailing expedition every Saturday," Graham explained. "Some of the men must be practicing."

"Have we almost reached the property?" She looked beyond the water to a stone staircase that led upward from the riverbank.

"We've only to go over the bridge there and then around to the front of the grounds," Graham explained. "There are a few different entrances, one by water and two by land, but we'll enter properly through the iron gates."

"Have you and Avery visited here together?" she asked, curious to how her cousin had become so knowledgeable about Vauxhall Gardens when he'd never mentioned it before.

"Yes," Graham answered, all at once surprisingly silent.

"Maybe you can escort her to my first show."

"That's an idea although..." He paused, and she knew he was already preparing a reason he wouldn't do it. "As your manager, I'm sure I'll be preoccupied backstage. That wouldn't be fair now, would it?"

She smirked, knowing his convenient answer was meant to further prohibit her from meeting Avery. That was telling. “Mr. Barrett seemed a nice sort.”

“Unfortunately, he’s married,” Graham said. “But once you’ve captured every Londoner’s heart with your singing, I have no doubt the Earl of This and Duke of That will be asking for your hand.”

“I hope not,” she said, a mixture of humor and panic in her tone. “And as I’ve already told you, you needn’t spend so much time thinking about romance on my behalf.”

When she met someone special and fell in love, she wanted it to occur naturally. Not as part of a grand scheme or pre-arranged responsibility.

“Yes, I do,” Graham said, before he went on to explain. “Interfering in your affairs keeps me from thinking about my own.”

“But you’re happy with Avery, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He paused, some unidentifiable emotion in his voice. “We’re both happy, but it’s complicated.”

She didn’t respond, allowing the subject to drop, and for the hundredth time wishing Graham would open up to her and share his feelings concerning Avery. Evelyn wanted to listen and offer advice when he needed it most. A female’s perspective could be exactly what would help the situation. Still, she’d never pry. So as he remained quiet, she tried to resurrect the light mood they’d shared previously.

“Please don’t tell me this entire endeavor has been motivated by matchmaking.” She watched her cousin’s expression carefully, their proximity making it difficult for him to hide the truth.

“No,” he said firmly, though a twitch of his mouth caused him to smile. “Not the *entire* endeavor.”

She didn’t have a chance to scold him as the coach rumbled over a wooden bridge, the carriage wheels against the slats so noisy it made conversation impossible and she was struck by an awareness that they were crossing a threshold, as

if the road itself shook a person into realizing things were about to change.

Her pulse sped up as they pulled to a stop, and in that fleeting moment, excitement winnowed through her. Perhaps Graham was correct in thinking the experience would do her good. She'd lived a quiet life, fuming over her father's misbehavior and avoiding the consequences for far too long. Singing on stage, expressing herself, and releasing pent-up tension suddenly sounded like the perfect solution to help expand her horizons.

If nothing else, it would serve as a much-needed distraction. And by chance, if it turned out to be a poor choice, she could always return to her unremarkable existence with the knowledge she'd given the opportunity her best effort.

“Once you pass through the gates, it's like entering another world. At least it will seem that way during operating hours.” Graham shared as they climbed out of the carriage and began to walk along the crushed oyster-shell path that led to the entrance.

As they moved inside, Graham stopped and pointed toward a squat brick building a distance from where they stood. “That's the business office. I've an appointment with Mr. Barrett to discuss ideas for your performance and sign the contract on your behalf. Why don't you take some time to walk around and explore? We can meet afterward.”

“That sounds reasonable, but how will you find me?”

“Good point.” He pulled his timepiece from the pocket of his waistcoat and glanced at the face. “Why don't we both return here in an hour. I'll share the details of my discussion with Mr. Barrett and you can tell me all the wonderful sights you've discovered. That way if you have questions, we can approach Mr. Barrett before we leave.”

“That's fine.” She nodded, slightly annoyed it was considered unseemly for her to sign her own contract. She supposed she was lucky to have Graham willing to speak to Mr. Barrett. She could never have approached her father with the idea.

“If you follow the path,” Graham indicated a wide walkway that led straight into the entertainment grounds, “you’ll come to the center thoroughfare where food and drink are served. From there you can decide where you’d like to explore. All you need do is pick a path. They all lead to someplace exceptional.”

They parted, advancing in opposite directions. As she wandered, her slipper heels sinking into the gravel along the path, she again wondered if she’d made the right decision by agreeing to perform on stage. She wasn’t one to seek attention, first as a shy, only child, and later out of social survival, not wanting to draw attention and have idle tongues discuss her father’s latest conquests.

Yet here at Vauxhall, it *was* another world from where she’d spent the morning shopping on Bond Street. All around her, people dressed differently, behaved differently, and despite all the disparities, seemed entirely more approachable. Everyone she passed offered an easy smile or gave a friendly nod. Surely they had no idea of her identity or how her father’s disregard for propriety had turned her into a pariah of sorts. That very idea was freeing, and she found herself smiling back whenever she caught someone’s eye.

Eventually she reached the clearing Graham had indicated. A large orchestra pit flanked one side of an open square, while several deep-set supper boxes created two adjacent barriers. The remaining space was dedicated to wooden stalls intended to sell various food stuffs and drinks. Workers bustled about behind the empty structures, stacking boxes and readying the supplies. No one paid her much attention, too busy with their daily tasks, and she relaxed by degree, the surrounding noise of the activity new and yet pleasantly familiar. The rattle of glass bottles amid convivial conversation, a sudden laugh, or a young dog’s bark all evoked a mood of carefree happiness. Even the air carried an appealing invitation. Her stomach growled in response to the enticing scent of fresh-baked bread.

Beyond the square, not far from the orchestra, she noticed the beginnings of a newly built structure and immediately recognized it as the platform of a stage. A pile of lumber sat

on the ground nearby, where sunlight glinted off a metal toolbox left in the grass. Was this the new performance site Mr. Barrett had told Graham about? A stage specifically for her use? Curiosity pulled her forward even though her stomach objected. She'd find a bite to eat after she investigated.

She didn't have to walk far, and as she neared the platform a sensation of imminent change swept through her. Anticipation, or something else important and yet unidentifiable, the name of which fluttered at the edges of her consciousness. Perhaps this moment marked a new beginning. Graham had described Vauxhall as being a place where she could become whomever she desired. It was possible the tingly jangle of nerves from her throat to the soles of her feet was caused by the unusual combination of excitement and trepidation, a signal of encouragement that she'd decided well, even if this new endeavor frightened her.

Caught up in this realization, she climbed the wooden steps, unbothered that the stage was little more than a partially constructed frame. How would it feel to stand before an audience as the pinnacle of attention? At church, she'd been closeted upstairs in a private alcove that overlooked the pews below. Here on this platform, there would be nowhere to hide.

"What do you think you're doing?" A male voice sliced through her capricious daydream. "Get off my stage."

Startled, Evelyn turned, caught unaware and at the same time unsettled by the deep resonance of the stranger's command. She'd been lost in her own whimsical reverie, but there was no reason for any person to behave brashly. She certainly wasn't accustomed to someone speaking so directly, and realized belatedly she'd brought her fingers to her throat, as if to somehow protect her voice. How ridiculous. She lowered her hand and took a clarifying breath before she replied. "I only wanted to see—"

"How quickly you would fall through the planks?" he interrupted, a sharp edge to his words.

She stood her ground, refusing to back down and confident she was in no real danger. Wanting to better understand the

situation before she answered, she matched eyes with the man. Unfortunately, that decision proved a mistake.

She wasn't prepared for her body's immediate reaction to his appearance; nevertheless she didn't look away. His eyes appeared silver in the sunlight, and quite lovely, outlined by long dark lashes. He was tall, with dark hair and strong, chiseled features. He wore no coat or waistcoat, only a white cotton shirt, that by the heat of the sun combined with his hard work had become damp, sculpting his physique in thin fabric that clung to his skin, outlining smooth muscles, the hills and valleys of his chest, broad shoulders, and a tapered waist. Dark brown breeches and boots completed his attire. Her pulse kicked up, causing her throat to tighten when she tried to swallow. All the while her brain made a conscious effort to stop her inventory of his physique. Regrettably, her eyes didn't listen.

She noticed he carried a hammer in one hand while the other held a box of nails. He'd called it *his stage*. Was he a performer? No. That couldn't be right. Entertainers didn't erect their own platform. He was the carpenter assigned to build the structure. That would explain all his lovely muscles. And considering the hard work involved, his arrogant objection at seeing someone walking across the boards.

A masculine throat clearing interrupted her swift conclusions, but it did little to calm her quickened pulse. Had the seamstress from this morning laced Evelyn's corset too tightly? It was difficult to take a deep breath all of a sudden and her clothes seemed irritatingly unnecessary. That stark realization held her motionless with unspoken awareness.

"Are you going to say something?" he asked. "Better yet, are you going to come down from the stage before you fall through it?"

That same deep timbre reached her ears and she realized she must appear an utter fool, a sharp reminder of the fear she secretly harbored for Opening Night. She pushed that thought aside and refocused.

His eyes were indeed uncommon and they held an intelligent glint as he assessed her. All the while, an unnerving feeling, like some kind of reckless charge or unharnessed energy danced between them, crackling and alive.

“I meant no harm,” she began, suddenly self-conscious, doing her best to both stand still and shake off the odd feeling of being uncomfortable in her clothes. “I noticed the new stage and thought I’d try it out. That’s all. I was curious. Hasn’t curiosity ever gotten the better of you?”

“I’m curious to why you haven’t come down yet.” He replied, a droll tone in his words, almost as if he was amused by his own comment.

What an incredibly insufferable man.

4

A HEART IS NOT THE ONLY THING THAT CAN BE BROKEN.

Malcolm would never have reacted so harshly if the woman on stage didn't look so damnably beautiful. Breathtaking, really. Standing there, glistening brightly like the source of all sunlight.

But no, that wasn't why his temper had flared, and certainly no excuse.

He'd reacted gruffly because his unkempt frustration had overflowed even though he'd carted lumber, stacked planks, and exerted himself all morning. He never should have allowed Cosmo to convince him to row out into the Thames this evening. It went against all better judgement and Malcolm was rarely wrong when he had a gut feeling. He regretted ever agreeing to the plan.

Having slept on the matter, he was certain no good could come of the delivery aside from the promised payment, and that was still debatable. Was the money worth the risk? Regardless of what Cosmo said, the entire endeavor sounded suspicious.

And that, right there, was the reason for his misplaced hostility.

He'd mentally kicked himself all morning, so when he'd come around to the front of the build and spotted a woman dangerously close to the edge of the stage — a stage that was only partially constructed and not sturdy enough to bear weight — all rational thinking had ceased. True, she appeared to weigh little more than a sack of feathers, but his misplaced

anger took the place of logic. Barrett would fire him on the spot if some fancy highborn lady got hurt here on the grounds. Vauxhall was just reopening after a devastating closure due to fire.

He attempted to reorder his thoughts and cool his temper. Why was she staring at him like that? Why didn't she say something? He must have startled her.

Her skin had gone pale and only now regained a bit of color, though the fetching rose blush he'd first noticed in her cheeks hadn't fully returned. She looked uncomfortable in the way she wiggled her shoulders and adjusted her arms. Was there a bee buzzing around that he couldn't see? He regretted his bad-tempered greeting, but the thought of apologizing didn't sit well either.

She *shouldn't* be up there. That was common sense.

"You need to come down so we can eliminate any threat to your safety," he said, in a forced yet kinder tone.

"Of course." She seemed to relax though she clearly didn't appreciate his suggestion.

Without hesitation, she turned and headed for the stairs, her long dark hair falling over her shoulders to catch the light, each curling ringlet glossed by a kiss of sunshine. He looked away, not wanting to notice.

"I meant no harm," she said by way of recompense once she stood in front of him.

"I shouldn't have reacted so harshly," he said begrudgingly. "It was a safety issue."

"Well then," she blinked several times. "I completely understand."

It was peculiar how in the length of an exhale, face-to-face within the vast acreage that composed Vauxhall Gardens, all extraneous noise, whether birdcall or loud conversation, fell silent. It was as though the universe insisted that he take notice of the moment. As if the exchange held some kind of undetectable significance.

The realization unnerved him. He usually wasn't so disheveled. One would think he'd never come face-to-face with a beautiful woman before. That was ridiculous, of course. Just because it had been some time...

But that didn't matter. He'd wait for her to break the silence and speak. This decision brought his gaze to her lips, pink and curved like Cupid's bow. Very pretty.

"I've held you too long," she said, seemingly anxious to extricate herself from the awkwardness that stretched between them.

Her choice of words gave him pause. *But I haven't held you yet.* An absurd voice inside him answered. That was not the correct reply.

"Very well," he said. His tone had roughened in objection to how his world had shifted and changed without his consent.

She moved past him then and he watched over his shoulder as she left, her trim figure growing smaller and smaller the farther she walked away, though the sway of her hips was no less entrancing.

"Mac." Snap, snap. "Mac!"

He jerked his head around, annoyed to find Cosmo standing in front of him with his fingers moving furiously in a bid for attention.

"What?" He would make good use of his annoyance now.

"About tonight."

"What about it?"

"I've learned the particulars," Cosmo said with a self-assured nod. "We're to row out to the north bank at midnight. Then we're to meet a fellow who'll give us the package."

"A package that we're going to open, correct?" It was the one stipulation Malcolm had put on the agreement and he wasn't about to let Cosmo ignore it.

"Sure, sure." Cosmo agreed without thought. "Makes no difference to me."

Malcolm was certain his friend spoke the truth and therein lay the problem.

“This is the one and only time,” Malcolm reminded him, taking a few nails from the box he held.

“If that’s how you feel,” Cosmo said with a slight shrug. “But you might change your mind once you see how easily we make the delivery and get paid.”

Malcolm reached deep for patience, wanting to get back to work on the stage. “I’ll meet you at midnight down by our boat. Don’t be late.”

He didn’t wait for a reply. As the lead rower, he had access to the boats and keys to all the locks. It wouldn’t take more than a few hours to complete the task and he’d return to the rooms he let near Walcot Square in Lambeth before daybreak, able to secure a few hours of sleep before practice began.

To solidify his plan, he brought the hammer down, driving a nail into the beam he worked to attach at the rear of the platform.

Before he was interrupted by the beguiling woman on stage.

Before he was distracted by Cosmo.

Admittedly, it wouldn’t be ideal to walk through the slums and murky wharf-side warehouses with a pocketful of cash during the wee hours, but years ago he’d learned how to use his fists to protect himself if a situation warranted action.

This defensive and unpleasant thought brought with it another, of his younger brother, and the price to be paid for poor choices. He pounded in the next three nails to extinguish that line of thinking. Remembrances like that were anchors he refused to drag into his future. It was easier to replace old memories with new experiences, a choice that motivated his desire to move from place to place frequently. If he settled down, stayed still, and planted roots, the past would catch up to him and he had no intention of allowing that to happen.

Not now.

Not ever.

Evelyn closed her eyes and allowed the delicate fragrance of fresh roses to fill her senses as she entered her private garden. The spacious area behind the east wing of the estate served as her sanctuary, the place she retreated when the world became unbearable or her father's chosen life overflowed and stained her own.

However, her garden wasn't just a place of refuge. It served as a haven for any significant event in her life. She found peace here among the flowers and took pride in her magnificent blooms. Roses of every color and species flourished in their carefully tended beds. Her flowers were attentive listeners whenever she needed to discuss her emotions, and cheerful companions when she anticipated an oncoming malaise.

Now, she stroked the velvety petals of a nearby Gallica bloom and wondered how she could feel so unmoored by the day's activities. Not the dress shopping. Nor Graham's non-stop retelling of all the plans he'd arranged with Mr. Barrett.

No, it was the few minutes she'd spent on stage and the stranger who'd called out to her that had her at sixes and sevens. The deep tenor of his voice somehow still resonated inside her.

Aware of the flower's fragility, she withdrew her fingers. Meeting someone new shouldn't be so befuddling. She wasn't a recluse. She moved in society, accepted invitations, and attended several outings each month. Granted, she was selective and often chose only the events where her extended family would be present.

Nevertheless, she had friendships and knew how to conduct herself when meeting a new acquaintance. How to politely make conversation and find commonalities. So why then, now, after one encounter with a surly, *albeit handsome* Vauxhall worker, did she feel uncomfortable in her own skin?

The answer to that question came too quickly. Had her mother not died when Evelyn was only ten years old, how would her life be different? Would she be more confident and self-assured? More open to new experiences in kind to Graham's adventurous spirit?

Sadly, Evelyn had passed through childhood like an orphan, subjected to an endless trail of inconsistent governesses, many of whom were hired for their appearance rather than qualifications, and then promptly fired when they rejected her father's untoward advances. Was it any wonder she didn't feel more prepared for social interactions?

And why, good heavens, was she questioning all of this now?

She suspected something had awoken inside her, become stirred up and agitated without a cause she could pinpoint. She hoped the feeling would fade away.

Giving her head a firm shake, she reached into the pocket of her apron and withdrew a pair of pruning shears and thick gloves. A fresh bouquet of Floribunda, in shades of pale lavender, vivid fuchsia, and creamy moonlight yellow, would brighten her bedchamber. The roses were large and fragrant and she found it impossible to remain contrary when such gorgeous examples of nature's gifts offered their beauty. Choosing a few select stems, she dedicated herself to the task.

"Excuse me, my lady. You have a caller."

Hearing one of the housemaids, Evelyn replaced her shears and turned toward the garden gate.

"Who is it, Dora?"

It wouldn't be Graham, they'd already spent the better part of the day together, and besides, he would make himself at home and stroll directly into the garden. No formal announcement was necessary.

"She didn't say, my lady. She claims it is a private matter."

The maid looked uncomfortable, and Evelyn gathered the flowers she'd already cut and moved toward the gate, similarly perplexed.

“Go ahead then.” She shooed Dora toward the estate. “Deposit the lady in the green sitting room and have a tea service brought in. I’ll need a little time to make myself presentable.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Dora scurried ahead, anxious to carry out the request, and Evelyn followed, questions buzzing around in her head like the bees she’d left behind in the garden. Once she’d changed into a fresh day gown, she hurried downstairs, curious but not overly concerned. A peek out the window upstairs had revealed little other than an unremarkable coach in the drive. Indeed, the visitor hadn’t used the word *urgent*.

She strode into the drawing room, confused further to see a familiar face. “Matilda?”

Lady Matilda Conover was a few years older than Evelyn, and while their social paths hadn’t crossed in some time, she considered Matilda a friendly acquaintance. Due to her gregarious nature, Matilda was a favorite guest at societal gatherings. With long dark hair, fair skin, and green eyes, her striking features caused her to be popular with the gentlemen as well. And, too, there was the matter of her ample bosom and narrow hips. Evelyn refused to glance down at her own body in comparison. Instead, she motioned to the pair of sofas that flanked the tea service on the rosewood table. “Please sit. Is something wrong?”

“I’m beside myself, actually.” Matilda dropped onto the cushions with such relief it was as though she’d suddenly lost the ability to stand. “I didn’t know what else to do? Whether or not I should come here?”

“What is it? You’re not unwell, I hope. Or your parents?” Evelyn read the distressed emotion on Matilda’s face and couldn’t fathom what caused it.

“They are fine, thank you. It’s my own situation that brings me here,” Matilda replied with a deep exhale. “I’ve come to ask about Lord Osbourne.”

“My father?” Evelyn reared back, the answer so unexpected.

“Have you seen him lately? Has he visited you here?”

“No, I haven’t shared his company in over a fortnight. Father prefers his Mayfair town house to the family estate, and we find the arrangement works in our favor. We see each other less and therefore argue less.”

Stating the terms of her poor relationship with her father should have caused a wave of regret and sadness, but Evelyn had conquered that flawed tendency years ago. She knew better than to pay attention to helpless emotions.

A beat of uncomfortable silence followed. Perhaps she’d spoken too candidly, but if Matilda was here asking odd questions, Evelyn suspected propriety had long left the day.

“I sent two messages to the town house, but they went unanswered,” Matilda said, her forehead wrinkled in obvious consternation. “The thing is,” she paused and let a long sigh hiss out. “He was supposed to visit me. We had planned it quite specifically. We have something important to discuss.”

“I’d rather not learn the details,” Evelyn said without hesitation, popping up to busy herself with the tea service. Why hadn’t she realized sooner? Matilda was her father’s type, young and vivacious, and far too trusting. “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help. My father’s private affairs are his alone. As a show of respect, I make it a practice not to become involved in his social business.”

That was an outright lie. The habit had little to do with consideration for her father. It was more a selfish act to preserve her own dignity and sanity.

Matilda remained silent and Evelyn replaced the teapot, her apprehension steeping in kind to the black pekoe in her cup.

“I suppose I should leave.” Matilda rose slowly. “But if you do see your father...” Her words trailed off as her narrow brows pinched together.

“I will tell him you were inquiring to his whereabouts,” Evelyn said, unsure what else she could offer.

“I would appreciate if you would do so.” Matilda said before she left in haste.

Evelyn picked up her tea and stared into the dark brew. “What is it now, Father? What trouble have you caused?”

5

REGRET IS A COFFIN THAT WON'T STAY BURIED.

Malcolm and Cosmo worked like shadows, a quiet fluidity to their movements. Malcolm slid the key from his pocket and opened the lock while Cosmo gathered the rope securing their boat and wound it into a tight coil. With a flow of automaticity, they stepped aboard the double scull, simultaneously picked up the oars, and paddled into the Thames. If it wasn't the middle of the night and Malcolm hadn't agreed to this foolish venture, their actions mimicked the precision of their daily rowing practice. When they were thirty feet from the shore, Malcolm broke the silence.

"Where are we going?" he asked, determined to complete the transaction quickly, for no other reason than to be free of the obligation.

"About a mile down river to the north bank. We're to meet near the culvert at the base of Regent's Bridge," Cosmo replied, with the ease of someone anticipating an enjoyable evening instead of a dubious, possibly dangerous, outing.

"And where are we to deliver this package?" Malcolm asked, when his friend wasn't more forthcoming.

"I reckon the men will tell us when we meet them," Cosmo said, unbothered by the vagueness of the details.

They rowed on, the water as dark and foreboding as the night sky blanketing the horizon. Only the occasional screech of a bat on the hunt dissected the quiet. Being out on the Thames in the middle of the night was something his past self

would have done. Not the present version he wore like a comfortable coat, for security and warmth.

More than once, Malcolm cursed under his breath, but it was too late for regret. At least the promised payment helped to assuage his doubts. The expected windfall guaranteed he'd have enough saved to move on to a new destination by winter, which in turn proved ideal. There wouldn't be any sailing competitions when the air became bitter and ice formed a layer over the water. Nor would any construction take place at Vauxhall. Unless another opportunity arose, something reliable and honest, he'd be unemployed in a few months.

Cosmo began to whistle a repetitive tune, and Malcolm decided to endure it rather than ask his friend to stop. He didn't want disharmony between them, no matter how miniscule, and just maybe Cosmo wasn't as relaxed in their situation as he wanted Malcolm to believe.

The flash of a lantern on the opposite shore guided them to their meeting place. He could see two shadowy figures standing beside a long wooden cart, the kind used for transporting lumber or boxed produce. Malcolm dropped anchor and stayed aboard the boat while Cosmo made the leap to dry land. Let him return with the package. The less Malcolm knew about these men, the better. Though he wasn't going anywhere until he looked inside the parcel. It was the one condition he'd placed on the arrangement and it was necessary for him to keep his conscience clear.

The scull was wide enough to carry crates of liquor, but he wasn't interested in the business of free-trade, imported whiskey, or other sought-after bottles of booze. There was easy money to be made in smuggling, but he hoped this evening wasn't centered around contraband, liquor or otherwise.

Waiting, he shifted his attention to the horizon. It was a rarity to see so many stars. The moonlight on the water created a shimmering path like a welcoming road forward. Its glittery sheen reminded him of the woman he'd startled on stage this morning. She looked just as beautiful, bright and full of

possibility, but his musings were cut short, the noise from the riverbank too disruptive to ignore.

He watched as the strangers spoke briefly to Cosmo and then folded back the canvas cover from the wagon. Malcolm had to squint, doubting his eyesight in the darkness when he saw what was revealed beneath.

Bloody hell.

A coffin lay amongst the blue-black shadows. Cosmo glanced back toward the boat, his expression equally curious as their eyes met, but then he turned away.

What the devil? There would be no looking inside the package now. However, Malcolm wasn't a fool. Any type of contraband could be hidden within the coffin. *Or* it could contain a body. Was that better or worse? He didn't know the story attached to this undertaking and didn't want to know. He endured a shiver of remembrance and ill ease as he watched each of the delivery men heft the coffin onto a shoulder and move toward the water.

Cosmo remained silent though his brows lingered near his hairline. Awkwardly and without discussion, the men struggled to settle the coffin across the narrow planks of the scull. Cosmo climbed aboard and together they worked to achieve an effective position to man the oars. Malcolm held his temper in check. It was his own fault he'd been pulled into this circumstance. Best he channeled his anger into powerful rowing.

"I didn't expect that," Cosmo said, after a few solemn minutes on the water.

Malcolm again checked his temper. "Where are we to go now? The sooner we're rid of this thing, the better."

The coffin was settled behind him with Cosmo at the opposite end of the scull. Malcolm purposely kept his eyes focused forward.

"We're to continue rowing north until we see two lanterns flash near the shore."

“Did they say anything else, Cosmo?” Malcolm struggled to keep a sharp tone from his voice.

“Just that once we deliver this, um, package, we’ll be paid by the men who receive it.”

Malcolm pulled harder on the oars. He wasn’t superstitious by nature, nor did he believe in ghosts, but a midnight jaunt on the water with a corpse was beyond anything he’d imagined when he’d first agreed to Cosmo’s proposition.

Shortly after taking the job at Vauxhall, Malcolm had met Dante, an illusionist and fortune teller, who worked in the picture house near the central arcade. Most all the performers claimed Dante possessed the ability to communicate with the dead. Malcolm wondered idly what the fortune teller would say about the circumstances this evening. Traveling with the dead might be beyond Dante’s scope of expertise, but Malcolm couldn’t be sure. Like the others, he believed Dante was truly gifted. Malcolm had proof from his own experience, though he’d never asked Dante to reach beyond the veil and speak to his lost loved ones. From their brief interactions, he’d gained the sense Dante could somehow perceive what others could not.

“We’ve been rowing for miles,” Malcolm muttered with a need to expend his frustration. “I don’t see a light along the shore.”

“Me neither,” Cosmo said, flatly. “It’s all dark and quiet.”

“Keep rowing. We don’t have any other choice.”

But thirty minutes later, the faraway outline of Westminster Bridge became visible. With that came the recognition they’d traveled much farther than intended.

“We need to turn around and paddle south,” Malcolm said, exhausted from the strenuous exertion of rowing with tensed muscles after a long day hauling lumber at Vauxhall. “I haven’t seen anything that resembled a signal, and we’ve gone on too long as it is.”

“I don’t understand,” Cosmo complained, his words carrying on air between them. “The delivery sounded so

simple.”

“Just keep your eyes on the riverbank so we can find the drop-off point and be rid of this coffin.”

For the next forty-five minutes, the only sounds to be heard were the scrape of the oars turning in the rowlocks, lapping slice of the tide, and mournful toll of wherry bells. When their effort brought them adjacent to the narrow dock at the foot of Vauxhall Gardens, Malcolm stopped rowing.

“Whoever was supposed to meet us hasn’t come.” He spoke the words aloud even though the fact was obvious. No one on either shore, north or south, had signaled to them in any capacity.

“What do we do now?” Cosmo asked, uncertainty heavy in his question.

Malcolm clenched his fists and opened them a few times, easing his muscles and at the same time quelling his desire to argue. He wasn’t surprised Cosmo looked to him to solve the problem, even though it was of his friend’s making.

“We have no choice but to return to Vauxhall and store the coffin. Until you hear from the man who hired us or you receive other information, there is little else to do. We can’t stay out here all night searching the shoreline. It’s clear that something went awry.”

Malcolm was tempted to heft the coffin overboard and be rid of the problem altogether, but his respect for the dead and his suspicion that Cosmo had gotten them involved in something complicated and potentially dangerous, made him reject the idea.

“Store the coffin?” Cosmo asked with subtle wonder. “Like take it home?”

Malcolm picked up the oars knowing Cosmo would do the same. “No. We can use the shed at the end of the dock. The coffin should fit in there, and I’m the only one with a key to the lock. It will be safe there for the time being.”

When Cosmo didn’t reply, Malcolm continued. “But you need to sort this out by tomorrow night so we can deliver it

and be done. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Cosmo said, his voice deflated. “Sorry about the trouble, Mac.”

Malcolm maneuvered the scull beside the dock and they set about securing the boat and removing the coffin. It was a two-man job because of the weight, but Malcolm had to force his mind elsewhere, detaching himself from the reality that he could be carrying a body, the scene powerful enough to exhume events from his past, images he'd prefer to keep buried.

Once they reached the shed, they placed the coffin on the ground and he unlocked the chain that kept the doors closed and boating equipment safe. After a few adjustments, he'd cleared enough space for them to slide the coffin inside. Then he locked the doors quickly, wanting to shut the entire evening away before any more memories leaked out.

“Tomorrow night we'll try again, but in the meantime, you need to return to Black Friar docks and look for the man who approached you the other day. This isn't a matter that can keep.”

Cosmo nodded, hesitating another moment, before he turned and hurried up the stone steps. Malcolm watched him until he reached the top and disappeared from sight. He'd only meant to help a friend, and instead his life had been turned upside down. He gave a final glance to the shed for no other reason than to confirm the lock was secured and their secret well hidden, before he too climbed the stairs and started for home.

But the night wasn't kind. Everywhere he looked shadows threatened to reveal remembrances from his past. He dropped his eyes to his boots, watching each step forward as if that would somehow get him home faster, reminding himself that only a fool walked through the slums with his head down.

By a stroke of luck or good fortune, he entered Walcot Square without issue and walked the last two blocks briskly, climbing the stairs to the room he let, locking the door, and shutting out the world behind him.

6

BEWARE THE MAN WHO CAN LOOK INTO YOUR HEART.

“**A**nd this is where you’ll be able to practice until the new stage is completed.” Mr. Barrett gestured to the walls of the rotunda as he stood beside Evelyn. “The orchestra assembles here twice a week, and you’ll find the high ceiling provides the perfect acoustics for both music and song. I thought you’d like to see the interior and hear how your voice sounds within.”

“Yes, thank you. When you referred to this space as The Umbrella Room, I didn’t know what to expect, but it’s lovely,” Evelyn said, impressed by the decadent design of the surround.

Considering the name, she’d envisioned a large cloth parasol as a roof in the same silhouette as the peak of a tent, and while she wasn’t altogether wrong, the luxurious fabrics, faceted mirrors, and Ionic columns were far grander than the whimsical vision she’d conjured in her mind. Fashioned in deep pink scagliola plaster with tasseled crimson and silver fabrics, the interior of The Umbrella Room resembled a jewel box. She wondered how any stage being built for her use could possibly surpass the elegance inside the rotunda.

“As you can see, I’ve spared no expense in creating a sanctuary of beauty.” Mr. Barrett smiled in her direction. “You’ll blend in seamlessly.”

Embarrassed by his compliment, she stepped toward the platform and tried to envision herself as the center of attention. She had confidence in her voice, but the reminder that she’d had no experience before a large audience was never far from mind. The idea was daunting and her pulse skipped faster.

“I will leave you to your exercises,” Mr. Barrett said from behind her. “There are a few repairs that need to be made to the exterior, and I’ve asked the carpenter to complete them this morning. If you hear work being done, please don’t be alarmed. It shouldn’t last long and hopefully won’t interrupt your concentration.”

Evelyn nodded, still distracted by the situation she’d found herself in. Graham had an appointment and so she’d come to Vauxhall Gardens alone, but she suddenly missed his company and innate ability to put her at ease. She took a few minutes to calm, walking the perimeter and admiring the refined decorations until she found herself returned to the center of the rotunda a few minutes later.

In her peripheral vision, she noticed two men enter through the open doorway to the right. She thought better than to greet them, not wanting to make eye contact and be drawn into a conversation.

Chaste ladies didn’t linger unchaperoned with men, bachelors or otherwise. It was considered unseemly. She realized this wasn’t a formal drawing room, so those same rules didn’t apply, but to that point, the situation wasn’t proper in *any* capacity and she needed to adjust her thinking. Here, everything was a bit turned upside down. This new Vauxhall life would be contrary to her present one, and the notion prompted a surprising thrill of anticipation. Anything was better than being Evelyn Osbourne.

She sneaked a sly glance at the two men in conversation. There were of equal height and build, though the similarities stopped there. One man had tawny skin, which suggested he was from another country, perhaps Greece or Italy. She couldn’t be sure, though his hair color and strong features suggested it. Silver tinged the area near his temples, and his eyes, as dark as his hair, were sharp and assessing. Something about him seemed familiar. Had she met him at a function or event? That didn’t seem likely.

The other man was the stranger who’d ordered her off his stage the other day. Her pulse had just begun to calm, but now kicked up again. It could only be a reaction to their

confrontation, not their proximity. It didn't matter that she'd found herself thinking of him last night when she'd laid her head on her pillow. He was handsome. There was no denying it. But she couldn't allow him to lead her to distraction.

Darting another glance in their direction, she was relieved to see the two men had left. She would do as Mr. Barrett suggested and run some scales so she knew how to modulate her voice inside the rotunda. Then when she was finished, she'd be free to leave. Graham was correct that singing on stage would offer her the chance to show any would-be critic she was more than her father's daughter.

With serendipity, she'd warmed to the idea of embracing control, building her confidence, and facing one of her fears. She wondered if by forcing herself out of her quiet comfortable life, she'd gain not just life experience, but a greater sense of self.

Fortified by these goals, she began to test her voice, first quietly, and then more purposefully. It didn't take long for her to abandon the scale exercises and sing solely for the joy it brought her. A romantic love song filled the air and that was curious. It was a rarity when she consciously selected which song to sing. It was more often an expression of her emotions at the moment, because when she sang, everything else vanished, and her focus became pure of any distraction.

She finished on a high note and drew a deep breath, satisfaction curling her lips, pleased with how she'd sounded. Still smiling, she turned to leave, startled to see that same stranger in the doorway. How long had he listened there? He looked quite comfortable with one shoulder leaned against the doorframe and his arms folded across his chest. The pose pulled his shirt taut, his biceps firmly pressed against the cloth. She swallowed. Her throat must be dry from singing.

"I thought Barrett had captured an angel," he said, in response to her prolonged stare. "I was working outside and had to see for myself if it was true."

He pushed off the doorframe. More's the pity, he'd looked incredibly virile in that position, and she had a feeling she

would recall the image later when she was alone in her bedroom. He stepped closer and her heart applauded with a rapid beat.

“I don’t believe we were introduced properly,” he said, when only a stride separated them.

“You mean after you scolded me?”

“You haven’t forgotten that?” he asked, an amused gleam in his silver-gray eyes.

“It was only the other day,” she replied, trying her best for suitable sternness.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” he said more seriously. “I’m Malcolm Walker.”

“Hello, Mr. Walker. I’m... Miss Evelyn Osbourne. I’ll be singing here in the coming weeks.” She intentionally omitted her formal title. If she was going to perform and work among the people at Vauxhall, she’d rather be perceived as an ordinary person. Attitudes often changed when it was known she was a genteel lady.

“Evelyn.” The way he said her name shivered up her spine. “Does anyone ever call you Eve?”

“No,” she answered, curious of his odd question.

“Your mother chose the perfect name, because you sound heavenly.”

“My mother had a way with everything she did, especially words.” She glanced away and back, her sadness fleeting. When she faced Malcolm again, she sensed he understood what she hadn’t said aloud, their eyes caught in a moment of wordless communication.

“Your name reminds me of Christian stories from my childhood.”

“So, you’re a religious man, Mr. Walker,” she said, enjoying the ease of their conversation and recognizing a pull of attraction, now that she wasn’t as nervous.

“Not especially, but my father was a pastor. He enjoyed sharing readings after dinner.”

“And your father told you about the Garden of Eden when you were a child?”

“What boy doesn’t love a good tale about a snake in a mysterious garden?” he quipped, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “It fostered my love of nature. Besides, being outdoors meant I had escaped schoolwork and chores, and instead was free to climb trees, chase rabbits, and hone my sword skills for my life as a pirate.”

“I take it you never fully realized that last goal.” She had to force the words out. If she allowed her imagination free rein, she could easily picture Mr. Walker, *Malcolm*, on the deck of a huge pirate ship, his ample muscles working to hoist the sails, an ominous tattoo on his forearm and gold hoop through his earlobe.

“Not exactly, although all that time spent building pretend ships from branches and logs honed my craft and prepared me to become a carpenter.”

Evelyn was caught unaware by his candid nature. Proper gentlemen weren’t nearly as forthcoming, and hardly ever generous with their thoughts and feelings. It took weeks, sometimes months, of strict courtship rituals to gain the opportunity to ask about one’s childhood. And it was far worse when out in public. It appeared to her as if proper gentlemen were all playacting whenever she attended a social event within the ton. Everyone pretended to be the person they wanted the world to see. Clearly things were different here at Vauxhall Gardens.

