



Lords and Ladies
of
St James

RAKES & *Reticules*

COLLETTE CAMERON

DAWN BROWER

RACHEL ANN SMITH

• CECILIA RENE

• MEARA PLATT

• AUBREY WYNNE

RAKES & RETICULES

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DAWN BROWER COLLETTE CAMERON MEARA PLATT
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HOW TO CHARM AN EARL

BY USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR - DAWN BROWER

HOW TO CHARM AN EARL

Lady Athena Thompson's family is notorious, and definitely not in a good way. Some say there is magic in their bloodline, and only through witchcraft can they lure gentlemen of good breeding into marriage.

Roman James, the Earl of Kendal has returned home from war, injured, and determined to live his life as he pleases. He doesn't need to be charmed, but he's more than willing to be led astray. Especially when a woman as lovely as Athena is involved.

Athena and Roman are taken by surprise with the depth of their feelings, but rumors have a way of ruining everything. They have a difficult decisions to make, and they may not like their choices.

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PROLOGUE

Lady Athena Thompson stared at the treasure chest located in the attic. She had never seen anything more beautiful in her entire life. It was a rich mahogany with gold filigree, and it was covered in a layer of dust. The box was bigger than a jewelry chest, so it would hold more than a few precious baubles.

“What do you think is inside it?” her twin sister, Maeve, asked. They were mirror twins. They each had hair as dark as the night sky and ice-blue eyes, but where they differed was where their dimples were placed, and they each only had one. It was a little eerie... Athena’s was on her left cheek, and Maeve’s on her right. That was how the servants had been able to tell them apart. Somehow their father knew how to tell the twins apart even if the dimple wasn’t visible.

“There is only one way to find out,” Isla, their older sister by two years, said. “We need to open it.”

“But it has a lock on it,” Athena said. “How are we going to do that?”

Isla grinned. “Leave that to me,” she told them. She pulled a pin out of her hair and bent it a little, then placed it in the lock on the chest. Isla tilted her head to the side and leaned it closer to the box. It seemed as if she was listening for something... Then she grinned and twisted the pin. “There you are,” she said, beaming. “Unlock now, you little beastie.”

Athena frowned. Her sister could be a little odd at times, but this was...definitely leaning toward beyond strange. “Are

you talking to the lock?”

“And if I am?” Isla lifted her brow, daring her to say the wrong thing.

Maeve giggled. Athena lifted her hands and said, “I mean nothing by it. I don’t know how to pick a lock. I’m only curious.”

What she didn’t say, and probably should have, was to remind her sister that everyone already stared at them as if they were odd creatures. It had a lot to do with how they looked, but even more to do with their family’s history. All three of them got their appearances from their mother—from their dark hair right down to their ice-blue eyes. Somewhere along the way in their family line, that coloring had bred true. Their father was blond and had blue eyes, but his eyes were darker in color than theirs.

Many believed they descended from witches. One of their ancestors, John Alden, had been accused of witchcraft in Salem in the seventeenth century. He had been acquitted, but that stigma had followed him. Their mother was an Alden and her family still resided in Boston. Their American roots were another check against them as far as the ton was concerned.

The lock clicked, and Isla lifted the lid on the box. They all leaned over it and peered inside. “Is that a book?” Maeve asked.

“It is,” Isla said and pulled it out. She flipped open the cover and read the first page. “The Diary of Sybil Alden,” she said quietly. “Was this mother’s before she wed father?”

Athena swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. None of them truly knew their mother. She had died giving birth to her and Maeve. Isla had her for two years, but even she was too young to remember her. All they had were tales her father told them, and some stories from their grandfather Jack when he came over from Boston. They didn’t get too many visits from him either...

“I want to read it,” Athena said. “Let me see it.”

Isla clutched it to her chest. “No,” she said. “What I mean is...” She sighed. “We all should have a turn with it in private. This is something that we will all treasure and we shouldn’t fight over it. None of us want to accidentally damage it, do we?”

Athena and Maeve both shook their heads. “You’re right,” Athena said. “How do we decide who reads it first?” As much as she wanted to grab it out of her sister’s hands she understood what that diary would mean to all of them. They all had lost their mother and craved to know more about her.

“First, let’s see what else is in the chest.” Isla glanced down. “There is more than this diary inside.”

They all huddled around the chest once more. There were some trinkets inside. Three to be exact... They were pendants. Each had a thin gold chain with a little black stone attached with a gold initial embedded in it. The first letter of each of their names. “Do you think mother meant for us to have these?”

“But how would she have known...” Isla frowned. “She didn’t know you two would be girls...”

She was right. They hadn’t been born when their mother had died, yet here were three pendant that were designed for them. “What should we do?”

“I think we should keep the pendant with our respective initials on them,” Maeve said. “I want it.” She held out her hand palm side up waiting for it to be handed to her.

Isla grinned. “Then you shall have it.” She handed Maeve the stone with a clear M embedded in it, then handed Athena the one with her own initial. “We should wear them.”

“I agree,” Maeve said and then did exactly that. She placed the necklace around her neck and patted the little black stone pleased with her actions.

Athena stared at her own pendant. She wasn’t certain she wished to wear hers, but they might question her reluctance. So she folded it in her palm and clasped it tightly. She would decide later if she wished to wear it. “What about the diary?”

she asked in an attempt to distract her sisters from her actions. “Do you want it first, Isla? Since you’re the oldest?”

She shook her head. “No,” she told Athena. “I think it should start with you, since technically you’re the youngest. I have no wish to marry, but I know you do. Perhaps there is some useful incite in these pages that will guide you.”

Maeve wrinkled her nose. “I’m too young to marry.”

They were both eighteen. Their birthday had just passed a month earlier and their father had decided it was time for their debut ball in the next couple of months. They would return to London after the season was in full swing. In late April, their London townhouse would be opened and they would take up residence there. They would have all of March and a couple of weeks in April left in the country before they departed. Maeve would have been happy to remain out of society. Athena didn’t blame her. No one seemed to like them; however, she wanted to fall in love. She couldn’t very well do that if she remained cloistered in her family home.

“There is no rush for any of us to find husbands,” Isla told her in a solemn tone. “Enjoy your season.” Her sister didn’t sound as if she thought they would have a good season, and for good reason. Hers hadn’t been pleasant.

“Did you enjoy your debut?” Maeve asked.

Isla glanced away. “Society isn’t for everyone.” Her tone was quiet, but the pain in her voice was unmistakable. “That doesn’t mean it won’t be special for the two of you.” She had pasted a smile on her face, but Athena saw through it. She wouldn’t push, though. If Isla wished to talk about it, she would.

Instead, she lifted her hand. “I *will* take the diary first.” She wanted to know more about her mother, and this was her only chance to do so. “And then I’ll give it to Maeve when I’m finished.”

Maeve grinned. “I hope she had more than advice about love. Do you think it’s true?”

“What is true?” Isla asked. The confusion in her tone evident as she spoke.

“That she was a witch.” She glanced at Isla as if she’d lost her mind, and what was a silly question to ask...

Isla frowned. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. Witchcraft isn’t real.”

This was an old argument. One that would never be resolved...or would it? Athena glanced down at the diary. There was only one way to find out, and she’d start reading her mother’s journal to gain some of that much needed insight. “Let’s go back to the sitting room. Someone will notice we’re missing soon and father told us not to come up here.”

“She’s correct,” Isla said, then stood. “Time to be respectable young ladies again.” They all scurried out of the attic and headed back to the sitting room. They were all seated when the door opened and the housekeeper pushed in the tea cart. All three of them blew out a sigh of relief. They’d returned just in time. Their father would never know they had disobeyed his instructions to remain out of the attic.

Athena stared at the diary sitting on the table next to her and then ran her fingers over the black pendant in her palm. What did this all mean? Would she find the answers in that diary, and would she be happy with what she did discover?

CHAPTER ONE

ONE MONTH LATER...

*R*estlessness rolled over Athena in waves... She'd had her mother's journal for weeks now and she still hadn't read one page. She was surprised that neither of her sisters had asked for it yet. Were they not eager to read it too? More importantly why hadn't she devoured every word her mother had written already? Why was she so terrified to start reading?

Because once she finished it, she'd no longer have something to look forward to from her mother... She hadn't wanted to admit that to herself. Perhaps it was time to let that go and open the journal. Not here though... She couldn't stay inside another moment longer.

"Why are you pacing, sister dear," Maeve asked as she entered the sitting room. "The last time you fretted this much, you were afraid father wouldn't let you buy that horse you favored."

She did love that horse... "True," Athena answered. "But I had good reason. Hades has a terrible temperament with the grooms. I feared father wouldn't allow me to ride him. Even though he's a complete sweetheart."

Maeve rolled her eyes. "That horse is a nuisance."

"Don't be a grump," Athena told her sister. "He has excellent taste and loves me."

"And he hates me," Maeve said with an irritable tone. "We're identical twins. How can he even tell us apart?"

Athena's lips twitched in amusement. "Perhaps he's noticed your dimple is on the other cheek." Athena shrugged and barely held back a grin. "Or that you're horrid with horses. Looks aren't everything." Maeve had tried to ride Hades once. Only once, and that had been enough for her to realize the horse wouldn't tolerate her as a rider. That had made her sister cross about it ever since.

“I don’t even want to know what you are implying.” Her sister sat on the settee and leaned back against it. “Tell me what is bothering you now. We both know it has nothing to do with your wretched horse.”

Should she tell her sister why she’d been pacing? Would Maeve even understand? She probably would. Neither of them had even had a chance to know their mother, and while Isla had two years with her, she couldn’t remember anything. They all had a hole in their lives that would never be filled. That journal might give them something, but it couldn’t replace their mother. “I am considering going for a ride.”

“You’re deflecting,” Maeve said. “That’s all right. You don’t have to tell me.” She tapped her head. “I bet I already know what is going on inside that head of yours.”

“You can certainly try.” Athena sighed. “But you’ve never been very good at reading my mind.” She barely held back a grin. They had a bond that went beyond being just sisters. They had always been able to read each other’s emotions, but telepathy was not one of their gifts.

“You’re correct, of course,” Maeve agreed. “But in this I think I am right.” She leaned over and tapped the journal Athena had set on a nearby table. “This is what’s troubling you. Did you read something disturbing that mother wrote?” She sat back up and met Athena’s gaze. “Is that why you’re pacing?”

Athena shook her head. “I haven’t read anything yet.”

Her sister gasped. “You’ve had it a month,” her sister exclaimed. “Why the blazes not?”

Perhaps her sister didn’t understand as she thought she might... “Because...” How the hell did she explain it? “Once I finish it...”

“There won’t be anything else left,” Maeve supplied, then nodded. “I do understand. I just hadn’t considered it because it isn’t my time with the journal. Perhaps when I do have it, I will take my time as well.”

She should never have doubted her sister. Maeve had always understood her, even when others didn't. They had gone to finishing school for a year, but no more than that. Not because they wouldn't have benefitted from extra learning, but because the other students were horrid. They had begged their father to let them return home and have tutors instead. With their ancestry, many looked at them as less than they were. It didn't matter that their father was an earl. Society only considered that their mother was an American, and not even one they deemed acceptable. Money had nothing to do with it either. Her mother's family had made a lot of that in shipping and other merchant endeavors. They were far wealthier than their father's family had ever been. They had, and always would be, outsiders. Which was why Isla had given up on the idea of marriage and resigned herself to spinsterhood. That may very well be Athena's and Maeve's paths as well. But they wanted to at least try before giving in.

"I do think I am going to go for that ride," Athena said, then picked up the journal. "Perhaps I'll find a nice sunny location to start reading."

Maeve grinned. "Hades will be glad to see you. He's a beast, but he is yours."

"That he is," Athena agreed. Her horse was one devilish monster. The breeder hadn't thought he would be appropriate for a woman rider, and honestly, a normal lady would have been too tame for a horse as large as Hades. Athena did not ride sidesaddle. She had riding breeches designed for her so she could be astride her horse as he galloped through the fields. Skirts only got in the way... "And he needs exercise daily. I should see to that at the very least."

"Well, you enjoy your ride." Maeve stood. "And I'll go to my studio. I am working on a spectacular landscape. When it's finished, I think it'll make a nice gift."

"For who?" Athena asked, curious.

"I don't know yet," Maeve answered honestly. "I just know it is meant for someone. Perhaps I have not met who it is intended for yet." Her sister had a faraway look on her face, as

if she was seeing some distant future. She shook her head and then met Athena's gaze. "Either way, I'll show it to you once I've finished. Go for your ride now. We both have things to do."

Athena laughed and exited the sitting room. Her sister was rude, but that did not make her wrong. They both did have their tasks, and she was going to see to hers...