“So now you know my life story,” he said in response to her moment of quiet.

He shifted his feet, and she wondered if he had forgotten that they’d just met and now thought he’d gone on too long about himself. Wouldn’t it be clever if they’d both considered the same notion at the same time but from opposite perspectives? The idea amused her.

“That’s it?” She hoped to ease his mind. “I daresay there must be more. Deep dark secrets, mischievous antics, or some skeleton hidden in the closet.”

“More like a coffin in a shed,” he replied, his mouth dipping into a frown as his demeanor changed. “I should return to my work and stop taking up your time.”

“It was a pleasure,” she said, and she meant it. She’d forgotten her nervousness as soon as they’d begun to speak.

“Your singing is lovely.” He stepped backward, that same invisible tether holding her gaze to his as he moved. “Barrett was a smart man to feature you.”

“Thank you.”

He didn’t say more and she watched him leave, taking in the angle of his jaw, etched profile, and powerful stride. The gentlemen in her social circle were all rather *soft* by comparison. From their polished vocabulary to their carefully chosen wardrobe, proper gentlemen possessed an air of refined tenderness, a result of having been cultivated and pruned by title and heritage.

But Malcolm was the opposite. Everything from the tone of his deep baritone to the width of his shoulders was hard, strong, and deliberate. She found the allure of that difference incredibly tempting.

She lingered a little longer to be certain she wouldn’t bump into him on the way out of the rotunda, wanting to cool the delicious simmer of curiosity that coursed through her, enjoying the invigorating and at the same time restless impatient energy. With nowhere else she needed to be, she decided to explore the grounds further. Graham had spoken true when he’d said every path led to an interesting location.

Following a line of oval slate stepping stones, she discovered an ornate marble fountain with a life-sized figure of King Neptune being pulled on his seashell chariot by five white stallions. The enormous sculpture was at the center of a large clearing, where identical benches formed a ring as if to provide seating for a show. How peculiar. It wasn’t as if

Neptune would come to life and perform. She'd like to return in the evening to see exactly what happened here.

At the sudden sound of hooves, she spun, so startled she questioned whether one of Neptune's stallions had leapt from water to land. But it was only a man on his horse, the animal decorated with brightly colored streamers, the end of each catching the breeze as they made their way past.

Wanting to regain her composure, she entered a nearby tent, relieved when it appeared empty and quiet. At first it was the scent of sage and rosemary that caught her attention, but while the fragrance was calming, her eyes flittered about, anxious to take in the unusual and wondrous interior. It was like entering another world.

A wooden table and chair stood at one side amid unlit candles of every size and shape. There were several small lanterns, a brass bell and satin scarf, as well as a velvet bag tied with a length of gold cording and suspended from a hook. Seemingly out of place, a China teapot sat on a block covered with glass tile. A whisper of steam rose from its spout. The pleasant fragrance of chamomile and lemon infused the air above it.

Glancing upward, she saw hundreds of glittering stars hanging from the fabric ceiling, reminiscent of the constellations she enjoyed locating in the night sky. Intermittent spheres, representing the planets she'd read about in books, also appeared in the suspended galaxy. In addition, there were paintings of the zodiac signs with their names written on canvas flaps.

The tent walls were less crowded and held a few large illustrations. One drawing showed a crystal ball with rays of light emanating from the core. Another displayed a dozen playing cards arranged in a complicated formation, their strange pictures unlike anything she'd ever seen. The last illustration, and perhaps the most disturbing, showed a man and woman wrapped in an embrace. She stepped closer, intrigued and yet at the same time, cautious. A sense of premonition accompanied her approach.

At first glance, she'd assumed the depiction was similar to one of the naughty etchings Graham possessed, but soon realized she was mistaken. The couple in the picture wore no clothing, yet the artist had painted the figures to maintain modesty even with their arms and legs entangled, their lips locked in a kiss. The background was lovely, the sky done in varying shades of blue, and around the lovers, an abundance of leafy foliage created a frame. A few small animals and birds were interwoven if one looked closely. It wasn't until Evelyn had studied the picture for several minutes that she realized it portrayed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Her breath caught. How could that be? Why she'd only just discussed the same subject with Malcolm an hour earlier. The coincidence seemed unlikely. She shook her head to clear it or perhaps shake a logical answer loose, but it didn't help. How very odd. She inhaled, soothed by the familiar scent of sage, but alert to the fact she needed to leave. She shouldn't be wandering into places she didn't belong. Turning to go, she let out a high-pitched shriek when she saw she wasn't alone.

"Welcome," the man said. "I didn't mean to frighten you, but this is *my tent*."

Evelyn drew a shuddered breath and blinked hard. What had gotten into her lately?

"No, it's my fault. Once I entered, I was curiously enchanted." She looked upward wanting to confirm the stars were still there. "Then I saw the illustrations." She gestured to the side as if to further prove her story. He was the same man who'd entered The Umbrella Room earlier.

"Perhaps you were meant to find this tent," the man replied, with evident seriousness. "And talk to me."

"I rather doubt that," she said too quickly. To make amends she added, "because I don't know you, that's all."

"Then we can remedy that." He stepped forward, his expression softening. "My name is Dante. I'm a fortune teller. I divine the future for customers here at Vauxhall Gardens. I'm not surprised you've found your way here considering your interest in the stars."

Evelyn reared back slightly. How could he know she studied constellations and kept an astronomy journal? That her interest in the stars was often the way she escaped in the evening, when she spoke to her mother and eased her loneliness?

“I should leave.”

“Why would you do that when you haven’t gained your answers?”

“Pardon?”

“Allow me to read your palm.” He extended his hand, his own palm exposed. “Your entire life is already mapped in the features of your skin and your hand is the portal to that information. One just needs to know how to interpret what’s written there.”

She noticed he wore a gold and ruby ring on his pointer finger. Fooling people into believing he was able to see the future must be a lucrative business. “I don’t think...”

“You shouldn’t,” he interrupted, dropping his hand and offering her a half grin. “Divinity is an art of subtleties. Thinking will interfere with the process.”

She watched as he moved to the table and poured a cup of tea. His movements were fluid and in the length of a few exhales he stood before her again.

“Here.” He offered the cup. “It will calm you.”

“I’m not nervous.”

His expression told her he knew she had lied, and she took the cup, unwilling to appear rude. The brew was strong, one sip enough to penetrate her senses. It was *just* tea, wasn’t it? Graham would call her every kind of fool if she ingested something that caused her to behave foolishly. She recalled an incident when he’d dared her to smoke one of her uncle’s imported cigars and she’d vomited after the first puff.

“That’s quite a potent brew,” she said, taking another small sip before she moved to set it on the table.

“I’ll take that.” He reached forward with his left hand, leaving her little choice but to release the teacup or the hot liquid could spill.

She watched as he held the handle firmly, swirled the contents three times from left to right. Next, he inverted the cup and allowed the remaining liquid to seep into the dirt at his feet. He placed the empty cup in a reverse position on the tabletop so the rim rested downward. He seemed to take great care in ensuring the handle was pointed in her direction before he resumed their conversation as if his actions were as normal as combing one’s hair.

“It is your decision whether or not I read the leaves.”

His assumption that she’d prefer tea reading to palm reading, *or any reading*, was surely part of the reason he was successful at his craft. There was a guarantee of payment when one didn’t give the customer a choice.

“Of course, you always have a choice,” he added, as if he’d just poked around in her brain.

“Oh!” She eyed the teacup, wary of what he might see in the delicate patterns of the leaves. “I really must go.”

“As you wish.”

He didn’t move, and she had a sense of his disapproval as she brushed past.

Out in the sunshine, she drew a deep breath and exhaled fully, wanting to expel any lingering air she’d breathed inside the tent. She assumed it was her imagination at work, that Dante was likely a kind person. He appeared to be friends with Malcolm, in fact. Yet some niggling sense told her there was more to the story.

She knew it was impossible to explain everything that happened in the world or to find a logical cause. Ugly caterpillars transformed into magnificent butterflies. Troublesome bees created sweet, delicious honey as if by magic.

Her mother had died too young.

Her father cared little for her welfare.

But Dante, with his ethereal manner and haunting insight, made her believe he could somehow look inside her and perceive her secrets, and that unsettling suggestion was too dangerous to consider.

There are mysteries in life that no one can unravel.

7

THERE ARE MYSTERIES IN LIFE THAT NO ONE CAN UNRAVEL.

As soon as Malcolm completed his work at Vauxhall, he hailed a hackney and dropped into the seat, the temptation to whistle too strong to resist. He was having a good day, even if he dreaded the task he had yet to complete with Cosmo that evening.

Seeing Eve and listening to her sing was only surpassed by the time they'd shared afterward. He had wanted to make amends after their first interaction went poorly, but he'd never expected for them to fall into conversation so naturally.

He stopped whistling, the blur of pedestrians on the pavement somewhat hypnotizing and his attention suddenly in need of focus. He wouldn't mind spending more time with Eve. Female company often brought peace to his soul. Up to this point, he'd purposely avoided taking pleasure with any of the women at Vauxhall, not wanting to invite trouble when he kept the relationship casual. A smart man didn't become entangled at his workplace unless he had thoughts of a romantic relationship in the future, and if there was one thing Malcolm knew without doubt it was that he'd eventually leave London.

The hackney rolled to a jaunty stop and he paid the driver and climbed out. St. Luke's Home for Boys was one of the establishments he occasionally visited to make repairs. Since he'd taken to the road, he sought out overlooked locations, whether church, orphanage, or hospital, and volunteered his carpentry skills. He wouldn't label this habit penance, but if he

took the time to examine why he felt compelled to act, the description would probably fit.

That aside, he liked to keep his hands busy. Repairing a roof or leaky window could change someone's daily living predicament dramatically. Cosmo liked to jest and call him a *Mac of All Trades*, but what his friend didn't know was that Malcolm needed the distraction. Here at St. Luke's he was currently replacing floorboards and building an additional pantry in the oversized dining room where the children ate their meals. The sisters thanked him profusely, often mentioning how their tight budget restricted repairs.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Walker."

"Hello, Sister Agnes." He smiled in greeting, amused that no matter how many times he'd asked the sisters at St. Luke's to call him by his Christian name, they always agreed and then subsequently referred to him as Mr. Walker.

"Your arrival is timely," Sister Agnes said with her usual cheerfulness. "I wanted to meet you outside so we could speak in private a few minutes."

"Oh, is something wrong?" he asked, taken aback by the sister's confession. Apparently, everyone kept secrets even those who took a religious vow.

"It's only that I don't want any of the boys to hear." She smiled up at him, her face a beacon of kindness. "Even when I close the door or talk to another sister on the opposite side of the room, the lads have a way of learning everything and this is a matter I'd like to keep between the two of us."

Malcolm recognized the concern in Agnes' eyes and he waited, wanting to help if it was in his capacity to do so.

"We've had a new arrival since your last visit," Agnes said, compassion in her tone. "Henry is twelve. A difficult age for a boy, with one foot in manhood and the other in childhood. He came to us through tragedy. His family perished in a fire and he hasn't a single living relative to take him in." She paused, the silence filled with the echo of so many similar stories before this one. "He's been with us nearly three weeks,

but he eats alone and hardly gives the other lads a glance. He likes books. He often spends the day in the reading room with his nose between the pages of some adventure tale. But solitary time isn't what he needs, and my heart breaks for him."

"I understand why you would be concerned, Sister, but I'm not sure how I can help," Malcolm replied, confused by Agnes' intention. "Would you like me to build something for him or make a repair to his sleeping quarters?"

"Your carpentry work is what brought you to us." She smiled then, all previous worry wiped from her features. "And I'm thankful for that, but today I'd like to ask you for something else. Something different."

"Yes?" Malcolm glanced at the children's home behind them. Inside, nearly thirty children struggled to find happiness despite the unfortunate circumstances that had placed them at St. Luke's. His own childhood had been happy, full of wonder and exploration. He'd had loving parents and a younger brother who enjoyed being his partner in crime. It wasn't until he was older that life had taken an ineradicable turn. Not wanting to exhume the pain that always accompanied remembrance of that incident, he pushed back on the unpleasant memories.

"I thought you might take him under your tutelage. Give him a job and have him assist you as you complete your repairs. It's clear he's uncomfortable around the other boys, but if he believed he had a purpose in the work he performed with you, one on one, perhaps a friendship could form. It would be a step in the right direction."

Malcolm hadn't expected this kind of request and his immediate reaction was to decline outright. "I'm in London temporarily, Sister. It may not be wise to befriend Henry and then turn around and leave shortly after."

Sensing his reluctance, Agnes placed her hand on his arm, her gentle touch giving him pause. "If you manage to bring him out of his shell, it won't matter when you decide to move

on. He'll have made friends with the other boys by then. He'll be more agreeable and hopefully, more willing to participate."

It may have been the influence of his father's teachings or his own sense of compassion, but Malcolm found it impossible to refuse Sister Agnes. He couldn't bear if she became disappointed in him. Besides, it would be helpful to have an extra pair of hands for minor work like sanding and painting.

"I suppose you should introduce us then," he said finally, dubious of the result the unlikely union would produce. "I haven't had much experience with children."

Sister Agnes gave him a little pat on the arm before she began to walk toward the building. "I assume you were one once. That's all the experience you'll need."

Malcolm stifled a chuckle and followed her inside, his eyes adjusting from bright sunshine to the dimly lit recreational room as they advanced. Anyone who considered Vauxhall Gardens to be a whirlwind of color and activity hadn't visited St. Luke's Home for Boys. Lads of every age and variety romped, yelped, raced, and caroused, from one wall to the other, the room hardly able to contain their high level of noise and energy.

Yet with all the commotion it wasn't difficult to identify Henry. In the far corner, near one of the rectangular sash windows, a boy sat by himself, his eyes on the pages of the book that rested in his lap. Even in profile, Malcolm could see sadness etched into the boy's face. Yet that wasn't the only thing that caused his heart to beat heavily in his chest.

Henry resembled Paul, Malcolm's younger brother, from his sharp nose and chin to his sandy brown hair. The realization was like a punch in the stomach and every muscle of his body tightened, fighting against a wound that would never heal.

"Henry." Sister Agnes maneuvered across the room with unexpected grace, given her advanced age.

Malcolm followed, growing more unsure with each step. Henry slanted a glance in their direction though he didn't lift

his head.

“Henry, dear,” Sister Agnes said in a kind but firm voice. “This is my friend, Mr. Walker. He’s the carpenter working in the dining room. He needs help, and I thought you would be the right young man for the job.”

Henry allowed his book to close. Malcolm was impressed. Agnes had somehow known her idea would pique Henry’s interest.

“Hello,” Malcolm said, aware of the anxious energy surrounding them.

Sister Agnes expected him to somehow help this boy. Malcolm expected to fail in that respect, and who knew what Henry expected from the exchange. When Henry stood, Malcolm realized he was taller than most of the others, thin as a reed and all lanky limbs. If nothing else, perhaps the carpentry work would help Henry fill out and build muscle.

“We should get started,” Malcolm said, for lack of another idea. “Thank you, Sister Agnes.”

“I’ll check in on you both later,” she said with a knowing smile.

Malcolm headed to the dining room, only aware Henry followed by the sound of the boy’s boots clomping behind him. When they reached the empty dining room, he gestured toward a lopsided pile of lumber and sifted through his thoughts trying to determine the right tactic to engage Henry. Beginning with an explanation of the work that needed to be done seemed a smart approach.

“There are several floorboards that need to be repaired. While I look over the damaged boards, I’d appreciate if you could bring some order to that mess. If you stack the boards according to size, it will be easier for me to choose lumber to replace the broken slats.”

“Yes, sir,” Henry said quietly.

“And you should call me Malcolm,” Malcolm said automatically. “Better yet, Mac. That’s what my friends call me.”

Henry didn't reply, only pausing a moment before he began to lift and sort the lengthy floorboards. Malcolm knew Sister Agnes wasn't watching, but the responsibility she'd placed in his care seemed like another pair of eyes in the room. When a quarter of an hour passed with only the shuffle and slide of wooden planks breaking the silence, Malcolm tried to engage Henry again.

"Have you ever built anything? A treehouse or fort, perhaps?" It seemed a reasonable question to ask a young boy.

"No, sir." Henry stopped and pushed his hands deep into his pockets.

"Mac," Malcolm said with a smile. "Remember?"

Henry nodded then returned his attention to the pile of lumber.

"I was always building something as a child," Malcolm continued, as he slid the claw of his hammer under a rotted board and gave a swift pull. "Clubhouses and pirate ships. I even made myself a tool box, even though I didn't have any tools to keep inside it. I used it to carry my lunch. But once my brother found out, my food was never safe." The amusing memory caught Malcolm unaware, and he closed his eyes for a long blink before he set the hammer down.

Across the room, Henry didn't reply though he worked diligently on stacking the boards in the correct order. Malcolm wondered if the lad was even listening. Not wanting to press, he picked up his hammer again and removed several more boards, allowing the conversation and the dust to settle. After a time, he tried again.

"Can you fetch me that box of nails?" Malcolm motioned toward a small white carton on the windowsill.

When Henry brought the box over, he didn't immediately return to the pile of lumber and instead stood over Malcolm where he was crouched on the floor. Henry watched him measure the floorboard, first drawing a straight line with the pencil he kept behind his ear, and then fitting it carefully into place. Malcolm was aware of Henry's careful attention, even

though the boy walked away and back again without saying a word. After Malcolm hammered a few new boards into place, he stood up to examine his handiwork.

“What do you think?” Malcolm asked, turning to look at Henry and finding an immediate smile.

Henry had one of the extra pencils tucked behind his right ear. He still held the box of nails and something about his facial expression seemed lighter, maybe brighter. Malcolm couldn't say exactly. But it was better. That much he knew.

“May I try the next one, Mac?” Henry asked, his voice stronger than earlier.

“Absolutely.” Malcolm nodded. “Let's work on it together.”

By the time Malcolm left St. Luke's, he'd established a fragile rapport with Henry. The situation was far from comfortable, but he knew with confidence that the time they'd spent together had benefited the lad. Malcolm looked forward to his next visit for this additional reason.

Walking to the street, he hailed another hackney. He needed to stop at his rooms to bathe, change his clothes and get something to eat before nightfall. Hopefully, Cosmo had gained a clearer understanding of where they could make their delivery. Malcolm would regain his peace of mind once the shed contained nothing more than boating supplies.

A few hours later, Malcolm leaned back on the shed doors and waited for Cosmo. The moon was only partially visible, and while not ideal for late night rowing, it would make keeping to the shadows that much easier. Bullfrogs croaking in the muddy reeds and the distant splash at the river's edge were the only noises that kept him company. He took the time to mentally review the circumstances that had brought him here, but then abandoned the effort to focus on more pleasant thoughts.

Decidedly, *Eve*.

What did he know about her, other than her pretty face and dulcet voice? Not very much, unfortunately. But that didn't mean he couldn't learn more. Especially since he assumed she would continue to practice in preparation of her debut, which would likely place them in each other's path.

Evelyn was beautiful, but she was also witty and talented. If he closed his eyes, he could still see her crystalline blue gaze as she'd listened to him. He'd memorized her features, having told himself he was focused on her lips because he was taken by her singing, but he wasn't a fool. He imagined her lips doing other things to various parts of his body.

He adjusted his position, swallowing hard against the immediate twitch of desire in his groin.

"Mac."

Cosmo emerged from the darkness. Malcolm hadn't heard his friend approach. But then he'd been caught up in an erotic fantasy.

"I'm here," Malcolm said, moving away from the shed. "Are you ready?"

"No."

"What do you mean?" Malcolm groused, frustration returning full force.

"I haven't heard from anyone about the... you know."

Malcolm smirked, annoyed by Cosmo's reluctance to discuss the coffin when it was his foolishness that ensnared both of them in this mess. "Did you go down to Black Friars like I told you?"

"Yes," Cosmos said in an exaggerated whisper. "But no one was there and anyone I asked looked at me like I was nicked in the head."

Malcolm pushed the hair off his brow and considered what they should do next. "The coffin isn't going to keep indefinitely. We don't know what's inside, but if it is a body, time is running out before it will make itself known." When Cosmo didn't respond, Malcolm continued. "I suppose we

could load it on the boat and row north, but how can we be sure anyone will appear to claim it? We could be out on the water, wasting our time for hours like last night.”

Cosmo nodded, his eyes catching the light, and Malcolm saw an odd mixture of fear and regret in his friend’s expression.

“Or we could bury it,” Malcolm said after another beat. “As long as we find a private location, whatever is inside will stay put. And if no one contacts you by the end of the week, we can forget about this entire situation.”

“And leave it buried?” Cosmo asked, his exasperation apparent. “But what about the money? We’re supposed to get paid.”

“We’re not going to get paid,” Malcolm said, his tone both consoling and matter-of-fact. “Unless you hear from the man who first approached you with this proposition, we haven’t enough information to make the delivery and if we don’t make the delivery, we haven’t done the job we were hired to complete. I wasn’t very confident in the plan from the beginning, but I wanted to help you out.”

“Bloody hell,” Cosmo said, all his earlier bluster gone. “I was counting on the payment. I need that money.”

“Let’s talk about this more tomorrow.”

“Right,” Cosmo said, glancing over each shoulder as if watchful for apparitions. “Before rowing practice.”

“Yes,” Malcolm agreed. “Maybe by then the circumstances will have changed.”

But he doubted it. Luck was not showing in their favor. Cosmo melted into the night and Malcolm took the stairs two at a time. How could a day that began so magically end so poorly? In the course of twenty-four hours, it was like everything had turned upside down, through no action of his own.

8

IN THE LIGHT OF A WAXING GIBBOUS MOON,

“Birdie,” Graham said, with his usual level of enthusiastic declaration, “you didn’t exaggerate when you said The Umbrella Room was more than a place to come in out of the rain.”

“Very clever,” she replied, pleased that her vocal exercises had gone smoothly this morning and doubly happy to have Graham’s company. “I doubt any new stage being built will be able to outshine this site.”

“Don’t underestimate Barrett. He has big dreams and extravagant taste.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to walk over to the new performance area and see how the work has progressed.”

And by chance see Malcolm again.

Her heart squeezed in favor of the idea. Their previous conversation had stayed with her, causing a hum of anticipation in her blood that hadn’t faded. She liked the way he’d looked at her, the entirety of his attention focused solely on what she would say next, his silver-gray eyes bright with interest as if he could see her words, not just hear them.

Had he thought her flirtatious? She almost laughed. She wasn’t one to flirt. She wasn’t even sure she knew how.

“Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?” she asked, forcing her lingering smile away.

“Like you just ate an entire raspberry trifle,” Graham said, stepping closer, his head tipped backward slightly and eyes

narrowed in suspicion. “You’re not telling me something.”

“What does that type of expression look like?” She pulled a face that could only be considered ridiculous.

“Not like that,” Graham said. “Although it does make me wonder why you’re overcompensating. Your voice rose a full octave and you’ve crossed your arms around your middle as if you’re protecting a secret.”

“Honestly, you have no idea what you’re talking about,” she replied quickly. Maybe too quickly. “I’m going to walk to the area where the new stage is being built.”

“Why? If it’s not completed yet, there’s nothing to see but a pile of lumber.”

If he only knew...

“You don’t need to accompany me if you’d rather do something else.”

Did she want him to join her? Part of her thought *yes*. Graham had such an ease about him, conversation with new acquaintances came naturally, which eliminated any awkwardness. His company would provide her with a safety net. She only had to eye him a certain way and he would know when she wanted to leave or if she needed help.

On the other hand, part of her thought *no*. Since she secretly hoped she’d have the opportunity to speak with Malcolm again, Graham was a dangerous distraction. His quick wit and vociferous nature often monopolized social gatherings, which she usually considered a boon, but now caused her to hesitate.

The realization that she wanted Malcolm’s attention all to herself made her breath catch. Yet it was no less true. It didn’t matter that she usually preferred to blend into the background and hardly ever initiated interaction in social settings. Somehow this was different.

“Are we leaving or not?” Graham’s complaint broke through her mental tug-o-war. “You’re behaving strangely this morning.”

“I must have had too much coffee at breakfast.”

“Oh, I doubt that’s the reason.” Graham crooked his elbow. “But no sense dithering over it. Let’s go.”

Looping her hand through her cousin’s arm, they left The Umbrella Room and followed the path toward the center arcade. As they approached, she could hear the sharp rap of a hammer, like someone was knocking on her heart to call attention to the situation. She caught her bottom lip in her teeth, not wanting Graham to question her sudden smile.

“Who do we have here?” he asked, his interest suddenly honed to the construction site.

“Oh, do you mean the carpenter?” she said, doing her best to act disinterested. “I met Mr. Walker the other day. He designed the stage.”

“Indeed,” Graham replied, his gaze focused straight ahead. “And Mr. Barrett introduced you?”

“No, I was alone.”

“Hmm.” Graham’s non-verbal comment provoked her to defend herself.

“You’re the one who told me society’s rules don’t apply at Vauxhall Garden,” she protested. “Are you annoyed that I *took* your advice?”

“Not at all. Just surprised,” Graham said, his smile returned. “Pleasantly surprised. You know, Kate invited a few friends over this afternoon. Why don’t you come by the house? I’m certain she included Lord Fenley on the guest list. He’d like to spend more time with you.”

“And you know this because you asked her to include him so you could then ask me to stop by as part of another matchmaking endeavor?”

“The ridiculously high level of your suspicion is unhealthy,” Graham replied plainly. “Or maybe, it speaks to your heart’s desire to find your soulmate, that you cast every effort I make into the realm of true love.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am,” he said, his grin growing despite his words to the contrary.

“Will my father be there?”

“Why would Kate invite your father? Besides, you have to stop avoiding him, Evelyn.”

“You have no idea,” she replied, her thought flitting to the unexpected visit from Lady Matilda.

A familiar ache yawned deep inside her. It was so much more than the embarrassing trouble her father caused. He’d never given her his attention or time, and his absence confirmed what she believed for years now. She was a mistake he was too busy to correct. One he didn’t care about in the least. To that point, she’d rather avoid seeing the indifference in his eyes whenever possible.

“Don’t allow your father to ruin this moment or your upcoming performance,” Graham said at her sudden silence, repeating his earlier advice. “You know, there’s an extraordinary fellow who works here as a fortune teller. You should visit him if you’re that concerned about the future. Perhaps he could put your worries to rest.”

Evelyn swallowed her immediate response and changed the subject. “Are you bringing Avery to your sister’s gathering?”

All amusement dropped away and Graham’s expression turned mulish. They walked on wordlessly and Evelyn considered the invitation to Kate’s luncheon. Lord Fenley was a nice enough gentleman, and she’d enjoyed his company during their past interactions. She tried to picture him, but the only image her mind conjured was of Mr. Walker. The shadow of whiskers along his jawline and press of his muscles against his white linen shirt. The charming twinkle in his unusual gray eyes. The way his smile turned slowly, almost as if he fought against it, but then couldn’t resist.

That same spike of heat and longing began to simmer under her skin and she waved her hand near her neck in an

effort to cool off. Unfortunately, they'd nearly reached the construction site.

"And there's Mr. Walker?" Graham asked, unaware her eyes had tracked Malcolm's movements as soon as he'd become visible across the arcade.

Malcolm had his back turned as he balanced at the top of a ladder that leaned on the front façade. She couldn't help but admire the way he moved with surety and strength.

"How do you fancy the name?"

"What?" she asked, startled by Graham's question.

"The name on the marquee," he insisted. "The Midnight Parlor. Isn't it perfect?"

"Yes." She forced her eyes to the sign, where large flowing letters painted in pale yellow danced against the cobalt background. Dozens of tiny stars floated in a sea of blue. "Did Mr. Barrett think of that?"

"Come now, Birdie, give me the credit that's due."

Something must have alerted Malcolm to their presence, because he glanced over his shoulder right then and descended the ladder. He paused at the bottom as if he was waiting on them, even though they stood several strides away.

"Well, we can't stand here gawking, can we?" Graham prompted. "Introduce me to your carpenter friend."

Suppressing the nervous shiver that coursed through her, she let go of Graham's arm and walked beside him until they reached the platform.

"Hello, Mr. Walker." She tried for a casual tone, but her effort came out forced, caught between giddiness and effusive delight. "This is my cousin, Mr. Milford."

"Nice to see you again, Miss Osbourne," Malcolm said, his words sounding effortless, unlike her own. "It's good to meet you, Mr. Milford."

"Call me Graham," Graham said, exuding his natural likability as the two men shook hands. "The marquee looks

perfect. Don't you agree, Birdie?"

Malcolm's dark brows shot up and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

"A childhood pet name," she murmured as way of explanation and then more directly, "The façade is beautiful."

"It should be finished by the end of the week." Malcolm gestured over his shoulder to indicate the stage. "Then you can hold your practice here."

"That would be ideal," Graham agreed, as he turned in her direction. "The more comfortable you become on stage, the easier opening night will be. Nothing chases away the jitters like habit and comfortability."

"The scarlet draperies recently arrived, so I'll have a crew install them later today," Malcolm went on, describing the work left to be completed.

"Scarlet!" Graham exclaimed, the fingers of one hand splayed against his chest like he'd been harpooned through the heart. "The draperies are supposed to be charcoal gray. Evelyn is meant to appear otherworldly, a shooting star in the night sky, not a two-bit tart on a dockside corner."

"Graham!" Evelyn hissed through a tight smile. "You're embarrassing me."

"I'm sorry if you're displeased, but the shipment I received from the textile mill contained only scarlet drapery." Malcolm explained.

"That won't do. Crimson draperies will ruin everything. This is a mistake I need to attend to immediately." Without further bluster, Graham headed down the main thoroughfare, shaking his head, his feet moving just as quickly.

"You'll have to pardon my cousin's behavior," Evelyn said apologetically. "He fancies himself my manager, and has a particular vision in mind for the performance."

"I didn't mean to upset him."

"Actually, you did us all a favor." She offered him a sincere smile. "The sooner the error is corrected, the sooner

we'll have peace."

"And yet, you don't seem overly concerned."

"No." She drew a deep breath and caught the faint fragrance of cloves. Could it be his shaving soap? The scent warmed her from the inside out.

"But you're nervous about the performance?" he asked, that same inquisitive sincerity in his gaze.

"Why would you ask?"

"Mr. Milford mentioned soothing your jitters."

"I've never performed before an audience of any size, never mind the type of crowd that fills Vauxhall Gardens. Not that I'm anticipating there'll be a large turn-out for my show," she added as a hushed afterthought. She dropped her eyes, noticing his shirtsleeves were rolled up to expose sun-browned skin, brushed with golden hair over hard muscle.

"You can be sure of it," Malcolm said, his words full of confidence. "*I* wouldn't miss it."

Their eyes matched and held for a few suspended moments. It didn't seem to matter that they weren't talking and so she drank him in, each sip increasing her thirst, wanting to fix their shared moment into her memory.

"You'll come to my performance?" she finally managed.

"I've heard how lovely you sound when you're rehearsing." He paused. Not long. Just about the time it takes to clasp someone's hand. To whisper their name. To press a kiss to someone's lips. "I would like to be there when you take the stage for your very first performance."

Evelyn shook her head to clear her thoughts. She wasn't given to whimsy, but good lord, she was smitten. How ridiculous was that? It could only be her reaction to his undivided attention, because she usually objected to such scrutiny, uneasy at being too closely observed and judged. Except she experienced none of those feelings when she looked into Malcolm's sparkling gaze.

“Well, let’s hope this farfetched endeavor actually becomes a reality.” She tried to laugh, still a little perplexed at how everything had advanced so quickly. “I have no idea what to expect.”

“You’ve never visited Vauxhall Gardens before?”

“No,” she admitted. “Though everywhere I look there’s a promise of enchantment. I happened upon a fountain the other day that appeared so real I assumed Neptune would speak to me.”

“You should see the fountain at night, when Neptune’s trident shoots flames and steam comes out of each horse’s muzzle.”

“Is that true?” she asked, unable to imagine it. “It must be magical.”

“If you’d like to return this evening, I’d be happy to show you a few of the popular attractions.”

Her heart sped up at the unexpected invitation. She was already breaking dozens of propriety’s strictures for ladies. If she was recognized by someone within Society’s circle, her behavior would be considered scandalous and the tongue-wags would find it irresistible, claiming she was her father’s daughter, her behavior tawdry and unbecoming.

However, instead of prompting her to refuse his offer, this fast-formed conclusion lit a fire in her belly. So much had already been taken from her, why shouldn’t she enjoy a little harmless entertainment? Things at Vauxhall seemed decidedly more fun than any ballroom dance or afternoon tea Better Society had invited her to attend. Besides, Malcolm didn’t know she was a proper lady. What harm could come from one shared evening? Who would even be at Vauxhall Gardens? If it was scandalous for her, the same rules applied for others, didn’t they? *Rules*. Always so many precious rules.

“Thank you.” That same hum of anticipation coursed through her body, heating her blood with sparks of adventure. “I’d like that. What time shall we meet?”

9

PATIENCE. EVEN THE STARS HAVE TO WAIT FOR THE NIGHT IN ORDER TO SHINE.

Malcolm glanced at the sky and checked for the threat of rain. He didn't want anything to disrupt his plans for the evening. Not the time he anticipated spending with Eve or the unfortunate circumstances of carting a casket up a steep embankment and further inland for an untimely burial.

He'd taken exceptional care with his appearance, wanting to look at his best even though he knew escorting Eve through the entertainment grounds tonight would be the one and only time he'd have her all to himself. Once she performed and people realized the quality of her talent, she wouldn't be interested in spending time with a carpenter.

He smiled knowingly as he left his rooms. No matter what trickery Eve thought she perpetuated, she'd showed all the signs of a refined, genteel lady. Meeting her cousin had provided the proverbial last nail in the coffin. Mr. Milford was a nob, even if Malcolm suspected Milford's blood wasn't exactly blue.

Malcolm didn't need Dante to tell him what the future held for a courtship composed of a proper lady and a commoner. It didn't matter that Malcolm's level of craftsmanship extended far beyond basic construction, that he designed furniture, created beautiful carvings, and had honed his skill to a mastery level. None of that mattered in the eyes of the Upper Ten Thousand.

If his suspicions proved true and Eve was of noble birth, her world was as far from his as the sun and just as likely to burn him in the end. It served him well that things would never

progress to that point. The life he'd chosen didn't allow for any serious romantic relationships. Annoyed that the foolish thought had even formed, he cursed into the night and walked on.

They'd planned to meet in front of the same fountain she'd mentioned earlier, and he hoped the elaborate display would elicit Eve's genuine wonder. He'd admired the way her eyes brightened and cheeks pinkened, soft and lovely, like the first bloom of a rose. Perhaps she'd have the same reaction when Neptune's Fountain came to life.

The grounds were already crowded when he entered through the gates, but the people congregating along the walkways didn't slow him down. He arrived at the fountain with ten minutes to spare and was pleased he could scan the area for her approach, wanting to savor the moment when their eyes met.

"Good to see you here, Mac."

"Have you come to watch our show?"

He glanced to his right, recognizing the voices of Daisy and Poppy, both in full costume, one a shimmering blue mermaid, the other dressed in emerald green.

"I'm meeting a friend who would like to see the fountain's display." He took a step to the left, wanting to widen the space between himself and the girls' obvious flirtation.

"Must be an important friend," Daisy said, leaning toward him. "You're looking very dashing tonight."

"You know," Poppy moved closer and placed her hand on his arm, "my sister and I can meet you later. The three of us can have a time of it in the Pleasure Gardens."

Malcolm squashed his first reaction. He'd been propositioned before, though the two young girls were far bolder than he'd ever imagined. Dressed as they were in costumes that clung like a second skin, with eyes heavily lined in charcoal and bright red lips, he mourned how they squandered their innocence, but the feeling passed. Daisy and Poppy had chosen their work, and could have easily decided to

serve food and drink like their friend Tessa, if they'd wanted more appropriate employment.

He was saved from the awkward task of having to politely decline Poppy's salacious offer, when he saw Eve enter the area.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, the words lost in his wake.

"Mr. Walker." Eve met him halfway across the clearing.

"Please call me Malcolm," he said, unsure if he should offer his arm. He'd prefer to hold her hand, but for some reason the gesture seemed too intimate.

Evelyn tamped down the pleasurable giddiness that had increased with every step she made through Vauxhall Gardens. It had taken her hours to decide on the appropriate gown, not wanting to look too formal and at the same time wanting to wear something flattering. She'd decided on an understated dress in pale blue, hoping she'd made the correct choice.

"Thank you, Malcolm." She tested the sound of his name on her tongue and liked the way it made her feel free and daring and *bold*. Like someone else she always wanted to be but never had the courage to become. "I appreciate you taking the time to show me the attractions this evening."

"It's my pleasure."

She watched as a man of extremely short stature, almost dwarf-like in size, scrambled up the side of the marble fountain and set about preparing for the show.

"He's lighting the fire," Malcolm explained, indicating a small black box behind one of the horses. "Once the water is hot and the pipes are opened, the fountain will come to life."

He widened his eyes for effect and she smiled, feeling at ease with his good-natured manner. She leaned to the side to obtain a better view of the little man at work. Unfortunately, several people had the same idea and she was jostled from behind, first gently, and then so forcefully she almost lost her footing.

“There,” Malcolm said, clasping her hand so she could recover her balance.

His effort to steady her was all for naught. When he didn’t let go, the impact of her hand held safely within his strong grasp combined with the rub of his palm, roughened from his work. The sensual tremor the contact caused caught her unaware. Her first reaction was to pull herself free. It wasn’t proper for a man to hold her hand in public. But he didn’t know she was a lady. That realization offered her additional freedom. Besides, his touch was *deliciously wicked*. When he laced his fingers with hers, their eyes still on the fountain, her heart tripped over itself.

The show began, but the activity before her was nothing more than a blur of color and sound as her mind spun with fast-paced decisions. She’d agreed to a performance here at Vauxhall which led to this one evening. One chance to live differently before it was made known she was a proper lady. Why not embrace a few hours of abandonment from the normal constraints of life? Why not indulge in a single night of pleasure?

She looked at Malcolm’s profile, illuminated in the glow of the flames that now licked upward from each point of Neptune’s trident. He must have sensed her attention because he turned, his smile hitching slowly, a glint in his lovely gaze.

“It’s spectacular, isn’t it?” he asked, his voice able to permeate the overflow of ambient noise and warm her like a caress.

“Yes.” She nodded, knowing she wasn’t only referring to the fountain’s display.

He didn’t say more, and when he softly stroked the pad of his thumb against her palm, she shivered despite the balmy night air.

From that moment on, abandonment became the insistent thrum of her heartbeat. Not in the sense of her father’s neglect. That would always exist as a wrong that couldn’t be righted. But in the choice to share her evening with Malcolm and

ignore the strictures of propriety ingrained in her since birth, even if that respite was only for a few hours.

As their evening advanced, she interacted with a mime and laughed openly when the ridiculous fellow pretended to climb a mountain only to fall off the other side. She ate with her fingers, shared a cup of strong malt ale with Malcolm, and lost twice in a game of chance that involved tossing beanbags.

At one point, they swayed together to a lively tune as a fiddler shared his music in one of the grottoes. Somehow throughout her evening of carefree happiness and uninhibited joy, holding hands with Malcolm became as natural as breathing. When he suggested they walk along the flagstone path that bordered the Thames so they could talk and admire the stars, she couldn't imagine a more entrancing invitation.

They strolled, hand-in-hand, taking in the calmer surround on the periphery of the entertainment grounds in companionable tandem, yet she struggled to find a suitable subject to speak of.

"It's so clear tonight, I can see all my favorite constellations," she said tentatively, wondering what he would say in return. "It's the perfect sky for making a wish." She felt his eyes on her as she paused and did just that.

"Will you tell me what you wished for?"

"Only if it comes true," she replied, enjoying his attention.

"My father taught me how to find Orion." He pointed toward an area over the water. "The idea of a hunter who lived in the sky was very intriguing to my younger self."

"That's a lovely memory." She imagined a miniature Malcolm at his father's side as they gazed into the night sky, pleased she'd landed on something they had in common. But she couldn't mention her uncle's grand conservatory or expensive telescope. Nor her seat on the Ladies' Astronomy Auxiliary.

"There, in Orion's belt." She gestured toward the constellation he'd pointed out. "The three stars are known as Frigga's staff. Frigga is the Norse goddess of marriage,

childhood, and wisdom. She uses her staff to wind the threads of faith and weave the clouds together.”

“That’s quite a tale.”

“I enjoy the stories attached to the heavens, and while it may sound fanciful, I believe a person is never too old to look up at the stars and dream,” she said in response, not wanting to break the spell that seemed to surround them.

He stopped walking then. They’d reached a particularly pretty location where the embankment sloped gently into the river. Starlight danced on the subtle undulations of the tide like a hundred candles set to flame, and the distant melody of nature, chirping crickets and the gentle sluice of curious fish, lent to a feeling of enchantment.

They didn’t speak and as Malcolm turned her so they faced each other, she peered up into his handsome face to see the moonlight reflected in his silver gaze. Anticipation made her pulse quicken, her heart beating as if it wanted to break free. Did he mean to kiss her? Should she allow him?

Yes.

That was worth a wish on every star overhead.

She drew a careful breath, rewarded with the scent of cloves while she waited. She didn’t need to say anything. Sometimes all the answers existed in the silence.

He must have sensed it too, some kind of bewitching, intangible pull, because he lowered his mouth to hers, the first brush of his lips an exquisite invitation. She closed her eyes, wanting to fully enter the dream unfolding in his embrace.

He tasted like the sugared marzipan candies he’d purchased for them earlier, but only at first. Then as their kiss deepened and his tongue stroked over hers, the flavor of his kiss became something else entirely. Sensual and spicy. An uncommon deliciousness composed of Malcolm’s rugged handsomeness, deep tenor, and the desire that swirled inside her. His kiss made the world fall away, like she was caught in a meteor shower, her every cell tingling and alive, sensitized to each new texture. The rough graze of his unshaven jaw. The

brush of his fingertips against her cheek. The caress of his exhales and heat of his body. There were so many pleasurable sensations coursing through her, she was untethered, a shooting star lost to space, yet she hardly moved, unwilling to ruin the magic of the moment.

“Eve,” he said softly, pulling back just far enough for the night air to whisper between them. “Beautiful Eve.”

The way he said her name sounded like an incantation, a wizard’s spell. Dangerous and yet compelling. Too familiar and forbidden. But how could something that elicited such pleasure be considered wrong?

His velvety lips settled over hers again, seemingly drawn back with the same force echoed in her pulse. She returned his kiss, weaving her fingers through the silky hair at his nape, wanting to be closer, to fill every space that separated them. He growled, a masculine sound that reverberated through her and her body responded, her legs squeezing tight as if to quell the ache of desire that continued to grow stronger. She didn’t stop him when he skimmed his fingers along her ribs and settled his palm over her breast. It felt too good. *Too right.*

His fingers left her face, brushing across her jaw and down her neck, then further, to wrap around her shoulders and draw her farther into his arms. What may have started as an ordinary kiss, now held the power to overtake them. She should feel ashamed, to be pressed against a man she hardly knew, to allow him to fondle and caress her body, and yet that emotion never manifested. Instead, empowerment and desirability evoked a sense of being utterly feminine and strong. The idyllic setting and delicious thrill of Malcolm’s kiss was enough to make her feel lightheaded, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to stop.

In another heartbeat, he was the one to break away, his breath coming as fast as hers as he slid his hands down to her waist, holding her firmly, unsure who he meant to steady with the gesture.

She lowered her hands from where they’d cupped his head and rested them atop his shoulders, but she didn’t widen the

distance between them. Her heartbeat thrummed so hard she wondered if he noticed the tempo against his chest. The air was heated with the intimacy of their embrace, and she inhaled the scent of spicy cloves, a fragrance she would always associate with him.

“Forgive me.” His voice sounded gruff and breathless. “I shouldn’t have kissed you without asking permission.”

“No,” she answered, a quick shake of her head accompanying the word. “I wanted you to. I still want you to.” She sounded equally short of breath and her cheeks warmed, knowing what she’d just confessed was terribly improper. Still, her body screamed for *more*. More of the deep rumble of his voice. More of his touch. More of his kisses.

“We should continue our walk.” He glanced at the moon as if looking for an answer in the stars. She didn’t know what question troubled him, but she fell into step, their fingers laced once again. Could he detect the tremble that still coursed through her?

They came to a steep, stone staircase that led down to a crook in the riverbank where several rowboats were moored alongside a narrow wooden dock.

“I’m one of the oarsmen on the rowing team,” he said, as if hesitant to mention it. He indicated the boats with a cant of his head. “On Saturday mornings there’s rowing and sailing expeditions that begin from this dock.”

Was he inviting her to watch? She was certain she could convince Graham to accompany her.

“I’ve never seen a boat race. It must be strenuous work given the current.” She couldn’t help but glance at his muscular arms. He must be a very good rower, indeed.

“The races begin at ten and there are paths along the riverbank where small groups of spectators gather. Some people like to wager and others pack refreshments. Mr. Barrett is the first manager to extend Vauxhall’s entertainment out into the river and the idea has been well received.”

So, it wasn't an invitation. No, he was much smarter, offering her all the necessary information so she could make the decision whether or not to attend, while there was no risk of her rejection. The realization, that he was vulnerable in that moment, struck an emotional chord.

"It sounds like an exciting way to spend the morning," she said, masking her observation in enthusiasm.

He didn't say more and they turned around to return the way they'd come. When they reached the iron gates of Vauxhall, he stopped at a far enough distance so they could share a few moments of privacy.

"I hope tonight was an enjoyable diversion for you." His voice rumbled through her, and she watched as he reached into his pocket and took out the bag with the remaining marzipan candies. "Why don't you take these with you?"

"Thank you." She took the pouch and tucked it into her skirt pocket. A smile spread across her face before she could stop it.

"I'll walk you to the front gates and call a hackney. I'd like to share the ride with you to ensure you return home safely."

Her smile fell away and she had to make a conscious effort to boost it back into place. "Oh, that's definitely not necessary."

What would he think when she gave her address? When the hackney delivered her to the best section of Mayfair?

"I couldn't possibly hand you up into some hired hack and send you out into the night with no regard for your protection." He scowled, but she found it only made him appear more endearing.

"You're right." She shook her head as if to underscore her ridiculous suggestion, though she had no immediate solution to the problem.

They made their way back through the crowds and out to the street where hackneys waited for an easy fare. Her heart pounded in her chest for a completely different reason than their intoxicating kiss near the riverbank. But then an angel

whispered in her ear and she realized the problem wasn't so worrisome as long as she rode in the hackney alone.

"You don't need to accompany me," she said emphatically, wanting him to know her strong feelings on the matter. "It's almost midnight and the streets will be quiet. I'll be returned home in no time at all."

"I didn't realize it had gotten so late. Time with you..." He didn't finish and she found herself wondering what he might have said, but he only glanced at the moon as if he used it as a clock. She understood his confusion. How did one hour spin into the next so quickly until now when they needed to say goodbye?

His expression suddenly became intense. "I do need to assist a friend."

"What interesting hours you keep," she said blithely, and waved to a nearby hackney to further her plan. "At this time of night, I hope you live nearby."

"Not far at all," he said as if to reassure her. "Just over a few streets to the brick-face on Carlisle. I rent rooms there."

She committed that to memory as the hack pulled in front of them. "Thank you for a wonderful evening. I'll see you soon, I expect."

"Let me tell the driver your direction," he said, squeezing her fingers tightly as he handed her into the cab. "I'm not comfortable with this arrangement but I see the determination in your eyes. There's no sense in arguing, is there?"

"Absolutely not." She suspected relief showed on her face as well. "Eleven Orchard Street."

She watched him relay the address to the driver, a shadow of guilt chasing away her smile. As soon as they pulled away, she'd redirect the driver, otherwise she'd be delivered to the home of her childhood governess.

She hadn't anticipated this little hiccup, but it didn't matter now, as she glanced back to where Malcolm stood, watching her leave, his eyes clung to hers until it became impossible to see him in the darkness.

THE TRUTH IS LIKE THE SUN
AND THE MOON IN THAT IT
CAN'T LONG STAY HIDDEN.

“**Y**ou’re a bit overdressed, aren’t you?” Cosmo huffed as they hauled the coffin out of the boating shed and moved it into the shadows.

“Keep your voice down,” Malcolm scolded, eager to be finished with the task.

It was well past midnight, and instead of lying in bed enjoying pleasant thoughts of Eve, he was here, lingering near the foot of a dank staircase, at the ready to haul a casket up to a waiting dray. The clouds parted and they were gifted with moonlight in a stroke of luck they didn’t deserve.

“I’ll go first and walk backward.” He exhaled deeply, cursing his foolishness for the hundredth time. “But pay attention to what you’re doing. The last thing we need is for either one of us to drop the damned thing or worse, get hurt in the process.”

“No need to get huffy,” Cosmo mumbled, barely loud enough for Malcolm to hear.

He decided not to respond and instead crouched down and gripped his end of the coffin. “Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, Mac.”

“That much is true.”

Malcolm heaved the wooden box upward and leveraged it against his chest, climbing up the stone stairs backward, the steep incline and weight of the coffin making each step perilous. All the while, a symphony of grunts, moans, and

epithets in Cosmo's voice serenaded Malcolm's effort. He'd only advanced a short way when he recognized the plan as futile.

"Stop."

"What? Now?" Cosmo asked, clearly unnerved.

"Go back down to the bottom. This isn't going to work."

They returned to the embankment and set the coffin in the dirt. Cosmo looked befuddled.

"Let's put the coffin on the boat and row down river. Then we'll unload it and drive the wagon to where we left it. That has to be easier than trying to carry it up those stairs." Malcolm said, hitching his thumb over his shoulder.

"If you say so, Mac."

"It will take longer, but it will be smarter."

And it was, even if Malcolm didn't return home for several hours. He'd worked rigorously with Cosmo to dig a grave deep enough to bury the coffin near the base of Lambeth Bridge, and while the location wasn't ideal, he didn't live in his own house where he could conveniently hide a body in the flower garden. He'd never before had to complete such an unappealing task, but as Cosmo had jested, he'd become a *Mac of All Trades*, and it was by his own decision that he'd become involved in the scheme from the beginning. At least he could feel relief now that the problem was solved and the matter buried.

He bathed hurriedly and prepared for bed, finally allowing himself the luxury of recalling his evening with Evelyn, the light, entrancing fragrance she wore on her skin and the surge of desire he'd experienced when he'd kissed her lips. He knew he played with fire, and yet the reminder that it was an isolated indulgence and soon life's circumstances would put an end to their relationship served as an adequate excuse for his behavior. Her image was his last thought as he fell asleep.

However, morning came quickly, and in a routine of restlessness and responsibility, he was back to work, feeling worse for the wear. There was no rowing practice on Friday

mornings since the exhibition races were held the following day, so he set to work examining the structural integrity of the new theater and preparing for the details yet to be completed. He envisioned Eve as she took the stage in two weeks' time, all too aware things would change dramatically thereafter.

“Birdie,” Graham sang her name. “Where are you?”

Sequestered with her thoughts on the far side of the rose garden, Evelyn didn't respond, wanting to savor her solitude a bit longer. There were few places that brought her as much peace as the garden, but not when her cousin visited.

“I have a secret.” His melodic intonation reached for her across the blooms and she heard the wrought iron gate ease open, knowing Graham was making his way to her. She closed her eyes anyway, and summoned the image of Malcolm in the moonlight, right before he'd leaned in to kiss her.

“There you are!”

She reluctantly relinquished her daydream.

“Here I am,” she answered, picking up the pruning shears she had yet to use.

“Someone has been keeping secrets.”

“I suppose that someone is you,” she said, making a judicious snip to the stem of a wilted bloom and feeling peeved she would need to sustain conversation when other, more inviting thoughts begged for precedence.

“Not I,” he replied with emphatic exaggeration before he leaned on the cornerstone of one of the raised flowerbeds. He watched her with both brows raised.

“What?” she asked, unwilling to participate in one of his guessing games. “Why don't you just tell me what brought about your impromptu visit?”

“Prickly,” he said, his expression unreadable as he admired a cluster of damask roses that brushed his shoulder. “But that might just be the aftereffects of the ale you shared with Mr. Walker last night.”

She froze, the pruning shears poised to cut and an automatic denial on her tongue. But instead, she lowered the tool to the gardening caddy she'd placed on the border wall. She needed an extra minute to absorb the swift exchange of emotions coursing through her — surprise, vulnerability, and last, a measure of exposure, her secret revealed. Memories of last night were precious and for her alone, like a flower pressed between the pages of a book. Yet, Graham was her confidant and he apparently already knew, so what sense did it make to deny his suggestion?

“You were there?” she asked, her voice tight as she wiped her hands on her gardening apron.

“You needn't behave as if you've done something wrong. Vauxhall Gardens is a public place,” Graham said glibly. “Far be it from me to pass judgement. I'm the one who has always encouraged you to take risks. I'm glad you had fun with your *friend*.”

She didn't like the way he'd inflected the last word, as if he *had* judged, even though he claimed not to do any such thing. And there it was in the bright light of day. The very reason her daydreams were nothing more than foolishness. She belonged to a world where Malcolm would be considered beneath her and unworthy of her time.

“Why didn't you say hello?” she managed, drawing a deep breath to steady her emotions.

“For the same reasons I've just shared,” Graham elaborated, pausing to stroke the petals of the closest flower. “Had I interrupted it would have distracted you from the rest of your evening. You would have wondered what I was thinking, or worse, you might have left altogether.”

She knew he was right. “Were you there with Avery?”

“I was.”

“So, the real reason you didn't approach me was because you insist on keeping Avery and me apart,” she said, a thread of superiority making her voice stronger.

“Aren’t you the clever one?” He leaned in and nuzzled the rose he’d admired.

“That’s a good way to get stung,” she said, motioning toward the flower. “Bees are territorial insects. They’ll protect what they want.”

“Is that your sly way of telling me not to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong?”

She laughed outright. “Perhaps I am more clever than I give myself credit for.”

They didn’t say anything for a few minutes and instead co-existed in a pleasant silence that was as much a habit of their relationship as their heated discussions. A starling landed nearby and chirped its high-pitched opinion of the day. Two dragonflies buzzed past, their colors blurred by the speed of their flight.

“You know,” Graham said softly, his tone altogether different from the beginning of their conversation. “You’re lucky it was me who saw you with Mr. Walker.”

“And why is that?” She reclaimed the pruning shears and concentrated on the plant in front of her.

“Oh, Birdie, you know why. Regardless of your father’s path to societal ruin, you need to remember your station. You were overly concerned about singing at Vauxhall, predicting the gossip would overtake your good intentions and drown you in ugly commentary, and yet you made a second decision that tempted a worse fate.”

“Mr. Walker behaved as any kind gentleman would,” she said, with more vehemence than she intended, the urge to defend him rising inside her with fierce insistence.

“I’m sure he did,” Graham agreed. “But I don’t make Society’s rules. If I did, I would live a far happier life.”

His voice held such a vulnerable note, she immediately turned in his direction, but her cousin averted his gaze and kept talking, as if he refused to allow her to see some unknown emotion.

“There are ways,” he began, though hesitantly, “if you wanted to continue to see your carpenter friend. If you felt strongly enough that you wanted to pursue more than a casual friendship with Mr. Walker.”

She didn’t reply, waiting instead for him to say more.

“It would have to be a secret. Whether hidden in plain sight or in a rented flat on Barton Street. You would need to be discrete. More careful than you’ve ever been with any aspect of your life to date.” His voice had gone soft and his expression grew serious. “That is, if the relationship was something you wanted, *needed*, to make you happy.”

“Graham,” So much emotion had woven through his words, she didn’t know how to reply at first, but connections were being made, his carefully crafted comments and obvious avoidance coming together now to make perfect sense. “Is Avery already spoken for? Is she married?”

A glimpse of something lit his eyes. Hope perhaps? Elation followed by disappointment? She found it impossible to decipher.

“You would be correct if you assumed the situation is difficult. Off-limits, even.”

“I’m so sorry.” She replaced the shears and went to him, gathering Graham into a consoling hug.

“Why does love have to be so complicated?” she asked, once she’d released him.

“And now you’re in love with Mr. Walker?” Graham teased, having regained his ebullient manner.

“I was talking about your relationship,” she said with an expressive scoff.

“I don’t blame you for wanting something different,” Graham replied. “But be aware it comes with a cost. It’s difficult to love someone but not be able to participate in an ordinary daily life. Not to share family gatherings and significant events. You have to create your own happiness, away from everyone and everything, and be satisfied with the choice.”

“That sounds like a painful decision.”

“It is,” Graham said, his tone serious once again. “But love makes all the difference.”

His words resounded in the garden long after he’d left, and Evelyn went about her gardening though her mind spun with their earlier exchange. She couldn’t deny the physical attraction she experienced whenever she was near Malcolm, nor their intriguing conversation, the desire to know more about him, his likes and dislikes, habits, interests, history, and thoughts for the future. It was the telltale signs of infatuation, and she relished the euphoria of it. Malcolm caused her to feel alive and invigorated and *hopeful*. A word that had long ago retired from her emotional inventory.

But when she examined the result of a relationship with him, the excitement of their shared affection paled. Gossip, insinuation, judgment, and disreputation cast long-reaching and ugly shadows over what would happen once a connection was made between her and Malcolm. What would her father say? What right did he have to say anything at all?

It was, as she’d mentioned to Graham earlier, quite complicated. There was the reputation of her aunt and uncle to consider, her cousins and their place in Better Society, not to exclude Malcolm and the assumption he’d prefer not to become the center of some undeserved scandal.

She placed two more roses in her gathering basket and sighed heavily as she closed her shears. Would it be better to end her association with him now, before stronger emotions took root? She already experienced a swirl of giddy anticipation whenever she thought of seeing him again. Or should she allow nature to take its course? She suspected once she made her decision, her love would grow like the bluebill clematis that clung to every inch of the garden bower, anxious and beyond control, a wild thing, wanting to extend as far as possible, to wrap tightly and become impossibly intertwined.

She looped the basket over her arm and picked up her tool caddy. Malcolm’s kiss still lived inside her. Just the thought of his lovely gray gaze caused her breath to catch. She couldn’t

ignore her reaction because it portended future consequences. Wouldn't that be like slamming a door before seeing who'd come to call? Besides, all her speculation that Malcolm felt the same way, experienced the same thrilling jolt of possibility, could be nothing more than her own imaginings.

She latched the garden gate and followed the polished stones that led to the back of the house. Graham had agreed to escort her to the boating expedition tomorrow morning. She supposed she should see what happened afterward. If Malcolm approached her or if there was an opportunity for them to talk, then maybe she would know what to do. Fate would lead her to make a decision one way or the other.

The universe had a unique way of keeping life's scale in balance.

THE UNIVERSE HAD A UNIQUE WAY OF KEEPING LIFE'S SCALE IN BALANCE.

She couldn't imagine a more perfect day to attend a boating expedition. Her first of its kind, and even knowing that fact, she was aware the butterflies tickling her belly had nothing to do with the sporting aspect. The chance to see Malcolm at the helm, if that was what the front of the boat was called, proved so invigorating she hardly touched her breakfast before Graham arrived with his carriage.

The air was dry and sun bright, an unusual occurrence for London, and she wondered fancifully if even the weather conspired to create the ideal conditions for the day. She'd taken care with her choice of clothing, deciding on a straight navy-blue skirt and white linen blouse, muttering about the layers required when she knew at some point, she'd appear a wilted flower from the day's heat. She wore flat walking boots, thinking they'd be the most sensible. Yet even the prediction of a damp corset and the inevitable trickle of perspiration between her shoulder blades didn't lessen her enthusiasm.

She was seated across from Graham now with her straw bonnet on the bench beside her, and she wondered idly if he was equally as anxious. He'd seemed inordinately pleased with her suggestion they meet early and attend the rowing expedition.

"I imagine it's quite strenuous work," she said, in the way of light conversation, her mind conjuring an image of Malcolm's muscular arms as he pulled on the oars. She'd never considered herself such a carnal creature, aware of male

physicality in such detailed inspection. Then again, she amended, the gentlemen of her sphere were always covered in several layers, their bodies perfumed and pampered. Malcolm seemed exposed somehow. Virile and unthinkably masculine. Not just by his simple apparel, but in his attitude and emotions as well. His genuine smile and likeable personality put her instantly at ease. She recalled his touch, the roughened brush of his fingertips on her cheek. With that, a current of desire, swift and sharp, caused her to readjust her position on the seat.

“Yes,” Graham agreed. “And the force of the river makes it all the more difficult. This isn’t a jolly afternoon jaunt on the lake at Hyde Park. The oarsmen will need all their strength to not only navigate the Thames, but compete to win. I’ve made a handsome wager on your carpenter friend.”

“His name is Malcolm,” she said tartly. “You know that.”

“But it’s more fun to tease you,” he replied. “You blush at his mention, and at the same time, your eyes spark with fire. I think you’re sweet on him. I’ve never seen you react so sharply for any other fellow. Certainly not Lord Fenley.”

“Who?”

“And the lady proves my point,” he said, with a wide grin.

They arrived to see they’d underestimated the audience size, and she immediately feared they wouldn’t be able to find a satisfactory place along the embankment to watch the competition. But then, whether by proximity or serendipity, two men vacated an ideal location at the same moment Graham and Evelyn approached the viewing platform.

A flicker of recognition held her immobile at first. One of the men had dark skin and tight, curly hair. He was a stranger. But the other was Dante and seeing him again caused an irrational leap in her pulse. She’d never returned to his tent after that disturbing day, unwilling to receive whatever he so anxiously offered.

Dante acknowledged her with a slight smile, his voice rippling through her with knowing insistence. “How fortuitous that you would arrive at this exact moment. Why don’t you

both take our place here on the platform? You will have an excellent view of the races.”

She shifted her attention to Graham, who'd gone pale at the interaction, and she wondered if Dante had an odd effect on everyone. Nevertheless, they moved into place, knowing the fortune teller's suggestion was too good to be dismissed.

Indeed, it proved the ideal location. Not only could she see down the embankment and beyond to where the race would begin, but if she leaned slightly to the left, she had a pristine view of the river's length where the boats turned around the buoys and headed to the finish line.

Six narrow sculls were positioned to start and she easily located Malcolm as the lead rower in the furthest boat. He couldn't see her and he certainly wasn't looking. His attention was on the water, although occasionally he glanced back and spoke to his partner at the rear.

Lord, he looked handsome! Sunlight glistened off the dark hair that showed beneath a tweed cap akin to the type worn by newsboys on the corner. His hands were on each oar and his body poised for the sound of the pistol signaling the start of the race. So concentrated was she on memorizing his fine features that she nearly jumped out of her boots when the shot was fired.

“Good thing we're not too close to the water,” Graham joked, amused by her reaction. “There'd be no chance of enjoying the gala after the race if you're drenched like a river-rat.”

She briefly considered pushing her cousin into the water, perhaps blaming the incident on the wide brim of her bonnet and her inability to see, but she discarded the thought just as quickly. Graham wasn't behaving any differently than he had his whole life. It was she who was jumpy and skittish and uncertain. And yet at the same time she was excited and hopeful and enthralled. Her emotions were a kaleidoscope, and someone kept shaking up the bits of colored glass.

The crowd came alive at the same time as the pistol fire. Spectators called out for their favorite oarsmen having

invested in a wager, while others urged particular boats to go faster. It was brutal work, both men in each scull pulling hard on the wooden oars, fighting against the river's current for the first half and then gaining the benefit of the same after they rounded the buoy. Evelyn was invigorated, anxiously following Malcolm's boat with her eyes as it moved into the first position, and then beyond as it sliced through the water and lengthened its lead.

On the riverbank below the platform, more and more people pushed forward to have a better view. At first, Evelyn paid no heed as she was too entranced by the race, but when her eyes sought out the finish line, she noticed how tightly compressed the people had become in their quest to see the outcome.

"Graham," she said, a premonition of unease clenching her middle, "they shouldn't stand so close to the water's edge." She kept her eyes on the scene, tucking a wayward curl into the side of her bonnet, wishing she could tuck the spectators safely away in kind.

"Good thing we're up here," Graham replied, though she found his answer unsatisfactory, his eyes never leaving the oarsmen who continued their strenuous effort.

Malcolm's boat won easily, gliding over the finish line before circling back to wait for the other oarsmen to finish. She watched his every movement and when he glanced toward the platform, she inched her hand upward, wanting to wave and at the same time unsure if she should. She managed a slight ruffling of her fingers although there was no keeping her smile contained. He tipped his cap in return and a rush of warmth swept through her that had nothing to do with the heat of the day, closely packed crowd, or bothersome underlayers of clothing.

As the last boat skimmed across the finish line, an undulation of celebratory cheering moved like a wave across the spectator area. Loud laughter, exclamations of congratulations, and equally loud bemoaning for having chosen the wrong boat, swelled around them.

Down on the riverbank, a tug-of-war of sorts was underway. Several people attempted to leave the narrow area at the same time as a surge of newcomers moved forward to commend the oarsmen who had returned to the dock. A woman and her three children were among the people who waited near the river's edge, and Evelyn wondered if perhaps one of the men were her husband and if she'd brought her family to Vauxhall Gardens to watch him in the race. A cozy feeling of familial yearning accompanied the idea. How lovely it must be for that family to spend the day in sunshine and laughter and then after the race was over, hie off to the enjoyment of a picnic lunch on the lawn.

But in the next breath, things took a decided turn for the worse. If Evelyn's eyes weren't glued to Malcolm, she might have missed the distressing chain of events that occurred, especially as it all happened quickly. One minute the child was standing beside the dock piling and the next he was gone, dropped into the river like stone, his tawny head bobbing once, twice, before he disappeared completely under the murky current. The child's mother let out a wail for help, her arms flailing, but with the ongoing raucous celebration, no one paid her any heed.

Without hesitation, Malcolm dove from his boat and swam toward where the child had last appeared, his strong arms slicing through the water and propelling him forward much the same the way he'd rowed to victory only minutes earlier. Evelyn gripped Graham's hand, unable to articulate what she witnessed, her throat too tight to force words out.

"What is it?" Graham asked, alarmed by the way she'd grasped his hand.

"Someone fell in," she said. "There."

She managed to indicate what was happening near the dock, and it appeared other spectators had begun to notice as well. Even if they didn't understand that a child had fallen into the river, they saw Malcolm diving below the surface, staying under for what seemed like far too long, before resurfacing only to dunk below the water again.

The mother was crying hysterically now, her other two children clinging to her skirts, while a stranger tried to console her. Evelyn watched, a pulse of dread marching in rhythm with her heartbeat, the knowledge that every minute that passed was precious time lost.

“He’s been under quite a while,” Graham said, as he took hold of her elbow and attempted to turn her away.

“Stop. What are you doing?” She didn’t know if he’d spoken of the child or Malcolm but either way she wasn’t leaving. She stared at the river but all she saw was the cap Malcolm had worn as it floating away listlessly.

“You don’t want to watch this, Evelyn.”

“Let go of me.” She jerked her arm free, returning her eyes to the water just as Malcolm surfaced with one arm tightly grasped around the child who appeared as limp as a ragdoll. Malcolm hoisted the boy over his shoulder and swam to shore.

People along the riverbank immediately moved back and allowed him room as he grappled up the ladder on the dock and placed the child on the ground. Somehow, in only those few minutes, awareness had spread throughout the entire crowd stretched along the Thames, bringing with it a solemn quiet. It was as though everyone stood in wait, motionless and unable to breathe, in kind to the boy on the riverbank.

But not Malcolm. He rolled the child on his side, striking him with intention between his scrawny shoulder blades as he held firmly around the boy’s middle. After three thrusts, the lad regurgitated a puddle of river water, opened his eyes, and immediately began to cry. Malcolm stared at the child, perhaps confirming he was actually conscious and alert, before he stepped back and allowed the boy’s mother to swoop in. It was what Evelyn saw in the aftermath that troubled her the most. Malcolm slicked the hair back from his face, his intense expression more a look of pained distress and solemn sadness than relief. His reaction was entirely unexpected.

“Well,” Graham said, his voice laced with awe, “that’s not something you see every day.”

“No,” she agreed, impressed and yet unsettled by what they’d witnessed. “It certainly isn’t.”

No one seemed to notice as Malcolm stepped away. He was soaking wet and likely anxious to change his clothing. All around them the crowd returned to their own conversations, distracted momentarily but otherwise unbothered. A band began to play in the distance, but Evelyn was hardly recovered. Naturally, she’d feared for the child. That went without saying. But she couldn’t completely rationalize the intense distress she’d experienced as she waited for Malcolm to resurface.

“I need to go home,” she said, the words sounding numb, empty, in kind to her mood.

“Of course.” Graham took her arm gently. “Let’s go now.”

It was almost noon by the time Evelyn arrived at Carlisle Street. She wore a lightweight cape with a hood in case she needed to become invisible, but the idea amused her more than anything else. When she’d looked at her reflection in her bedchamber mirror, she’d likened her appearance to someone who’d fallen from the pages of a fairytale.

The idea to visit Malcolm had come to her on the way home with Graham. Malcolm was visibly shaken from what had occurred. Understandably so. She’d seen the evidence on his face, in his stance, and the way he’d left quietly, not speaking to the mother of the child or accepting accolades for his heroic rescue. However, something was amiss. She knew it and *felt* it. It was an easy decision to change her clothes, gather a few things, and call for her carriage.

Now, with a basket of food and a bouquet from the garden, she had her driver leave her at the corner. Walking along the pavement, she looked for the kind of brick-face building he’d described the previous evening, happening upon three identical rental tenements that fit the description, side by side at the center of the block. She might have made a mistake if she hadn’t spotted Malcolm at the third-floor window of the building on the right. He was staring at the sky and not the

street, one hand splayed on his chest. Had he been hurt during his rescue of the lad? He didn't look like someone proud of his heroic actions and quick thinking.

Instead, the unbearable sadness etched into his features looked more like personal pain. Her heart squeezed with empathy, at a loss to understand why he appeared so forlorn. She thought better of her visit now, taking a small step backward, unwilling to lose sight of him and at the same time unsure she wanted to be seen.

His gaze fell to the street and their eyes met. A breath later, he was gone. It happened so fast she wondered if she hadn't imagined it.

Was he avoiding her? Did he want to be left alone? Perhaps she'd invaded his privacy by coming here. She frowned at the basket and flowers. She was a fool. It would be prudent to leave the items on the steps to the building and go home.

"I shouldn't be here," she murmured softly, the truth of that statement resounding on several levels.

"Eve."

Caught up in her reprimands, his voice registered as an afterthought. When she looked up, he was there, standing on the front steps of his building with that same bereft look haunting his features, and she couldn't stop from going to him.

Malcolm knew better than to invite trouble. Yet somehow, he also knew Eve was aware of whatever game they played and the undeniable affinity that existed between them like two planets in the same orbit. She was a willing participant. Besides, they were only going to talk a few minutes. That was fine. He needed conversation and distraction.

Desperately.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," she said, her voice soft with apology.

“You didn’t. I’m glad you’ve come,” he said, wanting to assuage her doubt.

“I brought you a few things.” She lifted the basket slightly. “I thought after what happened at the riverbank...”

Her voice faded away and he realized she was drawing conclusions. He’d need to explain.

“That was very nice of you.” He gestured toward the building. “Would you like to come upstairs? I have tea. We can put the flowers in water.”

Because it took two people to fill a vase.

He scoffed inwardly, a hint of humor seeping in. He didn’t even own a vase.

She glanced at him shyly, uncertainty in her gaze. What was she thinking?

“Yes, why don’t we do that?” she said at last.

He opened the door for her, taking the lead once they’d entered the narrow hall. They didn’t speak as they climbed the stairs. He rented space on the third floor. The rooms were modest, but clean. He didn’t need more than that. Once they entered, he snatched up the damp towels from his bath he’d left thrown over the back of a chair and a few empty plates, quickly placed in the sink.

“This is very fine, indeed,” she said, and he held back a chuckle.

It was an act of kindness for her to compliment what he imagined was far below her standards. He didn’t object when she set the basket on the table and began to meander around the small interior. He had nothing to hide. At least not anything she would discover from his living area.

“This should work.” He filled a glass jar with water from the pitcher on the counter and brought it to the table. “I’ve always liked roses. They remind me of my mother.”

“They’re from my garden,” she said, as she returned to the table, her exploration momentarily stalled. “I adore them as well. However, they can be demanding, insisting on coddled

treatment and excessive attention. It's a good thing they repay my care with effusive blooms — otherwise I might abandon them for daisies instead."

He'd watched her the entire time she'd spoken, his mood shifting, lightening, just by the few words she'd shared with him. "Why not have both? Elegant roses, yet also vibrant wildflowers, free from constraints and growing with abandon."

She arched a brow in reply to his comment, the innuendo noted. The mood in the room changed decidedly.

"You acted with astute bravery earlier this morning." She began to arrange the roses carefully. "Most people hadn't noticed the child, and many didn't act even when they realized what had happened. But you, already exhausted from having accomplished the strenuous race, thought nothing of your own safety and without hesitation dove into the current to save the boy."

"You make it sound far grander than it was." He stepped closer, watching her hands as she arranged each stem, unsure he wanted to look into her beautiful blue eyes and see the emotion there.

"Oh, it was more than grand." She turned, closing the distance between them. "You might reject the idea that you're a hero, but if you were to ask that mother or child, or any of the people who watched you dive underwater repeatedly until you emerged with the boy, I know you'd hear them confirm it was true."

"Eve..."

He saw her shiver. As if when he'd said her name, the word had caressed her skin and caused the reaction.

"What you did, how you risked your own life to save that child, it was extraordinary," she said in a heartfelt whisper.

"It was nothing."

"Nothing?" Her question was hushed, but it contained strong emotion.

“Recompense, perhaps.” His answer came out gruffly and he wondered why now, after so many years, he was willing to open the locked box of his regrets.