ROMAN JAMES, the Earl of Kendal, rode along on his friend the Duke of Thornridge's property. He'd come to the duke's country house because he had needed time to recuperate from his injuries during Waterloo, but hadn't wanted to return to his own home. His mother would have had a fit if she'd realized how close Roman had come to dying. His injuries had been grave, and it had taken him months to recover enough to travel, then he'd settled in at Thornridge Castle. He'd been there for three months now, and he should return home soon, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. While he had been in his sick bed, he'd learned of his older brother's death.

That had been more of a shock than he'd wanted to admit...

Roman was never meant to be the earl. He'd been all right with his lot in life. He'd become a soldier and had intended to live his life as one. His brother Cassius was the perfect son. Their father had groomed him to take over the title and practically ignored Roman. In fact, Roman preferred when he did ignore him. His life was much easier that way. For him, it was a blessing when their father died suddenly. It had freed him from what little constraints he'd had in his life. Cassius had encouraged him to purchase his commission.

But neither of them had expected Cassius would die in a similar way as their father... They both had taken ill suddenly, and succumbed to that illness. Then Roman had almost died, too, from the wounds he had sustained in battle. Thankfully, he still breathed, but that was labored, especially after too much

exertion. Something his mother wouldn't fail to notice and become distraught he would die as well.

Hence his sojourn with the Duke of Thornridge, his oldest friend. He hadn't even told his mother he had returned to England. It was best to wait until he was more himself. Each day he breathed a little easier and winced less with pain. His side ached whenever he took too deep of a breath and his thigh itched with pain where he'd been slashed clear to the bone. He didn't wish to distress his mother, though his absence certainly wasn't aiding his cause. She would be vexed with him when she learned the truth. He couldn't worry about that now. She'd learn of his brush with death soon enough and he would deal with it then. For now, he'd concentrate on healing.

Today was one of the better days. He'd felt decent enough that a ride didn't seem impossible. That didn't mean he didn't have any pain, just that it had been more bearable. Maybe one day he'd be able to move without feeling slices of agony ripping through him, but it was yet to happen. He sighed and pulled on the reins. He needed a slight break to catch his breath. Roman closed his eyes and sucked in a bit of air, then released it. When he opened his eyes, he thought he might be seeing things.

A blur raced by him. Roman would swear it was a woman on one of the largest horses he'd ever seen. Her black hair was loose and flowing down in waves, whipping in the wind as she urged her horse on. What surprised him the most was her clothing. Had she been wearing breeches? He blinked several times before his muddled thoughts caught up to him. Roman had to know more about her. He flipped the rein and urged the horse to a gallop. That was perhaps more than his battered body could bear, but he couldn't find any reason to care as he settled in for the horse's breakneck speed.

She had quite the head start on him, but he was determined to locate her. Luckily for him she had slowed down by a nearby pond. Her horse stopped by the pond and she slid off her saddle, then tied the reins to a nearby post. How often had she come to this pond? It was on Thornridge's land, and he wondered if the duke knew he had a regular trespasser. He'd

wandered enough of the ducal estate to have become familiar with the landscape but he had never seen this woman before.

Roman slowed his own horse to a walk. He didn't want to startle the lady. She was pulling a blanket out of one of her saddlebags and a small sack. A meal perhaps? She laid the blanket down and then reached into the sack. She presented something from within it to her horse as she stroked his mane.

He moved closer and he could hear her mumbling something, but the words were not decipherable. Roman cleared his throat, and it startled her, then the horse in succession. She lifted her hand to her chest as if to still a rapidly beating heart. "Sir," she said in a scolding tone. "You should not sneak up on a person. It's quite rude."

Roman held back a smile. "My apologies," he told her with sincerity. He'd wanted to find her and he did, but he never meant to startle her. He'd hoped to avoid doing so. "That was not my intention."

She lifted her brow. "And what exactly are your intentions?" Her glare was enough to flay a man. It was too bad she didn't realize it wouldn't take much to run him through, or she might actually do just that.

Her gorgeous mouth was full and lush, but clearly, she would not be inviting him to kiss her as much as he wished she would. That in itself was a pity. "Or do you even know what you hope to gain by accosting me?" she asked.

"Now that's going a bit far, don't you think?" It was his turn to lift a brow. "It is quite difficult to accost anyone when one hasn't even had time to dismount." Though to be fair, he'd done his fair share of damage to some soldiers in the war from atop his horse. He had been in the Calvary, after all. But she did not know that, and he didn't have a saber or weapon of any kind on his person.

"I suppose that is true." She narrowed his gaze. "You don't appear to have ill intentions, but as I have never been introduced to you, how am I to know what you wish from me?"

She was so bloody lovely it ached to look at her. Her dark hair looked luscious, and he wanted to stroke his fingers over those thick tresses. Why had she left it unbound for her ride? And he'd already studied those lips of hers... Her eyes were an eerie ice-blue that seemed to pierce right through him. He had to know more about her. "I am Lord Kendal," he said. "I'm visiting His Grace, the Duke of Thornridge. It is his land you're riding over."

The woman smiled at him. "Is it?" Her lips twitched a little. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lord." She picked up her blanket and folded it neatly and replaced it in her saddlebag along with her little sack. "Then I suppose I should return to my family's land. I would hate to trespass." With liquid grace, she hopped back onto her saddle. He was amazed at her skill, and a little dumbstruck at the view of her rear in those breeches. Women should never wear breeches. It was enough to make a man lose his mind. He'd barely been able to tear his gaze from her lush bottom.

"You're leaving," he said when she pulled her horse's reins firmly into her hands. He blinked as if he had lost moments of time he could never recover.

"Yes," she said. "Isn't that why you approached me? To warn me that I was on the duke's land?"

"No," he told her. "I really don't give a damn why you're here." He wanted her to stay...

Her lips twitched again. She must find him amusing. "That is good to know, my lord." Her eyes seemed to dance with mischief. "Perhaps we will meet again someday." She nodded at him. "Until then," she began. "Enjoy your stay at the duke's estate. I hear he's a beast of a man and hard to be around. I'd hate to be his guest."

With those words, she flicked the reins and galloped away. It wasn't until she was out of sight that he realized he'd never gained her name. He'd been a bloody idiot. But that didn't matter. She was Thornridge's neighbor. How many beautiful women could possibly live on the estate next to the duke's?

CHAPTER TWO

Athena dismounted Hades and then led him to the stables and secured him to a nearby post. She kept his attention on her as a stable hand, Tommy, removed his saddle and other tack. After everything was taken off she led him to his stall. She removed his harness and handed it to the Tommy.

“Bring me a brush,” she told the Tommy. Hades had been wonderful and ridden as hard as she’d demanded. Athena wanted to reward him for being the best horse she’d ever owned. The stable hand brought her the brush, and she groomed him. Athena brushed and brushed him and he practically preened before her. “You’re wonderful,” she told Hades. “The bestest horse that ever was a horse.” She sounded like an idiot, but Athena didn’t care. She adored her horse and didn’t mind showing it, to him, and any one bothering to observe her with Hades.

After she finished brushing him, she exited the stall and closed the gate, then pushed the lock into place. She couldn’t allow Hades to escape because none of the stable hands could handle him well if she wasn’t around to keep him calm. That was one of the reasons her father had been reluctant to allow her to have Hades. He was an unruly horse, and he hadn’t wanted to risk Athena’s safety. She reached into a nearby bag and pulled out a sugar cube and gave it to Hades. He crunched it and let out a whinny of appreciation. “You’re perfect,” she reassured Hades. “I’d spend more time with you if I could, but I must go inside now.”

She still had read nothing in her mother's diary. That definitely had been her intention when she'd gone for her ride. Athena had planned on settling down by the pond and reading the first few pages, but that had changed when Lord Kendal had made his appearance. It hadn't felt like the right time to open the journal and read her mother's words. Not with such a handsome and alluring man catching all of her attention.

That was when she knew she had to leave. He was a temptation she hadn't planned on, and it scared her to her very soul. Athena had never met anyone that had sparked her attention so quickly. She was restless in nature and prone to pacing to rid herself of excess anxiety. Sitting still in a serene pose was foreign to her. Maeve could occasionally, especially while she painted, but it was their oldest sister, Isla, that had the calmness that soothed everyone around them. Athena would never be that type of woman. So it had unnerved her to realize she could focus all of her attention on one man and have it calm her so effectively. She had to discuss it with her sisters.

Athena placed a quick kiss on Hades' mane and then said, "I'll be back tomorrow. I promise." She always kept her promises, especially to her horse. When they went to London, he would remain behind and that would be hell for the stable hands. They'd have to let him loose in the paddock so he got some exercise because no one else could ride him.

With a sigh, she stepped away from his stall and exited the stables. She made her way to the house and went to her bedchamber. As much as she wanted to speak to at least one of her sisters, she had to change out of her riding gear first. Her father frowned at her wearing breeches and didn't like to see her in them. He wouldn't go so far as to forbid her wearing them as long as they were at Harwood Hall. Being the daughter of the Earl of Harwood had some advantages, even if society thought they were ill bred mongrels.

She reached her bedchamber and stepped inside. Her maid was already waiting for her. "Mary," she greeted. "I need to change quickly. Is my gown ready?" Mary knew her well and

should have prepared for her arrival, but Athena usually took her time changing.

“Yes, my lady,” Mary said. “Your gown is pressed and ready for you. Your father requested you stop by his study when you returned from your ride. I think he wishes to speak with all three of you.”

What could her father wish to discuss with them that required such urgency? She blew out a breath and turned toward Mary. “Then we best hurry. I’ve probably kept him waiting longer than he wished.”

She quickly stripped her clothes off and handed them to Mary to launder. Athena only had a few pairs of breeches and she wanted to keep them in the best condition as possible. It was quite difficult for a woman to have them made. Seamstresses were appalled and men’s tailors flat out refused. She always had several pairs made at once when she found someone willing to humor her request.

Mary helped her into her underclothes and then into her gown. It was a pale blue that was a shade darker than her eyes. Athena thought it brought out that color and she liked to enhance their beauty—even if most found them peculiar. She loved the color. Mainly because of the one portrait that existed of her mother. They got their coloring from her, from her dark hair to her light blue eyes. They were truly their mother’s daughters.

“There,” Mary said. “Now let’s fix your hair. Why did you insist on taking it down before your ride? It’s a tangled mess. It’ll take a while to comb out all those knots.”

Truly, she hadn’t known why she wanted her hair down. Athena knew it was a bad idea, but she felt it had to be done. After her encounter with Lord Kendal, she couldn’t help wondering if somehow she’d known she’d meet him and wanted him to see it flowing around her shoulders in waves. Had he liked her hair?

She had certainly liked *him*. He was handsome and seemed to be kind. Athena wanted to know more about him, and it wasn’t all about his dark hair and piercing gray eyes. He had

tried to hide it, but it had been clear to her he'd been in pain. What had happened to him? "Try your best," Athena told Mary. "I'll not complain as you brush them out. I promise." Her thoughts kept wandering back to Lord Kendal and what that meeting might mean for her and for him.

Mary nodded and set to work and Athena became lost in thought. She couldn't wait to tell Isla and Maeve about the duke's visitor. Isla would hate him on principle. Her feelings for the duke were well known. Once upon a time Isla had thought herself in love with him, but he'd broken her heart. Surely Lord Kendal wasn't a cad like the duke, but she couldn't be certain. Either way, she wanted to find out.



ROMAN SLID off of horse and winced as pain shot through him. He'd been out too long and would have to rub down his leg later. Otherwise, the muscles would stiffen and he'd be in even more pain later. He wished he had someone he trusted to do it for him, but there was no one he could rely on. It was up to him to see to his needs. He was the earl now and couldn't let anyone see him as weak.

He kept his pace slow as he headed toward Thornridge Castle. The duke would be in his study. That was where he spent most of his time. There was a lot involved in running a dukedom, and Roman did not envy his friend. Roman had never wanted a title, and certainly not one as lofty as a duke. Being an earl would be a tremendous responsibility too, but nowhere near as suffocating as a duke.

The castle might be considered gloomy to some, but Roman had always liked it. Even when he had visited as a boy. Roman had attended Eton with Thornridge and they had become good friend there. The duke had been a duke even then. His parents had both died when he was only five years old. He'd been raised by an aunt and solicitors. His melancholy nature had been ever present. There was sadness in his eyes even now. Roman wished he could erase that for

him, but he didn't know what would or could make Thornridge happy.

He reached the study and rapped on the doorframe to catch Thornridge's attention. "I know you're busy," he began. "You're always busy. But I had hoped I could entice you to take a break and assist me."

Thornridge set his quill down as he met Roman's gaze. He smiled, but it didn't reach his forever somber golden eyes. "What can I do for you?"

Roman had always known two things in life. He was a forever disappointment to his father, and Thornridge would always be his friend. One he couldn't change, and the other he hoped never would. At least with his father's death, he could set the first aside. "I went riding earlier."

The duke's brow rose. "Was that wise?"

He grinned. "Perhaps not," he rubbed his aching thigh as he spoke. "But I had to try. I went farther this time than I have in the past." He'd kept to around the castle grounds when he attempted to get on a horse. This time he was determined to explore more of Thornridge land. He had visited in the past, but he had never gone far. There had been no reason to, and that was perhaps why he'd never seen her before.

"I hope it was worth it." What he didn't say was that the pain would be insufferable later. Roman knew that better than his friend did. "You never said why you need my help." Thornridge's gaze landed on Roman's, and he had the duke's full attention. That attentiveness could be difficult to withstand for those not accustomed to it.

"I made it as far as a pond on the east side of your property," he told the duke.

"I wouldn't recommend swimming there," the duke told him. "At least not for a few more months. Early April, it will be cold enough to freeze your bollocks off." His lips twitched. "Was that what you wished to know?"

Roman grinned. "No," he told his friend. "But that is good information to have. I don't think it is wise to attempt

swimming with my leg so unreliable. I might end up drowning if there is no one around to save me.” And he rather liked his bollocks attached to his body, thank you very much. He’d rather they didn’t freeze off. “I met someone there.”

Thornridge stilled and slowly sat back against his chair. “Who?” His voice had gone gruff and, for the first time in his life, his eyes had an unfamiliar emotion rolling through them. Was that...anger? Heartbreak? He didn’t quite understand what he was seeing. Did Thornridge have feelings for the hellion Roman had met?

“I’m not certain,” he began slowly, uncertain how his friend would react to his meeting with the young woman. “She never gave me her name. The only thing I can say with certainty is she lives nearby. I think the estate is near yours.”

“I see.” Thornridge glanced away. “There are three young ladies on that estate. It could be any of them, and they all look similar. Two are in fact identical...” He sighed. “Twins,” he added without preamble. “It’s been a few years since I’ve encountered any of them. I tend to stay in London.” He rubbed his hands over his face, but didn’t explain further. “I have been in residence here to help you through your convalescence.”

Roman tilted his head to the side. “I didn’t realize you don’t reside here much when I asked for your help hiding my condition from my mother.” Thornridge had always loved his home. What would make him stay away?

“It’s a long story,” he said. “A tale I don’t wish to expound upon.” He rubbed his hand over his face and sighed. “You needed my help and I wouldn’t have denied it. Don’t worry overmuch about it. Staying here has been no hardship for me.”

“I understand,” he said, but he didn’t. Roman could only guess at to the reason, and it had to include one of those three ladies. But which one? He prayed it wasn’t the one he’d suddenly become fascinated with. “What are their names?”

Thornridge swallowed hard. “Lady Athena and Lady Maeve are the twins,” he answered. “The oldest sister is Lady Isla.”

Had it been his imagination, or had his voice grown a little gruffer at the mention of Lady Isla? Had something happened between them? He didn't want to pry, but his curiosity had grown exponentially. It was best to leave his friend alone. His questions had left the duke anxious, and that had not been Roman's intention. "Thank you," he told Thornridge. "I'm sure you have much more work to do." He gestured toward the account books. "I'll see you at dinner. I have to see to my leg or I won't be doing much walking later."

The duke nodded. "Stay away from them," he said in a harsh tone. "If the rumors about them are true, they'll ruin you. They are not a good sort." Something flashed in the duke's gaze as he issued that warning. Did he actually believe what he was saying or repeating another's words?

Roman frowned. "All right," he said in a quiet tone. He refused to stay away from her, though. Roman couldn't say why, but he knew she was meant to be his. It might be whimsy or he might even be a fool, but he had always followed his instincts. Those very instincts had saved his life. He might be damaged, but he was alive. He couldn't ignore something that had kept him breathing, and he wouldn't let go of a woman that could very well be his future. "I'll heed your advice."

Some things were meant to be. Roman left Thornridge alone and went to his bedchamber to take care of his leg. The duke had followed the same advice from someone else, and that had led him to letting go of Lady Isla. Roman didn't know how he knew that with certainty, but he did. He would also bet that Thornridge regretted that decision, but would refuse to admit it.

Maybe one day he'd realize that having her was far more important than his pride, but he wouldn't welcome that observation now. Roman would keep those thoughts to himself, at least for now. One day his friend might be open to hearing them, and when that day arrived he'd say his piece.

CHAPTER THREE

Athena sighed and strolled into the library the next morning. Their father had been called away on estate business the previous day and she had not been able to meet with him as he'd intended. So she'd been informed there would be a family meeting in the library the next morning. They all woke at different times and there was no formal breakfast meal. It was easier for them to set a time to meet at a time that would work for the entire family. Athena was a late riser normally, but she had difficulty sleeping the night before. She'd been awake before Isla, who was usually the first to rise.

She entered the library and found it empty. Surely she wasn't the first to arrive. She'd had a tray sent to her room earlier that morning and had only left her chamber a few moments ago. Athena frowned. Where was her family? Had the meeting been cancelled, and no one had bothered to inform her? No, that wasn't possible. They wouldn't have forgotten her.

"You're early," Isla said as she strolled into the library. "I would have thought you'd still be dressing for the day."

Any other day Isla would have been correct. Athena hated mornings. She shrugged. "I woke earlier than normal." That seemed like an understatement; however, she didn't want to explain to her sister why she had trouble sleeping the night before. She'd never told either of her sisters about her encounter by the pond. At first she'd decided against mentioning it to Isla because of how she'd likely react to her riding on the duke's property, and then Maeve had been too

engrossed in her latest painting for her to take a break. Maeve had feared losing the optimal light required to add all the intricate details to her latest work.

Therefore, she'd kept her own counsel... It was probably for the best. She didn't know exactly how to describe what had happened with Lord Kendal. Honestly, nothing *had* happened. They talked, and he'd introduced himself, and she'd kept her own name to herself. It was her feelings that confused her. She would wait a while and sort them out before speaking about Lord Kendal. After all, she knew little about the man, and until she gained more insight, her silence was necessary.

"Is something bothering you?" Isla asked.

Her sister was too observant for her own good. Sometimes Athena wished she it was easier to hide things from her oldest sister. "Not at all," she replied in an amiable tone.

Isla stared at her as if she didn't believe her, and why should she? Luckily, she was saved from Isla's interrogation when Maeve and their father entered the library. "Good, you're both here," their father said as a way of greeting Isla and Athena.

"Please," he began. "Everyone sit. This won't take long, and then you can go about your day."

They all sat on the settee in the library and their father took the chair to the right of it. They sat in silence and waited for him to speak. "As you all know, Athena and Maeve are set to have their debut ball in a few weeks."

"We do," Athena said. "Has something changed?"

Her father nodded at her. "The debut ball will happen as scheduled," he explained. "It's our travel plans that have to change."

Athena frowned. She did not like the sound of that. Her time in the country was important to her. If they left London sooner, then she would have less time with Hades. He couldn't come to London with them. "When are we leaving?" she asked.

“In five days,” he told her. “It’s only a week sooner than planned. I’ve already informed the servants. Your maids will pack for you in time and be ready to travel with you.”

So good of him to inform their servants before them... That was discourteous of her to think, but she couldn’t help being displeased. Their father had a large estate to run, and he didn’t have to explain himself to any of them.

“Do I have to go?” Isla asked in a petulant tone. She hated society, and for good reason.

“Yes,” their father said. “I need you to help oversee the girls’ season. I’ve hired an elderly matron to chaperone, but I expect you to be there with them.”

“I understand,” Isla replied in a dejected tone. Poor Isla. Her season had been a terrible disappointment. “I’ll do as you ask.” What went without saying...she didn’t have to like it.

“Now that I’ve explained that there is one other thing we need to discuss,” their father said.

They all glanced in his direction. What else could there be? Hadn’t it been enough to end their quiet days in the country sooner than planned? Yes, Athena wanted a season, but she also wanted the time with Hades she’d been promised.

“I expect you all to be on your best behavior while we are in London.” He pinned Athena with a glare as if he was directing this speech at her. “No unladylike behavior.” He turned to Maeve. “No staring at people and making them feel uncomfortable.” Then he focused his attention on Isla. “And no avoiding company because you find them distasteful.” He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers together. “We’re going to enjoy London. Do you all understand?” He ordered this as if he could force them to find that very enjoyment when they all knew that was next to impossible.

“Yes, father,” they chorused together. What else could they do?

Their father was asking a lot of them. Some things were beyond their control. How were they going to enjoy London when society tended to snub them all? She had her doubts any

of them would attend the debut ball. She'd voiced that to Maeve and Isla a few weeks ago, and Isla had laughed. Her response was to explain that the ton wouldn't dare not to show their faces. They wouldn't want to offend their father outright and so openly. They were more apt to whisper their discord and hope it didn't reach their father's ears.

"Now that we've settled that you are excused. Have a good day."

They all stood and exited the library. Athena was restless once again and decided to take Hades out for another bruising ride. She wouldn't let her hair fly loose this time. That had been silly. Instead, she'd have her maid plait it and pin it up tightly. She wouldn't want any more tangles. It had taken Mary far too long to brush them out the day before.

Was it too much to hope that she might cross paths with Lord Kendal again? She smiled as she headed up to her bedchamber. Maybe fate would help her along a little...



ROMAN HAD GONE into town early that morning with Thornridge. Not because he had any interest in going, but because it had seemed like a good idea at the time. He'd regretted it almost immediately. The duke was in a foul mood and grunted more than held a conversation with him.

"What is bothering you?" he asked.

"I'm fine," the duke responded in a clipped tone.

Well, that had gotten him nowhere. He could guess, but didn't even know where to begin. He sighed and settled back into the carriage. Perhaps when they returned, he would go for another ride. Mayhap he would find the fiery lady at the pond again. He wanted to know her name. Thornridge hadn't been much help there. He'd not wanted to discuss the neighbor girls or why they were trouble.

"I am thinking I should return home soon," he told the duke. "I wrote my mother finally to inform her I was back in

England and I have been staying with you. She wasn't too pleased with that information." He'd written her a week prior but hadn't bothered to mention it to Thornridge. Her response had come that morning, and it had been filled with vitriol he'd been expecting.

"I would think she'd be happy to have you nearby and alive." The duke met his gaze. "But perhaps I am wrong. You were never the favorite son, were you?"

Roman blew out a breath. "I don't think my father believed I was his son." He hadn't ever wanted to admit that aloud. It was the only thing that made sense as to why he'd been treated so horribly as a child. He'd done nothing right. "Though I look more like a James than Cassius did, that didn't matter to him."

"Your father was an arse," Thornridge replied in a cool tone. "Have you asked your mother? Is there a reason he might have believed that?"

He hadn't wanted to broach the topic with his mother. Roman didn't wish to offend her, and a small part of him hadn't wanted to know the truth. What if he wasn't his father's son? Then he'd be rolling in his grave at the knowledge that Roman had assumed the title he'd held so dearly. Roman might feel like an imposter if he discovered he was not a true heir to the title. What would he do then? "She wouldn't tell me the truth." His mother would never admit if she'd had an affair. She'd be too proud and resentful of any presumption suggesting it, even if it was true. Not that he had any way of ascertaining the truth either way.

"You don't think so?" The duke lifted a brow. "You might be surprised."

"Perhaps," he said in a noncommittal tone. "Either way, it doesn't matter anymore. He's gone, and so is my brother. It may be best to let the past lie where it belongs and move forward."

"Do you really believe that?" his friend asked.

He wanted to. Desperately so... "I have little choice," he answered. "I refuse to live my life with my father's

disapproving voice echoing inside my head. I want to be happy.”

And perhaps a certain dark-haired beauty was the thing he needed to achieve that elusive emotion. Roman had never been happy. He wasn't sure he would know what that felt like. He had never thought to marry before. Not that he'd been against it, but as a soldier it hadn't been desirable for him. Now though... He found the idea of a wife, especially one like the woman he'd met the day before, quite appealing.

Thornridge nodded. “I still think you should speak with your mother about it. I don't believe you will be able to move forward as you wish and find that happiness until you do.” He tapped his fingers on the side of the carriage. “When do you think you'll return?”

Roman shrugged. “I haven't made any decisions yet. Maybe a sennight.” He didn't want to leave Thornridge Castle until he learned her name. There were three possibilities, but he wanted the correct one. Should he pay a call on them? No. That would be foolish. He wouldn't know what name to give the servants when he stopped in. Who would he ask to see?

“I think I might come with you,” Thornridge told him. “I've stayed longer than I should have.”

With that statement, guilt rolled over Roman. “I'm sorry...”

“Don't be,” his friend said. “You needed me. I was glad to offer my home to you.”