“I don’t understand.” She reached up and brushed the hair from his brow, but she didn’t immediately take her fingers away. She traced over his cheekbone, his jaw, settling her fingertip against his lips. It took all his strength not to move. “I couldn’t breathe while I waited for you to resurface. It’s shameful to admit. I was worried about the child naturally, but my heart seized for *your* safety. It may have only been a few minutes, but it had the power to break me... the thought that you might drown. That any harm would come to you. That we ___”

He pulled her into his arms, into his kiss, with the surety no words could express what he wanted to say.

And she understood.

A PAST IS A PLACE TO LEARN, NOT LIVE.

In that moment, Evelyn wondered if it wasn't what was left unspoken that wielded the most control and possessed the power to weave an ethereal spell around them. Regardless, there was danger in examining decisions and consequences, so she chose sensation instead.

She'd hoped he'd experienced the same thrum of desire, the same ache of yearning, but once their mouths met, she knew unequivocally that her fierce longing was matched. She was here, in his rooms, unbound by society's expectations and demands.

Utterly free.

His kiss was greedy and she reveled in being wanted, *craved*, as she opened her mouth and allowed his tongue to sweep in, to twist and tangle with hers, while his hands skimmed over her, brushing her ribcage, circling her back, until at last he settled his palm on her breast. His thumb rubbed over her nipple, tight and sensitive, and a jolt of intense pleasure arched through her. She arched into his caress, wanting more, tired of tamping down the insistent desire to be touched by him.

A growl, some masculine sound of approval, came from his chest and he broke their kiss, trailing his lips along her jaw, to her earlobe and the arch of her neck.

"Eve." The hoarse rasp of her name and erotic warmth of his breath against her skin caused her to shiver. "I want you. I

shouldn't. But knowing that that doesn't make the wanting stop."

His admission pulsed through her, settling in her belly and lower, where she grew wet, her body reacting swiftly to his every caress. She placed her hands on his arms to steady herself, his biceps firm beneath her fingertips, and she looked into his beautiful gray gaze.

"I know none of this makes sense, that on a different day I might have made a different decision, but here at this moment, I only want you. Afterward we can return to the worlds we live in."

Her words were nothing more than puffs of breath, as if she raced to say them and have him hear them, unsure if her sense of urgency was instigated by need or the fear their shared moment would end if she didn't grasp it quickly enough, like a rainbow over the water, promising beauty but at the same time daring to disappear. Saying the words freed something inside her.

He brought his hands up to cradle her face, capturing her lips in a deep, lingering kiss that instigated wicked pleasure. She didn't fight against the force between them. She didn't want to. It would be like trying to defy gravity. A waste of time when the inevitable would win out in the end. The realization caught her, so sharp she couldn't breathe. When he murmured her name, his mouth beside her ear, she melted against him.

"Let me take care of you, Eve." His voice rumbled against her skin and yet another sensation coursed through her.

"I would like that." Her words came out as a whisper, but he heard her nonetheless.

Lacing his fingers with hers, he led her across the room where a single upholstered armchair sat beside the hearth. A low fire burned in the grate.

"Please, sit here," he said, and her confusion must have shown.

Her heart thundered in her chest. She expected him to take her to his bedroom. She *wanted* to be taken to his bedroom, to undress, and feel his hard, hot body against hers, skin to skin. The more she thought about it the more unbearable her desire became. She squeezed her legs together as if she could stop the throbbing pulse of her fantasy, and still he stood there waiting. What good could come from sitting in a chair?

“Trust me, Eve,” he said, when she hadn’t moved.

She settled in the chair, her skirts tucked neatly on each side. The fire crackled, the noise too loud. Malcolm knelt before her and removed one of her shoes, then the other, and she relaxed somewhat, belatedly realizing he meant to undress her after all. Then, perhaps, they would go to his bed.

A simmer of anticipation warmed her from the inside out. His actions were deft, sure in their intention as he moved layers of fabric aside, the light pressure of his fingertips on her calf excruciatingly lovely. A sigh of pleasure escaped. She watched him intently, saw his fleeting smile in return to her reaction.

When the back of his hand brushed her inner thigh, the coarse friction of his touch fired through her and she almost moaned, catching the sound as her teeth sank into her lower lip. But he only sought the edge of her stocking, rolling it carefully down to her ankle before he placed it aside, first the left, then the right. Her skirts concealed her legs, and from where she reclined in the chair, she could see little else, but he still knelt in front of her and she wondered when he would stand and take her into the adjoining room.

“You are so beautiful, Eve, like the rarest flower.” His every syllable swirled inside her, silky and entrancing as woodsmoke. “Close your eyes. Dream. Let me take care of you.”

His request left her puzzled, yet she couldn’t think, her mind clouded by the thrum of her pulse and the veil of physical desire. When she brought her eyes to his, she was seared by the intensity she found there. He wanted her in equal measure, and she reveled in the realization.

His fingers grazed the top of her foot and her legs trembled. She couldn't stand if she wanted to, so she leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes as he'd asked, and losing herself in sensation.

He adjusted her skirts and the warm heat of the fire caressed her ankles, calves, knees —

“Malcolm.” Her voice was a rasp, and she slit her eyes open to see what he was doing.

But he didn't answer, busy moving layers of fabric to bundle upward, until she knew by his gaze, smoldering hotter than the hearth, that she was exposed.

A jolt of shock delivered clarity, although now she found herself mute. Worse yet, he was hardly finished. He took her by the hips, gently moving her forward on the seat before he carefully hooked her legs over each arm of the chair.

Her skin burned in mortification. When she looked at Malcom, his face was serene, his eyes heavy-lidded with desire. He licked his lips, and she all at once understood what he meant to do. She should object. Lift her hands from where they rested uselessly and somehow stop him. But she couldn't. Fascinated, intrigued, frightened, and at the same time eager, she wanted to feel everything he offered, to share herself with him in the most intimate way. A noise escaped her lips, a keening whimper composed of aching restlessness, and she closed her eyes again, allowing her head to fall back in complete surrender.

Time slowed. It might have stopped completely, and in that span her senses sharpened. For a few suspended moments, only her heartbeat pulsed in her ears. But then he moved closer, the feather soft touch of his hair against her skin was followed by the tender heat of his exhale, and at last the slow, deliberate stroke of his tongue as he tasted the secret warmth between her legs.

She'd never known such exquisite pleasure-pain existed. She pressed the back of her head against the chair frame, her body arching and legs trembling. His left hand found her hip and held her while he continued his wicked torture. She

managed a word, his name, her voice sounding far away, and still he tasted and teased her, stroking his tongue along her folds in aching slow caresses followed by swift passes that left her feeling lightheaded. He couldn't continue. She'd never last. She couldn't breathe. Yet some unrecognizable force built inside and it frightened her. How could her entire being, every sensitized cell in her body, be pooled into one carnal caress?

A long-held breath shuddered through her. He would bring her to the edge of oblivion if he continued. She was strung so tightly she would shatter, and yet she didn't want him to stop. She clenched her eyes. Yellow stars danced in the velvet black behind her lids until he slid two fingers inside her at the same moment his tongue smoothed over the sensitive bud at her core. Then her world exploded, white-hot and liquid.

She stayed that way, reclined and sated, in a cocoon of tremulous pleasure, vaguely aware as Malcolm righted her clothing. He left the room only to return a few minutes later while she slowly came back to herself. She wasn't so missish that she'd never explored sensual pleasure. A quiet life didn't mean a *chaste* one. But nothing she'd ever experienced or dared to dream possible could compare with how her body awoke in this moment, as if she was reborn. Invigorated.

Finally alive.

He kissed the top of her head, murmured something into her hair, and she opened her eyes to see him gazing down at her, a tender emotion she didn't recognize evident in his expression. Heat rose in her cheeks, but she refused to be embarrassed.

"I didn't know what to expect." Her comment was honest if nothing else.

He smiled, a slight tilt of his lips, and she stood up and went to him.

"I don't want you to think I offer my body to anyone who shows me attention."

"You trusted me. I know that." His expression grew serious. "Besides, I'd never assume what you just suggested."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pleased when he immediately encircled her with his own. In his embrace, she found strength and safety, but she also found unconditional affection and acceptance. Qualities that had been otherwise absent for most of her life.

They kissed again, sharing their emotions wordlessly, until she pulled back and rested her cheek on his chest, fascinated by the steady beat of his heart, at how he'd become such a meaningful part of her life in such a short period of time. She hardly knew him beyond their association at Vauxhall, and at the same time, it seemed like she'd known him forever.

"This morning..." she began in a soft voice. "What troubled you on the riverbank? After you recovered the child? You didn't celebrate. You didn't even smile."

His body tensed, every muscle going rigid, though he didn't move away.

"The situation reminded me of a less successful outing," he said, after a brief pause. Sadness ruined his words, confessing much more than his statement.

"I'm sorry." She raised her eyes to his, wanting to ease the pain she saw there, but knowing words would likely prove ineffective. Her regrets were ingrained in her soul. She assumed his were, too. "Did it happen long ago?"

It was the wrong question to ask. He released her and walked to the window, diverting his attention outside. "I don't talk about it."

"I understand." And she did. She rarely spoke of her mother's untimely death. She kept it bottled up, tightly corked, so the tender memories and lonely remorse wouldn't overwhelm her. And she hardly spoke of her father's disinterest to anyone other than her cousin. That was a knife that kept cutting, the blade dulled from use, but ever persistent.

Malcolm stood with his back to her and she didn't know if he would welcome her comfort. She knew little of his personal history, and had learned through her own experiences that the longer one stoked the embers of regret, the more likely they

would ignite. But while she considered how to breach the silence, he began instead.

“It happened on my watch. I should have done a better job to keep him safe.” His voice was low and thoughtful, almost careful, as if the words were sharp and possessed the ability to do harm.

“No matter what happened, I can’t imagine you acted with negligence.” She took a step closer. “Today, you were the only vigilant person at the race.”

“That was this morning. Back then I was young and foolish.”

“You couldn’t have wanted something bad to happen.” She hoped he received her words as they were intended. Grief was a private matter. Remorse as well. Yet she couldn’t *not* console him. He was a good man. She hated for him to believe he was at fault in a tragedy.

She waited, unsure, because her knowledge of what had happened in his past was limited and she didn’t want to say something wrong. After hesitating another few exhales, she crossed the room and wrapped her arms around him from behind to press herself close, offering him support and comfort. Perhaps it would be easier for him to speak of what troubled him if he continued looking out the window instead of into her face.

“It was a pretty day just like this one,” Malcolm said. “He wasn’t supposed to follow me, although sometimes I wonder why I didn’t expect that to happen. He was as much a shadow as he was my younger brother.”

Malcolm’s back rose and fell with the length of a long-held sigh. She’d known him as an amiable man, easy to smile and anxious to assist others, but in a parallel trait she’d discovered they’d shared, he too struggled with an irrevocable sadness.

“Instead, I told him to stay home. That I didn’t want his company. He had no idea where I was going and what I meant to do, and it wasn’t wise to have him tag along. But I should have thought twice. Except I didn’t. I put it out of my mind,

consumed with my own worries because I'd gotten myself mixed up in trouble. I didn't want to disappoint my parents and I didn't want anyone to discover what I'd done. So, I set out that morning to right my wrongs and I refused to let my brother to distract me."

When he didn't continue, she moved to his side and stared out the window, her focus on the other side of the glass. "It's heartbreaking and exhausting to carry the weight of regret."

"I shouldn't have spoken of it. I've already said too much." He shook his head, an ache of sorrow evident in every word. "We shared an intimate afternoon, and I've..."

"You've confided in me," she said, her voice resolute. "You've trusted me enough to tell me about a meaningful part of your life. I wouldn't change that for anything."

They stood elbow to elbow and his hand found hers, warm and waiting, as he twined their fingers.

Malcolm hailed a hackney after walking several blocks to an intersection where the traffic was more trusting. Hackney drivers weren't inclined to visit Barton Street, especially late in the evening. Luckily, it was still bright daylight when Eve left for home, and the process of acquiring her a ride had proven easy. He wondered what she was doing now. With several hours having passed, was she disappointed by what had transpired between them? He decided not to consider it in a rare act of kindness to himself.

He wasn't certain why he'd dredged up his brother's death, marring the precious time they'd spent together. Perhaps it was the automatic ease they'd shared since their first meeting. Although the cause was immaterial when he considered the result. She fascinated him. Not just her talent and beauty. It was something else, something otherworldly, as if a spell had been cast and he'd become enchanted. He scoffed at the notion; the idea was ridiculous.

The cab rolled to a stop and he jumped out. However he felt about Eve, however much she stayed with him, even now,

didn't matter. He wouldn't be in London long enough to see their relationship through. Once the season ended, he would leave the city behind. It was better that way.

“There you are, darling.”

Evelyn turned at hearing her aunt call her name. She was at Milford House, where the family had gathered in an impromptu celebration of her cousin Kate's twentieth birthday. Graham's message had arrived while Evelyn soaked in a lavender bath, her head resting against the rim of the tub and eyes closed as she relived the sensual memories of Malcolm's kisses, on her mouth and other places. One of her maids had retrieved the invitation from where the butler left it atop the silver salver on the chiffoinier in the foyer and placed it on Evelyn's vanity, to be read after she dried herself and dressed.

Her immediate instinct was to decline. It was already close to four o'clock, and the desire to take dinner in her bedchambers and lounge near the fire with a glass of wine was almost a tangible thing. She wanted to live inside her memories a little longer, recalling the intimacy she'd shared with Malcolm. Her skin still tingled. All that occupied her thoughts was how she could plan to see him again.

Perhaps in the end, that singular fact was what forced her to call for her maid and arrange for one of her finer gowns to be made ready. She needed distraction, and Graham and her extended family provided a safe environment for exactly that. Too, she wanted to wish Kate a happy birthday and share in the festivities. How selfish to consider lying abed with her naughty fantasies. If the memory of Malcolm's touch lingered beyond the party, Evelyn would be returned home and to bed within a few hours, thus solving the problem. She promised herself she could 'have her cake and eat it too,' a popular saying that Graham was forever spouting from the poet Jonathan Swift. Cake. There would be cake at the party, wouldn't there?

“Yes, Aunt Jane.”

Dinner had finished over an hour ago, and they'd assembled in the formal drawing room for port and dessert. Kate had mentioned a few of her closest friends were set to join them shortly.

“Will you grace us with a song?” her aunt asked. “Spoil us, before you step into the spotlight next week.”

“Capital idea. Especially since this evening you may enjoy Evelyn's performance for free,” Graham piped in, his words jovial. “Allow me a word or two about song selection.”

And then he scurried across the room to the corner where she stood, her mind replaying her afternoon, that same frisson of energy alive in her blood. Thankfully, her aunt and uncle had received the news that she was performing next week at Vauxhall Gardens with kind surprise and generous excitement. Kate intended to gather a group to attend, and Graham had gone on effusively during dinner, elaborating on the extravagance of his production plans for the show. But none of that was responsible for her delighted demeanor.

Now Graham took her elbow and angled them away from curious eyes in the appearance of a top-secret meeting.

“I'm glad you're enjoying yourself,” he said, though his grin yielded to an expression of concern. “After the near drowning we witnessed this morning and how you went completely pale, I wasn't sure you'd come out this evening, so I'm pleased that you did. It's a convenient diversion.”

When she didn't answer right away, he persisted. “You are all right, aren't you? How did you spend the afternoon?”

His words were said with genuine empathy, and at first Evelyn could only smile in return. She imagined it was beatific, her smile. Like she was lit from the inside out, because that's how it felt to her. Or maybe she was behaving foolishly and it was actually an aftereffect of the champagne. She glanced at the liquid in her glass, the effervescent bubbles doing a coy dance, and she twirled the stem just so she could see the candlelight refract off the facets in the crystal. No, her

giddiness wasn't due to alcohol. She hadn't even finished her first drink.

"Do tell," Graham said, his tone altogether different now, an imperative taking place of a question. "You might want to keep a secret, but your face doesn't know how. What have you been up to, Birdie?"

"I visited Mr. Walker." Lord, it felt good to share. She sighed and took a long sip of champagne. "I wanted to confirm he was well after his heroic rescue."

"I take it from the stars in your eyes that he was quite *well*. Perhaps more than well."

"Yes, very well."

"Are the two of you ready?" Kate asked, at the same time the butler led several guests into the drawing room. "Oh, wonderful! My friends have arrived at the perfect time."

Kate hurried off to greet the newcomers, already caught up with introductions and conversation, but Evelyn hesitated. Instead of a small family gathering, there were suddenly close to twenty people in the room. She placed her glass on the nearest end table and delicately wrung her fingers. Then, she picked it up again and drained the contents.

"Don't you dare look like that," Graham said in a hushed tone. "Kate's birthday offers a fortuitous opportunity to practice. If you feel nervous, imagine something pleasant. Think of Mr. Walker's kisses. That should warm you up."

"Graham!" She gritted out his name.

"Never mind." He took her arm and steered her toward the front of the room. "Carry on."

OFTEN WE WANT THINGS IT
WOULD BE BETTER NOT TO
WANT.

Malcolm strode across the grounds and turned back to stare at the new performance theater. He expected Mr. Barrett shortly, and with only the final minor details left to be completed, Malcolm wanted to appreciate the result of his hard work. Every beam, plank, and support had been painted, varnished, and polished. Plaster had been applied to the back wall, where a mural depicting celestial bodies had transformed the simple structure into a work of art. Stars in various sizes, glittery and sharp, were suspended to give the illusion that whoever stood on stage was floating among the clouds. Thick velvet curtains in a smoky gray color framed the area and softened the freestanding walls that flanked the stage and touched the sky, unhindered by a roof or covering.

He pictured Eve under the glow of moonlight in an elegant, ethereal gown, her eyes bright and voice heavenly as she sang to an awe-struck crowd. He was confident she would charm the audience with her talent. She'd certainly charmed him. He conjured an image of her face when they were last together, her long lashes crushed against petal soft skin, the remnants of their intimacy evidenced by her rosy blush.

But reality intruded too soon. Everywhere he looked, people bustled, the new stage drawing curious friends and other entertainers to investigate. Barrett hadn't arrived yet, but Malcolm spotted Marco, Tessa, and Dante. Daisy and Poppy appeared soon after. Would Eve welcome the attention? He'd praised her skill, knowing Barrett had made his complimentary opinion clear as well, and yet Malcolm believed Eve doubted her own ability.

Somehow, he sensed when she arrived and he looked up. She was headed toward the stage on the arm of her cousin, and yet she stared straight in Malcolm's direction. The arrival of a cart intersected their line of sight as it entered the thoroughfare. Two large signs designed to advertise her upcoming performance rested in its bed beneath a thick canvas covering.

His earlier illusion of Eve singing in the heavens was marred now with frenetic commotion. He walked toward the melee not wanting to miss an opportunity to enjoy Eve's company, and aligned himself in the circle of conversation so he stood directly across from her. Their eyes caught again and held as if they weren't among others in the middle of Vauxhall Gardens. He noticed the hint of a smile on her lips, and the sparkle of their shared secret reflected in her gaze before she looked away.

"This is all so exciting. Only one more week of practice until you'll take the stage," Tessa said with enthusiasm. "Are you ready?"

"The box office has already sold out of tickets to your first performance," Marco added before Eve could answer Tessa's question. "I heard Barrett has ordered more benches to be brought it."

"We haven't had a famous singer take the stage in all the years I've worked here," Tessa added.

"I'm hardly famous," Eve interjected, clearly at odds with the swift flow of discussion whirling around her.

"But you're a proper lady," Daisy said with careful intention. "Isn't that so?"

"She's not one of us. Not a performer," Poppy commented to the group, though her focus was solely on Malcolm. "She's a nob."

The group fell quiet and Malcolm watched Eve closely, wondering how she'd explain the one fact she'd worked hard to conceal.

“It’s true,” Graham said into the breach. “Although it hardly matters. One’s talent isn’t measured by one’s heritage.”

Graham might have thought his explanation sufficed, because he left without further comment and turned toward the cart to examine the signage under the canvas.

“I only meant that Lady Osbourne isn’t familiar with how we do things here at Vauxhall,” Poppy persisted. “I didn’t mean to imply anything else by what I said.”

“I think this is all a distraction, isn’t it?” Daisy put the question to Eve in a deliberate tone. “You’re bored with your life so you thought to change it around a bit.”

“Like you want to try something different,” Poppy added. “Be someone different.”

Marco tugged at Tessa’s hand and they left, walking away without a word. Eve looked stricken, though her expression didn’t last. Poppy and Daisy’s veiled comments were meanspirited and aimed to cause unnecessary tension. Malcolm hesitated, unsure how he should intercede, not wanting to ignite further problems and at the same time anxious to diffuse the situation. And then Eve proved she didn’t need him to rescue her. Not in the least.

“There’s no reason to be petty, girls. My business is hardly a concern of yours,” Eve replied, her tone sugary sweet. “As you mature, you’ll realize emotions aren’t something to be toyed with and words should be considered carefully before spoken. Now, I have more important business to attend and should see to it.”

She left and walked in the opposite direction of the stage. Malcolm watched her go, but he couldn’t follow her outright. That would only instigate more gossip, even if he intended to find her. With her reputation at stake in more ways than one, he didn’t want to see her hurt.

Furious with the conversation and equally frustrated with herself, Evelyn hurried away from the stage, her brisk stride doing little to settle her anger or soothe her temper. She’d

anticipated criticism from her social circle for having chosen to perform at Vauxhall Gardens. It wasn't deemed proper and the behavior was considered beneath her. Yet while she'd expected there to be gossip, she hoped the praise for her performance would outweigh the hurtful rumors of the tongue-wags.

In a twist of circumstances, she hadn't expected the reverse. That the performers here at the entertainment grounds would resent *her*. She supposed it was shortsighted on her part. Why wouldn't they be angry if it seemed she'd encroached on their territory? Clearly the sisters had a fondness for Malcolm. The two girls were threatened by her hold on his attention. And there was the matter of her hiding the fact she'd been born a proper lady. That intentional omission hinted at deceit. The entire situation was maddening.

"Eve."

She didn't answer, dreading the conversation and her weak explanation, and yet unsurprised that Malcolm had followed her. One would think she'd be better prepared, having anticipated this confrontation numerous times.

When he touched her shoulder, she closed her eyes and relished the moment, wondering if she would be able to remember the tender weight of his hand once this was over and done. She shook her head and turned.

"Come," he said, grasping her fingers and tugging her toward a nearby tent.

She had no idea where she'd wandered, too distracted by her emotions. When he lifted the faded canvas flap at the rear of a large tent, she followed him, anxious to speak away from the prying eyes and ears of others.

Inside the air was cool, the area dim. Only a sliver of light seeped through a separation in the panels of a secluded area, somewhere completely private. He faced her now and for a moment she just took him in, the sharp angle of his jaw, the depths of emotion in his soft gray eyes, and the way his dark hair curled in a slight wave near the edge of his shirt.

“It’s true,” she said at last.

“What is?” He took a step closer, his eyes searching her face.

“I didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“My father is Lord Carl Osbourne, Earl of Spencer.” She paused and drew a deep breath, regretting every word that needed to be confessed. “Poppy and Daisy were correct, although they were cruel in their delivery of the news. I don’t belong here. I don’t belong with you.” She steeled herself for his reaction, but he merely stood before her, having somehow moved closer while she’d spoken.

“It would have become known soon enough. The signs in the back of the cart are being hung as we speak. They carry your name and boast that you once performed for the king.”

“I was ten years old,” she muttered. “A child.”

“You’re a woman now.” He touched the fine hairs at her temple before he gently lifted her chin and aligned her lips with his. “One would have to be blind not to see how beautiful you are.”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“No.”

“But I didn’t tell you.”

“You did,” Malcolm said, amusement in his gaze. “Just not with words. But, if it matters to you, you can tell me more about it later.”

Later.

The implied meaning of the word blossomed like a rose in her chest and her heart beat faster. Still, she knew better.

“We shouldn’t do this.” She angled her head, her mouth a whisper from his. Everything inside labelled her a liar as she spoke, especially the insistent desire unfurling inside her.

“Do what?” he said, as he lowered his mouth and captured her lips in a deep, possessive kiss.

She swayed from the impact. He wrapped his arms around her, catching her, locking her against his strong chest as his teeth caught her bottom lip, seeking entry. His biting caress caused her to arch into him, needing to be closer still.

His tongue found hers, anxious and willing, and she whimpered, wanting nothing more than for them to sink into the sensual oblivion they’d found in his rooms. Another few beats and their kiss turned slow and heavy, an enchanting incantation that summoned all the languid pleasure from yesterday afternoon. A throb of longing pulsed through her but she forced her eyes open, pulled back, and broke his hold.

“We shouldn’t.” She was out of breath, and the two words came out as a shallow exhale when she turned away. “This will only make it worse. I know better than to want the impossible.”

He caught her from behind and trailed kisses along her neck. His delicate caresses sent a tremor rippling through her, and that same searing pulse of longing made every muscle in her body tighten.

“Tell me to stop and I will.” He turned her, his hands bracing her waist. “But I don’t think you want that any more than I do.”

“I don’t,” she whispered. “Heaven help me, I don’t.”

He chuckled, a low, deep sound, as tempting and enticing as a warm bed. The sound of his laughter skittered through her, like a stone skipping across the water’s surface before it settled inside her, to keep in her heart. In that startling moment, she realized she’d never heard him laugh. There was so much more about him she wanted to discover.

“I need to feel your skin, taste you again, to cause that prickle of sensation here.” His deep voice beside her ear was all impatience as he skimmed his fingertips along her collar bones, down her neckline to dip beneath the fabric of her day

gown in an attempt prevented by her undergarments. “Why must you insist on wearing so many layers?”

His words faded away as he managed to loosen the fabric slightly. But the echo of Poppy’s harsh words forced logic to interrupt and again, she attempted an objection.

“Malcolm, it can never be more than this,” she whispered, right before she leaned in and crushed her lips to his. Sliding her palms up his chest, she smoothed over the thin cotton of his shirt, tracing his hard muscles and warm skin, twisting her fingers into his hair. She didn’t want to give him up. She’d hardly had any time with him. But she would try, at the least, to make him aware of the circumstances that dictated her life.

“This is enough,” he said, after another long kiss.

And his words broke the spell.

She was a fool.

Why had she assumed he wanted more? She was a distraction to him as much as the reverse was true.

Something new.

An arousing game.

He wasn’t planning his future. Malcolm wasn’t *courting* her.

She was a fool one hundred times over.

That realization struck her like a bucket of cold water.

“This is enough,” she said, the words falling flat as she withdrew from his embrace. She watched his expression cloud with a mixture of confusion and disappointment.

“What’s wrong?”

“We shouldn’t start what we can’t finish.” Her answer sounded cryptic but that wasn’t her intention.

“You’re right,” he agreed, and her heart sank. “Not here.”

No, he’d misunderstood.

“I’ll leave you.” He walked out and she waited, lightheaded from their kisses and the impact of her emotions.

When clarity returned a short time later, she lifted the flap that led into the main area of the tent stepping into the bright interior that had always been there, partitioned with nothing more than a large piece of canvas. She blinked several times as recognition took hold. She was inside the tent where Dante worked. The same scent of rosemary and sage greeted her as her eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight pouring in through the front entrance.

“You have returned,” Dante said, and she startled, not realizing he stood draped in shadows near the corner. “Have you changed your mind?”

“I didn’t know this was your tent,” she replied in way of explanation, wondering if Malcolm had known. But of course, he must. He worked here.

“All are welcome,” Dante said with a slight grin. “Sometimes a person is meant to find a particular place without conscious decision.”

“Oh, no. That’s not what happened,” she said, as she started toward the exit. Dante had a way of drawing her in and at the same time, causing her to feel wary of becoming too close. She needed to return to the stage. Graham must be wondering what happened to her. She was supposed to sing the entire program today, and instead she’d only managed petty bickering and a few bone-melting kisses with Malcolm.

“He is a good man.”

“Who?” Not for the first time, she wondered if Dante had the ability to read her mind.

“I refer to Mr. Walker.” Dante picked up a deck of cards. “But if you’re unsure of his feelings, you should permit me to consult the stars. Lady Tarot will tell you everything you’d like to know.”

“I mean no disrespect,” she said carefully, “But I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Allow me to prove you wrong.” Dante gestured toward a wooden table on the far side of the tent. “It will only take a

few minutes, and a brief span of time in exchange for insight that will assuage your misgivings is a fair and equal trade.

She swallowed thoughtfully and considered his offer, knowing a few more minutes wouldn't matter at this point. But what if he informed her of something dire? Foreboding news that would haunt her as he exposed her secrets to the light of day? What if he discovered her deepest fears? Taking the stage and failing. A confrontation with her father. Scandal with Malcolm. Disgrace. Death. She forced herself to stop, the list in her head becoming overwhelmingly long. She had no desire to tempt fate or invite existential dread.

“You should consider the opposing view,” he said, with that same uncanny sense of observation. “You might discover reassurance and other pleasant information. Success. Friendship. Reunion. Love.”

“How do you do that?” she asked cautiously.

“It is a gift,” he replied, the simple answer doing little to soothe her nerves. “Most times, it is a blessing.”

“And I can leave whenever I wish?” She eyed the table again and Dante's laughter caught her unaware.

“Of course.” He grinned now, amusement alive in his eyes. “Do you fear for your safety?”

He shuffled the cards as if the decision had been made and then went to the table, where they both sat down. Silence enveloped the tent, the air heavy with untold confessions, and she laced her fingers together in her lap, a sliver of doubt skittering down her spine. Dante arranged the cards in a pattern with a horizontal line atop a vertical line to form a cross. He didn't look at her, his complete concentration on the placement, and she darted her eyes around the interior, as impatient as her racing heartbeat.

The illustration of the Garden of Eden, the one she'd noticed the first time she'd come inside the tent, was gone. Now a large picture of a man and young girl, reminiscent of a father and daughter, hung in the same place. Like everything she'd discovered about Dante, the illustration struck her as

preternatural. She shifted in her seat, wringing her fingers tighter as she waited for him to reveal the first card.

GOOD FORTUNE, LIKE TRUE
LOVE, FAVORS THE FEARLESS.

“M ac!”

Malcolm turned and spotted Cosmo as he approached with his hand raised in greeting.

“I’m glad I found you.”

“Why?” Malcolm asked, taking in his friend’s disheveled appearance. “Has something happened?”

“Yes. I have good news,” Cosmo said, pausing to catch his breath before he continued. “I know where we need to make the delivery.”

“I thought we were finished with that business.”

“Not if there’s a chance to still earn a pocket full of quid,” Cosmo went on, unbothered.

“Have you considered that whatever was put in that coffin is probably ripe and rotten by now?” Malcolm scoffed.

“Only if it was alive at some point.”

“Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?”

“I would dig it up myself, but it’s a two-man job and I’m not sure I remember the exact location we buried the thing. It only makes sense for us to finish what we started.” Cosmo looked more serious now.

“I only started this mess because you convinced me it would be a fast way to make money.”

“And it still is.” Cosmo nodded vigorously. “Tonight, we can make the delivery and be done with it. What do you say?”

“You don’t want to hear what I have to say,” Malcolm grumbled, aware he was going to become involved further even though logic told him he shouldn’t.

“Thank you, Mac.” Cosmo grinned and gave Malcolm an appreciated slap on the shoulder. “I’ll meet you at midnight.”

Did the candles flicker? Evelyn’s imagination had to be playing tricks. She supposed it could be a draft, but the air inside the tent seemed still, the moment suspended in anticipation.

“Six of Swords.”

Bringing her attention to the table, she watched as Dante produced a single card apart from the others he’d placed in formation.

“Six of Swords is your significator,” he began. “This card represents you.”

“Me?” she asked, skeptically eyeing the depiction of a ferryman on a little boat. A child was also aboard the skiff. “Why?”

“Asking why is a fool’s task. Six of Swords shows that you are taking a journey. It invites you to let go of whatever is holding you back and look toward the future. Your journey will require compromise and difficult decisions.” He didn’t elaborate more, and touched the pattern arranged on the table before he lent her a brief glance and turned the next card. A swift flick of his fingers revealed a lovely drawing that featured an angel with bright red wings and a headful of blond curls. The angel held a long brass horn to his puckered lips, as if he was poised to create music from the clouds. She released a long-held breath. Perhaps she’d become unnecessarily worried over what this reading would reveal. Such a joyful image could never be the foreteller of bad news.

“Judgement,” Dante said, his voice careful as if he shared a secret.

“Is that a good card?” she asked, her voice equally as hushed.

“Your first card is your most important. It will influence every card that comes after it.” He placed the Judgement card over the Six of Swords.

She allowed herself to smile, encouraged by the cheeky angel that stared up at them. “Does the judgement card mean that I’m making good decisions and using sound judgement?” Her idea seemed a sensible conclusion, although the reverse could be true. She’d been judged by her father and labelled *unlovable*. Whereas the ladies of the ton had decided she was *unworthy*. These thoughts chased away the fleeting relief she’d only just latched onto.

“Nothing is ever as it first appears,” Dante said pointedly, tapping the card with his fingertip. “Judgement can indicate many things. Awakening, renewal, redemption, decision, and transition.”

“Good heavens.”

“But there is much more to discover. In a true divination, we gain little understanding from having only a few cards revealed.”

He reached forward and turned another card. This one showed a woman kneeling by the water with seven stars shining brightly overhead. The picture looked equally as pleasant as the Judgement card, but she’d learned that first impressions were deceiving and all was not how it appeared, especially here in the illusionist’s tent.

Dante’s brows lowered thoughtfully as he considered the image. Time stretched. Outside the canvas walls, she heard voices in passing and a stark, faraway birdcall. When she shifted her attention back to the table, Dante’s expression had smoothed.

“The Star,” he said quietly. “This is a good sign.”

“In what way?”

“The Star brings renewed hope and faith. See how the woman has one foot in the water and one on land. The woman’s position represents balance and the stars above her indicate that magic flows through you. To have this image revealed is a favorable occurrence.” He placed the Star card horizontally over the Judgement card. “It foretells that you will discover a new sense of worth and fresh perspective.”

She liked the sound of that. Already she’d come to respect the entertainers here at Vauxhall Gardens for all their hard work and dedication.

“But you want to know about love, don’t you?”

Dante’s sudden change of subject surprised her. Especially since she *did* hope he would reveal some clue to her relationship with Malcolm. The turn of another card brought her eyes to the table again.

“The Empress.”

She waited, admiring the detailed picture of a young woman on a throne. She wore a headdress composed of celestial ornamentation and carried a gold scepter topped with a red heart.

“This card crowns the star.” He positioned the Empress card over the Star card. “It predicts the best outcome, the ideal future, and what you want most from your mortal life.”

“And for finding love?” she asked quietly, embarrassed by the question, but needing to hear the answer all the same.

“The Empress is one of the most powerful and influential cards of the tarot. It represents success, art, romance, and the creation of life.”

“That’s encouraging.” She breathed a sigh of relief. “Because I need to know more about the presence of love in my life.” *A deep, lasting love.*

“The Empress signifies the development of a new bond, a union made of abiding devotion.”

Her heart sped up, and she caught her bottom lip with her teeth to suppress a smile, but as she raised her eyes to focus on

Dante, she noticed the hanging illustration, the picture she'd seen earlier of an older man and young girl. What if the tarot cards weren't referring to Malcolm? What if they suggested a reconciliation with her father?

"Who?" she asked, a note of urgency in her voice. "Who will form this bond with me?"

"The cards have made it clear. You're meant to have a significant relationship with—"

"Evelyn!" Graham entered the tent, his expression of disapproval impossible to misinterpret, even from across the width of the tent.

She'd held her breath waiting for Dante to complete his sentence, but now she huffed her irritation and stood, turning to conceal the cards on the table with her skirts.

"I've been all over the grounds looking for you. If I hadn't run into Mr. Walker a few minutes ago and asked if he'd seen you, I never would have thought to look for you here. You should be singing on stage, not conversing with a charlatan."

Dante coughed, and when Evelyn glanced over her shoulder, she noticed the table was now cleared of cards, her fortune and future whisked away like dandelion fluff stolen by the wind.

"No insult implied," Graham said belatedly, his voice somewhat contrite.

"Of course. I'm ready." She heard Dante push in his chair. Her reading was over. She'd never know what he was about to say. Disappointment wended through her, carving a sharp path.

Yet she couldn't blame Graham. She was supposed to be singing. And besides, since when did a tarot card reading become so important that she couldn't function without the guidance of its alleged legitimacy? If what Dante had shared was true, her future was already foretold. She would simply live out her days and discover whom this mysterious bond was meant to include. The conclusion settled heavily in her stomach. The fact that she possessed no inborn compass for love couldn't be ignored.

“I believe this belongs to you.” Dante stepped around her and offered Graham what appeared to be an empty silk purse.

“I...” Graham began, shifting his stance. “You must be mistaken.”

As the two men stared at each other in silence, Evelyn took the black bag from Dante’s outstretched hand. “I don’t think he’s wrong, Graham. Your initials are embroidered in the lining.”

“I must have dropped it.” Graham collected the purse from her fingers and pushed it into his trouser pocket. “We should go.”

She didn’t argue. She was supposed to be singing, but as they walked toward the stage, her temper increased. She’d done nothing wrong, aside from becoming distracted, and didn’t appreciate her cousin’s attitude.

“Didn’t you suggest I visit the illusionist here at Vauxhall?”