The duke was one of his closest friends. They only had one other friend that was equally as close. Roman hadn't seen him since before he'd left for the war. “How is Pemberton?” he asked as thoughts of their friend came to him. “When was the last time you saw him?”

Thornridge shrugged. “Not since before you arrived. He has changed little.”

Viscount Pemberton was one of the biggest scoundrels in the ton. He discarded lovers frequently and was often found in some of the most disreputable gaming hells. Pemberton

thought highly of himself and offered no apologies to anyone. He might mutter one begrudgingly to Roman or Thornridge, but only because they were the only two people alive he respected enough to bother. He had dark blond hair, pale green eyes, and a face that drew more women to him than one man could handle, but the viscount certainly tried.

“I think I’ll write to him and tell him I’m returning to London soon. I won’t stay with my mother for long. She can be a bit...much.” Thornridge had been right in his earlier statement. Cassius had been the favorite of both parents. His mother would welcome him home because she had no choice. He was the earl now, and she depended on him for support.

The duke’s lips twitched. “If you’re going to visit with Pemberton, keep in mind his proclivities might be more than you wish to participate in.”

He laughed. “I am aware of our friend’s habits. I think I’ll be all right in his tender care.”

Besides, he didn’t want to spend his night with any courtesans or women with loose morals. There was only one woman he wanted in his bed, and he’d gladly marry her to have her there. There were several steps in-between until he had that goal. The first one being discovering her name. Then he’d start courting her in truth. He was acting like a bloody fool and did not care.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Thornridge Castle. The duke exited, and Roman followed. “Go inside without me,” he told the duke. “I feel the need for a walk.” Riding would be too much. His leg was still too stiff after yesterday’s jaunt. “My leg needs the exercise after being in the carriage.”

Thornridge nodded. “Don’t overdo it,” he told him. “We will talk more later.” He said nothing else. Instead, he turned on his heels and went inside, leaving Roman alone.

Roman took that as his cue to start his walk. He only had one destination in mind, and he hoped he’d find the gorgeous woman he’d met the day before there. Maybe, for once, luck would be in his favor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Roman strolled into the clearing by the pond at a leisurely pace. Yes, he hoped she would be there, but he also realized rushing would go against his own interests. For several reasons... If he walked too fast, he would aggravate the still healing injuries in his leg, and how would it appear for him to come running up on her? She didn't seem like the typical female and probably wouldn't easily startle; however, she would realize quickly how eager he was to see her again. That would give her an advantage in their exchange, and he wanted to keep them on equal footing. At least for as long as possible...

Everything changed inside of him when he met her. It was almost as if he'd been waiting his entire life to meet her, and now that he had, Roman had one goal. To have her by his side for the rest of their lives. He stopped near a tree and glanced around him, then grinned like the fool he most likely was when he noticed a horse tied to a post in the distance.

He hadn't seen her yet, though. Where had she disappeared to? Roman headed in the direction of the pond, glancing around him as he made his way to where he hoped to find her. Underneath a large tree with budding leaves, he found her on a blanket with a leather-bound book in her lap. She seemed engrossed in the pages and hadn't yet noticed him walking toward her.

Roman stopped in front of her and waited. Slowly, she lifted her head and met his gaze. A smile filled her face as she stared up at him. "You're sneakier than you were last time,"

she said, then laughed. “Aren’t you a surprise?” Her light laughter was a balm to his heart. If only that would soothe the other aches he endured each day.

He lifted a brow. “Is that so terrible?” Roman didn’t wish to tell her about his infirmity yet, and the reason he now walked instead of approaching her on a horse. The last thing he wanted was for her to see him as some sort of cripple. He had worked hard to overcome his difficulties, and he still had more work to do, but he fully believed he would recover completely in time.

She closed the book she had been reading and tucked it away into a small bag. He was curious about it, but didn’t ask. She stood up and brushed down her trousers. Her hair was bound today, and he found he was disappointed that her dark locks were not flowing over her as they had been before. Instead, they were wound around her gorgeous face in firmly secured plaits on top of her head. She glanced at him and said, “I had hoped to see you again.”

“You did?” That surprised him. He hadn’t thought she would admit to such a thing. “Why?”

Her lips tilted upward into a smile, but there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. He didn’t like it. “Because we won’t be here much longer,” she told him. “and I wanted to apologize for my rude behavior yesterday.”

“I didn’t think you were rude,” he told her as her words seared through him. “Where are you going?” He focused on what was most important. Roman couldn’t very well court her if he couldn’t find her. He had thought he could handle his mother and be seen around London a bit, then return to her. That wouldn’t work if she left.

“To London, of course,” she said, as if that was the only answer that could be acceptable. “I’m to have my first season.” She shrugged as if she wouldn’t mind skipping the upcoming season. “Well, Maeve and I are.”

She was probably one of the twins if it was her first season. He still didn’t know her name, but at least he could narrow down which one she was not. He smiled. “That’s

wonderful,” he told her. Roman felt happiness in his very bones. He had just decided to return home and then go to London. They would be in the same city and he could court her openly during the season.

“It is?” She raised both brows. “I’m afraid I do not understand your happiness at my upcoming season.”

He may regret his next words, but he did not see any reason not to tell her. “Because I’m leaving soon too,” he explained. “I’ll be in London soon enough as well. Perhaps we shall meet again there.”

Her smile held more warmth when it slowly filled her face. He basked in it and wanted to lean down and kiss her. It was too soon. Roman didn’t wish to frighten her away.

“I would very much like to see you again,” she admitted, then tilted her head to the side to study him. “But I must ask... You don’t know me. Why do you wish to be around me?”

Did she not realize how truly beautiful she was? There was something absolutely pure about her. When she glanced at him with those inquisitive eyes, he almost became speechless. Somehow, he found enough to utter, “Because you’re a surprise I never thought to wish for.”

Her eyes widened, and she stepped closer to him. “I feel the same about you,” she admitted. “Though I cannot explain why.”

They were so close now, he could close the distance and give in to the need to kiss her. He shouldn’t. How scandalous would that be? He’d kiss her and compromise her without even knowing her name...

“I should go.” His voice came out gruff as he fought his need to close the distance between them and press his lips to hers. He would not accost her like a lecherous man who could not control his own actions. “You were occupied when I strolled toward you. It’s not my intention to keep you from your activity.” He took a step back so he could leave before he found a reason to stay.

“Do you have to leave?” she asked. Roman stopped and stared at her. “I would like for you to stay.”

He could stay and listen to her speak for hours, or not say anything at all. Roman calmed in her presence and just felt content. “Do you think that is wise?” He couldn’t believe he was actually trying to convince her to let him leave when it was the last thing he wanted. “My presence with you now might be misconstrued by those with the mind to make it something it isn’t.”

“That is true,” she agreed. “Many would spread rumors without much thought to what it might do to a perso.” She studied him for several moments and then said, “If you must leave me, I have one request before you do.”

“Anything,” he said and meant it.

“Kiss me,” she told him.

He couldn’t have heard her correctly. “Pardon me?”

She flicked her tongue over her bottom lip and stepped closer. “You heard me, Lord Kendal,” she insisted. “Kiss me. I know you want to.” That was definitely not the way to avoid a scandal...

He closed his eyes and groaned. It would be so easy to do as she asked, and he wasn’t strong enough to resist her. Now when she was asking him to do the very thing he desperately wanted. Roman cursed and pulled her into his arms, then pressed his lips to hers. His entire body erupted with need at the contact. He slanted his lips over hers and when she opened her mouth on a gasp; he slid his tongue inside her mouth. Their tongues tangled together as their desire became an entity they couldn’t control.

Somehow, with great reluctance, Roman stopped. This couldn’t happen in a field where anyone could walk up on them. He had to protect her. He took a step back and stared at her, his breathing ragged. “That...”

“Was everything,” she finished for him. Her smile was so sensual it gutted him. “Thank you, Lord Kendal. You’ve told me all I needed to know.”

He wished he could think clearly enough to decipher her meaning. “Roman,” he told her. “You should definitely call me Roman.” He met her gaze. “Tell me your name.” He was tired of not knowing that little detail about her. It was important.

“I’m Athena,” she told him. “Lady Athena Thompson.” She grinned. “I should return home.” Athena folded her blanket and placed it in the saddlebag on her horse where she’d placed her book earlier. She mounted her horse and then said, “Until we meet again in London, Roman. Don’t disappoint me.” Then she flicked the reins, and the horse took off. Roman stared after her like a bumbling fool.

“Athena,” he whispered her name. “I *will* see you again.” She’d charmed him the first time he’d glanced her way, and now he was most definitely besotted. He couldn’t wait to spend more time in her company.



THREE WEEKS LATER...

ATHENA STARED down at the gown she’d had designed for her debut ball. It was a dark green that was too bold for a young debutante about to be presented, but she didn’t care. Her hair was piled high on her head, with dark ringlets draping around her face. The pendant with her initial that she’d found with her mother’s journal was her only jewelry. The black stone glittered in the candlelight, and it almost felt as if her mother stood beside her approvingly.

All she could think about was Roman. He had kissed her. Yes, she had asked him too, but she hadn’t thought he actually would. And what a kiss it had been... She touched her lips as if she could feel his lips still there. She would kiss him again. Athena hadn’t been certain until that moment, but he was meant to be hers.

That might seem ridiculous to believe, but she did. Athena didn’t regret kissing him. It had been a test. At first, it had

started out as something she needed, but then it quickly turned into something far more devastating to her. Her heart opened up to him in those fleeting moments, and he had willingly entered. She would bet everything that he had felt what she had. They were drawn to each other for a reason.

A knock echoed through the room, and Isla stepped inside. She wore a gown of deep gold that made her skin glow. Her only jewelry as well was the black stone pendant with her initial. “Are you ready?” Her gown was a declaration in itself. Isla held her head high as she prepared herself to face the ton again. They’re brutal tongues had flayed her the last time she’d been in London, and she’d fled home to heal. Athena still didn’t know all that had happened to her older sister. She wished she could protect her now from what was to come.

“I am,” she told Isla. “Is Maeve done dressing?”

“Almost,” Isla said. “There was a slight difficulty with her gown. One of the buttons had loosened, and it had to be repaired. She shouldn’t be much longer.”

Maeve had decided on a soft peach gown that was more suitable for a debut ball. She was more practical than Athena ever would be. The gown suited her twin, though. They had distinct personalities and their gowns would show the world who they were. Soon enough they would be out in society and they would be subject to the same ridicule that still haunted Isla. Were they fools to go through that same torturous gossip and disdain from the ton?

“Let’s go down into the hall then and wait for her. We should enter the ballroom together.” Presenting a united front to the ton would only help them as they navigated the sea of disdain they would likely encounter. The buzzards might not want to pick over their remains if they couldn’t actually reach them. She looped her arm through Isla’s. “We will be with you every step of the way.”

Isla sucked in a deep breath. “Thank you,” she said in a quiet tone. “I’ll be all right. I promise.”

She thought she heard her mutter something under her breath. Had Isla said, at least *he* will not be here. Did she mean

the Duke of Thornridge? That was the only he that Isla avoided. What had happened between them? All Athena knew with certainty was that the duke had broken her sister's heart, and both of them seemed miserable. The duke, the last time Athena had seen him, had been as forlorn as Isla. Maybe one day they would find their way back to each other. It was clear to her they were unhappy apart, so they might erase that unwelcome emotion if they admitted they belonged together. She didn't know if that was possible, or if they would be open to it, but the solution was there for them to grasp on to.

They were not in the hall long before Maeve joined them. Her hair was secured in an elegant chignon, but she did not have as many loose curls as Athena did. She also had on the pendant with her initial. They all had chosen to honor their mother, and Athena prayed they would not regret that choice. The peach gown enhanced Maeve's beauty. "You look beautiful," she told her twin.

"Thank you," Maeve said, then smiled. "You do as well."

"It's time," Isla told them both, then braced her shoulders. She was preparing for something unpleasant and it hurt Athena that her sister felt that need. "Let's descend the stairs and let them announce us. My maid told me that it is a crush. Everyone who is anyone is here."

That should make Athena happy, but dread filled her. Something terrible was about to happen. She only prayed it didn't leave emotional scars as it had with Isla, or worse. "We can do this," she said, more for herself than her sisters, but it applied to them all. Slowly, they descended the stairs, and with each step, they accepted their destiny. They would make it to the end. Nothing could destroy them if they didn't allow it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Roman wished he could have skipped visiting his mother and gone straight to London. Her ramblings and reprimands had both been tedious and frustrating. She had seemed happy to see him, but he didn't think it was for his sake. His mother was practical and knew having one of her sons still alive was to her benefit. If one of his cousins inherited the title, she might not be so well off. As the mother of the earl, she was held in much higher regard in society. The Dowager Countess of Kendal enjoyed having the ear of the most prominent members of society and wanted to stay exactly where she'd been placed upon her husband's death. She didn't have to be a wife any longer, but had all the benefits that allowed it.

The visit had been an exercise in futility. He listened to her berate him for his absence while in the same breath, asking when he would leave again. She also intended to go to London for the season and hoped she would see him there. Roman didn't actually believe she wanted him to attend any societal events searching for a wife, but she probably did hope he would marry and secure an heir for the earldom.

Not because she had any hope of having grandchildren and in turn become a grandmother. His mother had far more mercenary concerns. Grandchildren, or more accurately, a grandson would secure her place. His mother would so hate to fall into a state of destitution, or something she'd consider akin to beggary. Roman would ensure she was taken care of no matter what. It might not be in the fashion she liked though.

He was happy to be away from her loving company. It had left him feeling cold, and he had a deep need for warmth again. Which was why he found himself at the Earl of Harwood's London townhouse. There were so many people there to attend the debut ball for the twins. He had to wonder if all of the guests actually received an invitation. No one seemed to have been turned away, that was certain. It surprised Roman to find that he had an invitation. Had Athena ensured he would have one? When had the invitations actually been sent?

Roman wanted to believe she wished for him to attend. He wanted to see her again. It had been a very long while since he'd last seen her. All right it had been a little more than a fortnight, but it definitely seemed far longer. He glanced toward the two gentlemen who had agreed to attend with him. "Are you prepared for this?" The carriage almost seemed too small for all three of them. None of them were small in stature.

They were all eligible to the ladies searching for a husband, but Thornridge would have the biggest draw. He pinned Roman with a glare. "I would rather go with Pemberton to one of his favorite brothels."

"So would I," the viscount added in a jovial tone. "That is I would like to take myself to one. I can definitely suggest a few more pleasurable choices. Why are we here again?"

"To watch Kendal act the fool," Thornridge drawled. "I told him he should stay away from this family, but he's determined to ruin himself with his pursuit of one of the twins."

"The chit cannot be as terrible as you're suggesting," Pemberton said amicably. "I heard they're all beauties."

Thornridge was silent for a few moments, then said in a tone so quiet Roman almost missed what he'd said, "No lady is more beautiful than Isla." He cleared his throat. "They're all beautiful. That is their allure, but you will regret being in their company. Trust me on that."

Roman wanted to ask questions, but he held them back. He didn't think Thornridge would discuss what had happened. He

clearly had feelings for Athena's sister, but he didn't know how deep they went. Had Isla broken his heart or was it much worse than that... Had Thornridge been his own undoing and ensured he would forever have a hole in his life because he'd done what he should instead of what he desired. Roman would not follow that path. He'd been the dutiful son and went down the expected path already. That had not gotten him anything but pain. He wanted happiness, and that meant claiming the only woman he had ever wanted in his life.

"You're wrong," Roman said. "Some things are worth every risk. She is important to me. If that is too much for you, then perhaps you and Pemberton should go to a brothel and leave me here."

The duke shook his head. "This is where we will be. You may need us."

"Then keep your opinions to yourself. Some things shouldn't be spoken." Roman frowned. "And do try to enjoy yourself. It is a ball. They're meant for amusement."

"Blasphemy," Pemberton mumbled. "Societal events are never as entertaining as the wicked variety." His green eyes twinkled with mischief. "Though I suppose with the right lady, a ball could be more wicked than even the most decadent house of sin. I'll see what I can manage at this one."

Roman closed his eyes and prayed. Pemberton would do whatever he pleased. He always did. "Do try to be discreet," he told the viscount.

"I'm always the very picture of discretion," Pemberton scoffed. "Ladies love me. They cannot help themselves."

"You should control yourself," Thornridge said. "I do not understand how you have not been trapped into marriage yet."

"Because of that very discretion I mentioned before," Pemberton said. "That and I do not bed innocents. That's a sure way to end up with a knot tying me to one woman for the rest of my days." He shuddered. "That's a fate I'd like to avoid for as long as possible."

The carriage came to a stop at the entrance finally. It felt as if they had been in the carriage forever. They each stepped out of the carriage and headed up the steps leading to the townhouse. It didn't take that long to reach the ballroom. They were each announced, but no one truly paid any attention. At least not that he noticed... There were far too many guests attending for anyone to be observant of the room as a whole.

Roman wanted to see one woman. He tried to locate her but was failing.

"Is this the ball of the season?" Pemberton asked. "I didn't know the debut of two young ladies would be such a draw."

"It's not simply two young ladies," Thornridge said ominously. "It's these specific young ladies, and the identity of their mother or more specifically the family she derived from."

"What do you mean?" Roman frowned. Thornridge had not been forthcoming with information. He had just warned him to stay away, but gave no real reason for the censure. "What family?"

The duke opened his mouth, but then closed it and shook his head. It seemed as if Roman would not get the answers he craved. "Have it your way," Roman told him. "I'll find out either way."

He left Thornridge and Pemberton together and went in search of the woman he'd come to the ball for, and it didn't take too long for him to find her. She was on the edge of the ballroom, surrounded by gentlemen. Her dark green dress was exquisite and made her a beacon in a sea of dresses. Roman moved toward her and when he reached the circle surrounding her, she glanced up. Her smile when she met his gaze sent warmth through him. This is what he'd been missing. *Her*.

Roman held out his hand. "Dance with me," he said. It should have been a question, but he it hadn't come out that way. He should have asked to see her dance card. What if someone else was supposed to lead her on to the floor?

She grinned and placed her hand in his. "I was saving this one just for you."

He didn't know if that was true, and he didn't much care. He led her to the floor and almost laughed when he realized what music was being played. It was a waltz. Thank God. Something was finally going right in his life.

Roman ignored the pain in his leg. It was worth it to have her in his arms. She fit in his arms as if she was made for him alone. "You're beautiful," he told her. "I missed you."

Perhaps he was saying all the wrong things. He shouldn't rush forward as if she was already his, even though in his mind she had always belonged to him. She had a choice, and he had to respect it.

"I missed you too," she said. "I'm glad you're here."

She was perfect, and to him, she always would be. His future lied with her. He twirled her around the floor, and as the strands of the waltz floated over them, everyone else disappeared. For those moments, it seemed as if the world disappeared and left them alone, with nothing standing in their way. "Can I call on you?"

"Always," she answered immediately. "You should meet my sisters."

He wanted to. Roman wanted to know everything about her. "I'm sure they're as lovely as you are."

Athena grinned, and that dimple in her left cheek drew his eyes. He wanted to kiss her there, and then give all of his attention to her lips. Later, once she agreed to be his wife, he'd kiss far more than that. Roman wanted to taste every inch of her and love her completely. He could wait, but he hoped he wouldn't have to keep his desires restrained for too long.

"Well," she began. "My twin does mostly looks like me. I would understand if you think she's as beautiful as I am."

He frowned. "How can your twin not look completely like you?" Roman would know Athena anywhere. He hadn't even noticed another woman that might resemble her and could not imagine two of her.

"Our dimples are the only difference," she admitted. "If you're ever uncertain, our smiles will tell the truth every

time.”

“Your dimple.” He glanced at her left cheek. “Is adorable. How is hers not like yours?”

“It’s on her right cheek,” Athena explained, then shrugged one shoulder as he led her around the floor. He didn’t know how she had managed that. “It’s like looking into my own reflection. A quirk of nature, I suppose.”

He nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.” Roman wanted to be alone with her. Even if it is only for a few moments. “Can we leave the ballroom?” Roman didn’t know where to take her, as he wasn’t familiar with the townhouse. He’d never been to the Earl of Harwood’s residence. He’d been at war, and then convalescing for over a year. Roman hadn’t had time to socialize.

“I would love that,” Athena said, then glanced around the room. “Lead me over to the other side of the room. As the music ends, we can sneak out by the balcony doors. The garden has a maze in it. I’d love to show you.”

Roman did as she suggested and then not long after that, they were outside on the balcony. There were several guests outside enjoying the cooler air the night sky offered. It had been quite hot inside the ballroom. She led him to a nearby stairway, and they headed down.

“How far is this maze?” he asked.

“Not much farther,” she told him.

They were passing by a rosebush with buds just starting to form. He wished they had already been in bloom. Roman had the urge to pluck one and present it to her. He would give her dozens of roses later. They reached the edge of the maze. “It’s not elaborate,” she explained. “But it is tricky if you’re not familiar with it.”

“Lead the way,” he told her. “They were completely alone now, and they didn’t need to enter the maze, but he wanted to ensure they wouldn’t be interrupted.”

He walked with her through the pathways until they reached the center. There was a fountain in the center. A

simple one that trickled water from its spout surrounded by vines and flowers. “My mother had this made.” She glanced at him. “My father said it was her wishing fountain. That if one hoped to hold on to love, they could throw something inside that has meaning to them and their wish would be granted.” She turned toward the fountain. “It’s silly and a lot of the ton would think it is witchcraft if it did work. Then we would truly be shunned.”

Roman lifted his hand and placed his fingers on her chin, then lifted it so she would meet his gaze. “I don’t need to make a wish for love,” he told her. “And if anyone believes ill of you, then I’ll ensure they never make you feel less than the wonderful woman you are.”

“You’re sweet,” she said, and stepped out of his reach. “But you cannot control the ton. They’ll never truly accept us.”

“Does this have to do with your mother?” Thornridge had mentioned something earlier and he had to know the truth. He couldn’t fight a battle without all the information. “Tell me about her.”

Athena sighed. “I never knew her. She died when I was born.” Athena turned away from him. “The rumors are that she was a witch. One of her ancestors had been accused of it in Salem, Massachusetts in the seventeenth century,” she began. “He was acquitted, but the stigma stayed. It followed her from America back to England when she married my father.”

He nodded. “And no one wants that to follow into their families. Then why is everyone here for your debut? What do they expect will happen?”

“They expect we’ll fail,” she said. “And they want to witness every agonizing moment of it. Isla fell in love during her first season, and he ended up spurning her. I don’t know if I would survive a broken heart.”

“That will not happen.” Thornridge had made a mistake. He knew with certainty then that the duke had been the one to destroy the woman he loved. Why had he done it? That didn’t matter in the end, though. Roman would not follow that same

path. “You’re my everything. Surely you understand that. I could no more stay away from you than I could quit breathing. You’re my sunshine and without you, the world is a dark place. I need your warmth.”

She inhaled sharply. “Don’t disappoint me. Words can be easily spoken, but in the end they don’t always equate to actions.”

“You’ll see,” he promised. “I didn’t survive a war only to lose in the end.” Roman took a step toward her. She turned toward him and with one more step, she was in his arms, then his lips were on hers. The kiss was more than a promise, it was a declaration. He would marry her. Even if he had to kidnap her and ride as fast as possible to Scotland to prove it to her. They belonged together.

CHAPTER SIX

Sunlight bathed over Athena as she strolled with her sisters in Hyde Park. They had decided to partake in the afternoon promenade with the rest of the ton. Not that Isla had been enthusiastic about their decision to take a walk in the park. Isla wanted nothing more than to hide in their townhouse or, better yet, return to their father's country house. Athena couldn't really blame her older sister for her desire to remain outside of society. None of them had been welcoming. They were invited to social events, but they were not truly welcome there. The matrons of society had no real reason to exclude them. They were all waiting for that reason to be forthcoming and make the Thompson girls pariahs.

Athena would not be the one to give them that reason...

She doubted Maeve would, either. Isla kept herself separate from everybody on purpose. She hoped that no one actually noticed her long enough to find anything troubling about her. There was no scandal to be found if she didn't actually speak or do much more than hug a wall at every social event they attended. They all did everything they could to not only appear respectable, but their very actions were beyond reproachable.

None of that aided in what they needed most...

Rumors were still spreading faster than they could ever be squelched. Their very presence instigated their formation and as long as they remained in London, they would continue to grow. The latest whispers to reach their ears had been about

the Earl of Kendal and how Athena had somehow woven some wickedness to lure his attentions.

Athena had, of course, done nothing of the kind.

She couldn't, and wouldn't, explain any of that. No one would listen or believe her if she did. Her real dilemma concerned the earl himself. Athena didn't want his reputation harmed because the ton refused to believe her to be respectable. She was starting to understand Isla's reluctance to attend the season. The earl had come to mean a great deal to Athena in a short time. Her heart ached at the thought of never seeing him again.

"Lady Athena," a woman said. "How lovely to cross paths with you and your sisters."

Athena glanced up and met the gaze of Lady Atherton. Her daughter had her debut this season as well and she did not like that Athena and Maeve had caught the attention of some of the most eligible gentlemen looking for a wife. "The pleasure is ours," Athena said, then pasted a smile on her face that she didn't feel. The viscountess demonstrated an unpleasantness with every word and deed she presented to the world. What did she hope to gain by approaching them?