“I did,” he said curtly. “But not when you have other *important* responsibilities.”

“I agree, the timing might have been better, but you behaved rudely. What’s wrong?”

“Everything. Nothing,” he snapped. “What does it matter?”

“Wait.” She tugged on his arm and forced him to stop walking. “You’re always there for me whenever I’m upset with my father or worried over my future. Please let me do the same for you. I’m a good listener.”

“It’s complicated,” he said, his voice world-weary.

“That’s what you always say, but you’ve never let me decide if there’s some way I can help. I know a bit about disappointment.”

“You have no idea.” A sharp bite crept into his tone. “You can’t help.”

“That isn’t fair, Graham,” she objected, her empathy transforming into annoyance.

“Your belief that things were meant to be fair is a rare trait at this age,” he countered, his expression dark. “Do you think you’re the only person who has had to compromise? To hide their disappointment? You can’t possibly be so selfish that you believe everyone else is getting what they want, but you’ve been slighted.”

Taken aback by his harsh outburst, she blinked away a sudden rush of tears. She never argued with Graham. They usually rubbed along like two sides of the same coin. Lately, it seemed her world had been turned on its ear, upside down and backward.

At her continued silence, he began to walk and she followed, stunned by not just his uncharacteristic temper, but his words. Forced to continue with their plans, she went through the motions of rehearsal, standing on stage and staring out into the empty audience. In the distance, she noticed workers adding additional benches to the already expansive viewing area, and it gave her pause. The magnitude of what she’d agreed to do was steadily eroding her confidence. Unwilling to falter, she closed her eyes and concentrated on her voice, the song pure and joyful as she began.

Malcolm looked out on the Thames and wondered for the hundredth time why he’d ever agreed to help with this maddening scheme. The same redundant answer echoed back. Another attempt to make amends for his past sins. A weak effort at reparation for allowing his brother to die on his watch. That was an error he could never correct. A mistake he could never make right.

He stabbed the shovel into the damp, grimy soil near the bridge embankment and banished thoughts of his brother. Malcolm worked hard at not remembering. He wouldn’t unearth unwanted memories this evening. And where the hell was Cosmo anyway? It had to be past midnight by now.

He stopped digging and scanned the area. Fog was creeping in, thick and slow, as heavy as a blanket over the water, to conceal secrets as tightly as a mother tucks the covers around her child. How many bodies were lost to the rushing river? Were his brother's bones buried in the sand beneath the water in a careless pile, mixed with so many others who'd met the same fate? Malcolm cursed into the night, repositioned the shovel, and sliced into the dirt. The past had a good memory and the sly ability to reach across time and catch a person unaware. He wouldn't fall into that trap tonight.

"Mac." Cosmo's overly loud whisper broke the quiet.

"Over here."

"How did you remember where to dig?"

"I remember a lot of things," Malcolm replied, tossing Cosmo the second shovel. "Now let's get this over with."

It didn't take them long and when they'd heaved the coffin out of the shallow grave, Malcolm immediately set to work on the distasteful task of opening it. Nothing indicated that they'd discover a rotting corpse and he'd run out of patience.

When the last nail was loosened, he wedged the blade of the shovel beneath the coffin's lid and flipped it over. He noticed Cosmo had averted his gaze and a touch of humor crept into Malcolm for the first time this evening.

"You can look," he said, shaking his head. "There's only bags which I assume are filled with cash."

That final word caused Cosmo to immediately crouch down and examine the contents. He untied the drawstring of the first bag and whistled, his eyes widened in surprise.

"Cheese and biscuits, I must be dreaming." Cosmo fondled the contents and lifted the bag the same way a mother cradles a dear child.

"Well, wake up," Malcolm snapped. "Let's deliver the bags and be done with this already."

"I don't know," Cosmo said, his voice reedy with awe and indecision.

“What are you talking about?”

“All this cash,” Cosmo said with a sharp glance from where he knelt near the coffin. “Who would ever know if we just kept it?”

“Cosmo...”

“No, I’m serious.” Cosmo’s eyes looked entranced. His arm angled protectively across the bags now as if he protected little children from harm. “I needed to see what was inside. I knew it had to be valuable. Otherwise, why was there all that secrecy, right?”

“But it’s not ours and there’s someone waiting for the delivery, so stand up and help me load these bags into the boat. I’ve had enough of this adventure and want to be finished.”

“Think about it, Mac.” Cosmo stood, his eyes still fixed to the money as if he worried it might vanish if he looked away. “You have no plans to stay in London anyway. We can split what’s here and be gone before morning. There’s no way anyone can find us. We simply vanish and live a much better life somewhere else.”

“I never agreed to stealing,” Malcolm said plainly. “Now help me load the boat.” He leaned down and grabbed hold of the bag that was closest to him.

“Wait,” Cosmo said, a note of urgency in his voice now. “What can I say to convince you?”

“Nothing.”

“But think about it, just for a minute.”

“I’m not a thief.” Malcolm dropped the bag near his feet.

“I don’t see how this is stealing. The coffin went unclaimed. That makes it lost. And we just happened to find it. It’s a simple case of Finders Keepers, just like a lost button or old key.”

“That’s a liberal distortion of the facts.”

“But the truth, nonetheless.”

“I’m finished with this discussion,” Malcolm hadn’t any patience left. “If you don’t help me load the boat, I’m leaving.”

“But, Mac.”

“Good night, Cosmo.”

He untied the rope and stepped into the skiff.

“You can’t just leave me here.” Cosmo called after him. “I can’t carry the bags by myself.”

Malcolm picked up an oar.

“You could give your share to that boys’ home you visit. Think about all the good it can do,” Cosmo went on. “And you’ll have plenty to set yourself up wherever you land after you leave London.”

“I’m not a thief,” Malcolm repeated. “You aren’t either, Cosmo. You’re an honest man who has hit a rough patch. That’s all.”

“It’s more than a patch.”

“Then take my share of the payment after we make this delivery,” Malcolm said without hesitation. “I don’t want you to make a mistake you’ll regret. You have a family at home that depends on you. Regret makes for poor company.”

“That’s kind of you, Mac.” Cosmo nodded. “I understand how you wouldn’t want to invite the law into your life, so I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Good.” Malcolm gestured toward the bags that still rested on the riverbank, unsurprised Cosmo agreed so readily. “Load them and let’s get moving.”

Cosmo did as he was told and stepped into the boat, claiming an oar as they rowed silently into the night. The fog was thicker now and visibility wasn’t nearly as good as it was only an hour before. Dank, humid air engulfed them, heavy with the scent of moss and decayed fish.

“I’m going to make the delivery on my own,” Cosmo said after they’d rowed a distance. “Up ahead is the dock. I’ll let

you off. Without the coffin, there's no reason for you to prolong your night."

Malcolm considered his friend's words. He wouldn't mind disentangling from the venture at this point. Besides, what Cosmo said was true. Without the coffin, it was no longer a two-person job, and since Cosmo would keep the entire payment for delivery, there was no reason for Malcolm to join him.

"Very well," he agreed, on the breath of a long exhale. Maybe tonight, he could finally get the sleep he so desperately needed.

SIX OF CUPS: CHILDREN IN AN
OLD GARDEN, THEIR CUPS ARE
FILLED WITH FLOWERS AS THEY
COLLECT MEMORIES OF
CHILDHOOD BEFORE THEY
VANISH.

Evelyn arrived at Bond Street a few minutes before ten o'clock in the morning. She often relied on a new pair of shoes to brighten her spirits. To that end she had amassed a large collection, composed of the finest leather boots in every color imaginable to the daintiest silk slippers embellished with elegant embroidery. She couldn't attribute the whole of her obsession with footwear to her father's misdeeds. Frustration caused by disagreements with Graham had also caused past trips to the cordwainer's place of business.

This morning, she was full of emotion instigated by both Graham and her father, although she added Malcolm to the list now, too. Perhaps she needed to purchase more than one pair of shoes.

The silver bell above the door jingled a pleasant welcome as she entered and inhaled the familiar scent of cordovan leather, specially imported from Spain. Quality in footwear shouldn't be compromised, and she didn't mind spending more for the guaranteed comfort and expert craftsmanship.

The shopkeeper was busy with other customers, so she browsed the designs displayed on the nearest shelf, unhurried and uninterested in the social conversation that would be expected if she joined the other ladies. Besides, shoe selection was serious business.

Almost immediately, a pair of tall, sleek walking boots tempted her. Sewn from buttery kid leather in a muted shade of dove gray, they reminded her of Malcolm's eyes. She

couldn't stop herself from lifting the left boot and tracing a fingertip over the black laces. The boots would match nicely with the half-dress day gown she'd purchased from Harding, Howell, and Company last month. The dress had included a matching spencer in almost the exact same color, and she imagined it would make a smart impression if she were to have somewhere important to go.

Somewhere Malcolm would see her.

As soon as the idea flittered to mind, she dismissed it and replaced the boot on the shelf as if it had burned her fingers. She needed to stop placing Malcolm in her path or within her social circle. That idea was impossible and foolish. She couldn't assume he even wished to see her again. Although he had said *later* the last time they were together. Didn't that imply an ongoing relationship?

She huffed a restorative breath. Good lord, she sounded like a goose. She was a grown woman who had been courted, kissed and at times, intimately involved with a gentleman. These flighty thoughts and calf-eyed imaginings were reserved for naïve young girls who had never experienced the complications of true emotion.

That final thought soured her spirit, and a familiar sense of being insufficient and *forever unloved* reminded her even her own father had little to do with her.

“Lady Osbourne? Is that you?”

Caught woolgathering, Evelyn blinked away her melancholy and turned, aware the vinegar-disguised-as-sugar voice calling her name belonged to Lady Roth-Weaver, the most vociferous dowager in better London. There would be no escaping a brief chat. Evelyn silently cursed her misfortune.

“Lady Roth-Weaver, how good it is to see you,” Evelyn lied.

“You're looking a little peaked, dear. Are you feeling unwell?”

So much for a polite greeting. “I'm quite fine, thank you.”

“A waxy complexion and a few worry lines are to be expected, given the current on-dit,” Lady Roth-Weaver said without the slightest remorse.

Don't ask. Don't ask. Don't ask.

“I suppose a cup of tea might help. I should visit the cozy shop across the street. If you'll excuse me.” Evelyn nodded, wanting to curtail further conversation, extract herself, and scurry across the street into a nearby tea room until she could return to select her new shoes.

“I once believed your father was a good man,” Lady Roth-Weaver continued, her tone tantalizing and likely carefully planned, as she ignored Evelyn's effort to take her leave. “I do my best to put an end to contrary talk, although at times it's almost impossible to disregard and at the same time hardly worth remembering. I do wonder if there's any truth to what's being said though. Why only yesterday Lady Hartworth heard from Lord Bittleton who went riding with Lord Jeffers who shared with his wife who visited me for lunch yesterday afternoon that Lord Osbourne was clearly foxed, mid-afternoon in Hyde Park, and spouting outlandish nonsense concerning undying devotion to Lady Atson. I imagine it must have appeared like one of those dreadful dramas put on at Drury Lane. Not that I've ever attended a showcase of such tawdry entertainment. A lady must uphold her standards.”

Had the dowager taken a breath? For a woman of such advanced years, she possessed remarkably robust lungs.

“Yes, I agree,” Evelyn replied, with a tight crimp of her lips. “That's why I make it a practice to ignore the rumor mill.”

“I quite understand.”

No, the dowager didn't. This wasn't the first time Evelyn has been ambushed by Lady Roth-Weaver. “I will let you return to your shopping.”

“It's a shame about Lady Conover, isn't it?” Lady Roth-Weaver said, without missing a beat. “Such heartbreak.”

“Matilda?” Evelyn asked, remembering Matilda’s recent visit. Evelyn had dismissed it, not wanting to become embroiled in another of her father’s messes, but it would seem she might be the only one not discussing the problem. Unbidden, Matilda’s dire request for Evelyn to locate her father and intervene echoed as a forebearer of bad news. “Has something happened to her?”

“Dreadful business.” Lady Roth-Weaver drew an expansive breath. “But you should know. You should.”

Evelyn waited, aware her silence wouldn’t be wasted.

“Matilda’s with child,” the dowager said in a not-very-hushed tone, her eyes flared for effect. “And it’s said the babe isn’t her husband’s. Lord Conover has been cuckolded, poor man. He was away, you see. In an altogether different country for eight months. One doesn’t need to be a scholar to understand. Matilda hasn’t uttered a word, not wanting to instigate further trouble, although her secret won’t keep. What will she do when she can’t hide the inevitable?”

A sinking feeling, something akin to dread and misery combined, darkened Evelyn’s soul. How could her father do this? Lord Conover was a respected peer and Matilda was easily twenty years younger than her father. Evelyn didn’t know how much more she could bear. Never mind the shoes, she needed fresh air before she suffocated from shame.

“You haven’t been at tea or luncheon lately, so all this news must come as a surprise. It’s been said you plan to sing on stage at Vauxhall Gardens, but I’m sure that can’t be true.” Lady Roth-Weaver’s expression seemed more jubilant than compassionate, her words unmatched to the emotion on her face at having shared the current gossip. “It certainly wouldn’t be proper.”

“I have been asked to sing. That’s correct.” Evelyn refused to elaborate when her words would be misconstrued, distorted, and repeated to further darken her reputation.

“Involvement in such base entertainment is beneath you, dear. There will be talk. Most especially considering the choices of your father. He hasn’t made it easy for you to keep

your dignity while he runs about town in disregard of propriety.”

“I’m sorry,” *she wasn’t*, “but, I must leave now. Do take care. It may rain later.”

Evelyn left the shop, barely managing to keep her temper contained. To cause a scene would condemn her further. And wasn’t that the rub of the situation? No matter what choice she made, what goal she pursued, or how honest her intentions, her father had created an atmosphere of embarrassment and judgement she could never escape. It was no one’s business but her own if she chose to sing at Vauxhall Gardens. With a touch of irony, she realized it was when she was there that she was freed from haughty opinion and disdain.

Hardly mollified by the thought, she hurried away from the cordwainer’s shop and made a decision that went against everything she’d once avowed. She’d made it a practice to avoid her father, a somewhat easy task as he made no attempt to interact with her, and thereby she’d avoided the inevitable pain that accompanied his neglect.

Regardless of this history, now things needed to change. She would find him and confront him. Especially concerning Matilda’s situation. A familiar feeling of humiliation chased her decision, but she wasn’t deterred. Regret was a weed in the garden of life, and she had no intention of allowing the sentiment to overtake her. She walked to her carriage, the new shoes forgotten, and instructed her driver to move on to her father’s town house.

Malcolm entered Mr. Barrett’s office, pleased to inform him that the new stage was completed and ready for Eve’s singing debut ahead of schedule. Regrettably, that fact was a double-edged sword. If Mr. Barrett didn’t have other work that needed to be accomplished in the near future, it meant Malcolm would be leaving London sooner than he’d anticipated. But not before Saturday night. He anticipated the audience would be enthralled by Eve’s voice, and he intended to be there to watch

her performance, even if he had his bags packed and set to rest at his feet.

“Malcolm, come in and have a seat.” Mr. Barrett waved him closer. “I have a favor to ask.”

Malcolm raised his brows in question. The manager wasn't one to ask favors of the workmen, at least not in his experience. He settled in the chair before Barrett's desk and waited for him to continue.

“I've watched your progress with the new theater and I'm quite satisfied with your work.” Barrett said, giving nothing beyond his statement.

“I've finished early, so if there are other projects you'd like me to take on, I'm free to do so,” Malcolm said.

“Actually, I asked you here because I need a different kind of task,” Barrett said, his forehead furrowed in an expression of deep thought. “Have you seen Cosmo today?”

“Cosmo?” Malcolm repeated. “No. He didn't arrive at the work site. As I mentioned, the project is completed, so I assumed he was busy with another task.”

“And did he attend rowing practice this morning?”

“No, but...” Malcolm hesitated. He didn't want the manager to think poorly of Cosmo. Last night before they'd parted, Malcolm had told Cosmo to skip practice due to the late hour and their complicated excursion at the foot of the bridge. “He might be sick.”

“That could be true,” Barrett said, in a tone that implied he'd already considered that suggestion. “But as his employer and a businessman dependent on the productivity of my staff, I deserve the courtesy of a message. Cosmo should have sent me a note if he planned on staying home.”

“I agree.” Malcolm couldn't bail his friend out of this mess.

“And that's where my request for you comes into play,” Barrett continued. “I'd like you to take my carriage and visit Cosmo at home. This isn't the first time he's abandoned his

responsibilities. As a matter of fact,” Barrett flipped open a ledger on his desk, “I’ve noted more than a dozen times over the past two months when he hasn’t shown up for his scheduled hours. I need to discover if he’s taking advantage of his position here. There are plenty of men who would like to fill his shoes for a fair wage. If there’s a good reason Cosmo hasn’t come in to work, I’m willing to hear him out. But his neglect to inform me of his absence is inconsiderate and irresponsible. He’s part of the crew in charge of assembling, stocking, and disassembling the food stands. And there’s the boat races to consider as well. I can’t have him neglecting work that needs to be completed so the rest of the entertainers and crew have what they need.”

“I understand,” Malcolm said, unaware Cosmo had treated his responsibilities so carelessly. Perhaps he didn’t know Cosmo as well as he thought.

“I know the two of you have a friendship of sorts. On occasion I’ve viewed rowing practice and have noticed the trust and synchronicity necessary to excel at the sport, so I’m sending you to soften the oncoming blow. If Cosmo is exploiting this opportunity, I can no longer employ him here at Vauxhall Gardens. I’m a businessman first and foremost, but I am willing to listen if there’s an explanation for his behavior.”

“I’ll visit him now if you’d like.” Malcolm stood, annoyed at Cosmo’s negligence, and at the same time relieved Mr. Barrett was acting reasonably. It spoke to a shared trust, that the manager was sending Malcolm to complete this errand. Cosmo needed this job. His family depended on the money he earned at Vauxhall.

“My carriage is waiting outside the entrance near the Grand Gardens.” Barrett gestured toward the door. “You should leave at once.”

“Thank you. I’ll share what I’ve learned as soon as I return.” Malcolm didn’t say more and left the entertainment grounds, able to locate Barrett’s sleek coach easily. Rarely was such a fancy conveyance waiting outside on the street, and definitely not during daylight hours. And too, there was the

colorful banner advertising Vauxhall Gardens affixed to the side.

Malcolm spoke to the driver and climbed inside, carefully dusting off his pants beforehand. The interior of the carriage was lush and refined, an immediate reminder of how other people lived. His thoughts shifted to St. Luke's, and how the sisters gave generously even though supplies were always in demand. He considered the two satchels that housed his personal belongings. He owned very little and traveled with even less. But the velvet seats, smooth mahogany wood trim, and shiny brass of the coach's interior mocked Malcolm's simple life. He was as out of place inside the lush carriage as he'd be inside a nob's ballroom. Or Evelyn's world.

The disturbing realization made him unusually hesitant and uncomfortable, and by the time the coach rolled to a stop on Lant Street near the outskirts of Lambeth, he itched for fresh air. Stepping down from the coach, he strode directly to the front door of Cosmo's small cottage. Malcolm had only visited Cosmo's home one time before, when his friend had needed help fixing the roof. It hadn't proven difficult for Malcolm to make the repairs, and watching Cosmo's wife and children in a house of laughter and love had buoyed his spirit.

But now the modest cottage stood quiet. Not even a dog wandered the small plot of grass at the rear. Malcolm entered, surprised to find the front door unlocked. What he saw inside surprised him further. The few pieces of furniture that had decorated the two rooms were broken and the pieces were littered about carelessly. A bowl of spilled porridge had congealed into a cold, dry lump on the floor. A few pieces of clothing remained, but other than this proof of occupancy, the rooms appeared abandoned. Malcolm sighed heavily as understanding drawn from the evidence before him found its way through his confusion. Cosmo and his family had left London with the money. Though it appeared that afterward someone had come looking for something. *Undoubtedly the money.*

Malcolm blew out a long breath, relieved he hadn't become ensnared further in the mess Cosmo had initiated.

Whoever was after their misplaced packages wouldn't stop looking. If each bag was filled similarly, there would have been over fifty thousand pounds stashed inside that coffin. And now it had become a dead man's money, if Cosmo was caught.

Shaking his head in disappointment of Cosmo's decisions, Malcolm left the cottage and returned to Mr. Barrett's waiting carriage. Across the road, a tall, hefty man watched his every move. Cosmo's neighbors were probably just as puzzled at the family's sudden disappearance.

Needing to order his thoughts and decide what to say to Mr. Barrett, Malcolm climbed inside and directed the driver toward Oxford Street and Burlington Arcade. He wanted to purchase a special gift for Evelyn, a token of good luck before her first performance, and he hoped Mr. Barrett wouldn't mind that Malcolm had commandeered the wagon for the trip into Mayfair. It would have cost a tidy sum in hackney fare.

As they moved closer to the popular shopping center, traffic slowed and Malcolm pushed the velvet curtain aside to look out the window. This area of London was filled with nobs and snobs, aristocratic men who maintained town houses apart from their larger familial estates. Men who'd been born into wealth and perpetuated a life of excessive entitlement. He looked down at his scarred and calloused hands. He'd always worked hard to earn his pay and still gave of his time generously. Society had an odd manner in which it judged a person's worth.

He replaced the curtain, wanting to shut out the ugliness outside his window, but right before it fell into place, he noticed a woman as she exited one of the stately town houses. Her profile made him pause and catching the curtain, he realized the lady was Evelyn, her eyes red from crying and cheeks tear-streaked. She ducked her head and smoothed her fingers over her face in an attempt to summon her composure, no doubt worried someone would notice her state of upset.

But it was too late.

Because he had.

“Eve.” He cracked the door open and called out, drawing the stares of a few pedestrians on the street. Let them see Mr. Barrett’s advertisement and blame the poor behavior on the Vauxhall manager. “Eve.” He called louder.

She looked up and her eyes flashed with alarm. Then she averted her face and began to walk faster.

“Lady Osbourne, wait!” Malcolm tapped on the ceiling to signal the driver before he hopped from the carriage and crossed the pavement. When he reached her, Evelyn didn’t look at him at first, but when she did, her lips trembled with barely contained emotion.

Without another word, he clasped Eve’s arm and led her to the carriage. After helping her inside, he instructed the driver to change course and ride through a nearby park. Then he climbed inside, closed the door, and reached for her.

THE LOVERS: THIS CARD
REPRESENTS A UNIQUE BOND
AND DEEP CONNECTION
BETWEEN

“How did you find me?” Evelyn struggled to keep the distress from her voice. She’d had a terrible row with her father, whose sharp tongue bolstered by his disgraceful inebriation, had shredded her confidence and heartfelt pleas in less than ten minutes. He’d made it abundantly clear she was to stay out of his business.

Out of his life.

What a foolish mistake she’d made to believe she could talk sense into him, whether the matter included Matilda’s situation or any of his other affairs. Yet how could a father behave so horridly to his daughter? Emotion welled up inside her again, tightening her throat and squeezing the air from her lungs, though she battled through it.

“I was on an errand for Mr. Barrett and saw you from the window.” Malcolm reached across the width of the interior and took her hands within his.

“I wondered about the carriage,” she said, finding peace in his soothing touch.

When he tugged gently, she moved from her bench to his, accepting the warmth and security of his embrace even though she knew it was unseemly to be draped across his lap. Still, she settled against him, her cheek pressed to the welcoming strength beneath his soft cotton shirt. After what she’d just experienced with her father, she no longer cared about propriety, and besides, within the coach she and Malcolm were safely hidden from prying stares and insidious opinion.

She closed her eyes and listened to the steady thrum of his heartbeat. He seemed to appear whenever she needed him most, like an anchor in the choppy tide of her existence. She breathed in thoroughly and relished the spicy fragrance of his shaving soap.

“Would you like to talk about what caused you to become upset?”

The warm rumble of his voice rippled through her, producing an inviting sensation. She instinctively nestled closer. He rested a hand between her shoulder blades, and at her continued silence, his fingers drew circles, the soothing gesture serving to calm her further. Nevertheless, she didn't want to discuss her father and stir up the conflicted emotions she'd finally managed to quell.

“If you'd like, we can go to my rooms. I'll make you tea and you can—”

“No.” She lifted away from the wall of his chest so she could look him in the eyes. “Take me home.”

“Whatever you wish,” he said, his expression filled with compassion.

He tapped on the ceiling and when the driver opened the box, Malcolm gave her address without pause. She didn't question how he'd come by the information. He took excellent care of her without effort.

“I'm better now,” she said, noticing how the tightness in his jaw relaxed at hearing her reassurance. “Thank you.”

“You don't have to thank me for caring about you, Eve.”

“That's true, I suppose,” she said, her voice no more than a whisper. “My gratitude calls for something else entirely.”

She couldn't explain when she'd become so bold as to sit atop a man's lap, wrap herself around him, and initiate a kiss, but she was that woman in this moment, and she reveled in the freedom and defiant joy the act provided.

His response was immediate, their kiss transforming from a gentle caress into a hungry, demanding tangle of tongues.

The taste of him was intoxicating. The more she had, the more she wanted, and she felt him react with the same insistency, as if they had to hurry for fear the moment wouldn't last. The longing between her legs, combined with the remembrance of his tongue when he'd tasted her sex, caused her to press against him more fully, and he widened his thighs, settling her there while his hands swept over her ribs, his thumbs smoothing the sides of her breasts with impatience.

He wanted her and she wanted to be wanted in return.

“What are you doing to me, Eve?” he asked on a gruff exhale before he trailed kisses along her jaw, nipping at the skin and then soothing each place right after. “You're all I think about. I shouldn't want you, but every time I close my eyes, you're there, and I want you all over again.”

“It's the same for me,” she said between kisses. “I can't explain it...”

Their kiss deepened, and when Malcolm sucked on her tongue, she trembled, every muscle of her body tightened in yearning, the need to be closer to him more powerful than ever before.

“Is it wrong to want you like this?” she asked, her voice a whispered rush, unwilling to sacrifice a single kiss or caress. “To need to feel you, want you to kiss me, and touch me and...”

“Eve.” He growled in protest, but at the same time he slid his hand under her skirts to glide up her stockinged leg and find the bare skin of her thigh. His palm was warm and rough, the texture evidence of a man who worked with his hands. The sensation his caress produced was so visceral and pleasure-inducing she jolted with awareness.

“Come inside.” The carriage rolled to a smooth stop.

He growled again, or perhaps it was a groan.

“You can't say things like that,” he managed. “And I can't stay. I have to...”

He never finished, his mouth finding hers, his tongue claiming hers in another heated embrace.

“Send the carriage back.” She broke free and grasped his chin, the brush of whiskers against her fingertips a delightful benefit as she forced his eyes to hers. “I want you to come inside.”

She watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. Whatever words he might have said were lost to her now. She stroked over his jaw, reveling in the bright flare of desire in his silvery gray eyes as the carriage rolled to a stop.

“Eve, what you’re suggesting, that we—”

“I know exactly what I’m suggesting and I know you want it as much as I do.” She shifted, moving off his lap and sitting beside him, their bodies pressed close as she spoke with surety. “Send the carriage back. Tell the driver to deliver a message.”

She took a minute to right her clothing and then she turned the latch and opened the carriage door. The driver extended his hand and she stepped down carefully. With one last glance over her shoulder, she walked to her front stoop, wondering if Malcolm would follow. She experienced a jubilant surge of victory as she took the steps and heard him exit and speak to the driver.

“I’m expecting a guest,” she stated plainly to her housemaid as she opened the door. “Please bring the gentleman caller to the drawing room and then you may have the day to yourself. I won’t be needed anything further.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Evelyn continued on to the kitchen, refusing to look over her shoulder to see what was happening in the front hall. Her servants wouldn’t gossip, but even if they did, Evelyn no longer cared. There would always be talk. She’d learned that at a very young age and spent too many wasted years trying to stop it. She refused to cease living her life or denying her own happiness any longer.

She entered the kitchen and approached the cook. “Ellie, I’ll need you to prepare a tray of light refreshments, a bottle of

wine and two glasses, after which you can have the rest of the day for yourself.”

She heard an echo from the hallway, the door opening and closing, and a smile danced on her lips. Leaving the kitchen, she followed the hall behind the stairs and turned back toward the drawing room. She hoped to see Malcolm waiting for her. Inviting him into her home during the daylight hours with the intent they would spend the day making love was the most daring and enthralling thing she'd ever done. Would he accept her invitation?

Malcolm didn't disappoint.

He stood beside the hearth, his expression a mixture of expectation and careful consideration. His hair was still mussed from their embrace within the carriage. Her heart beat faster. Another moment or two and the house would become quiet, the staff having taken their leave.

“I—”

“I—”

She laughed as they both began to speak at the same time. “You first,” she said as she stopped in front of him.

“I can't offer you what you're accustomed to, Eve. An elaborate courtship and promise of an exciting future full of comforts and extravagance.”

“Have I asked you for any such thing?” She eyed him with amusement and ran her fingertips across his chest, noting the hard muscle awaiting her touch beneath his shirt.

“So, you think to have your way with me and then cast me out?” he asked, a note of humor in every word.

“Precisely,” she said. “Now if you'll kindly follow me.”

She led him upstairs to her bedchambers in silence. They were both aware of the sensual game they played, so there seemed little need for conversation.

She wanted him.

He wanted her.

What was left to discuss? He certainly hadn't objected to the proposition she'd insinuated.

When they entered her rooms, she closed the doors and turned the lock before she faced him. All humor had fled now and the air stood heavy with anticipation.

She'd never seduced a man, nor had she ever offered herself so boldly, but she wanted this more than she'd wanted anything ever before. It didn't matter what came after today.

"I just want you to be sure—"

She set her fingertip over his lips. "I'm sure."

"You're beautiful when you're bossy." He cradled her face, his touch reverent as he stared intently into her eyes. "You're beautiful at all other times, too."

She stepped out of his grasp and began to undress, hearing his breathing quicken in surprise. Reaching behind her neck, she untied the ribbons of her gown and with a slight smile, turned and gave him her back. He didn't hesitate, his skilled fingers working down the row of buttons and hooks with agile efficiency. With her bodice unfastened, she pushed her gown below her waist, taking other layers with it, until the fabric pooled at her feet. She was left in a pale pink chemisette.

She watched his eyes spark with carnal desire as she pulled the ties free and allowed the garment to fall. She was still covered by her corset, petticoats, and stockings. When he reached to loosen the neck of his shirt, she stopped him.

"No." She placed her fingers over his. "Allow me."

"Like I mentioned, you're bossy," he said, one side of his mouth rising. "As you wish."

She smoothed the front of his shirt open and parted the fabric into a vee, sighing in appreciation. She'd imagined what the muscles of his chest would look like, had even admired them after rain and perspiration had dampened his shirt, but nothing had truly prepared her. Greedy to touch him, she brushed her fingertips over the hard contours and heated skin, slowly baring his chest as she moved the fabric aside. She noticed several scars near his shoulder, one round mark amidst

several smaller ovals, like the moon among the stars. She leaned in and pressed her lips over his heart, inhaling his heady scent while that same thrum of desire grew ever more persistent inside her.

“If you set out to torture me, you’re exceeding the mark.” His voice sounded rough and tight now. Any hint of humor was gone. “Standing in front of me in nothing more than a scrap of sheer lace as you explore my body is both exquisite and wicked at the same time.”

“What would you have me do?” she said, her voice low and husky.

“Eve...” He drew a harsh breath. “No more games.”

He swept her into his arms and pulled her close to his chest as he strode toward the bed. She clung to his neck, wanting nothing more now than to feel his weight above her, the press of his skin to hers as they moved together on the mattress. She was hot and wet and anxious. Her body ached for him. She, too, wanted no more games.

He deposited her atop the counterpane before he raised his shirt up over his head in a masculine gesture that accentuated his hard biceps and beautifully sculpted shoulders. A mat of dark hair dusted the center of his chest where it trailed down in a narrow path to the band of his trousers. Her pulse hammered in her ears, but she ignored it and instead allowed her eyes to commit every delicious detail of his body to memory.

“You look like the cat who swallowed the cream,” he said, with a poorly concealed smirk of satisfaction.

“I’ve given a lot of thought to what you would look like without your shirt.”

He leaned over to capture her mouth in a long, deep kiss. “I hope I didn’t disappoint.”

“Not in the least,” she asserted. “Although I do need to see more of you to be certain.”

He removed his boots, the thud of each hitting the floorboards.

“It was good of you to discard your boots, but I had something else in mind.” She stood up to resume her exploration, grasping his trousers by the waistband and working to unbutton the placket so she could tug his pants down over his lean hips. Drawing a deep breath, she did the same with his smalls. She watched his reaction, his jaw tense, and when he groaned a low, guttural noise it pleased her to know she’d affected him so.

He stood before her, completely nude, his body a work of art, each muscle carved meticulously, all contained strength under soft, smooth flesh. Every part of him seemed as perfectly crafted as his carpentry. Solid muscle amid the flat plane of his stomach. The sharp angles of his hipbones. She wanted to touch him everywhere. Taste him, too. Unwilling to lose momentum, she clasped her fingers around his thick arousal, holding the velvet heat of his cock against her palm.

“Eve.” His body jerked forward, her name no more than a grunt, and she let go, worried she might have hurt him.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t be.” He tried for a smile; his lips pressed tight. “You’ve surprised me, that’s all.”

She took hold of his hand and pulled him forward onto the bed. When they landed, he made quick work of removing the last of her clothing. He dropped it all to the floor without a care.

“I thought you were shy.”

“Me too,” she whispered in answer.

The hot breath of his laughter against her skin elicited a trail of sensation he smoothed away with kisses. For a moment she didn’t dare move, the weight of his body against her and the brush of masculine hair enticing her into appreciative silence. He’d braced himself so their upper bodies barely touched, propped on his elbows with their position aligned. He matched his gaze to hers and she saw genuine emotion there. He was not a man to take this moment lightly, and she cherished that realization.

“I can’t stay pressed to the soft, silky length of you for much longer, Eve.” His voice vibrated with need. The longing in his gaze took her breath away.

She wriggled in protest and the movement made him curse.

“Then kiss me, Malcolm,” she said, her voice as hushed as a shared secret. “Show me what you want.”

EVERYTHING THAT IS, WAS FIRST A DREAM.

He did kiss her. Tenderly at first. Their tongues caressed and stroked, tasting deeper and hungrier, until she thought she'd burn to cinders waiting for more. She'd looped her arms around his neck, her breasts pressed to the heat of his chest, but now she moved her hands over him, learning the shape of his smooth, hot skin as she explored every flex of his muscles. Her body pulsed with desire. Her actions only brought her further restlessness. Did he feel the same way? How could he kiss and caress her without urgency?

His lips left hers and, in that instant, before he could again capture control, she pushed his shoulder and rolled them atop the mattress so she was positioned above him.

"You little minx," he grouched, though delight flared in his eyes. "What do you plan to do with me now?"

"You'll have to wait and see," she said, emboldened by the press of his hot erection against her inner thigh. She wanted to sit up and climb over him, to slide down and take him inside her. Did she dare? She was enjoying their playful tussle atop the bedsheets too much to have it end so quickly.

"Eve," A curious note entered his voice. "Is this your..."

"No." She'd never told anyone about the awkward loss of her virginity. Not Graham, her governess, or even her most trusted maid. She was young. It was foolish. And there'd never been anyone since who she'd wanted to share herself with in that way. "I've had only one experience and it isn't something

I recall favorably. While it was what I wanted at the time, it brought me no pleasure.”

She wished he hadn't asked. Or that she'd refused to answer. But perhaps it was for the best. He reached up and cradled her cheek, drawing her face to his in a tender, careful kiss that was meant to erase the poor memory of the past. She sighed as a dangerous realization took hold. *It would be terribly difficult not to fall in love with Malcolm.*

Of course, that would be unwise. But at least they had this moment, this memory in the making.

Acting on her earlier impulse, she lifted herself up and straddled him, angled her hips before she slowly guided him to her sex. His entire body tensed and he gripped the sides of her hips, but he was too late to stop her. She shifted backward slightly and came down, his full length sliding inside to fill her completely. She lost her breath, the tight, searing heat of him within her overwhelming. He may have experienced the same undeniable impact. He remained completely still.

“I've dreamed of us like this,” she said, aware her face warmed from the naughty confession.

“I've had my own share of fantasies,” he answered, reversing their positions with one swift turn. Now she was pressed beneath him, his cock still buried inside her. “You aren't the only one who has had ideas. Although I never dreamed any of them would be realized. The truth is—”

She shook her head and he paused. “This isn't the time for revealing truths and secrets. Our time together is meant for something else completely.”

She refused to ruin their coming together with thoughts beyond the bedsheets and he must have understood. He captured her mouth in a long, lingering kiss that caused any idea of conversation to evaporate.

He shifted slightly, settling into her more fully before he began to move. She hooked her legs around his hips, wanting him inside her as deeply as possible, and then still wanting more. Every part of her body touched his. Every thick stroke

sent tremors racing across her skin. All the while he caressed her, suckling her breasts, causing the tight tips to ache with longing until she trembled with need and want. She opened her eyes, surprised to see him staring down at her, his jaw clenched and eyes like liquid silver.

“Tell me what you want, Eve.” His voice growled out between them; his breath hot against her skin.

“I want you,” she said, knowing she was breaking every silent promise she’d made with herself. “I want us together like this.”

He thrust hard, and sensation, hot and insistent, spiraled through her. With every stroke, pleasure built, more demanding each time he withdrew, only to return in a rush when he entered her again. She curled her fingers in the bed linens and admired the flex of his muscles, the friction of his skin against her as he filled her completely. Her body vibrated with desire, and she closed her eyes and lost herself to bliss, wound as tight as a harp string, wanting the feeling to never end and at the same time feeling anxious for the promised moment of release.

Any attempt at willpower proved useless, her body’s reaction swift and intense. Another moment and she was on the precipice, eager to let go and yet trying desperately to hang on. When he murmured her name and sheathed himself tight and deep, release claimed her in a storm of pleasure. Caught unaware, she locked her legs around him, lost in the undulating demand of her climax, her skin sensitized to every nuance of him above her, the weight of his body, bristle of chest hair, and the musky scent of his shaving soap. She didn’t dare open her eyes and relinquish the moment, as fleeting as a shooting star, just as rare and beautiful.

On some other level of awareness, she knew Malcolm had pulled away from her, just far enough to slide to the sheets. She immediately felt bereft, the loss too noticeable to ignore. She heard his grunt of satisfaction and turned her head on the pillow to see where he’d collapsed beside her. His eyes were closed and expression calm. The moment spoke to her heart.

She couldn't explain this connection, the undeniable yearning that went far beyond the physical sense. But she was a fool to believe it could be anything more than what they'd just shared. It didn't matter that she craved him now more than only hours before.

"And so, I've discovered yet another way you share your beauty," he said, his voice low as he turned to his side on the bed.

She placed her hand on his chest. She could detect the hurried beat of his heart beneath his hot skin. Could he possibly feel as she did? That they were meant to be together? Logic interceded and stopped the question from being voiced. She was falling into a trap she would be wise to avoid. Malcolm was a melody inside her head she couldn't forget and she was too smart to believe she could just ignore his existence, but what would become of her deep emotion? The last thing she wanted was another rejection or regret.

"Such serious thoughts don't belong in bed with us." Malcolm smoothed the subtle furrow etched across Eve's brow, her skin petal soft beneath his fingertip.

She smiled in response, her pretty pink lips only inches from his on the pillows, yet she didn't speak.

"Would you like me to leave?" he asked, unsure of her expectations. He was a guest here and Eve was a member of better society. He didn't want to cause harm to her reputation. The reminder cast a pallor over their afternoon, and he inhaled deeply, preparing for her response.

"No." She sat up abruptly, gathering the sheets around her breasts in an act of belated modesty. "I'm sorry. I've never invited a man to my bed before. I'm sadly lacking in the knowledge of what happens next."

He held back a chuckle. Her belief that her inexperience was cause for an apology added to her charm. "I only mentioned it because I don't want my visit to invite scrutiny."

She fell back on the pillows and reached for his hand, lacing her fingers with his and linking them together. “I can’t predict the future. I only want to think about right now.”

Her answer sounded indulgent. He supposed it was a gift of being born into wealth. He pulled her closer, settling her back against his chest so their bodies were spooned comfortably. Her hair carried the scent of lavender and he inhaled, wanting to remember the fragrance. What did she expect from him? He should warn against assumptions, full-knowing he would make no promises he couldn’t keep.

“My employment at Vauxhall is temporary. Once Barrett has depleted his list of carpentry tasks, I’ll be out of work and on my way,” he began quietly. “I’ve never been one to stay in a particular place overlong.”

“Because you haven’t had a reason?” she asked in that same quiet tone.

“More so because I prefer it that way.”

“Why?”

That one little word held the power to unravel all the emotion he kept coiled tightly inside. But at his continued silence, she turned onto her back and lent him a sideways glance.

“You must be terribly isolated. You can’t form any lasting relationships if you’re always moving on.”

“That’s the general idea,” he admitted plainly.

“Why?” Her voice was stronger now, her curiosity laced with indignation.

At the least he could offer her an explanation. He didn’t want her to view his choice as a rejection of her affection.

“It’s easier to avoid dwelling on the past if I’m always planning for the future,” he said, reclaiming her hand, wanting the connection as he gave voice to his regret.

“Malcolm,” her voice had taken on an empathetic tone, “you’ve told me a little about what happened, and I would never make assumptions, but no matter the circumstances, you

shouldn't carry the blame of your brother's death into your daily life. You didn't plan for him to perish. I know in my heart you would have done everything in your power to prevent tragedy."

"But that's just it. I didn't. I had no idea he had followed me. That he'd decided to best me. But I should have realized." He blew out a harsh breath, a familiar combination of frustration and regret unfurling in his gut. "None of it matters, and all my excuses only make me sound more foolish. It won't bring him back."

"No. That's true. Instead, you keep traveling, avoiding anything permanent, so you can protect yourself from the loss? What kind of existence is that?" she asked, a thread of sadness in her words now. "I don't see how that's any way to live, even if moving frequently protects you from pain."

"No, but it serves me. Changing scenery, meeting new people, and working with my hands keeps the memories at bay." He bristled, trying to keep frustration from his voice.

"Aren't you lonely?"

"I deserve to be lonely."

"Malcolm," she turned and faced him now, her eyes glistening with concern, "you don't have penance to pay for what happened. You've already lost someone precious. You've already been punished. What do you hope to gain by ignoring the past? It won't enable you to forget."

"No, but it's a better choice," he said, his voice rough. "Besides, you don't know me very well."

Her elegant brows rose high on her forehead. "It doesn't feel that way. At least not for me."

He'd sought to set boundaries and explain why he made certain decisions, but instead he was on his way to alienating Eve and ruining the intimate time they'd spent together. "Let's speak of something else."

He didn't give her the chance to object and pulled her forward into his embrace. The kiss they shared was deep and lingering, able to communicate everything their words failed

to express, and when they finally broke apart, the world had almost righted itself.

“When you saw me from the carriage, I had just left my father’s town house,” Eve shared, her mouth dipping in a frown as she spoke. “We don’t have a good relationship. Mostly because he hasn’t taken part in a relationship with me since I was a young child. When my mother passed away, he turned to drinking and left my care to a series of governesses and tutors. I rarely saw him, and on the odd occasion that I did, his visits were brief and awkward. I was a child, up early and eager for the day. He was a drunken sot, staying out late and sleeping off his headache in the morning. As time passed, his undignified habits took a turn. He did little to hide his behavior from society’s opinion. There were frequent, lurid affairs and public displays of drunkenness to keep the tongue-wags busy. As I grew older and was no longer considered an innocent child, his poor behavior stained my reputation. People drew incorrect conclusions, or worse, expected my life to emulate his. It has been painful and difficult, so I’ve learned to live a quiet life. Graham’s family has been lovely in their attempts to fill the void, but at the end of the day...”

“Is there no way you can repair your relationship with your father?”

“I’ve tried, especially in the beginning. But things have gone on far too long for that now, and we’ve come to live separate lives. Although I still worry, despite he doesn’t deserve the sentiment. I worry he’ll harm himself or someone else. That he’ll create a situation that causes irreparable damage.”

“I believe he’s done that already.”

“You know about Matilda?”

“No.” Malcolm pressed a kiss to her lips, barely separating as he spoke. “I was speaking of how much he’s hurt you.”

“Thank you.” She closed her eyes and moved further into his embrace.

“You’ve no cause to thank me.”

“Well, it’s rare to have someone listen and not lecture me or try to fix a problem that has no solution.”

“That I understand,” he said sincerely, because there was no way to turn back time and repair the damage he’d done in the past.

THE FOOL: TAROT'S SYMBOL OF NEW BEGINNINGS

“I came by the house earlier,” Graham said with obvious annoyance. “No one answered the door. Where was your housekeeper? It’s unlike you to employ undependable staff.”

“I allowed the servants to have the day,” Evelyn replied through a guilty grin. “I was indisposed and didn’t wish for any unnecessary interruptions.”

Graham angled a skeptical glance in her direction. “Indeed, this conversation has taken a turn. I won’t take offense at being labeled an unnecessary interruption if you tell me more.”

The carriage rumbled over a large rut in the roadway, and the equipage groaned in complaint. Evelyn glanced to the scene outside the window. Crossing Vauxhall Bridge had become a routine. She recalled how much she’d objected to Graham’s impetuous suggestion she sing at Vauxhall Gardens and how, in only the course of five weeks, her world had become incredibly expansive.

And, most importantly, she’d met Malcolm.

“You know, Birdie, I won’t let this matter remain unexplored. You can’t drop a few breadcrumbs and not expect me to follow the trail.”

She smiled at the delightful torture she’d inflicted upon his curiosity, however fleeting.

“You never allow anyone to get close, and I understand why, but have you finally realized by that practice you will never be loved?” he added a moment later.

He was correct of course, though she hardly wished to acknowledge that truth and affirm his arrogance. “No one has mentioned love,” she replied blithely. And then she resorted to a subject she knew would curtail further conversation. “Aren’t you in love with Avery? And yet, you keep her a secret, away from all prying eyes and opinions.”

His demeanor changed, like a cloud sliding over the sun. “We aren’t discussing my choices, we’re discussing yours.”

Choices.

She’d chosen to subject herself to her father’s callous rejection yet again. She’d chosen to invite Malcolm into her bed. Her attraction to him went far beyond the bedsheets. Their unexpected relationship was a song in her heart. And yet, he would choose to leave once his work was finished. He’d made that matter clear. Apparently she wasn’t enough to keep him in London.

“What is it?” Graham asked, all humor gone. “You suddenly look unspeakably sad.”

She forced a more cheerful expression and drew a deep breath as the carriage came to a stop. “Well, we can’t have that. This is my final practice, and Friday night, my first performance. We should get on with it.” She placed her hand on the latch, anxious to exit the suffocating confines of the carriage.

“Wait,” Graham called sharply, and she paused. “I’m proud of you, Birdie. I never imagined that my devious challenge would lead to this. All of London will soon hear your beautiful voice. I’ve behaved close to impossible at times, and you’ve put your trust in my care, but I hope that after Saturday evening you’ll feel as gratified in yourself, as you should. I’ve known how talented you are for years now, but you’ve never believed in your talent. This moment is entirely for you, to shine bright. I want you to embrace it.”

“I will and thank you, Graham.” His honest emotion and sincere words touched her heart. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“Well, that goes without saying,” he replied without missing a beat, their spirited mood recovered as they exited the carriage.

“Mr. Walker.”

“Mr. Barrett.” Malcolm entered the office and waited, anticipating the manager’s displeasure.

“I expected you to return hours ago.” Barrett’s face was drawn tight.

“Did you receive my message? I sent it with your driver.”

“Indeed, I did.” Mr. Barrett waved toward the chair on the opposite side of his desk before he took his seat. “Cosmo’s departure doesn’t surprise me. Workers come and go often in this line of work, but it does create a problem for the rowing expedition on Saturday morning.”

“The thought had occurred to me.” Only when he’d forced himself to think about something other than Eve and the sensual hours they’d spent in each other’s arms. Even when he’d returned to the entertainment grounds, it had been a challenge to refocus.

“And have you any ideas for a solution? Is there another rower who could join you?”

“The other men are happy with their position and partner,” Malcolm explained. “And I’ve no desire to break up a competent team.”

“The rowing and sailing expeditions have worked well to stir up interest for visitors to view the sport here at Vauxhall. It’s been challenging to rebuild attendance after the fire. The rising cost of creating innovative attractions and hiring staff was already a strain on the budget, but the new activities on the Thames have increased revenue significantly with very little investment. All things considered I don’t want the

slightest interruption in the schedule. You've proven your skill and expertise as a carpenter, but you're also the lead boat and most popular rower. Whether or not you'll pull across the finish line and capture first place garners the highest wagers."

"Is that so?" Malcolm commented for lack of a better reply. Mr. Barrett was not going to like what he said next. "With the new stage completed and no more carpentry work to be done, I plan on leaving London. Cosmo is gone, so you can replace the lead boat with a new pair of rowers as a simple solution. People like change when it comes to entertainment. With smart advertising, the wagers will continue."

"What is this?" Mr. Barrett's dark brows knotted together. "Miss Osbourne's arena is finished, but I have another project in want of your skill."

"You hadn't mentioned anything, and I'd planned to move on in a few weeks' time in case you needed to find reliable help."

"I'm not hiring another carpenter when I already have you. Your design skills are as proficient as your craft. I haven't shared this with anyone yet, but I have an important project specifically in need of your attention. You must reconsider."

It was Malcolm's own fault he wasn't aware Mr. Barrett had other tasks for him to complete. He'd been caught up in Cosmo's maddening midnight errand and otherwise occupied with everything involving Eve. His work had gone neglected, and now he felt he owed the manager the courtesy of time and consideration.

"I've made no permanent plans," Malcolm began, trying to assuage Barrett and simultaneously remain true to himself. "What type of attraction are you interested in having built? If it isn't a difficult undertaking, I'd be willing to postpone my departure and complete the construction for you."

"It was my wife's idea actually," Mr. Barrett began, a bemused expression softening his features. "She's been going on a bit about having a social event at our home. You must know how ladies become obsessed with an idea if they believe society will view them in a favorable light."

Malcolm had no idea of any such thing.

“She recently mentioned that holding a masquerade would provide great fun. Before dinner was over, we’d realized that the same enjoyment could be created here at Vauxhall Gardens. It sparked an idea to have you design a new area located on the western side of the Centre Cross Walk behind the Chinese Pavilion.”

“Adjacent to the Cascade Fountain?”

“Yes, the illuminated waterfall effects of the Cascade already draw a huge crowd. I thought to add a covered walkway that leads to a private grotto, something ornate and inviting, with hundreds of candle-lit fairy lanterns and heady flower arbors, although it would be your design entirely.” Mr. Barrett paused and spoke pointedly. “I’d have you construct a series of large gazebos, at least three in different themes and styles, sure to invite repeat visitors, all meant to be used in a masquerade event. I plan to invite actors and actresses to interact with the guests. There would be light music, perhaps dancing. When I consider the expense involved, I’m not sure yet how often a party of such grandeur could be offered, but I do believe the idea holds merit.”

“A build of that size is a large undertaking. I would need a few months at the least.”

“I’m prepared to hire as big a crew as you’ll need to have the area completed by the change of season. It would be advantageous to hold the first masquerade in autumn. Winter keeps most everyone indoors, and after the first successful event, visitors would clamor for the next one come springtime. Word of mouth is still the most effective form of advertisement and it’s completely free. Furthermore, if there are any problems or difficulties with the initial masquerade, the winter months provide time for me to iron out the wrinkles.”

“You’ve given this considerable thought.” Malcolm knew the idea to be a good one. It wasn’t hard for him to conjure an image of Eve in a beautiful evening gown and mysterious mask, her pretty pink lips waiting for his kisses.

“And now I ask that you do the same.” Mr. Barrett stood, a signal their meeting had come to an end. “I wouldn’t trust anyone else with a build of this magnitude. Additionally, there is the matter of your unmatched craftsmanship and innovative design. I’ll pay you handsomely, Malcolm.”

They shook hands and Malcolm left. The chance to put his name on a once-in-a-lifetime, everlasting project was incredibly tempting. Likewise, the payment for the design and construction would be added security to his savings. He could offer funds to St. Luke’s and the lads would benefit. Not to forget his obligation to the rowing team.

And Eve.

He’d be able to continue seeing Eve if that was what she wanted.

The beautiful light in her eyes.

Her angelic voice.

Her kisses.

Her bed.

Emotions, both good and bad, warred with logic. He definitely needed to think his decision through. All the while, deep down, the temptation to spend more time with Eve preempted everything else.

Evelyn stood at the center of the stage and shadowed her eyes with her hand, peering out at the area designated for the audience. Row after row, bench after bench, the clearing had been transformed to accommodate an enormous crowd. Did Mr. Barrett truly expect to sell that many tickets? What if the audience hissed and laughed at her performance? Worse, what if they got up and left? She couldn’t bear another humiliation.

“What’s the matter?” Graham appeared beside her. “You stopped singing in the middle of the song.”

“I don’t think I can do this, Graham.”

“You just were,” her cousin said with a note of humor. “Of course, you can do this. You need to stop doubting yourself.”

“I don’t know.” It was the best answer she could muster at the moment.

“Everyone will be here to support you. The entire Milford clan with additional friends. So, you see, you’re guaranteed an adoring audience.”

She lent him a glance and then returned her attention to the empty benches, trying to control the leap in her pulse every time she envisioned the seats full of opinionated men and women.

“You know you have a lovely voice,” Graham began. “Mr. Barrett wouldn’t invest in this showcase if he thought otherwise. That alone is proof of your talent.”

“I went to see my father,” she said, her tone saying more than her words.

“Did you invite him to the show?”

“Graham.” Her voice wobbled and she blinked away tears. “I can’t joke about it. It hurts too much.”

“I’m sorry.” He took her hand in his. “Forgive me. That was thoughtless. I assume the visit went poorly.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” She slipped her hand free and took a few steps, needing the distance. “He told me to leave it be. That he would manage his own affairs without my interference. But he looked awful. Exhausted and melancholic. Most likely inebriated or suffering the effects of recent drunkenness. He certainly doesn’t want my help. He doesn’t want my consideration. He doesn’t want a daughter.”

“I wish things had turned out differently after your mother passed away,” Graham said softly. “Her death set him on a self-destructive path that no one has been able to curtail. And he refuses to change or even acknowledge how his behavior hurts you. It isn’t just or fair, but he has the right of it when he suggests you live your own life, apart from his.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing already?” she asked, allowing a few tears to slip free. “What if the reviews of my performance are paired with accounts of his exploits in the gossip rags? I don’t think I can survive the mortification.”

“Birdie, please stop,” Graham implored. “All these *what ifs* are destroying your confidence and causing you to forget the most important reason you wanted to do this. Did you hear how beautifully you sang that last song? All of Vauxhall Gardens stopped to listen the moment you began. It was like a wizard’s spell cast them with wonder. Everyone within hearing distance ceased working, talking, or moving, so they could listen to your voice. You wanted to show all of London that you possess talent and charm. That you’re not the person they assume with their attempts to mar your reputation. And you shall do just that.”

“Thank you.” She wanted to believe every word.

“Why don’t you take a break and go for a walk,” Graham said at last. “You can come back and finish rehearsal when you’re clearheaded.”

She nodded and left the stage, knowing the one person she needed to visit, the man who would calm her nerves and soothe her fears.

When she entered his purple tent, Dante was already seated at the wooden table, the tarot cards replaced in the pattern from her last visit as if he’d awaited her arrival. As if, somehow, he’d already known. She breathed in the now familiar fragrance of sage and rosemary and sat down in the empty chair.

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE TURNS
EVERMORE WITH FORCES THAT
GOVERN THE CHANGE OF
SEASONS, RISE OF THE TIDE,
AND FATE IN ALL SITUATIONS.
IT'S SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN THE
TAROT REMINDS THAT ONE
SHOULD EMBRACE THE GOOD
TIMES, BECAUSE THE BAD TIMES
ARE ONLY A ROTATION AWAY.

It was later than usual when Malcolm walked home that evening. He'd lingered at the entertainment grounds and joined the men from the rowing crew for a few glasses of ale after a long day of hard work, but it hadn't silenced his conflicted emotion. Mr. Barrett's offer was interesting and worthy of consideration. Accepting the new job would allow Malcolm to settle into London and strengthen the friendships he'd formed. He'd be able, not just to hone his craft, but build a lasting structure within Vauxhall Gardens that could very well become part of history someday. He could stop running.

He could continue to spend time with Eve.

Regardless of these thoughts, something told him it was all an illusion he'd created to make himself feel better. He was never one to stay long in any particular place, and he was every kind of fool if he fell in love with a woman who lived in a world high above him.

But it was too late. He'd already fallen.

The past month he'd sensed a lightness within his spirit, a feeling he'd lost years ago that now gave him a reason to look forward to each day. He awoke with renewed motivation, his work more intentional, and every time he strode into Vauxhall Gardens, he wondered if he would hear Eve sing, see her smile, or taste her lips.

But love often brought pain. One seemed inevitable without the other. He'd experienced it again and again with the loyalty and affection he'd felt for his brother. And then the reversal as he witnessed the sorrow and disappointment in his parents' faces when they'd grieved a tragedy that could have been avoided. He despised himself for not saving his brother that day in the river.

A faint voice inside him argued there was no way he could have known his brother would attempt the same swim, that it was a terrible accident with horrific consequences, but Malcolm had grown deaf to that voice and ignored it whenever it baited him.

Reaching the corner, he broke free from his melancholy contemplations and paused, innately aware of another presence. He glanced over his shoulder casually and noticed a hulking shadow against the dusky wall of a nearby tenement. Someone was following him. A thief? Malcolm welcomed the confrontation. Alcohol, regret, and anger provided the perfect excuse for an altercation, and he was well skilled with his hands, not just in carpentry, but fisticuffs as well.

He slowed, waiting to see the stranger's intentions, and then turned left down an alleyway that led away from his rooms. The man followed; his footsteps blunt on the soot-covered cobbles. Malcolm curled his fingers into his palms and spun, facing down the stranger, seeking answers and at the same time needing no excuse to fight.

"Walker."

"What do you want?"

"The money you stole."

Malcolm stared at the stranger whose shadow was lengthened in the murky light, and recognized the same man who'd stood across the street from Cosmo's home watching when Malcolm had visited with the carriage. Not a neighbor. Someone who'd waited there to see if Cosmo would return or if an associate would pay a call. It would only take a few questions and a bit of time to piece together Malcolm's

identity and place of work. Who knew what Cosmo had shared beforehand?

“Cosmo took the money and left. I don’t know where he’s gone.” It was the truth, though Malcolm doubted it would satisfy the man’s interest.

“And you helped him steal it?”

“No,” Malcolm explained, assessing the stranger. “I went to his home to see why he hadn’t come to work. Nothing more. I don’t know where he went and I don’t have your money.”

“That’s what a liar always says.”

“No, that’s the truth. I don’t know anything more. I don’t even know who was behind all this.”

“Maybe, or maybe not.”

When the stranger advanced, Malcolm was prepared. He landed a punch that took the man by surprise, but the thug wasn’t deterred. His fist connected with the side of Malcolm’s head, jarring loose every instinct to fight as their scuffle pushed back to the broken slats of a wooden fence.

Clouds moved away from the moon and lent a timely shaft of light to glint off the blade the stranger drew from beneath his coat. Malcolm kept his eyes on that weapon, all the while calculating the best way to disarm the man. The stranger lunged, swiping the knife in a wide arc. Malcolm dodged out of reach and used his momentum to reverse their positions, but he still wasn’t out of danger. The thug lunged again and his blade sliced into Malcolm’s shoulder.

“Son of a bitch!” Malcolm cursed as he landed a punch to the thug’s jaw. The blow sent the knife clattered to the street. When the thug moved to chase after it, Malcolm wrapped his forearm around the man’s throat and cut off the motion. The stranger stilled, immobilized by the pressure Malcolm exerted against his windpipe, unable to breath if Malcolm tightened his hold. He shifted and hauled the man to the fence again, keeping his arm pressed effectively against his airway. “Be sure to tell whoever sent you that this is the last visit you’ll

pay to me. I didn't steal your money. I wanted no part of your plan. Cosmo left London. Any issue you have about that arrangement needs to be resolved with him. Not me." Malcolm released the man, pushing him hard against the jagged slats before stepping away. "If you follow me again, you won't be able to carry any messages back. Is that understood?"

The stranger had one hand splayed over his throat and a miserable look in his eyes, but he nodded before Malcolm turned, walking home with his energy expended, and at least one problem solved at the price of bruised knuckles and a sore shoulder.

Early morning sunlight filtered through the windows of Evelyn's bedchambers as she finished getting dressed. She'd asked Graham to accompany her to the rowing expedition this morning, partly to keep her mind occupied for fear she'd talk herself out of performing that evening. Mostly because she wished to see Malcolm again.

But when they arrived at the riverbank and took their places along the rail, Malcolm wasn't in the lead boat. Neither was the man he'd rowed with the first time she'd watched him race.

"Where do you suppose he is?" she asked Graham, knowing she wouldn't have to elaborate.

"I don't see him," Graham said, his gaze traveling over the boats waiting for the signal to begin. "I suppose he had something more important to do."

"What could be more important than winning?" she asked, her tone disgruntled.

"Watching the race beside you," Malcolm replied, his voice against her ear.

"Oh." She turned so quickly her nose brushed his jaw, the contact sending a delightful frisson of desire through her. His breath was warm on her nape, and a shiver of gooseflesh raced over her skin.

“How chivalrous of you,” Graham commented in a convivial tone. “And excellent timing, I might add.”

“What happened?” Evelyn reached toward Malcolm’s jaw, her fingers suspended over the purple bruise visible beneath the faint shadow of whiskers. She despised the ingrained proprieties that prevented her from making contact with his skin. Did it matter here at Vauxhall? Did anyone care?

“Nothing to cause you any concern,” Malcolm said quickly.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Graham quipped before he stepped away and feigned interest in the activity on the water.

The shrill sound of the race whistle caused Evelyn to startle, while all around her, people rose up on their toes, their voices elevated as they cheered for the rowers.

Malcolm leaned in closer. “If you’d like to walk and talk, we can step away from the riverbank.”

She simply nodded, knowing it would be difficult to be heard until they moved away. She caught Graham’s eye and he smiled; their silent communication convenient given the circumstances.

She automatically looped her hand through Malcolm’s elbow and tugged, trying to match his stride. His muscles tightened beneath her touch. As soon as they’d moved a reasonable distance, she spoke. “Are you hurt? Your jaw and somewhere else?” Her eyes went to his arm and then his shoulder. Was that the outline of a bandage beneath his shirt? “What happened?”

“A thief chose to challenge the wrong person last night.”

“That’s terrible.” Alarm caused her words to come out strongly. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Very much so,” he said, canting his head and matching her gaze. “But not fit for work or rowing this morning.”

“Well, I’m pleased you’re fit for strolling,” she teased.

“As am I,” Malcolm said, stopping and turning so he faced her now. “Mr. Barrett has offered me a larger construction project. Something that would keep me in London for several months.”

“That’s wonderful.” As his expression remained serious, she wondered if she’d spoken too soon. “Isn’t it?”

“I’d planned to move on.”

“Yes, I know,” she said more softly. “You told me as much.”

“But the build offers a unique opportunity. The design and construction will be challenging. Naturally, the pay would be beneficial.”

“And that’s why you would want to stay?” she asked, knowing the motivation for her question was transparent and possibly humiliating, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking it anyway.

“Eve, I…” He paused, drawing a deep breath before he started walking again, forcing her to do the same. “I won’t assume to know your plans for the future, but from our time together I know you’d like to continue our relationship.”

The tightness in her chest eased. He wasn’t telling her he never wanted to see her again. She’d tortured herself with that horrific thought. And besides, Dante had assured her love was in her future — the near future. It had to be Malcolm. Who else would suddenly come to love her? He won simply by being the only entrant in the race. How delightful.

“Yes,” she managed, when she realized he still waited for her to say something. “I enjoy our time together. I care about you.”

She’d already broken so many rules of propriety — at this point, what did a few more matter?

“I don’t know how to categorize our relationship, but regardless, it can’t continue,” he said carefully, as if the words might break if he voiced them too loudly. “You’re a proper lady. You live in a world unfamiliar to me, somewhere I wouldn’t be accepted.”

“I don’t give a damn about that world.” Her temper spiked at hearing his words, that same tightness in her chest squeezing her heart. “Society has never been kind to me.”

“They’ll be even worse if you suddenly take up with a carpenter,” he said with concern. “I’d always planned on leaving, so I knew our time together would come to an end, but now the circumstances have changed.”

She laid her hand on his arm, wanting him to stop hurting her. Perhaps she hadn’t explained fully enough about her father and his embarrassing behavior, about her broken family, about her feelings. “Malcolm, I…”

“I don’t want to see you hurt, Eve. I can’t be the one who brings you pain,” he interrupted, laying his hand over hers and gently removing it from his arm. “Your reputation is far more important than mine, not just in a broader sense, but in connection with your friends and family.”

“My friends and family want to see me happy. That’s their only concern.” She couldn’t not try to change his mind, yet when she looked into his eyes it was as though a curtain had fallen, the sparkle of interest gone. “I’ve decided to sing here at Vauxhall. Taking the stage is a choice far beneath a refined lady. That alone should prove I don’t give a fig about gossip.”

“But you will,” he replied, reluctance in his voice. “When the gossip becomes spiteful or you enter a room and people turn away in judgment. It won’t be warranted or just, but it will hurt you, and that is one thing I can’t bear, that time spent with me will ultimately bring you pain.”

“Malcolm, please.” She glanced away, wanting to reorder her emotions, refusing to sound upset. Apparently, he didn’t feel as she did. That they’d discovered something special. That they deserved happiness and the chance to see if their relationship could lead to love.

“We were both aware from the start that this game couldn’t be won.”

“I never considered our relationship a game.” She straightened her shoulders in hope of composing herself, as a

lick of anger replaced hurt. She'd looked forward to this morning, wanting to find a sense of calm in his company to chase away her nerves before this evening's performance, but instead he was breaking her heart. She was a fool to believe in a few tarot cards, to think printed paper and superstition could predict a guarantee of love and happiness.

"I don't want us to part with anger between us. I came down to the riverbank in hope we could talk about this and both see reason."

"So, you think I'm being unreasonable?"

"That's not what I said." His mouth dipped in a thoughtful frown. "What I think is that we both want something we aren't meant to have. I never should have kissed you the first time, but I couldn't stop myself. You'd already wound your way into my every thought, and then soon after, you were inside me, your presence in rhythm with my heartbeat. I looked forward to seeing you and sought you out if I knew you're be here at Vauxhall. I brought you to my rooms and followed you to your house, unwilling to see the truth or logic, even though the entire time I knew we played with fire. If anyone sees you with me..." His voice trailed off and left the sentence unfinished, somehow the absence of words making the message all the more powerful.

"I told you that none of that matters to me."

"Well, it matters to me."

"Isn't that rich?" she said tartly, unable to stop herself. "I'm above you in station and yet you don't find me fit for a relationship."

"Eve!" His voice was riddled by a new sense of frustration. "That's not what I'm saying."

"I honestly don't think there is anything left to say." She took a step back, creating distance as her gaze slid toward Graham and the other spectators. She could see the crowd breaking apart, the race over, and the scene struck her as a bitter pantomime of what she'd believed existed between her and Malcolm. Her heart was breaking, their relationship over.

“I understand completely. If you didn’t have the extra work for Mr. Barrett, you would have left. And now, even though you’re staying, you still want to walk away.”

“To spare you.”

“That’s what people always say when they want to exonerate their own guilt. It’s a preferred response of my father’s. Oddly, I never considered you to be anything like him.”

“I’m sorry I’ve hurt you, Eve.” Malcolm stepped nearer as the crowd around them thickened. “That was never my intention.”

“Nevertheless, it’s the result.”

SPEND TIME LIVING YOUR
DREAMS INSTEAD OF LIVING
YOUR FEARS.

That evening, Evelyn arrived at Vauxhall Gardens an hour before she was expected to take the stage. Dressed in an ethereal creation of pale blue, she'd once adored how the diaphanous fabric floated with her every movement as if it defied gravity, but now it hardly seemed important. Graham had commissioned the gown to coincide with his vision, her voice meant to be a gift from the heavens. The stage had been prepared with dozens of candlelit lanterns, and hundreds of stars were suspended from the narrow-beamed pergola overhead. The backdrop portrayed a captivating tableau of galaxies, constellations, and planets, adrift in an otherworldly universe intended to transport the spectator to another place entirely, far from Vauxhall Gardens and London, somewhere that only existed in one's pleasant dream.

As Evelyn peeked out from the curtained area at the rear of the stage, she watched men and women fill the benches, even though there were nearly thirty minutes before the show would begin. Her song list was comprised of carefully selected favorites guaranteed to please the audience and showcase her voice. The arrangements began with *Midnight Love*, a familiar tune meant to invite undecided spectators into the show. That particular song ended on a lovely high note that she'd worked hard to perfect. Hopefully the crowd would be impressed from the first selection and remain through the end of the performance. Her most recent nightmares were composed of angry mobs who threw rotten vegetables and called her insulting names as they fled in search of better entertainment.

But while everything was perfectly placed and prepared, Evelyn hadn't resolved the overwhelming swirl of emotions threatening to overtake her and combust like a comet targeting the earth. Anger toward her father still simmered, the regret of unspoken words causing her to bite her tongue, no matter the feeling was familiar. However, it was her conversation with Malcolm that caused her deepest distress. She'd envisioned an entirely different outcome between them.

At one time, she'd believed tonight she'd meet his gaze in the audience, the notes she sang coming from her heart as she confessed her love. Instead, he'd made it clear they would no longer see each other and now she had nowhere to put her feelings of disappointment and hurt. Her heart was already full with love and affection. To be asked to make room for rejection seemed cruel and unfair. She hadn't meant to fall in love with him. But she had anyway.

"Birdie, it's almost time." Graham came up beside her. "Are you ready to share your beautiful gift with all of London?"

"No," she said, failing to find even one other word to express the tumultuous emotions tightened into a knot in her stomach.

"This is not the time or place for teasing," Graham said, his smile faltering. "My entire family is in the audience as well as a number of mutual friends and associates. I wanted you to have a safe place to look in case you experienced even the slightest misgivings. Though I'm sure it's all for naught. Is that correct?"

"Have you invited Avery?" she asked, unwilling to tell him what she wanted most was to find a private place to empty her stomach and cry. When was the last time she'd eaten anyway? She blinked hard, a slight humming blocking out the sounds of the crowd beyond the curtain.

"I have, actually, although I'm needed here backstage with you, not in the audience cheering alongside Avery."

"Promise me I can meet her," Evelyn said, finally able to concentrate on something other than the fact she would soon

make a complete fool of herself on stage. “I won’t perform until you promise.”

Graham looked taken aback. His brows pinched over his eyes, suddenly saddened by her request. He recovered quickly though, a sly smile once again in place. “You know, you must perform at least once and receive a standing ovation before you can become a demanding diva.”

“I’m completely serious.” In truth she was looking for any excuse to leave and return home. What had she been thinking when she agreed to this? Would Malcolm be somewhere in the audience? Did he care any longer?

“I told you my relationship is more complicated than you assume.”

“Then explain.”

“Now is not the time for that. Your concentration should be focused on the lyrics, not my personal affairs.”

“I’m not walking out on that stage until you promise I will meet Avery this evening.” A rush of relief and pleasure swept through her, knowing Graham would never agree. Then she could leave. She’d apologize to Mr. Barrett. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be angry, although he’d invested a large sum of money into this ill-fated endeavor. That fact gave her pause. This was all Graham’s fault. He’d have to make it right with the manager. She wanted to go home. To change out of her new slippers that were far too tight and uncomfortable. She wanted to take a hot bath and scrub Malcolm out of her brain. She wanted to cry. Not just from loneliness. But from heartache.

“All right,” Graham said tightly.

“What?”

“You win. After tonight’s performance, walk with me to Dante’s tent and I’ll introduce you to Avery.”

“In Dante’s tent?” she asked, surprise and confusion overriding shock at his acquiescence.

“I’ve given you the answer you desired. Now stop asking questions and prepare yourself. The curtain opens in less than ten minutes. Are you ready?”

Of course, she wasn’t ready. She was still considering her cousin’s promise while trying hard not to reexamine her conversation with Malcolm or recall the way his eyes didn’t match his words. His resolute rejection. Would he be in the audience tonight? She refused to peek through the curtain and search for him in the sea of faces beyond the stage. Whether or not he’d decided to watch her performance meant nothing now. It wasn’t as though they were a couple. She should never have believed otherwise.

Malcolm was no different from her father in that respect, offering disappointment and abandonment when life became difficult and inconvenient. She’d been a fool to consult the stars, when in the past they’d never shone in her favor. Malcolm was like the water beneath his boat, always moving, swift with change, and she couldn’t force him to stay in London. Her love wasn’t enough to keep him here.

She heard the discordant notes of the orchestra as the musicians prepared their instruments and she drew a deep breath, trying desperately to clear her mind and find inner peace. She could never deliver so much as a passable performance with frayed nerves and an aching heart.

Someone took the stage and began speaking, welcoming the crowd and introducing the program. The subsequent hush of the most obvious noise on the other side of the curtain reminded her time had run out. Her pulse skipped in a reckless beat. She couldn’t do this. Familiar feelings of vulnerability and fear layered atop her trepidation. Walking out on stage felt like stepping off a cliff without knowing where she’d land.

If she’d land.

She needed to push all other thoughts from her mind, but it seemed an impossible task with her heart aching over Malcolm’s decision. Her life had become tangled with his and there was no way to undo the knot. Even now, when she needed to focus solely on her performance.