Maeve froze next to Athena, and Isla held her breath. Her sisters knew something awful was about to descend upon them. They would not like whatever Lady Atherton had planned... Athena held herself still and waited.

"You're familiar with my daughter, Miss Bethany Smythe?" Lady Atherton gestured toward the woman at her side. "She had her debut the week before yours." Why was she addressing Athena and practically ignoring her sisters?

"We've been introduced," she replied carefully. Athena nodded toward Miss Bethany. "It's good to see you again. I trust you're well."

Miss Bethany smiled. "I am Lady Athena. It's a lovely day, is it not?" The viscountess' daughter was a shy girl and doomed to become a wallflower. Athena actually liked her. She was nothing like her mother.

“Indeed, it is,” Athena agreed and returned her warm smile with one of her own. “Are you attending the Covington musicale tonight?” Isla had complained about going to it earlier, but Maeve had been the one that wished to attend. Maeve was the more artistic of the three of them and the only one that had any musical talent. She favored the pianoforte, but they heard the Covingtons were proficient in string instruments. It might be entertaining. She prayed they wouldn’t leave with an earache of some sort.

“Is it true what we’ve heard,” Lady Atherton asked, ignoring Athena’s question about the Covington musicale.

“I couldn’t possibly say,” Athena answered. “As I have no way of discerning what you heard to confirm any truthfulness of it.” She barely refrained from rolling her eyes. What Lady Atherton had overheard or whatever gossip she had readily gathered was most likely inaccurate. But Athena could only guess at the contents of the falsehood, and she really didn’t wish to add any additional fodder for them to pick over.

“Then you haven’t heard?” Lady Atherton practically gleamed, and not in a good way. She was like a scavenger bird about to pick their bones clean with glee. “It concerns your earl.”

Maeve moved closer to Athena, but didn’t say a word. It was her show of support for what was to come. Isla became stiff next to her. She’d had her own problems with society and it appeared as if Athena was about to experience a bit of her own unpleasantness. “I’m afraid I don’t understand your meaning. What earl do you refer to?” She refused to give the viscountess any satisfaction in admitting her connection to the Earl of Kendal. Roman was indeed her earl. He’d all but declared himself already. That woman didn’t need to know any of that, though.

“You can act innocent, but we know the truth.” Lady Atherton leaned in closer. “Everyone is talking about it. You charmed him into submission already, and a betrothal is imminent.” Lady Atherton winked. “The only thing everyone is uncertain about is if you seduced him already or not.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Though does that truly matter?

He is yours now, and no one will be able to steal his attention from you. That is the magic of your family line, is it not?"

How dare she... "There is one thing you're correct about Lady Atherton. Everyone talks, and no one takes the time to wonder if what they speak about, should be. Good day." With those words, she spun on her heels and headed out of Hyde Park. She didn't stop to wonder if her sisters followed. It was unnecessary to do so. They would never abandon her.

One thing was obvious. She couldn't stay in London. Isla had been right. They were not worth her time, and she had to protect Lord Kendal. He deserved better than to have his name attached to hers. She would beg her father to allow her to return home. Her horse was there, and that was enough comfort for her. The season and the ton had lost all of its appeal to her.



ROMAN MISSED ATHENA. He had hoped to pay a call on her much sooner, but his mother had decided to come to London. She'd decided it was time for him to marry and he couldn't possibly choose a wife without her assistance. He didn't have the heart to tell her he'd already met the woman he hoped would become his wife. If he had, she might have insisted on meeting her and the last thing he needed was for his mother to frighten Athena away before he had a chance to win her hand.

He liked his chances of her already agreeing, but he didn't want to assume she'd say yes. A woman deserved to be wooed and he would continue to court her. Roman whistled as he walked to the entrance of the Earl of Harwood's townhouse. He lifted the knocker on the door and rapped it twice, then waited. The door opened and a tall man with salt and pepper hair greeted him. "May I help you?"

"I'm here to call on Lady Athena," he told the man and handed him his card. "Is she receiving?"

The man stared at the card and frowned. "Please come in." Roman entered and stood inside the foyer waiting for the man

to tell him where to go and wait for Athena. The man continued to frown at his card. "Give me a moment." The man didn't wait for Roman to agree. He bustled out of the room and left Roman in the foyer alone. How odd. Was he uncertain if Athena was available?

A few moments later, steps from the hallway caught his attention. He smiled and then frowned. He had thought it was Athena, but instead her twin headed toward him. "Lord Kendal," she greeted him. "Please come into the sitting room with me. I've ordered refreshments. You will have tea with us, yes?"

"Of course," he said. Roman hadn't thought he'd be left alone with Athena. There had to be a chaperone of some sort, but he had a bad feeling in his stomach. Why had she not come to escort him into the sitting room? What was Maeve not saying?

They entered the sitting room, and their other sister, Isla, waited inside. She sat on a settee with a book in her lap. She glanced up when they entered, and frowned. Isla stood and greeted them. "Lord Kendal," she said in a surprised tone. "How good to see you."

Where was Athena? He smiled. "I trust I have not come at an inopportune time."

She glanced down at her book. "Not at all." Isla set it on a table and glanced at Maeve.

"I ordered tea and biscuits sent in." She gestured toward a nearby chair. "Please have a seat, Lord Kendal."

Isla and Maeve sat on the settee and stared at him expectantly. He didn't know what to say. Roman wanted to demand they fetch Athena. She was the reason he'd come to visit. He cleared his throat. "What social engagement are you attending this evening?" He wanted to ensure he saw Athena later and hopefully dance with her again.

"We are staying in tonight," Isla said. "It's been a trying couple of days."

What had happened? “Has it?” He lifted a brow. “I trust it hasn’t been too difficult.” Roman wanted to glance toward the door, but somehow refrained from doing so.

Maeve fidgeted in her seat, and Isla twisted her hands together in her lap. Neither of them met his gaze. Finally, Maeve glanced up. “I understand you have come to pay a call on Athena.”

“I have,” he agreed. “Is she delayed?”

“It’s not that simple,” Isla said, then sighed.

He was about to ask her to clarify when a maid walked in with a tea tray and set it on a nearby table. “Do you wish me to pour?” the maid asked.

“No,” Isla told her. “We will take care of it. Thank you, Sarah.”

The maid curtsied and then left the room. Isla turned her attention to him. “Tea, my lord?”

Isla stood and poured tea into the cups and handed one to him, then Maeve, and took her own back to the settee. He sipped the tea, but he didn’t actually want it. Roman frowned and waited. Surely they would explain where Athena was now.

Maeve blew out a breath, then set her teacup down on the table. “As we were saying...” She frowned. “We know you wish to see Athena, but she’s not here.”

“She’s not?” Why had they taken so long to tell him that? What did he fail to understand? The butler could have told him that at the door as well. Why did they invite him in and make him wait to impart that news?

Isla shook her head. “She has returned home. To the country.”

He felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. “I don’t understand.” They had a good night a few days ago. He’d kissed her. Roman wanted to kiss her again, and soon.

“It’s hard to explain,” Maeve began. “Suffice to say the ton isn’t welcoming. They make us all feel...inferior, and Athena decided to end her season early.”

What the bloody hell had happened? “I see...” Roman didn’t quite understand, but he could guess. He had heard some of the rumors. He would have to go to Athena. There was only one solution to this dilemma. She thought it best to withdraw from society, from their budding relationship. Roman didn’t accept that. He set his teacup down. “If you’ll pardon me.” He stood. “I must leave now. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“You’re going after her, aren’t you?” Isla asked as he reached the door.

He turned and smiled. “Of course I am.” There was no other answer to give her.

“Good,” she said and gave him a sad smile. “At least some men are brave enough to claim love when it is freely given.”

Roman sighed. His friend had made a grave error when he had set aside his own feelings. One day he’d tell the duke how much of a fool he had been, and if Thornridge was lucky, he wouldn’t be too late to claim the woman that held his heart.

“Have faith,” he told Isla. “One day, he might surprise you.”

“It’s too late for that,” she said. “Go. Athena needs you.”

Roman nodded and left the townhouse. He had a trip to plan for, and the love of his life to find.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Athena set her reticule on her bed, then flopped down next to it and sighed. It had been a long journey home, but she had finally arrived. Her reticule held the pendant from her mother's box inside of it, and she hadn't wanted to lose it. She should put it away to ensure that would never happen. It would be all right in her reticule a little while longer. Where would it disappear to in her own bedchamber?

She pulled the bell by her bed to summon her maid. Now that she was home, she wanted to go see her horse and then take a swift, exhilarating ride. It had taken her three extra days to make it back to the country estate. Her father had insisted that they travel at a more sedate pace, and the coachman hadn't wanted to upset the Earl of Harwood. So he had followed her father's instructions to the letter. They had stopped overnight at three inns on the journey home. If the coachman had listened to her and changed horses at each inn instead, she would have been home much sooner.

Her maid came into the bedchamber. "You need me, my lady?"

"Yes," Athena said. "Help me out of this gown. I'm going for a ride." She didn't need assistance into the trousers she used for riding, but the gown and her corset was impossible to remove on her own. Men's clothing was so much easier to manage. A lady had too many laces and buttons to do them all on her own.

It didn't take long for her maid to undo the buttons on the back of her dress. Athena stepped out of it and her maid hung

it on a nearby hook to be cleaned and pressed later. “Do you wish to remove your stays as well?”

“I do,” Athena answered. “They are too constricting to ride in.” Isla had chastised her for removing them, but her older sister didn’t understand. Athena liked to breathe while she was racing through the fields. The last thing she needed was to faint while her horse galloped along. She’d be dead for sure once she fell off and broke her neck.

Her maid loosened the laces on her corset. Athena sighed as she pulled it off and set it on her bed. It was always a relief when she was able to remove her corset. She went over to her armoire and found her riding clothes, then quickly dressed. She sat on her bed and pulled on her riding boots. Another item that was usually reserved for me and she’d had made specially for her. Luckily, some of the shops in town didn’t want to offend her father and had reluctantly agreed to make the items for her. Though the bootmaker was easier than the tailor to convince. They were not as good as Hessians, but she didn’t care. They were not something she wore out in society. All Athena needed was something comfortable and durable.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be,” she told her maid. “I’ll ring for you when I’m back in my chamber if I need your assistance.”

“Very well, my lady,” she replied, then curtsied. “I’ll unpack your trunks and have everything organized for you.”

“Thank you,” Athena replied. She smiled. “It’s so good to be home.”

That smile remained on her face all the way to the stables until she reached Hades’ stall. Her horse made a loud whinny when she stroked his mane. “Did you miss me?” She held out some sugar cubes for him and he licked them off her hand. “I definitely missed you. Let’s go for a ride.”

Athena gestured toward Tommy to help her. She prepared Hades herself as much as possible. Once the saddle was secured, she led Hades over to a mounting block. She could climb on without one, but she preferred the extra help when it was available. Her bag of snacks, along with her mother’s

journal, was already in her saddlebag. She had made a lot of progress since she'd first started reading it. There wasn't much left of the journal and she would have to pass it on to Maeve. Isla wanted to be the last to read it.

She kept Hades at a sedate walk until they were some distance from the house. Then she pressed her knee into his side to tell him she wanted to go faster. Hades took off and raced across the field. Athena leaned down and enjoyed the wind whipping across her face. There was no better feeling than riding her horse as fast as she could. She pulled back on the reins. It was time to slow down. They had already gone farther than usual. The pond she normally stopped at passed by in a whirlwind. Perhaps she should circle back...

Hades buckled when he stepped into a hole, and she went flying off his back. Athena landed on the ground hard, but fortunately, they had already slowed. Her pride was more bruised than anything. She started to pull herself up and winced. Her hip burned with pain and it hurt to move.

Hoofbeats pounded on the ground. It wasn't Hades. Her horse, thank heavens, hadn't been injured either. He trotted next to her and whinnied. Athena glanced around her and that's when she noticed him. Another rider was barreling towards them at a breakneck speed. He slowed down as he reached her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She frowned. "Why are you here?" The Earl of Kendal, Roman, had come for her. Athena was certain of it.

"You didn't answer me," he responded. "Did you hurt yourself?" Roman slid off of his horse and walked toward her.

"I'm perfectly all right," she said and juttred her chin upward. "Now you can leave."

He laughed. "Darling, I'm not going anywhere without you."

In response, the sky opened up and started to pour rain over them. She glanced up and cursed the unfortunate weather. She was drenched through. "We need to get out of this rain."

She couldn't walk far, and incidentally, they wouldn't have to. "Follow me. There's an old hunting cabin not far."

They would have their confrontation in something resembling shelter, at least...