The curtain parted to an overwhelming round of applause. Time slowed. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears and feel the thrum of her pulse, faster than only seconds before. Perspiration dotted her temple. When she tried to inhale, her body refused to co-operate and the oppressive wave of expectancy displayed on the faces of the crowd suffocated her further. She couldn't sing if she couldn't breathe and *she couldn't breathe*. The air was locked in her chest, refusing to budge. Her fingers began to tremble and she caught one hand in the other, not wanting anyone to see evidence of her fear, all the while the silence stretched. Anticipation mounted. Someone coughed, the sound loud and brash. It came from a man in the front row. Without moving her head, Evelyn slid her eyes along the benches. She'd left Graham back stage. Was it her uncle who'd tried to break the quiet? One of her cousins? How embarrassed they must be. With decided determination, she forced herself to exhale and stepped forward the smallest space.

As if receiving an unintentional sign, the orchestra began an enchanting preamble. She was supposed to move forward and take center stage. Everyone was waiting. Her gaze skittered over the crowd, searching desperately for a safe haven, somewhere to land that would enable her to reclaim her calm. Face after face was unfamiliar, strangers waiting for her to begin, some expressions concerned while others appeared displeased. A rumble of conversation began, whispers of speculation soon to become embarrassing rumors. She blinked rapidly and swallowed, her breathing shallow. If only Graham had thought to tell her where she'd find her aunt and uncle, her cousins and their friends, perhaps she'd be able to settle.

Her eyes traveled to the farthest corner of the bench rows where a column marked the end of the performance area, and there she found Malcolm, outlined by moonlight, leaning one shoulder against a pillar. Her eyes connected with his and she watched as he placed his palm over his heart. She breathed, a deep inhalation, the orchestra's music suddenly making sense. Drawing a truer breath, she kept her gaze locked to Malcolm's and moved forward. At last, she began to sing.

Her voice quivered at first, just until she shook loose from the last vestiges of her nervousness, but like so many times in her past, she soon became lost in the music. Her voice grew stronger and she delivered the lyrics with heart-wrenching emotion and sincere sentimentality. She hadn't wanted to take the stage discouraged and heartbroken, but the swift course of circumstances served her purpose now, and she drew on her feelings, finishing the first song with tears in her eyes.

She breathed easier, free from any lingering agitation, and finally forced her gaze from Malcolm, although she noticed his wide grin before her eyes darted away. Regardless of their earlier conversation, a thrill flowed through her. The audience was on their feet, their resounding swell of applause sudden and demanding, like the overwhelming crest of a wave that rushed in and then quieted, waiting for more.

Song after song, her voice rang out, to the best of her ability and apparent pleasure of the crowd. Someone tossed a bouquet of roses onto the stage as she took her final bow and her eyes blurred with unexpected tears. When she hurried backstage, Graham was waiting with his arms splayed wide. He hugged her briefly, the excitement over her success too overwhelming to keep contained.

"I knew you could do it, Birdie. I've never seen such an exuberant response. The crowd was on their feet before the orchestra's final note. I'd wager London Proper heard that applause all the way in Mayfair."

His mention of Mayfair threatened her happiness, the remembrance of her argument with her father still fresh, but she pushed it out of mind.

"I didn't think I could do it."

"Well, you have. All that wasted worry. You were making yourself sick."

"And now I have something else to look forward to." She placed one hand on Graham's shoulder. "I can't wait to meet Avery. When shall we go?"

Graham slid his pocket watch from his waistcoat and lent it a cursory glance. “Let’s plan for an hour from now. Mr. Barrett will certainly want to—”

“Lady Osbourne!” Mr. Barrett joined them in the alcove behind the stage, a broad grin on his face. “Your voice is magnificent. This performance will be the talk of London by morning.”

“And a fine advertisement for more customers here at Vauxhall,” Graham added.

“Thank you for your kind words,” Evelyn said, a flush of pride heating her cheeks. She’d managed to overcome her emotional turmoil and stage jitters, and sing at her best.

“Oh, Evelyn!” Graham’s parents exclaimed, as then what seemed an endless line of cousins with their friends filed into the cramped space.

“We always knew you were talented,” her aunt exclaimed.

“And possessed the voice of an angel,” her uncle added.

Before Evelyn could reply she was swallowed up by her cousins and their enthusiastic conversation.

It wasn’t until forty-five minutes later, when the stage had gone quiet and the benches were empty, that Evelyn and Graham began their walk to Dante’s tent. She couldn’t help but try to find Malcolm as they moved through the overflowing walkways, but she knew it was an exercise in futility. It was Saturday evening, and it seemed like all of London had decided to visit Vauxhall Gardens. It would be next to impossible to locate Malcolm in the crush.

And why did it matter? Did she need to hear him tell her she’d performed well? No. Although, she did wish to thank him for providing the connection she’d needed to believe in herself. And for having offered her comfort when her heart ached, even though they’d decided to part ways.

No, he’d decided they should part ways.

Maybe he was right. She frowned, contemplating all that had happened in a span of twelve hours. Maybe he was doing

what she was too weak to do, not because he didn't care for her, but because he knew it would be too difficult, that despite their best effort, society would ruin the special bond they'd created. He was sparing her future heartache by ending their relationship now before they professed their feelings.

"Here we are."

Graham's words jarred her from her sorrowful considerations and she stopped in front of the now-familiar fortune teller's tent.

"Won't Dante be busy with other customers?" She glanced around the area, noting it looked as populated as every other part of Vauxhall this evening.

"No," Graham said without hesitation. "He knows we're meeting here this evening."

"Then let's go in," she answered, her earlier excitement restored.

"Just one more matter, Evelyn."

His use of her given name snagged her attention and she searched his face, surprised to see his expression had grown pensive.

"We're more like brother and sister than cousins. You're my closest confidant and so I'm ready to introduce you to Avery, but I want you to be prepared. The circumstances will not be what you're expecting."

"Graham," she said, emotion causing her to gentle her tone, "I can't imagine any circumstance that would cause me to doubt your choice."

"You don't understand. Avery is—"

"For heaven's sake, stop worrying and allow me to make up my own mind." With an impatient flick of her hand, she slipped through the tent flaps, startled to find the interior quiet and empty. It seemed every corner of Vauxhall was crammed full of fun seekers, and yet here, at a seemingly popular attraction, the air was still. Only Dante and another gentleman stood in a circle of glowing lantern light at the far side. When

they turned in her direction, Dante nodded in acknowledgement and left through the back, while the other gentleman approached.

“Pardon me,” Evelyn said tentatively, “I didn’t mean to interrupt.” She looked over her shoulder to where Graham had followed her inside.

“There’s no need to apologize,” the man assured cheerfully. “And may I compliment you on your lovely voice. The performance this evening was glorious. It truly took my breath away.”

“Thank you,” she said, confused and curious. She glanced at Graham again and saw that he was grinning. A sparkle lit his eyes and when she followed his gaze, understanding finally took hold.

“Birdie, love, I’d like you to meet Avery.” Graham moved to the gentleman’s side.

“At last,” Avery said, taking her hand and pressing a gallant kiss there. “I thought Graham would never relent. How foolish of him to fritter away all this time when we could have become better acquainted already.”

Evelyn watched Graham and Avery, allowing the unexpected idea of two men sharing a loving relationship to settle.

“I didn’t realize,” she finally managed. No wonder Graham had behaved so secretively, so protectively, of his relationship. It all made sense now.

“Of course, you didn’t. Our love is not the usual way of things, Birdie.”

“I’m happy you’ve decided to trust me,” she said, her smile genuine. “And I’m anxious to get to know you too, Avery. At last I’ll have the opportunity to share all Graham’s most embarrassing childhood mishaps. Like the day he decided to hide in the boot of the carriage, convinced he could stow away to the Bond Street Bazaar and visit his favorite bakery. He meant to return home with no one the wiser, except nothing went as planned.”

“Birdie!” Graham interrupted, a note of warning in his voice as he flared his eyes.

Unbothered, she waved in his direction, enjoying the moment far too much to stop, further encouraged by Avery’s amusement. “I believe it was several hours later when his brother Thomas found him, green-faced with motion sickness, clammy and crying from being closed up so tightly. His sister Kate said he resembled a week-old cod.”

She couldn’t continue, overtaken by a fit of laughter, relived when both Graham and Avery joined in.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO VIEW THE PRESENT THROUGH A LENS OF THE PAST

Evelyn was in her garden pruning rose plants with excessive vigor when Dora found her. There was something decidedly satisfying about the precise snip of her pruning shears as they cut away wilted blooms, broken stems, and browning leaves. She wished she could prune the newspapers in the same fashion, the comments filling the society page this morning in need of an attentive gardener. Most reviews were complimentary, mentioning the fine quality of her voice and range of notes she was able to produce, yet there were thorns in the bouquet. How peculiar was the human spirit that the harsh comments were the ones that stayed with her and not the effusive praise.

Unseemly behavior... garish performance... inappropriate decision, in kind to the deteriorating Osbourne reputation...

Snip, snip, snip.

“Pardon my interruption, my lady.”

“What is it, Dora?” Evelyn turned toward her maid’s voice, keeping the shears in hand, the weight of the metal tool grounding her for a reason she couldn’t identify. A ladybird landed on a grandiflora blossom in front of her, and she watched it with gratitude as it went about its industrious business, eating harmful aphids from the nearby leaves.

“You have a caller.”

“I’m not home to visitors today.” Evelyn scowled, wondering why her housekeeper hadn’t informed the staff.

“Mrs. Halley should have told you as much if she was going to step away from the door.”

“Yes, she did, my lady.” Dora replied, her lips pressed tight before she continued. “And your instructions have been followed. We’ve only accepted deliveries from the florist. Otherwise, we’ve turned everyone else away.”

“So then?” She didn’t wonder about Graham. He didn’t fall into that category and her servants knew as much. Had her father sent a message? Why couldn’t she stop hoping he would recognize how much his behavior hurt her? It was a fatal flaw, to want something she would never have. Perhaps because it evoked such a sense of not belonging. If her own father didn’t care to spend time with her, why would anyone? Why would Malcolm?

“The gentleman is insistent,” Dora said carefully. “He stated he would stay on the front steps until I at least informed you of his arrival.

Having just brought to mind an image of Malcolm’s handsome face, a shallow gasp escaped her. She remained riddled with foolish hope. Could he have changed his mind and come to call?

“It’s Lord Osbourne, my lady.”

With a groan of frustration, Evelyn clenched her eyes and willed patience to the forefront. “Does he seem like himself, Dora?”

Honestly, what was she asking her maid to determine? What did *himself* mean? Was he an inebriated sot? A traitorous philanderer? A neglectful parent? More likely, the entirety of the list.

“He appeared reasonable, my lady.”

Perhaps that was the best Evelyn could expect. “Bring him to the drawing room. I’ll be in eventually.” She had every intention of making her father wait. Something was definitely amiss. Her father owned this property and possessed the key. He had no reason to drop the knocker and wait to be admitted.

Nevertheless, curiosity drove her inside sooner than he deserved.

When she entered the drawing room, he was standing near the mantel, and at first glance appeared composed and sober. An exhalation of relief served to buffer her wary apprehension.

“Good day, Father.” She bustled into the room, greeting him with a chill in her voice. The last time they’d spoken, he’d eviscerated her. The memory still caused her pain.

“Evelyn.” He nodded, his eyes passing over her, perhaps assessing her temperament.

“What’s brought you here on such a formal mission?” She didn’t sit, forcing him to remain standing, not that he could be counted on for any semblance of decorum.

“I’d like your assistance.”

Laughter bubbled up from her stomach, maybe from her toes. *He was asking her for a favor?* If she needed something to lighten the mood, this absurdity certainly met the mark.

“Why would I assist you with anything, aside from finding the door on your way out?”

“Don’t be flippant,” he chided, though he had no right. “You’re my daughter. It’s your duty to help me when asked.”

Was there no end to his ignominy? How disgraceful, to show up and ruin her morning, a morning that was already quite ruined without his interference. What’s more, to ask her for a boon.

“I’m your daughter,” she repeated tartly. “I didn’t think you realized that fact.”

“I pay for this home, for your clothing and expenses, don’t I?”

“Parenting is far more than providing clothes and lodging.” She stepped closer, staring into his eyes and detecting not even a glimmer of shame or regret.

“Don’t undermine the importance of provision. Your mother was supposed to provide me with a son before she

died.”

“How inconvenient of her to perish at a young age and not fulfill your list of wishes.” Evelyn inwardly applauded herself. Graham would be proud of that rebuke. Her father scoffed, though he gave no other indication he’d perceived her intentional sarcasm.

“I haven’t come here for another argument,” he replied, his voice low and impatient.

“We can’t always have what we want... isn’t that the point you just made moments ago?” The words were their own punishing truth. She wanted Malcolm. She wanted him to want her. Worse yet, she believed he wanted her. So why weren’t they together? She returned her eyes to her father, the Earl of Spencer, all too aware that none of the rules that kept her locked in a gilded cage with her heart in pieces applied to him, even when he was the perpetrator of so much of her misery.

“Your friend, Matilda, claims I’ve gotten her with child.”

Did he not see how very wrong that statement sounded?

“Claims? You doubt her word?” Evelyn asked, closing her eyes with a long blink meant to fortify prolonged patience.

He gestured with his hand, as if her questions didn’t merit answers. “I’ve never had a fondness for children.”

“I’m aware,” she murmured.

“Matilda won’t see reason. She should give the child away and avoid all the nastiness that’s already begun.”

“What are her plans?” Evelyn wondered aloud. Would she have a half-brother or half-sister in less than a year’s time? The idea wasn’t unappealing. It buoyed her spirits just by considering the possibility.

“I’ve offered her a substantial sum to keep the matter quiet.” At Evelyn’s lack of reaction, he added, “For her sake, especially.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible.” Evelyn paced to the window and then turned, remembering belatedly that her father had

asked for her help. Doing what exactly? “Why are you here? What do you want me to do?”

“Convince her to rid herself of the child, to give it up.”

“I will do no such thing.” It was a decisive moment Evelyn would later remember with pride and satisfaction.

Malcolm finished putting away his tools and watched, as across the room, Henry mimicked his actions, carefully returning a box of nails and a hammer to the workbox Malcolm had helped the lad build. An apprentice needed to learn how to care for the tools of his craft with the same careful attention as the art of design and construction. Just then, Sister Agnes appeared in the doorway with a soft smile on her face.

“Now that you’ve completed your work for the day, why don’t you join me for tea?” she said, with a nod that indicated his automatic agreement, even though Henry wrinkled his nose, the offer immediately unappealing. “Henry, you’ve been inside all morning. You should take some fresh air while I speak to Mr. Walker.”

Sister Agnes had a way of seeing the shadow of discontentment that lingered around a person and coaxing out secrets meant to remain hidden. It was a natural gift when one considered her chosen vocation, but today Malcolm realized that ability might cause him an uncomfortable conversation.

They settled in the compact room designed to receive visitors seeking to provide a home to a child or make a donation. Sister Agnes poured their refreshment and reclaimed her seat. Then she didn’t hesitate a moment longer.

“The last few weeks, a lovely lightness has existed about you.” She took a sip of tea, studying the floral pattern on the side of the cup as she continued. “At first, I’d attributed your pleasant outlook to your dedicated work with Henry, but here we sit, after you’ve given him a rewarding lesson, and yet I notice a cloud of troubling emotion in your expression. Clearly it was something else, *someone else*, who brought that light to

your eyes and brought you an effortless smile. I can only surmise circumstances have changed.”

She hadn't posed a question and yet he was certain her silence was meant for his explanation. She was correct, of course. He'd stopped himself a dozen times from seeking out Eve, from sending her a message or aimlessly walking down the street where she lived in case, by chance and good fortune, she might glance out the window and see him, or better yet be on her way to a social event. Then he could speak to her, hear her voice, admire the beautiful glimmer in her lovely eyes. Yet, he hadn't acted. Couldn't act. It would only make their inevitable parting all the more painful in the future. Because there was no way around the fact, he was a common carpenter and she was a lady of distinction and daughter of an earl.

However, his heart wasn't so easily reconciled, his emotions completely undone. He'd assumed *wrongly* that coming to St. Luke's and immersing himself in a project would help keep his mind occupied and ill feelings at bay, but he'd been wrong. Sister Agnes had noticed and they'd hardly shared any interaction today.

He couldn't deceive the sister, would never lie, and yet the complicated knot of what he felt for Eve and why he wouldn't allow himself to pursue their relationship further was too tightly tangled to resolve over a cup of tea.

“I had a younger brother,” he began, wanting to fill the silence. “He died several years ago. He drowned.” Saying the words aloud was always a punch in the chest, even after all these years.

Clearly not anticipating this type of confession, Sister Agnes's expression changed from expectant helpfulness to genuine compassion. “I'm very sorry for your loss and will pray for you and your family to find peace. May your brother's memory become a blessing.”

“Thank you,” he said with a slight nod, uncomfortable and determine to continue. “It's only me now. My parents...” He didn't finish.

“Blaming yourself for actions of the past of events that can’t be undone is never beneficial,” she said after a few minutes. “Even when mistakes are made, the human spirit must move on with forgiveness, not just of others, but of oneself.”

Malcolm stood up and walked to the window. “Had I paid better attention I would have seen that Paul had followed me. But I was too consumed by my arrogance. Of all things, I was trying to steal smuggled liquor sunken off shore, but reachable by a strong swimmer. It was a dare made by a group of older lads who were probably too scared to try to find the liquor themselves. I was cocksure I could succeed and win their respect. In hindsight, it all seems so foolish, to have lost my brother over a bottle of rum.”

“You can’t punish yourself for something you didn’t understand at the time.”

“But I should have known. Paul was always trailing a few steps behind me, and that night he’d pleaded with me, wanting to come along, except I didn’t relent. I should have known he’d follow anyway. I was already late, in a rush, and too anxious to boast and earn the acceptance of the older boys.” He glanced at Sister Agnes’s face, but he saw nothing there but compassion and sympathy. “I was already back on shore, exhausted from diving repeatedly to untie the rope and swim with a crate of bottles in tow, when I noticed someone else was in the water. At first, I thought I was caught, that someone was coming after me. But then I realized it was Paul. He went under and never came back up. It was late, the current was unforgiving, and as I searched for Paul, it was all black, above and below the water. I was too late. I couldn’t find him, and the river stole him away.” He drew a deep breath, then another, misplaced relief soothing the ache of regret. He hadn’t shared the details of his brother’s death with anyone since he’d returned home and told his parents that night.

“Your family suffered a horrible tragedy,” Sister Agnes said into the quiet. “But you were hardly to blame.”

“You’re very kind.” He resettled in the chair, aware of how obtuse his reply sounded.

“And then you left home?”

“Not right away. A year later my parents passed within two months of each other. Life was never the same in our house after Paul died. I needed distraction and decided I’d move to another town, try a new city. But wherever I settled, my memories joined me. Travel became a means to outrun the past. It was an excuse to keep moving. If I didn’t get to know people well, they didn’t ask questions about my family, and no explanations were ever needed. Friendship requires sharing, and no matter how well intended the conversation, this was too painful to share.”

“And now?” Sister Agnes prodded gently.

He laughed briefly despite the serious tone of their discussion. “Now I enjoy working at Vauxhall Gardens, feel fulfilled by my involvement here, and I have a few friends...”

“So whatsoever could be the problem?”

“I’ve made yet another irreparable mistake,” he said gravely.

“A mistake?” Sister Agnes repeated, her tone filled with doubt. “I find that hard to believe. What have you done?”

“I’ve fallen in love.”

“Love is never a mistake,” Sister Agnes said gently, though a hint of amusement colored her reply. “What is it that prevents you from sharing your feelings?”

“I refuse to bring hardship into her life. She already knows sorrow from her father’s choices. And besides, what could I possibly offer her?” He’d pondered this problem constantly. He wasn’t accomplished enough, privileged enough, or wealthy enough to provide for Eve’s lifestyle or be worthy of her love.

“What can you offer her? The answer is simple,” Sister Agnes said with a soft smile. “Happiness, of course.”

Two weeks passed after Malcolm’s conversation with Sister Agnes and life continued as expected. He led rowing practice

in the mornings, considered design ideas for the gazebo project, and visited Vauxhall only when he was certain he wouldn't cross paths with Eve. The last took painstaking effort, as the greater part of him missed their playful talks and the intimacy they'd shared; however, he knew he'd only dig the bottomless pit of his lovesickness deeper if he happened to see her, hear her laugh, or listen to her sing.

He told himself repeatedly in an argument he couldn't win that he was making the right choice and sparing her heart more than his own, though it hardly felt that way. He wondered how she was feeling, what she was doing, where she spent her evenings, and how the crowds received her performances. He didn't dare ask anyone at Vauxhall Gardens, not wanting his inquiries to funnel back to Eve, for her to somehow find out he was miserable without her. To accompany this misery, he'd lost all motivation to sketch an innovative design for Mr. Barrett's new entertainment area. Inspiration had evaporated. It didn't matter if he took an early morning walk, visited a museum, or paged through history books — nothing appealed to him, no idea seemed interesting. His colorful world had suddenly become dull and gray.

In an act of desperation and in need of distraction, Malcolm hired a hack to bring him to Regent's Park. He'd discovered the location accidentally and, feeling bleak this afternoon, assumed the history and architecture of the surroundings would clear his mind and help refocus his work. He was aware Mr. Barrett waited impatiently for an initial presentation of construction plans.

The expansive property was expertly designed at the masterful hand of John Nash, commissioned by King George to develop the acreage with ornate terraces, cultivated flower gardens, and classical statuary. Every time Malcolm visited, he discovered something new and fascinating, and he hoped today would yield the same result. He desperately needed a burst of inspiration that would send him into a creative storm and block out the resounding echo of his sullen despair.

Yet he'd barely advanced through the outer circle of the park's geometric configuration before he spied Eve,

immediately recognizable, as if her heart was attached to his by a silken ribbon. He would know her anywhere. She was a good twenty strides away, on the arm of a gentleman dressed in dashing attire. They were engrossed in a discussion that looked cheerful and engaging from the animated expression on Eve's face. How could she be so happy when he was having trouble sleeping?

Thinking clearly.

Breathing.

Not wanting her to notice him, he slipped inside a marble folly and then out the other side, keeping to the shadows cast by the ring of blackthorn trees that formed a border along the gravel walkway. What had love made of him? Had it reduced him into a six-foot-two, calf-eyed sop? He tucked that question away for when he was feeling morose and lonely in his rooms later.

Taking an additional minute to examine her profile from head to toe, he memorized her image just so he'd have another version of Eve to remember. The sunlight bloomed on her skin, warm and rosy. Her petite nose, upturned slightly at the tip, composed the perfect bite in kind to her little round chin. She was dressed very prettily in a day gown of butter yellow, the perfect complement to her hair, strands of burnt caramel and rich cinnamon, upswept and pulled away from her face. A few wisps had escaped her chignon and floated near her neck. She was ticklish there, the skin tender as it carried the light floral scent of her bathing soap.

The gentleman beside her suddenly laughed and broke Malcom free from his daydream. The stranger gestured with his hands and Evelyn replied to the apparent storytelling, but all Malcolm heard was the lovely lilt in her voice.

This was insanity. It couldn't continue. He had no right to question who kept her company. He wasn't jealous by nature, but the lick of temper that threatened to consume him made Malcolm turn his back and start the long walk home.

The perfect deception is composed of truth and lies.

THE PERFECT DECEPTION IS COMPOSED OF TRUTH AND LIES.

“A very, you win! You’ve more embarrassing stories about Graham than I do.” Evelyn was thankful for Avery’s unexpected invitation. She needed to get out of the house, but with nowhere specific to go, she knew her discontent would follow her. Even spending time with Graham would lead to a bevy of questions she had no desire to answer.

“The fun is in the retelling. I’m glad I’ve brought a smile to your face.”

“You have, and I appreciate it.” They entered one of the inner circles of the park and walked in companionable silence until they reached a bench. “It must be difficult though, being perceived as only a friend, and all the while disguising your true feelings. Does it frustrate you?”

“To no end.” Avery shook his head decisively. “But it’s the only way.”

A weighty silence fell and she wondered if she shouldn’t have mentioned anything about Graham and Avery’s relationship. Perhaps she’d overstepped. Her father was often reminding her, with a decidedly lack of parental warmth, that her habit of interfering was unwelcome.

“Although,” Avery said after a time, “your predicament is not altogether different. Class and status seem like just as powerful dividers as gender.”

“Graham told you?” she asked tentatively.

“He did, although it wasn’t a difficult puzzle to solve. Your eyes sparkle whenever Mr. Walker’s name is mentioned, and it looks like you’re trying too hard not to appear delighted.”

Half a smile pulled her mouth upward, but she wasn’t convinced. “I’m not so sure our predicaments are alike. You can go out with Graham, eat meals, enjoy a show.”

“But only as comrades. I can’t so much as touch his hand without someone mistaking it for unnatural affection,” Avery said, a forlorn note in his voice. “Besides, the very same condition I mentioned, how your face lights up at the mention of Mr. Walker’s name, afflicts me as well. I suspect our admiration is transparent. One wouldn’t need to be scholarly to notice the affinity your cousin and I share.”

“So, you meet in secret,” she said.

“What else can we do? We have no other option.” Avery drew a deep breath. “But you do.”

“What do you mean?” She turned to stare up at him. She shouldn’t like for Avery to offer her hope where none was to be found. “Please explain.”

“Well, wherever Graham and I go together, our relationship would be judged unacceptable. Two men aren’t supposed to love one another, even though I fail to see the logic in that assumption. Love shouldn’t be questioned. It should be celebrated. Life is difficult enough without censure and criticism. That said, you and Mr. Walker can be whoever you care to be. Together, you can move away from London and not look back. You can marry, start a family, and tell the world a delightful story of your own making. A true love story. No one needs to know your history. Unlike gender, it’s a secret you can keep to yourselves. Were you to travel to Paris or Rome, who would question that you aren’t the loveliest married couple on their wedding trip? You can proudly become Mrs. Walker without threat of discovery or shame lurking in the background.”

“It sounds like you’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“When one is trapped by emotion, it often leads to long, sleepless nights. Besides, if you chose to pursue my idea, you could write to Graham and invite us to visit.”

“Ha!” She smiled at his self-serving suggestion, but as time stretched on, each of them became lost in private thoughts. She wondered if what Avery said made perfect sense. She had no ties to London. Her father wanted little to do with her, his life about to become decidedly more tumultuous with the upcoming birth of his bastard child. And aside from Graham’s family, her relatives were few, her acquaintances distant.

In return, she’d have Malcolm, and someday, if they were lucky, children to fill their home with laughter and joy. But was this something Malcolm desired? She needed to find out. Until she did, she wouldn’t be able to think of anything else.

“I must go.” She stood up and shook out her skirts. “Now.”

“I’ve upset you.” Avery’s voice was apologetic. “I’m sorry.”

“No, quite the contrary.” She shook her head. “You’ve motivated me. I need to send an important message. Thank you, Avery, and please wish me luck.”

Several hours later, Evelyn paced the floor in the drawing room, the hour late and staff released from duty. She’d sent Malcolm a note as soon as she’d returned from Regent’s Park, and without a reply, she wondered if he’d even received it. Or had she acted as a misguided wanton by inviting a man who’d rejected her into her home for a late-night rendezvous? Her heart beat rapidly beneath her breastbone and she tightened the sash of her robe hoping to reclaim a sense of calm in the process. She’d never told Malcolm she’d fallen in love with him, but tonight, no matter the outcome, she intended to confess her feelings. The words needed to be said aloud. Otherwise, how could she accept his decision?

A solid knock on the front door startled a gasp from her lips. Smoothing her palms down her ribs, she walked to the

foyer and swung the door open before she could doubt her decision. Malcolm stood before her, partially turned away as if he was might change his mind at any moment. Backlit from the lamplight near the road, he looked incredibly handsome and undeniably solid, the complete opposite of the fluttering tension alive within her. Her heart squeezed with yearning and she waved him inside hurriedly, knowing that, while the street outside was quiet, gossip always had a way of finding something to carry it forward.

“Hello.” Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I was surprised to receive your message. Is everything all right?”

He must have worried. Her heart turned over when she noticed the inflexible tightening of his jaw.

“No, it isn’t.” They moved into the drawing room and she sat on one end of the divan leaving room for him beside her but he chose the chair on the other side of the rosewood table. “I realized after we’d parted that I’d forgotten to tell you something important and the words are better said face-to-face. I hope it hasn’t inconvenienced you terribly to come here this evening.”

His eyes watched her so intently, her skin grew warm beneath her robe, but he didn’t reply. Was he angry? He didn’t appear to be. Yet as the silence yawned, her courage to speak her heart diminished. Was it possible only she felt their connection? Perhaps he considered their intimate embraces nothing more than opportunities for physical release.

No. That wasn’t possible.

She refused to believe that was true. The way he stared at her now, waiting, his gaze both penetrating and inviting, told her she couldn’t be wrong.

“I’ve learned several lessons recently that prompted me to send you my message,” she began, her voice revealing only a trace of nervousness. “I’ve waited a lifetime for someone to love and for someone to love me. I’m not going to let the

chance to have a future filled with happiness pass by without a fight.” She blinked away the tears that accompanied her declaration, a mixture of long-ago emotions taking hold.

“Eve—”

“No, let me finish.” She stood up and moved to where he waited in the chair. Looking at his handsome face, she knew in every fiber of her being that what they shared was worth any risk. He had to experience the same affinity. He stood up, his eyes locked to hers and she continued, determined to say her piece. “You may not feel as I do. But I ask that you allow me to speak my heart before you reply.”

He glanced over her shoulder to the hallway and a shadow of doubt clouded his expression. For the briefest moment she thought he might walk out. Still they stood poised in the question of the moment, and when he returned his attention, he nodded his agreement.

“I realize we haven’t known each other very long, but I do believe we share something precious.” She drew a shaky breath, trying to gauge the look in his eyes as her words tumbled out. “It’s a feeling I’d long forgotten, a sense of connection I once had with my mother, but disappeared upon her passing. It’s rare, a sense of knowing and caring and *loving* someone so deeply, you can hardly think of anything else.”

“Eve,” He touched her hands gently and held them, his skin warm and rough. It was exactly the encouragement she needed.

“I love you, Malcolm. I do.” It felt extraordinary to say the words aloud, as if she’d unlocked a secret and shared it with the world, as if by confessing her feelings, she answered a question she hadn’t known her soul was asking. “And I don’t want to walk away from what we share just because I’m the daughter of an earl. My father is of noble birth, but he’s hardly respectable, and you’re honorable and good and—”

“Eve, wait.” He squeezed her fingers more firmly. “All the reasons won’t change just by wanting to be together.”

“I know that.” She pulled her hands loose and walked closer to the bookcase that spanned the far wall, wanting to gather her thoughts before she continued. “I have a proposal.”

He came up behind her quickly and when she turned her bodice brushed his chest.

“Don’t. It will only make things more difficult.”

“It’s not what you think,” she said, although the idea amused her. “Good heavens, I’m not doing a very good job of this, am I?”

“You can’t throw away your future.” He said it so seriously it pained her to hear the words.

“We’re a fine pair,” she said to alleviate the tension. “We both believe we are unworthy of each other’s love.”

“You’re worthy. You’re everything,” he said, brushing a few strands of hair from her cheek. His fingers lingered to caress her skin, and his touch sent an ache of longing spiraling through her. “You’re beautiful and talented and generous and so much more than I deserve.”

“But you don’t love me?” she asked, unwilling to compromise.

“Eve, I’ve loved you since I noticed the spark of defiance in your eyes when you refused to come down from my stage, when I heard your voice singing in that tent, and especially from the moment our lips met.”

“So why do we keep fighting this?” she dared, leaning into his chest. “We can leave London. It was in your plans anyway. We can have a wonderful life far away from here.”

“And would that make you happy? You would be giving up everything you’ve known since childhood.”

An odd noise escaped her. He had no idea, couldn’t possibly know the isolation. She hadn’t told him how lonely and removed she’d become for too many years to count. Graham and his family had tried to include her, but it wasn’t enough to erase the emptiness inside her. Sometimes when she stared at the stars at night, she imagined herself belonging to

another place entirely, somewhere peaceful and accepting, and then she'd found that place in Malcolm's arms. He gave her hope and grace and love. She didn't need anything beyond that.

"What can I do to convince you?"

"Nothing. Everything has already been said."

"Then forget about words." She grasped his hands, lacing their fingers as she tugged him to follow. "I have another idea in mind."

"Eve, however tempting, inviting me to a night spent in your arms will not alter the circumstances."

"I know and I wasn't implying what you've suggested." His expression showed surprise and contrition, though desire flared in his gaze. She'd bet anything he'd already begun to think of them tangled together in the sheets, and now she'd erased that idea. "You've made your decision and I respect that choice. However, I'd like to say goodbye a different way. You said there are no more words left to be spoken and you're right."

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing as she detected a fleeting uncertainty in the muscles near his jaw.

"Very well."

Malcolm followed Eve upstairs to her bedchamber, his mind crowded with conflicted emotion while his groin hardened, invigorated by his recent decision. Eve didn't say anything more and that suited him, hypnotized by the sway of her hips beneath the silky robe she wore. He'd been so concerned about the reasons she'd asked him to visit, he hadn't considered her attire until this moment, and realization hit him like a fast-breaking wave. She'd planned to take him to bed all along. Had he played right into her clever little hands?

She paused and opened the double doors to her rooms, and as he stepped over the threshold, he noticed the care she'd taken for his arrival. Dozens of candles burned, their flames

dancing brightly against the azure wall coverings, while the dove gray bedlinens billowed atop the mattress to create swirling clouds within a secret cosmos of pleasure, theirs alone.

She turned and motioned toward an overstuffed chair near the fireplace, but he didn't sit. All earlier indecision left him, replaced now by chagrin. He'd called her Eve. Tonight, she was definitely a temptress.

He removed his boots and placed them near the hearth, ready to play her game to some extent. He'd honor her vow of silence until she cried out his name. His arousal pulsed with desire at that decision. He was a fool, smart enough to know he'd made an unwise decision but yet not strong enough to resist. Therein lay the problem. He'd spent too many years retreating from any kind of meaningful personal relationship. This evening would have to serve as comfort for the inevitable pain to follow.

She moved to stand in front of him, the glint in her blue eyes a combination of affection and mischief, and his heartbeat pounded, strong and heavy in response.

He loved her.

Completely.

When she slid her nimble fingers below the hem of his shirt, he didn't so much as exhale. Her hands grazed his ribs. She raised the fabric and he complied, allowing her to remove his shirt with a fluid arc of her arm. She smoothed her palms over his chest. His muscles twitched under her inspection, and she began to say something that he stopped with a carefully placed finger against her lips. One slender brow peaked in response, before her fingers went to work on the falls of his trousers. He stepped out of his smalls as well, catching the sash of her robe and pulling it open at the same time, the silk nothing more than a sensual whisper as it slid to a puddle on the floorboards. And then, they were equally bare.

"Your body is exquisite," she said, stealing the words from the tip of his tongue. "All carved muscles and taut, smooth

skin.” Then she shook her head, her eyes squeezing tightly for a blink. “I had to say it aloud.”

He answered by caressing the slope of her hip, the delicate skin warmed by the glowing fire. A sudden surge of possessiveness gripped him then, threatening to overshadow the joy in the moment, and he fought to keep it at bay. They might not have forever, but they had now. He swept his eyes over her, the blush of her cheek as soft and pink as her tight nipples. Then his gaze traveled lower to her flat navel and the downy hair at the seam of her thighs.

She knew his mind as well as any fortune teller’s prophecy. How could he resist her delicious proposal? Together they moved to the bed, still sealed in their pact of silence, while only the hushed conversation between the logs and flames was left to be heard.

If she didn’t want him to speak, he would express all that he felt for her in each caress, every touch of his skin against hers, every sensual lick and provocative nuzzle. He kissed her first, leaning down to press her to the bedding with the gentle force of his mouth until she lay beneath him, his chest partially covering hers, their bodies angled. She might have planned to enact an effective seduction, but she was mistaken. It was he who would brand her with memories, enough to last long after they’d parted ways.

But Eve wasn’t so easily distracted. As he deepened their kiss, licking into her mouth and relishing the warm velvet of her tongue, she reached for him, gliding her fingertip along his erection from the base to the crown. Her delicate stroke nearly undid him.

Christ.

He managed to turn the word into a groan, but it was a struggle, the momentary pause offering her all the time she needed to take him in hand. She broke their kiss, rearranging herself so she could watch as her hand slid down his shaft, her fingers delicately circling his cock in a devastating caress. He gritted his teeth, determined not to be defeated, as she stroked again and again, his erection hard and hot, overanxious for

release and too close. With every ounce of will, he placed his hand atop hers to stop the unbearable pleasure. Their little battle wouldn't end with his immediate surrender.

Capturing her mouth in another deep, lingering kiss, he smoothed his palm down her stomach, slowly dipping his fingers between her legs where she was wet and hot and ready. She sighed, a sound as soft as the air, and shuddered, trembling as his fingers explored her heat, finding her core slick and hot. The sweet musky scent of their love-play filled the room, their shadows melting into the flickering candlelight as if even the silence pulsed with the force of their desire. He caressed the tight bud hidden within her sex, and she arched her back, offering herself without inhibition.

One glance at her face told him she was as tortured with pleasure as he'd been moments before. Her eyes were closed and she'd caught her bottom lip with her teeth. Still, he didn't relent. He leaned close and licked over her nipples, sucking gently at first. When she whimpered, her hands finding his shoulders, he teased each tight peak until she moaned with pleasure. His body ached, his cock stiff and thick, while his pulse hammered a rapid beat, but he didn't want their last time together to be hurried.

He stopped and moved carefully so his body shadowed hers. When she opened her eyes, he was surprised to see tears. They didn't need to speak, not a single word, and with their gazes locked together, he thrust deep and tight, burying his body inside her welcoming heat as they both found release.

Malcolm awoke while darkness still stained the windows. Careful so he wouldn't wake Eve, he left the bed and fed the fire. The candles and lanterns had fluttered to sleep hours before. Aside from the glow of the flames, the room was composed of dark shadows.

He thought about collecting his clothes, getting dressed and leaving, but everything about that idea seemed wrong. The passion they'd shared through the evening was like a midnight love song that spoke to his soul. Afterward they'd nestled

together in silence and fallen asleep. The alchemy of their relationship stemmed from trust and respect. Eve was right. They needed few words to express their feelings.

He returned to stand beside the bed. Eve's beautiful face was only partially discernable in the darkness, but he could see her profile, the sight bringing him calm. For whatever reason, when he was with her, the constant restlessness that plagued him disappeared. It was as if she was his counterbalance, able to steady him and soothe his uneven kilter.

He hadn't looked for love, hadn't wanted to find it, and yet here he stood nonetheless. She murmured his name in her sleep, her hand reaching out to the empty space beside her and he climbed back into bed, pulling her to his chest, kissing the top of her hair as he held her close.

LOVE IS A LANGUAGE ONLY THE HEART CAN UNDERSTAND.

“It’s like he can look inside my heart,” Evelyn said on a sigh, her wine glass nearly empty on the end table near her elbow.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Graham replied from across the room.

“Yes. Maybe. I’m not sure. That means he can see that I’m unhappy with what we’re doing, when in truth I’ve never been happier in my life.”

“I don’t understand. You’re talking in contradictions.” Graham abandoned his interest in the books on the shelf and reclaimed his glass before settling beside Evelyn on the sofa. “The way you look at him, it’s the same expression you wear when you’re stargazing. As if you’re captivated and reverent in the moment.”

“That’s because I love him.”

“And you don’t want him to know?” he asked.

“Oh, I’ve told Malcolm countless times. He knows how I feel. And he’s returned the sentiment, but regardless of that fact, for weeks now we’re skulking around in the night hours, avoiding notice, and keeping to the shadows.” She almost laughed, but there’d been no humor in it. “I’m sure my staff is aware what’s happening at all hours, but they’re too loyal to comment. At the same time, my behavior mimics my father’s so identically, I feel embarrassed and ashamed instead of giddy and elated.”

“The tarnished reputation your father created isn’t a mirror of your own.”

“Thank you for saying that, but it’s beginning to feel like it is. Why must this be so difficult when all I want to do is spend time with the man I love? Why should any love match be perceived as wrong?”

“You’ve just described my life in precise detail,” Graham said, draining the contents of his glass. “Although I will say that everyone should have someone in their life that looks at them the way Malcolm looks at you, Birdie.”

“What good is any of it if he won’t see reason? I’ve tried to convince him. Socially, I’m already somewhat of a pariah. I don’t care if there’s talk, I’ll always walk proudly on his arm.”

“But he objects,” Graham added. “He cares more about your reputation and safety than his own.”

“And he’s determined to stay in London. He doesn’t want to uproot me. He said he’s tired of running from his past.”

“That’s a good thing, I suppose.”

They sat in companionable silence, empathetic to each other’s predicament, and lost in a unified sense of hopelessness.

“I’ve always wanted to see Italy and France,” she said finally, needing to break the quiet.

“You’d adore Italy. History and culture abound,” Graham said with renewed vigor. “You should go anyway. Nothing’s holding you here. You only have one performance left at Vauxhall.”

“Are you suggesting I just up and leave?” She twisted on the sofa cushion to look her cousin squarely in the eyes.

“Why not? You don’t see your father, and you owe him nothing. His life has returned to its normal disreputable disarray now that Lord and Lady Conover have reconciled and moved to their country estate.”

“How Matilda convinced her husband to forgive her is beyond my comprehension,” Evelyn said, mostly to herself.

“When I marry, I want trust and loyalty within my relationship to exist in equal proportion to the depth of my affection. Am I a fool?”

“No more than I.”

“The gazebo project is almost complete. Malcolm mentioned that Mr. Barrett already had the adverts printed for the first masquerade ball to be held at the end of the month.”

“Oooh!” Graham popped up from the sofa so quickly, Evelyn startled in alarm. “Now there’s something to get excited about. Avery and I can attend and no one will be the wiser. I should start considering a theme for our masks. They could match in a secret way, so that no one realizes the clever connection except the two of us.”

“You can be Hamlet and Horatio,” she suggested, warming to the change of subject.

“I was thinking of something more devilish,” he said with a sly grin. “Perhaps Poseidon and Hades.”

“But what about Zeus?” she objected. “You can’t just omit one of the brothers.”

“Of course, I can. It’s all in fun.” Graham resettled on the sofa. “I’m amazed at the person you’ve become. You suffered paralytic fear the first night you took the stage, and now you openly address the audience, discuss your song selections, and entertain as if you were born to do so.”

“All in all, singing on stage has been beneficial. I’ve discovered a sense of confidence I didn’t know I possessed. In some ways, it was more a coming-out than any debutante affair from years ago. But don’t you dare say *I told you so*.”

“I won’t, although I’m thinking it,” Graham replied airily. “And to make the experience even more wonderful, you’ve met Malcolm.”

“Yes,” she said softly, “except now instead of running from his past, I have to convince him to start running toward our future. Love is such a little word and yet it wields so much power. I hope fate and luck are on my side and equally as assertive.”

It was late. The woman who owned his heart lay beside him in her love-warmed bed. Time lingered and yet neither of them spoke, lost in the aftermath of sensual pleasure. It was a delightful regularity now to visit Eve's home after hours, dine at her table, share a bath, and make love. He didn't know how to label their relationship other than to call them lovers. *Illicit lovers*. Even if the words struck him as unfair and inappropriate.

Seeking escape from his conflicted thoughts, he instead admired her profile, lost in her serene beauty, until some wayward emotion provoked a change in her expression.

"What's troubling you?"

"I'm fine," she replied automatically, opening her eyes and turning in his direction.

"You may not wish to discuss it, but I know something's wrong." He reached across the bedlinens and traced over the delicate arc where her forehead met her nose. "Otherwise, the tiniest crease wouldn't settle here."

She seemed to consider her thoughts a long moment before she answered.

"I don't want to do this anymore." She gathered the sheets around her breasts and pushed upward on the pillow so she could face him more readily.

Meanwhile his heart hammered in his chest. Had he misheard her? They'd exchanged *I love you* more than once as they'd made love. "What do you mean?"

"This," she said mulishly, her delicate brows mirroring the frown that settled on her lips. "Hide in my home. Protect secrets. Pretend that I don't know every inch of your body when we see each other at Vauxhall."

He relaxed, although not completely. He'd already known she was unhappy with their arrangement, and he was equally at odds with how they carried on with their relationship, but he was at a loss to find a solution. His work on the gazebo project

was completed, the influx of cash into his bank account exceeded the amount he'd anticipated. Unfortunately, having financial security didn't change his social status.

Besides, how could he expect Eve to give up all she was accustomed to, the aristocratic connections and privileges, the acceptance and esteem, in exchange for *him*? The thought was so humbling he abandoned it as soon as it formed. They were trapped by their love. Nevertheless what they had, this delicious affair, was better than not sharing each other's company.

"It doesn't have to be this way," she continued, when she realized he didn't have an immediate rebuttal. "I don't want to hide. I want everyone to know how much I love you and I don't give a damn who turns their nose up at our relationship. People with poor opinions don't deserve our attention anyway."

"I agree." He moved closer, enclosing her hand in his when he'd settled. "But I can't be the man who changes the course of your future. I experienced that exact circumstance already, and the regret of my actions hollowed me out for years. My brother's death forced my parents into decline. They died with sorrow in their hearts, sadness that I caused. I can't be the one who ruins you."

"But I can."

"What?" he asked, shaking his head at her comment.

"Nothing," she said, as she reached up and pulled him down to her mouth. "Kiss me and make me forget I ever said anything."

When Evelyn took the stage the following evening, the electric frisson of their passionate lovemaking still simmered within. She understood Malcolm's hesitation. He carried a burden of guilt over his brother's death and parents' untimely passing, but she wouldn't allow his undeserved censure to prevent their happily-ever-after. If he wouldn't force the issue, she would. His attempt to shelter and protect her was admirable, except it

prohibited them from sharing a future together, and she believed Malcolm wanted that just as much as she did.

To that point, when she'd visited Dante earlier, he'd drawn the Ace of Pentacles from the Tarot, the most powerful card. It represented a new beginning filled with positivity and prosperity. If she was waiting for a sign to convince her to perpetuate her plan, a more significant omen couldn't be conjured. For years she'd led a quiet life, hidden from the harsh rumors and overflow of gossip caused by her father, but tonight she was anxious to step on stage and claim happiness.

"The orchestra is ready." Graham came up behind her, his voice hushed. "You look lovely, Birdie. This may be your last performance, but it will live forever in the memory of everyone who hears you sing tonight."

"Thank you, Graham." She squeezed his arm and moved to her position in the wings. When the curtain opened, she walked to center stage and greeted the crowd. "Good evening and welcome."

A round of applause followed and she began without pause, the orchestra's timely swell providing the perfect accompaniment. Perhaps it was the anticipation of her closing remarks which lent her singing heartfelt emotion beyond any other performance. An hour passed in the blink of an eye and as she finished her final note, a thrill of expectation shimmied through her.

"Tonight is my last show here at Vauxhall," she addressed the crowd with a sincere smile. "I'd like to thank Mr. Barrett for inviting me, convincing me, really, to accept the opportunity to perform on stage. He made it difficult to say no, but I'm very happy I agreed. What I didn't realize months ago when Mr. Barrett's proposal found me by surprise, was that this endeavor would change my life and foretell my future. So, I've a confession to make."

She paused and mild laughter at her comment mixed with subtle chatter among the audience met her ear. When the moment stretched and everyone settled their attention at center stage, she continued.

“I’ve fallen in love, and not just with Vauxhall Gardens and the wonderful performers. I’ve fallen in love with a talented, handsome man who is employed here. He’s the carpenter who designed and built the elaborate and breathtaking arena surrounding us. I’m sharing my story with all of you because I believe what I have to say matters. I’m the daughter of an earl, Lady Evelyn Osbourne, but my heart isn’t closed to some people and open to others. My heart only knows love and recognizes goodness. I suspect Mr. Walker is in the audience this evening. I hope I haven’t embarrassed him.” She caught a glimpse of Malcolm in the same place beside the pillar where he’d watched her opening night, except when their eyes met now, the thrum of happiness coursing through her body came to a shuddering stop. He looked angry. His mouth was set in a hard line and his eyes were dark and intense. As she watched, he turned and walked away.

“I’m not content drifting along in the current without a specific goal to embrace the future,” Evelyn said, crossing her arms over her chest and staring at Malcolm pointedly.

“You told everyone about our relationship,” he ground out in reply. “And you didn’t give me a chance to choose my own future.”

“What?” She huffed in exasperation. “You’ve told me that you love me and yet you don’t plan for us to share the future?”

“That’s not what I mean.” Malcolm looked across Dante’s tent searching for someone, something, to de-escalate their argument, but ever since Eve had found him here after she’d left the stage, they’d quarreled.

“That’s what it sounds like to me,” she said with annoyance.

“Now you’re twisting my words to aid your defense.”

“I’m still confused as to why we’re arguing, so why would I need to defend myself?”

“I didn’t like being announced on stage like a, like a...”

“Like a what?” she asked, her tone low and careful.

“Like an attraction or some rare exception to a rule. It felt belittling.”

“You should know something like that would never be my intention. I wanted to showcase our love. To prove a point, that one’s heart shouldn’t be bound by Society’s rules. That people should be free to love whomever they choose.”

“Declarations like that are easy to say when standing on stage in expensive slippers.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.” Now she sounded wounded and he cursed himself for the millionth time. “All I wanted to do was tell as many people as possible that I’ve fallen in love with an incredible, smart, and talented man. I don’t want to hide in the shadows, not when I’ve never been so happy. That hardly sounds belittling to me.”

“It was how and where it was said.” He gentled his tone, unsure how he could express the conflicted feelings tightening his chest. He was enjoying her performance, imagining a dozen ways to celebrate together after the show, when her closing remarks shocked him. He never felt more out of place than in that very moment.

“You have too many rules, Malcolm. I view our relationship as something to celebrate. Gossip be damned.” She sighed, and he wasn’t sure if it was motivated by frustration or disappointment. “And now I’m quite through with this conversation.”

“Eve, wait.” He reached for her but she evaded his grasp. “Let’s take a few minutes to calm down and discuss this without anger.”

“A few minutes won’t be long enough,” she said with a curt shake of her head.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” She had to realize that, didn’t she?

“My father used to say those same words right after his latest excuse, although these days he doesn’t waste time on details like my feelings.”

“Don’t go.” He stepped closer. “Leaving in anger won’t resolve this. It seems petty.”

“I need time to think, Malcolm,” she said without anger. “I’ll send you a message through Graham when I’m ready to talk about this again.”

“If you leave now without allowing me to explain further, then don’t bother sending me your summons.”

“Now who’s the one being petty?”

He stood there, shocked a second time that evening, as she turned and walked out.

“Did I make a complete fool of myself?” Evelyn closed her eyes and eased back onto the sofa in a slump of despair and defeat.

“Not in the slightest,” Graham reassured her.

“I found your parting words to be as charming as your performance,” Avery added in a consoling voice. “Mr. Walker just wasn’t expecting such an ardent proclamation. I take him to be a more reserved man.”

“He thought it was wrong of me to share without discussing the matter with him first,” she grouched, upset with herself and wishing the words back.

“I can understand why,” Graham replied. “Imagine if you’d said as much about Avery’s and my relationship.”

“That’s hardly the same situation,” she objected.

“Isn’t it though?” Avery asked. “It’s all a matter of privacy.”

“Up until this entire fiasco, I was a rather quiet woman.”

They sat in her drawing room, the hour after midnight, but she harbored no guilt about summoning Graham for emotional support even if it was ridiculously late. Graham had felt comfortable enough to bring Avery with him to her house. That, at the least, was a highlight this evening.

“We’ve never argued before,” she continued wistfully. “Everything inside me feels tied in knots, dozens of tight, impossible, uncomfortable knots.”

“It will work out, Birdie.”

“And don’t forget the best part of arguing with someone you care about.” Avery eyed Graham affectionately.

“The best part?” Evelyn asked, unsure anything good could come of being cross and misunderstood.

“Making up afterward, of course.” Avery grinned.

“I don’t even know when I’ll see Malcolm.” She blew out a sad little sigh. “With the gazebo work completed and my last performance done, unless I show up on his doorstep, I doubt our paths will intersect. I don’t know what made me storm off and leave Dante’s tent when Malcolm wanted to calmly discuss this further. My pride, I suppose, and my preconceived notion of his reaction to my words on stage. But now, how will I apologize if I never see him again?”

“That’s it!” Graham slapped Avery on the shoulder in an exclamation of excitement. “The masquerade debut is next weekend. Evelyn, you should don a mask, lure Walker into one of the gazebos, and take it from there.”

“Didn’t you say you told Mr. Walker you’d send Graham with a message when you were ready to discuss things further?” Avery asked.

“Yes,” she replied, sitting up and considering the plan as it took shape. “I could ask him to meet me somewhere on the grounds.” But the way things had ended between them cast a shadow of doubt. Would he want to see her?

“Ask him to meet you in one of the gazebos, the one that speaks most to your relationship. There are specific themes, aren’t there?” Graham said, clearly warming to the idea.

“I have the pamphlet Mr. Barrett had printed over there.” She gestured toward the rosewood table, her emotions still conflicted.

“The Gazebo Gallery has six separate structures, three attached to a lower platform, then two more, slightly larger and a few steps above that, until the largest gazebo sits like the cherry atop a cake.” Avery read aloud. “The largest gazebo is surrounded by scrolled lattice and intricate trim to give the appearance of a royal balcony with a view of Vauxhall Gardens below. The other gazebos are all linked together by ribbons of staircases, elegantly woven throughout the area to present an innovative design to captivate any visiting guest.”

“What about the themes? Do you remember them, Birdie?” Graham asked.

“That part of the project was quite fun, actually. Malcolm and I made the list while lying in bed abovestairs. Each gazebo is designed to represent a different culture and named with infamous lovers in mind. There’s Italy’s Romeo and Juliet, Egypt’s Antony and Cleopatra...”

“Oh, I had no idea you were such a romantic,” Graham interrupted. “How love has changed you, dear cousin.”

“I even suggested Zeus and Hera. A Goddess of the stars deserves her own gazebo, even if it is otherworldly,” she quipped.

“Clever, and most likely very beautiful,” Avery replied. “Graham and I are anxiously awaiting the event and the unveiling of Mr. Walker’s intricate work.”

“I hadn’t planned on attending. Not now, after Malcolm and I quarreled, but your idea has given me hope.”

“You have nothing to lose, Birdie.” Graham said, his voice consolatory. “You could at least apologize, and then if he’s receptive to your grand gesture, perhaps all will be well in the end.”

“That’s all I can hope for, I suppose.” She didn’t add that she feared Malcolm would stay true to his word and fail to show. Graham stated she had nothing to lose, but deep down she believed the exact opposite.

It's possible to live several lives all in this one life.

IT'S POSSIBLE TO LIVE SEVERAL LIVES ALL IN THIS ONE LIFE.

Malcolm packed a bag and left his rooms on Carlisle Street readying himself for the long ride ahead. Conflicted emotions clouded his judgement, and traveling always helped him clear his mind. In the past, restarting, exploring a new location, and formulating a plan for the future were all intertwined, the only exception being his heart was involved now, and his feelings for Eve caused him to approach every decision with a different perspective.

She'd taken matters into her own hands and announced their relationship on stage. Was her intention to force him to agree to her proposition that they turn their backs on Better Society and live a life of their choosing? If it meant having Eve all to himself, the idea was tempting. But how long would it take before the bloom left the rose, before she resented all she'd left behind, every advantage she sacrificed for a humble life with a carpenter? He didn't want to find out. It was likely she'd already burned bridges between herself and society. If he left town, talk would die down and the gossip mill could turn to someone else's misery. It might spare Eve further heartache.

He descended the front steps of the boarding house, aiming to hail a hackney at the corner, but an elaborate coach slowed on the street and stopped before he'd made it to the bottom of the stoop. He hoped Eve wasn't inside. He needed time to think, not another argument.

"Mr. Walker." Graham exited the carriage and approached. "Might I have a word this morning?"

Malcolm didn't see how he had a choice. "Yes." He bit out his answer and gripped the handle of his bag more tightly.

"Are you traveling somewhere?" Graham asked, his brows raised high on his forehead. "Isn't the grand reveal of your gazebo project tomorrow evening? Surely you want to be there."

"Mr. Barrett doesn't need me to be present when he opens the exhibit."

"I just assumed you'd like to observe the reception of your fine work."

"I know what I created," Malcolm answered succinctly. He wished Graham would get on with whatever he'd come to say.

"I have a message for you, best delivered by hand." Graham turned and leaned into the carriage's interior. He withdrew a small box with a folded note beneath the ribbon that tied it closed. "It's something from Evelyn. She wanted you to have this."

When Graham didn't elaborate, Malcolm took the package, unsure what was left to discuss. He supposed he looked foolish, standing outside the boarding house with a gift in one hand and his traveling bag in the other. "Thank you."

"Evelyn never acts with malice," Graham said, his tone sincere. "No matter how many times her father has disappointed her or some gossipy busybody repeats a harsh comment, she's always remained pure of heart. It's a rare, admirable quality and one to consider valuable. She cares for you quite deeply."

"Did she ask you to speak on her behalf?"

"No, she would be appalled if she knew I'd done more than hand you that box." Graham chuckled, "But it pains me to see her brokenhearted, when she had no other intention than to convince you she was committed to your relationship. She wanted to share her inner joy with the world."

Malcolm swallowed his immediate retort and nodded, watching as Graham climbed inside the waiting carriage and

left. Opening his bag, he pushed the box inside and then continued to the corner.

Later that day, as he sat on the bench across from his parents' and brother's graves, he searched his heart for answers. He was astute in knowing that carrying around the guilt of the past served no one, and yet he'd allowed himself to hide in those feelings for years. He was alone in the world, but he didn't have to live that way. He could be with Eve. For better or worse. For always.

In that moment as the realization took hold, something changed, as simply as a key opens a lock or a page is turned in a book. He didn't want to be the loner who denied himself relationships and lasting pleasure, moving from place to place so he could outrun the past. If Eve was certain she wanted to share her life with him, if she was true to her words of love, then he should open his heart and mind to the possibility of their future together. She'd certainly had enough time to consider whether she wanted to change her situation. He needed to let go of the doubt that plagued him.

Invigorated by his decision, he hailed a hack and dropped the bag that was intended to lead him away from London onto the floor. Settling on the seat, he withdrew the package from Eve and slipped the note free. As he unfolded the paper, he saw the sweep of Eve's elegant handwriting filling the page.

Dearest Malcolm,

I hope you don't think this another misjudgment on my part. In truth, I haven't been able to think logically since we've met. Every idea that forms intersects with my emotions, and all my emotions now include thoughts of you. Perhaps it is wrong of me to want both the moon and the stars, to desire more than the brief love affair we've shared, but I will not allow this moment to pass without asking you for one last boon.

Please meet me tomorrow evening in the Celestial Gazebo. I'll know it's you by the mask I've included in the box. You'll know it's me by the yearning of your heart.

If you don't arrive by half past nine, I'll hold no ill-will toward you. There is no room in my heart for any emotion

other than love, no room in my memory for anything other than remembrances of our precious time together.

Fondly,

Eve

Evelyn paced inside Dante's tent, each flowing ribbon of her gown floating behind her like the tail of a comet, her movement as frenetic as a meteor storm.

“What if he doesn't come? What if he's already left London? What if he never wishes to see me again?”

“You'll have the answer to all your questions by evening's end,” Dante said with calm assurance.

“Can't you just tell me what's going to happen?” she huffed impatiently. “Isn't that your job?”

“I consider my foresight a gift, not an occupation,” Dante replied. “Regardless of my talents, if you wish to reach the Gazebo Gallery at the pre-arranged time, you should leave now. The masquerade event has sold out of tickets. It will be overflowing with guests. I don't believe you want to be late.”

“No.” She hurried toward the exit. “Of course not.”

Evelyn left Dante's tent, startled to see the illusionist's comment proven true even in this older section of Vauxhall Gardens. The walkways were packed and almost impassable. Being near the food and drink concessions only made the situation worse. Fun-seekers in large groups were clustered in high-spirited conversation or blocked the paths as they enjoyed assorted refreshments. It was a struggle for her to pass and at the same time keep her gown from becoming wrinkled or soiled.

She was almost out of breath when she finally reached the entrance to the Gazebo Gallery and the throng had only thickened as she'd approached. She hoped Malcolm was somewhere nearby relishing the success of his achievement. He deserved to see how much pleasure his creative ideas brought people, even if he'd decided not to meet with her

tonight. A stab of alarm followed that thought, but she refused to give it life.

Before she entered the gallery, she stepped behind an empty marionette stage and opened her reticule to take out her mask. She'd had Malcolm's and her own mask designed to complement each other. Hers was made of silver silk, adorned with dozens of glittering beads to form swirls of cosmic wonder, while Malcolm's was the opposite, midnight blue and trimmed with the most exquisite gold cording around the edges. Tying the ribbons tightly around her head to conceal the top half of her face, she hurried up the path leading to the first tier of gazebos. She wished she had more time to dally. She wanted to admire the intricate woodwork and delightful ornamentation Malcolm had created, but a glance to the clock tower at the side of the clearing told her it was nearly half past nine.

Why did she propose they meet in such a loud and crowded area? How would she have a chance to share her feelings if he couldn't even hear what she had to say?

She pushed her way through to the next set of stairs, aiming for the gazebo on the top platform where, beneath the roof, dozens of tin lanterns with star-shaped cut-outs were hung, the effect enchanting. A string quartet played nearby, the violin's romantic melody a perfect accompaniment. All along the walkway, stout pillars displayed elaborate bouquets of orchids and wood anemone in white and pale pink, while smaller pots held lily-of-the-valley, their fragrance perfuming the air. In the distance, lush greenery had been strategically placed to create a sense of being far and away from London.

At last, she reached the Celestial Gazebo, surprised to see the grand structure could easily hold fifty people. She entered, wondering if Malcolm had already arrived. How she would find him in the crush? Her well-thought-out plan suddenly seemed ill-conceived and naïve. She adjusted her mask and drew a calming breath. She would simply mingle among the guests on the platform until she found him. Standing in one place seemed an ineffective way to locate Malcolm, and

besides, if she didn't move, her agitation would surely get the best of her.

Malcolm climbed the stairs, his peripheral vision impeded by the holes in his mask, although he knew where he was headed. He should feel pleased, elated in fact, that countless tickets had been sold for the masquerade. The Gazebo Gallery was crammed full with so many visitors it took considerable effort and care to climb the stairs safely. Yet everywhere he looked, people were enjoying themselves. Glasses clinked in toasts of reverie, laughter and delightful conversation could be heard in the surround, and every once in a while, a couple brushed past him with their heads bowed, anxious to sneak away undetected for a romantic interlude.

He told himself he would recognize Eve immediately, that a costume and mask wouldn't disguise the innate pull and undeniable attraction between them. But once he entered the crowded platform with guests milling about in all directions, he realized it would take effort to find her and dismissed the idea that the callings of his heart would override the reverie. He supposed it would make the most sense to start near the entry and move along the railings in a clockwise direction, though even as he formulated his plan, he knew it was futile. People moved, danced, entered, and left, all in constant motion. If he could only freeze time, finding Eve would be a hell of a lot easier. Damnation, he didn't even know how she was dressed. A clue to her attire would have made his task significantly easier. He wanted to remove his mask and stuff it into his pocket for no other reason than to improve his search, but she'd asked him to wear it and he'd play along. What did she mean to say? And how would he react? Too many questions added to the tension coursing through him.

Evelyn cursed her plan multiple times as she pushed through the revelers in an attempt to locate Malcolm. Was he even here? Her stomach gave a sharp twist. Yes. She refused to believe he would leave her searching for him without an

indication that she shouldn't expect him. She moved along the railing and came full circle before she turned toward the center. She would stand there for a few minutes and observe. Malcolm was tall, easily a head above most men, and even behind a mask, she would recognize him anywhere. The angle of his jaw, slant of his broad shoulders, and strong arms were burned into her memory.

Rising to the tips of her toes and likely ruining her slippers, she turned slowly, her breath catching when she found his dark profile, the flash of his knowing grin, and the intention of his gaze as he moved toward the center of the gazebo. Pierced with longing, her heart began to pound in her chest as if she'd run a long distance and hadn't remembered to breathe. Surely, he couldn't mean to break her heart if he'd just offered her that smile. Surely, he couldn't be angry over what she'd said on stage. She recognized these misguided assurances for what they were, nothing more than a mask of her fears, and she clasped her hands together in nervous anticipation

"Eve," he said, his deep baritone reaching her regardless they were surrounded by noise and activity. "I would recognize your lips anywhere."

She released the breath trapped in her lungs. If he teased her, he couldn't be angry or set to disappoint her, could he?

"You look very dashing in your mask," she replied, unable to take her eyes from his full lips, showcased perfectly as if on display below the dark silk.

"I've missed you." He reached for her hands, enveloping them in his warmth.

"You have?"

"I was relieved when Graham brought me your message." He leaned closer and for a moment she thought he might kiss her. "But before I could respond, there was something I needed to do first."

"Oh?" The one-word question whispered out, and she licked her lips in case he did decide to kiss her.

“I’ll explain later,” he murmured.

“It’s so noisy, it’s difficult to hear you.”

“But *you* invited *me* here.”

“I wanted us to be inside your beautiful creation when we met, except I didn’t anticipate how difficult it would be to talk with you.” She shook her head, wishing she’d invited him to her house, so it would be only the two of them in absolute quiet, and every word would be heard. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you and caused you to feel pressured when I shared my feelings on stage.”

“You don’t need to apologize. Your honesty and fearlessness forced me to examine my own feelings and decide how I want to embrace the future.”

“And?”

“All I really needed to do was quiet all my misgivings and listen to my heart.” He gathered her closer, swaying to the nearby strains of the violin quartet. “You’ve been living there for quite some time now.”

She noticed the crowd had widened, offering them a circle of space at the center of the gazebo. Couples were smiling in their direction and little by little, by no deliberate intent, they were becoming the center of attention. Was it so very odd to see a masked couple dancing in the center of a gazebo designed for entertaining? Perhaps not, but she felt a rush of thrilling sensation course through her with every step. Or maybe it was his strong, warm hold that caused the feeling or the smile that played along his lips or the adoring look in his eyes?

“I love you, Malcolm.” She couldn’t contain her emotions any longer. More than anything she wanted them to leave Vauxhall and return to her house where they could plan the future with no interruptions.

“Will you marry me, Eve?”

At first, she thought she’d heard him incorrectly. All around them noise swelled in kind to her heart. A smile bloomed across her mouth and she looked up into his eyes.

But then he dropped to one knee and the crowd hushed as if on cue.

“Even with the mask I can tell you want to say yes, so why don’t you just say yes?” he teased, sweeping off his mask and dropping it to the floorboards. “Will you marry me, Eve?”

It felt like all of Vauxhall Gardens was holding their collective breath and willing her to say one tiny word, but she didn’t need an audience or any convincing, she only needed Malcolm. She slid the mask from her face and gazed into his lovely gray eyes.

“Yes,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Yes!”

Malcolm stood and swept her into his arms, twirling her in a circle while a thunder of applause met her ears. When he set her down again, she was breathless, lightheaded, blissfully giddy and never happier. “I love you.”

“And I love you.”

“Malcolm, do you remember the wish I made on a star that first night we walked along the Thames?”

“I do.” He smiled down at her, the love in his gaze causing another thrill to shimmy through her.

“Well, it just came true.”

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER, VENICE, ITALY

It was too early to be awake. Evelyn knew she should still be snuggled next to Malcolm's warm, naked body in their bed, yet she'd donned her robe and come out onto the balcony to overlook the water, despite the fact that the sun had barely kissed the sky. Life was deliriously wonderful, and at times she had the urge to pinch herself and prove all of it was real.

Later today, Graham and Avery were due to arrive. They planned to spend a fortnight in the villa Evelyn and Malcolm had purchased and renovated with the generous inheritance she'd received upon her father's passing. Italy's view of relationships was more accepting than the speculative judgment found in England, and she knew her cousin would thoroughly enjoy the chance to share time with Avery without clinging to the shadows. While Graham and Avery would still need to act with discretion, the anonymity of being in Venice offered them a measure of freedom.

Smiling, she glanced over her shoulder and through the French doors behind her, but Malcolm hadn't moved. Together, they'd created a beautiful haven here in Italy. Malcolm's designs for their home were a culmination of their combined personalities — elaborate yet tasteful, well-crafted and inclusive of all the newest conveniences, white marble in Italy's gothic architectural style, with vast open chambers. The bathroom included a tub large enough for two, and there was daring gas lighting installed throughout the rooms.

And while Venice was a bustling port city filled with culture and entertainment, it was moments like this, when the first rays of the sun creased the horizon, that had caused her to fall in love with the location. Their private wedding among the kindhearted local people last year was an afternoon she would forever treasure.

She sighed, gazing out at the water and marveling at how her life had become peaceful and interesting and most of all, happy. Malcolm's carpentry skills had gained recognition, though he chose projects sparingly. Together they enjoyed attending the theater, open-air concerts, or discovering new restaurants. When they weren't together, he spent his free time with friends on the water, sailing or fishing. She kept her singing to herself now, little songs as she prepared their morning meal or carefree melodies while they indulged in lazy afternoons.

She heard the sound of sheets rustling inside, but she didn't turn. In the next moment, Malcolm's arms encircled her, his chin set gently atop her head, his palm placed on her stomach, the slight swell their own personal miracle. Someday soon she would sing gentle lullabies to their baby. The thought filled her heart near to overflowing.

"Was I not good company?" His morning voice, still drowsy and gruff, vibrated through her, warming her from the inside.

"You were sleeping." She replied, placing her hand over his where it rested on her abdomen.

"Have you decided on a color for the nursery?"

"It's easy to be inspired by the delicate pink of the morning sky and sparkling teal water, but I don't know if we'll have a precious Roselyn or mischievous Paul."

They'd decided to honor her mother or his brother when the baby arrived.

"Why don't you come back to bed?" He gave her a little tug in the direction of the bedroom, the inviting brush of his

thick robe caressing her skin. “It’s too early for wishing on stars, love, unless you’ve spied a starfish below.”

“Oh, I’ve no need for wishes any longer. What could I possibly wish for?” She twisted in his arms and rose up to press a kiss to his lips. “I have everything I could ever want right here with you.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Vauxhall Gardens was one of the most popular entertainment destinations available to the public during the Regency era. I find it especially fascinating since, unlike attendance at the Royal Theater or within exclusive clubs for gentlemen, Vauxhall Gardens was a location accessible to all classes of society and both genders. With that in mind, the entertainment grounds offered the perfect setting for the Vauxhall Voices series where forbidden love is a central theme and people of all levels of society could follow their heart's desire and fall in love.

Music was perhaps the most enduring and significant form of entertainment featured at Vauxhall Gardens since the first orchestra played in 1735. Instrumental music was favored over vocal music with the idea that visitors would stroll through the gardens and spend their money on refreshments, rather than stop and listen to a specific performance. Marco, who plays the fiddle in my novels, is an example of a strolling musician, while similar players would be scattered through all areas of the grottos and squares to delight visitors. Trios of musicians who played flutes, oboes, and various woodwind instruments were also common.

Through history as Vauxhall Gardens was sold, renovated, and reopened, entertainment became more refined. A grand organ was installed. Music from classical composers, such as Handel, was highlighted and lasted three decades. As Vauxhall Gardens moved into the Regency era, classical compositions were created to accompany the fireworks display, not unlike celebrations today.

Like business today, the succession of managers at Vauxhall Gardens knew an everchanging evolution of entertainment was necessary to keep the public interested. During the Regency era, the presentation of opera singers became a paramount endeavor. Accompanied by a forty-piece orchestra, ballad singers and other female vocalists performed nightly, their show often consisting of over twenty songs. Famed opera singers from Italy would appear for limited engagements which added draw to the box office and provided another reason for patrons to visit.

I modeled Evelyn's character after someone who would have a limited engagement event of this type. While she wasn't famous for her singing and didn't have a following, Evelyn's voice was special for its existence as a hidden talent. She didn't possess a diva attitude or demanding personae often common with acclaimed performers. Instead, she was insecure and uncertain about her ability. It's one of the reasons she suffers so painfully from stage fright, battling feelings of inadequacy in her personal life, only to find success and acceptance on a public stage.

If you've been reading through the Vauxhall Voices series, you've met a tightrope walker, tumbler, and singer, as well as the many entertainers who surround these heroines. I hope you've enjoyed traveling back in time to glimpse Vauxhall Gardens and that you'll continue to explore the entertainment grounds and the romantic love stories found there as the Vauxhall Voices series continues.

ALSO BY ANABELLE BRYANT

Anabelle Bryant Book List



Regency Rogues Series

To Love A Wicked Scoundrel

Duke of Darkness

The Midnight Rake

Regency Charms Series

Defying The Earl

Undone By His Kiss

Society's Most Scandalous Viscount

His Forbidden Debutante

-

Bastards of London

The Den of Iniquity

Into the Hall of Vice

The Last Gamble

Return to the House of Sin

-

Midnight Secrets

London's Wicked Affair

London's Best Kept Secret

London's Late Night Scandal

London's Most Elusive Earl

Vauxhall Voices

Love on the Line

Magic in His Kiss

Midnight Love Song

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Anabelle Bryant began reading at age three and never stopped. Her passion for reading soon turned into a passion for writing and an author was born. Happy to grab her suitcase if it ensures a new adventure, Anabelle finds endless inspiration in travel; especially imaginary jaunts into romantic Regency England, a far cry from her home in New Jersey. Instead, her clever characters live out her daydreams because really, who wouldn't want to dance with a handsome duke or kiss a wicked earl?

Anabelle's books have been translated into several languages including Japanese and Russian, but writing isn't all that keeps her busy. Building miniatures, baking and photography are other favorite pastimes. Often found with her nose in a book, Anabelle is just as happy in a room full of people. She enjoys meeting readers, attending conferences and book signings. She has earned her Master's Degree and is ABD for her Doctorate Degree in education.

A firm believer in romance, Anabelle knows sometimes life doesn't provide a happily ever after, but her novels always do. Visit her website at AnabelleBryant.com.