ROMAN HELD the reins of his horse and followed her as she led her own horse to wherever the hunting cabin was located. He didn't know the area well enough to be certain there was actually a cabin nearby. Though he didn't think she would have any reason to lie to him.

Finally, they reached a building. Not that he would call it much of a hunting cabin. When was the last time anyone had come out here? It was not in shambles exactly, but it was definitely abandoned. "Why is this no longer in use?" he asked.

She shrugged as she tied her horse to a nearby post. "This belongs to the Duke of Thornridge. You would have to ask him." He did the same with his own horse and then they went inside. It was dusty, but it still had all of its furnishings. He went over to the hearth and luckily there was kindling nearby that they could use for a fire. Roman arranged them and quickly lit a fire. It took a while for it to grow enough to provide warmth, but he was satisfied with his work.

He turned toward her. "Now tell me how badly you were injured?"

"I told you I am all right," she insisted. "My side will have a bruise, but it'll heal. Nothing to concern yourself with."

Roman sighed. She was so damned headstrong, but he liked that about her. "I won't ask again then." He stared at her. "There are other things that are far more important we need to discuss."

She lifted a brow. Her ice-blue eyes held curiosity and something else he couldn't quite identify. "I am glad you have your priorities, my lord."

He shook his head and sighed. “We’re back to formalities, are we?” Roman moved over to her side. “I thought we had progressed past all of that.”

“We had,” she said. “But that was a mistake.”

“We are not moving backwards,” he said in a firm tone. “Your sisters were not forthcoming, but I can guess what the issue is. I won’t let you run away and hide.”

“What do you think you know?” She had that defiance in her tone that he almost admired, if it wasn’t being used against him. “We’ve barely had any time together. It’s been nothing but slips of time that can be easily set aside. You’re better off not having me in your life.”

“I don’t agree,” he said. Roman had known the moment he met her she was the woman for him. He had also known that she might require convincing of that fact. “The only thing I’ll ever regret is walking away from you. Nothing in life is easy, and sometimes the things that are the hardest are the most worthwhile. I’ve seen a lot of atrocities, but you’re not one of them.” He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. “You love, are the one thing I have always wished for and never imagined I could have. I’ll never be able to let that go. Don’t ask me to.”

She closed her eyes. “My family...”

“Is not the reason I started courting you.” He smiled. “I know what they say about your mother.” Roman pulled her into his arms. “Let me be clear. Even if that nonsense was true, I would not care. I would want you despite it, or maybe because of it. Either way, I don’t give a damn. The ton can go to hell for all I care. You’re the one thing I cannot live without. Do you understand?”

Athena sighed. “You might come to regret that.”

“No, love,” he told her. “I won’t ever regret you. I promise you that. The only things that are ever worth regretting are the things we do not do, and loving you has made me happy.”

Roman’s heart raced inside his chest. He had to make her believe that he couldn’t live without her. This all had happened so fast, but all he could do was be honest with her. In a more

perfect world, they would have time to sort it all out. If the ton were not full of bigoted fools, she wouldn't have run home. But none of that mattered in the end. As long as they were together, they could find their way through anything.

"You make me happy too," she admitted. Athena licked her lips. "Kiss me.

"There's nothing I'd like more," he said. Roman had dreamed about kissing her every night since the first time his lips had touched hers. He wanted too much more with her, but this might not be the time for that.

He pulled her flush against his body and kissed her deeply. She sighed, and he slipped his tongue inside her mouth. Her clothes were soaked, but then again, so was his. He could kiss her forever and it wouldn't be nearly long enough. Roman had to stop, though. "If we stay in these wet clothes, we might catch our death."

Athena's lips twitched. "Why, my lord, are you trying to seduce me?"

"I..." Roman was speechless. "No... I mean..."

She winked and then pulled her shirt free from her breeches. The white fabric was so wet it was nearly transparent. Her chemise underneath was the only reason he couldn't see her plump breasts, but that wasn't much of a barrier, either. Athena yanked her shirt over her head and undid the strings of her breeches. She pulled off her boots and let her breeches fall to the ground. "Don't worry, love." She stood before him in nothing but her chemise. "I want you to seduce me. Now it's your turn. Take off those wet clothes and come keep me warm. I don't know that we have any blankets to help with that endeavor."

Sweet torture. She was so damned perfect. Roman had never stripped so fast in his entire life. Once he stood before her in nothing but his smalls he stepped toward her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he lowered his head to kiss her. He slid her chemise up and caressed her stomach and hips, then slid his hand up until he could cup her breast in the

palm of his hand. She moaned as he tweaked a nipple between his thumb and finger.

“Are you certain,” he asked as he trailed kisses over her neck. He didn’t want to take advantage of her, but she was so damn sweet and irresistible.

“You said we only regret the things we don’t do,” she said. “I don’t want to have any regrets. Make me yours.”

Roman groaned and pulled her chemise off and led her over to a settee. It had seen better days, but it still looked comfortable, just worn. He lowered her on to it and then leaned down to press his lips to hers, then he moved down and licked a nipple. She moaned. He wanted to taste her everywhere. This would be her first time, and he wanted it to be good for her.

“I love you,” he said. Then he licked her other breast. Roman cupped her between her thighs and slid a finger through her folds.

“That feels...” She moaned as he rubbed her clit. “Roman, yes, do that again.”

He smiled and decided to taste her sweetness. Roman wanted to hear her scream his name as he licked her into her climax. He spread her thighs and kissed her sensitive nub. She began to writhe beneath him. Athena’s breathing became ragged. He slid a finger into her core as he sucked her sensitive nub into his mouth. “Roman,” she screamed as her body shook. “I’ve never...”

“You are perfect,” he said as he slid his smalls off. He had to be inside her.

“I’m not,” she said. “But I’m glad you think so.”

Roman joined her on the settee and started to kiss her again. “This might be uncomfortable. At least the first time.”

She nodded. “I know. I don’t want to stop.”

Thank heaven... He settled between her things and began to push inside of her. Roman kissed her as he slid slowly inside her heat. He had to make her feel good, but he couldn’t

be certain she would enjoy this part, at least not the first time. Finally, he was all the way in. He gritted his teeth and stilled.

“That wasn’t so bad,” she said. “Is that all?”

He laughed. “No, love,” he said and pulled back out and then slid in again.

“Oh...” She moaned. “Yes. Do that again.”

She was so demanding, and he loved it. Roman thrust into her again and again until she writhed beneath him again. He was so close to his own climax, but he wanted her to find her release again. He wanted to feel her squeezing him as he came. Roman reached beneath them and rubbed her clit as he thrust inside of her. She moaned and shattered, and he quickly followed.

Everything went black as his own release spread through him. He’d been with other women, but it had never been like that. He rolled to his side and pulled her with him. “Marry me,” he said. He should have asked her before he’d taken her virginity, but he hadn’t been thinking clearly.

“I thought that was a given,” she said, then chuckled. “I love you, Roman. Of course, I’ll marry you.”

“Good,” he said. “Otherwise, I would be kidnapping you and we would make a mad dash to Scotland.”

She laughed. “I don’t believe an elopement of that magnitude will be necessary. Though you will have to speak with my father. I do want his permission, but I will add that on the chance he says no that mad dash would be acceptable to me”

“I will speak with him immediately. Though not until after this storm passes. It doesn’t appear to be letting up. We might be trapped in this cabin overnight.”

Athena pressed her lips to his then settled back into his arms. “I’m all right with that. There are far worse things than sleeping in your arms. It truly is one of life’s greatest pleasures. At least in my opinion...”

“Mine as well,” he agreed. “Rest, love. I’ll keep you safe.” He closed his eyes and fell asleep with her in his arms. Life was good. Nothing could go wrong as long as he had Athena.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A chill slid up Athena's spine, and she groaned. The warm blanket that had kept her cozy had suddenly disappeared. She flicked her eyelids open and frowned. Where was she? She stretched and then groaned again, this time in pain. It was then she remembered everything. Including the fall from Hades and the reason her hip bit with a harsh ache that hadn't improved overnight.

"You have a fine bruise on your hip," Roman said. "We should have taken that into consideration. I'm an arse for taking advantage of you when you are injured."

She stared up at him. "I'm perfectly fine," Athena told him. "It's a minor injury, and you did nothing I didn't want you to do. So stop feeling guilty." She sat up. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," he said. "I went to check on the horses. The sun should be up soon, and it would be prudent to ride back as soon as it does."

She smiled. Roman had dressed, but she still sat there without a stitch on, and for some reason that didn't bother her at all. If she wanted to, she was certain she could charm him out of his clothes. Especially since his gaze kept trailing over her bare flesh and he paid particular attention to her chest. He liked her breasts, and she wasn't above using that to her advantage. "Are you certain I should put my clothes back on?" Athena trailed her fingers over the side of one of her breasts.

He swallowed hard. "As much as I'd like to keep you just as you are," Roman began. "I'm afraid you'll get cold soon enough. The fire in the hearth has died down and I don't wish to start another when we need to leave shortly."

Athena sighed. "I do admit that a chill roused me from sleep. I suppose I should dress." She stood up and stretched. Her hip ached, but stretching helped ease it a bit. She reached for her chemise and pulled it over her head and then retrieved the rest of her clothes and dressed quickly.

Roman sighed. "You shouldn't be able to wear men's breeches, love. You're a temptation in a gown, but your derriere is pure decadence in a gentleman's trousers."

"You will not convince me that it is in my best interest not to don them while I ride. I've had this argument with my father, and I will not have it with you." Athena glared at him. "I don't wear them outside of our property. I'll never wear them riding in Hyde Park." She rolled her eyes. "I do understand some decorum is necessary. But when I ride Hades, I like the freedom breeches allow."

"I had no intention of ordering you out of them." Roman's gaze trailed over her body. "At least not in the way you're suggesting."

She laughed. "Darling, you just had a sound argument as to why I needed to put my clothes back on. Do not tell me that you now have reconsidered." Athena adored this man...

"I much prefer you in a state of undress," he agreed. "But we do not have time to frolic any longer. The sun is rising, and I need to see you home." Roman tilted his head to the side. "Is your father in residence?"

Her father had sent her home with servants. He wouldn't be there waiting for them. For that, she was grateful, since she had spent the entire night in the cabin. Though her maid and the rest of the servants might wonder what had happened to her. She met Roman's gaze. "He's in London."

"Then I'll have to return there to ask for your hand." He kissed her cheek. "Will you miss me?"

“Always,” she said. Then she frowned. “How did you know where to find me? I mean yesterday afternoon. I hadn’t stopped at the pond as I usually do.”

Roman smiled. “I went to call on you first, but the butler informed me that you had gone for a ride. I headed toward the pond to search for you. You were a good distance ahead of me, but I saw you galloping in the distance, and you had flown right by the pond. I did my best to follow you in the hope I would eventually catch up to you.”

“That explains it.” She hadn’t thought to ask him that the day before. Another thought occurred to her. “You spoke with my sisters. What did they tell you?”

“Not much,” he said. Roman paused for a moment before continuing. “What happened to send you running? They inferred that the ton was not welcoming, and you decided to end your season early.”

How much should she tell him? Would it scare him away? She should be honest with him. If they had any chance of having a good relationship, she needed to tell him the entire story. She had almost finished reading her mother’s journal. “I need to show you something. Give me a minute.” Athena went out to Hades and retrieved the journal from her saddlebag. Fortunately, the rain hadn’t ruined it and the leather of the saddlebag had protected it from becoming waterlogged. Athena rushed back in and flipped through it. “Here, read this page.”

Today I learned that my family’s past will follow me wherever I go. It doesn’t matter that there is no truth in the rumors or that my ancestor had been exonerated. The very fact that he had been arrested for witchcraft all those years ago still haunts the Alden family. I am an Alden first, and everyone knows that. My fear is that it will follow my daughters and their daughters. If I could save them from that possibility, I would. Isla is merely two, and soon I’ll give birth to twins.

There is something I have never told my husband. He would love me regardless, at least I believe he would... Nevertheless, I cannot risk seeing fear in his eyes. It would

devastate me. I've seen my own death and when my twins are born, I'll never see them grow. This may be the last passage I write in here. I pray it is not. One day, they will find men to love them. I've seen that too. Fear of the future will delay the first, and temptation will be too much for one twin, and heartbreak will be another's undoing. In the end, if they choose the right path, it will lead to a happy future, and even if our family's supposed magical abilities haunt them, that love will be enough to guide them.

My daughters, if you're reading this, have faith. Believe in love, and beyond all, be true to yourselves. I love you more than anything. I have no regrets. You were my greatest gift and if I could be with you now, I would be.

Sybil, Countess of Harwood.

Roman glanced at her. "You're not a witch."

Athena stared at him. "Of course not, and neither was my mother. Though this suggests she had other special gifts. That might let others believe that she did have some magical capabilities."

"Do you think she actually saw the future?" he asked. "Is this why you ran?"

"No," she said as she shook her head. "I didn't run because of this. I hadn't even read it before I decided to leave. There was an incident in the park and it made me afraid." She tapped the journal. "The first is delayed by fear. That is me. Though I suppose it could be Isla, too. Fear is delaying her from finding happiness, but then again, so is heartbreak." Athena shrugged. "I do know one thing. I will not let anyone scare me into rejecting happiness. I'm going to take my mother's advice and believe in our love and remain true to who I am. I won't apologize to anyone for something that is beyond my control."

"And you shouldn't have to," he agreed. "Let's get you home and then I'll go to London to speak with your father."

"Yes," she said. "It's time."

They went outside. Athena stored the journal in her saddlebag and pulled her into the saddle. Their night together

was at an end, but someday soon she'd be his wife and they would never be separated again.



ROMAN STAYED by Athena's side as they made their way back to Harwood Hall. The manor was impressive, though not nearly as massive as the Duke of Thornridge's estate. That was to be expected, he supposed, considering Harwood was an earl and Thornridge was a higher rank. Athena led him to the stables and dismounted from her beast of a horse, then handed the reins over to a stable hand.

"Be careful when you're removing his saddle. He's a little ornerier than usual because he was tied to a post all night. I would brush him, but I'm sore myself."

"He'll be all right, my lady. Hades and I have become friends. You're still his favorite, but he'll accept me if you are not available."

"Good," Athena said. She pet Hades' mane. "I will come see you later. I promise." She turned toward Roman. He'd dismounted from his own horse and left him with another stable hand.

"I'll see you inside before I leave," he told her.

"That's unnecessary. I know my way home. It isn't even that far from here." She winked at him, and Roman grinned.

"I'll feel better. Humor me."

"In that case," she began. "I would be happy to have you walking with me back to the manor."

She looped her arm with his and they strolled leisurely toward her home. He couldn't wait to make her his wife and have her in his home. They went inside and they both froze in the foyer. Her father was there and neither of them had expected that.

"Thank goodness," the earl said. "I arrived a half hour ago and the butler just informed me you were not here. Where

have you been?" Her father glared at Roman. "Why are you together?"

Roman stared at Athena's father, uncertain what to say. Sorry, my lord, I compromised your daughter. That wouldn't go over well. The last thing he wanted to do was offend the man. Especially when he wanted to marry Athena.

"Father," Athena said. "Why are you here? I thought you would stay in London. Maeve is still participating in the season, isn't she?"

The Earl of Harwood glanced at his daughter. "The estate manager needed me here for some business. I'll return in a few days." He narrowed his gaze. "You were riding. Did you go with him without a chaperone?"

"Of course not," she said, then snorted. "We crossed paths. I had a small fall off of Hades and the Earl of Kendal assisted me."

The concern on the Earl of Harwood's face made something inside Roman ache. He clearly adored his daughter. "Are you all right," he asked Athena. "Do you need me to send for a physician?"

"It's nothing," she reassured her father. "It hurt my pride more than anything." She glanced at Roman. "The earl was kind enough to see me home safe."

He should say something now, shouldn't he? This was as good a time as any. "My lord," he started. "If you have a moment, I'd like to speak with you."

"Of course," Harwood said. "Come with me to my study. We can speak there. I can thank you properly for assisting my daughter."

Roman glanced at Athena and smiled. "There's no need for that. I would do anything for her."

He followed the earl to his study. "It's early," the Harwood began. "But I still feel like I need a drink. Would you like some brandy?"

“Yes,” he answered. He needed it. Roman had never needed it more in his life.

The earl handed Roman a snifter of brandy. “What did you wish to discuss?”

Roman took a drink of the brandy. It burned as it traveled down his throat, but he welcomed it. He swirled the amber liquid in the glass and stared into it as if it held all the answers he needed. He glanced up at Harwood. “I would like to ask you for permission to marry your daughter.”

Harwood grinned. “I assume you mean Athena, as I have three daughters.”

A lump formed in Roman’s throat. “Yes, my lord. I wish to marry Athena.

”

The silence in the room was deafening. Would he ever give Roman an answer? He held his breath and prayed. He wouldn’t say no. Harwood couldn’t be that cruel.

Harwood sipped his brandy, then set the glass on his desk. “Why do you want to marry Athena?”

That answer was easy. Roman didn’t even have to think about it. “I love her.”

“I trust you have heard the rumors about my late wife.” Harwood held Roman’s gaze. He seemed to say, without speaking a word, that Roman had better give him an answer that wasn’t derogatory. The earl need not have worried.

“I don’t listen to gossip,” he told Harwood. “However, Athena has spoken to me about her mother and what some believe about her family. Even if there is some validity to that speculation, none of it matters to me. Athena’s happiness is my only concern, and I hope I’ll have the privilege of being a part of her life.”

Harwood grinned. “Good answer. Yes. You may marry my daughter.” The earl picked up his glass and saluted him with it. “However, it will not be a hasty wedding. The banns will be read, and it will be a proper ceremony. I do not want the ton

speculating about anything and that means a special license is out of the question.”

“Agreed,” Roman answered. As long as she was his wife, in the end he would have agreed to any of the earl’s demands.

“Now go tell my daughter she can stop listening at the door,” the earl said. “And give her the news she was hoping for.”

Roman smiled and did as Harwood suggested. He set his glass of brandy down. It held no interest to him any longer. Then he strode to the door and yanked it open. The earl had been right. Athena was on the other side, pacing in front of the entrance to the study. She glanced up at him and lifted one brow expectantly.

“We’re going to get married,” he told her. “Start planning the wedding. The banns need to be read, and I’d prefer it to be as soon as possible.”

“Not too soon,” Harwood yelled from behind them. “No unnecessary rumors need to spread about this union.”

Athena grinned. “I think we can plan something acceptable in a couple of months. That gives us time to arrange for the banns and send out invitations.”

Roman wanted to kiss her, but he knew better than to do so in front of her father. “Let’s walk in the garden,” he suggested. “We can discuss our wedding some more and then I’ll depart to go visit my mother. She’ll need to be informed of my plans to make you my countess.”

She led him toward the back entrance of the house. Once they were outside, they stopped. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her as he wanted to moments earlier. He pulled back. “I love you,” he told her.

“I love you as well. Now kiss me again,” she said. “You’re leaving soon and I don’t know when we will have a chance again.”

Roman would deny her anything. Especially something he desired as well. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers and savored her sweetness. The ton might believe she had

charmed him, and perhaps she had, but he knew the truth. There was no other woman for him. They were fated. If that was magic, he would gladly thank whatever being gifted him the love of Athena. He couldn't imagine loving another as much as he adored her.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER...

Athena stared at her husband. They had been married mere hours, but it seemed as if he had always been her husband. Roman had always been hers. She didn't know how she knew that with any amount of certainty, but she did. They were at their wedding breakfast and soon they would depart for their wedding trip. Roman still had not told her where they were going. He wanted to surprise her.

“Are you happy?” he asked.

“Yes,” she told him. “As long as I am with you.” She realized that not every day would be as wonderful as this one. They would disagree at times. That was just part of life. Still, even then she would not regret marrying Roman.

“What do you make of that?” Roman gestured toward Maeve and the Viscount of Pemberton. “Does your sister know he's a rogue and should be avoided?”

Athena studied Maeve and the viscount and then smiled. She had given her mother's journal to her twin earlier that day. It was time to pass it on, and Maeve might find reading it beneficial. Athena had. “He's a temptation. My mother did say one of the twins would face it.” That temptation would lead Maeve to love. The question, of course, was the viscount the temptation and did that mean Maeve would fall for him, or would he lead her to the one that she should fall for instead?

Roman sighed. “That's what I fear,” he admitted. “He's my friend, but if he hurts her...”

“You do not need to worry about Maeve,” she told him. “She is far more capable of protecting herself than most realize.” Athena glanced at her other sister. Isla looked miserable. She kept glancing toward the Duke of Thornridge when she thought he wasn't looking. “Isla on the other hand...” She frowned. “It breaks my heart to see her so unhappy.”

“Perhaps your mother was right. This time of sorrow will lead her to where she belongs.” Roman glanced at Isla. “It is terrible to witness, but some things have to be endured to find out where we belong. She will be all right in time. I have to believe that.” He kissed her cheek. “During the war I experienced a lot of pain and loss, but when I made it through the worst of it I found you. This is Isla’s version of that war.”

Athena frowned. “I still don’t like it.”

“No one expects you to. That’s part of living through a hardship. Nothing about it is pleasant.” Roman lifted her hand and kissed her palm. “Your sisters have something few have.”

“What is that?” Athena asked.

“You,” he told her. “They have you, love. The three of you have a special bond that cannot be broken. So, if the worst should happen, lean on that. It will see you through almost anything.”

She nodded. Athena loved her sisters, and she would help them if they should need it. If what her mother had predicted was true, they had a lot more to endure. Maeve had the lure of temptation, and apparently Isla still had a heart to mend. She didn’t know who their love would end up being or what might lead them toward finding them, but she understood her sisters. They would be all right.

Athena glanced at Roman. “Thank you for loving me.”

“That, my love, is my pleasure.” Roman pressed his lips to hers.

Their life together was just beginning, and it was better than she could have imagined. Her destiny, her love, and this man...she couldn’t have asked for anything better.



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[Rakes and Reticules](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY Bestselling author, DAWN BROWER writes both historical and contemporary romance. There are always stories inside her head; she just never thought she could make them come to life. That creativity has finally found an outlet.

Growing up, she was the only girl out of six children. She raised two boys as a single mother; there is never a dull moment in her life. Reading books is her favorite hobby, and she loves all genres.

www.authordawnbrower.com

KISS A RAKE AT MIDNIGHT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR COLLETTE CAMERON

KISS A RAKE AT MIDNIGHT

*In a world where secrets intertwine with passion,
one rake's heart is set aflame by the last person he expected.*

Fletcher Westbrook, a dashing figure of wealth and wit, enjoys the luxuries of Regency London, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing around him. As sabotage and danger threaten his world, an unexpected twist leaves him stunned—Siobhan Kenney, the supposed boy he employed, is not only a woman, but a stunning one whose very presence challenges his well-guarded heart. When her true identity unravels after a fainting spell, Fletcher's initial fury gives way to intrigue. Why would a woman go to such lengths?

Compelled by desperation, Siobhan Kenney adopted a male disguise, seeking employment and refuge in the heart of London. Her life as an Irish immigrant wasn't easy, especially after her parents vanished, leaving her the sole guardian of her younger siblings. While masquerading as a boy offered protection and opportunity, exposure threatens everything she's built. When Fletcher proposes a daring plan, Siobhan is trapped between her need for safety and the tantalizing allure of forbidden romance. As the two of them hatch a scheme to unmask their shared adversary, sparks of passion ignite a fire neither anticipated.

Will the perils of their world, from class distinctions to lurking enemies, quench the flame growing between them, or will the intense allure of opposites drawing closer prove too powerful to resist? Dive into the tempestuous world of Regency London and find out if love can truly conquer all.

Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides

Moonlight Wishes & Midnight Kisses - (Included in the Under the Harvest Moon Anthology)

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Holly, Mistletoe, & Midnight Snow - (Included in the
Christmas in Cumbria Anthology)

Kiss a Rake at Midnight - (Included in the Rakes & Reticules-
Lords and Ladies of St. James)



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CHAPTER ONE

De la Chance Social Club

London, England

July 1827 – Early morning

As was Fletcher Westbrook's wont, he walked through his social club's now silent and empty rooms with a cup of strong coffee. Tonight, like every other night, the place would teem with glittering guests eager and, in some cases, desperate for a few hours of entertainment.

Caution and wariness tempered the sense of pride that accompanied these daily inspections. Someone had slipped a threatening note beneath his office door last night.

The first such secret message in months.

"Bloody, sodding hell."

Fletcher swore beneath his breath before blowing on the scalding, sweetened brew and taking a bracing gulp. Nothing suspicious had occurred since last March when Torrian Westbrook, his cousin and a private detective, had apprehended the offender responsible for setting two fires, as well as sabotaging and vandalizing Fletcher's enterprises and sending other ominous letters.

The culprit, Mike Prescott, a low-end gaming hell competitor, hadn't appreciated Fletcher's scruples or losing elite customers to the classier, and quite frankly safer,

establishment. Prescott had grown careless, hence his apprehension and imprisonment.

As Fletcher stood in the card room with its dozens of round tables, black Italian marble fireplace, and the occasional cobalt blue and gold striped damask settee, he pondered this unwelcome and unfortunate turn of events. He honestly believed he'd put that troublesome annoyance behind him for good.

Until last night.

His half-brother, Leonidas, and the only Westbrook besides Fletcher and their cousin Torrian Westbrook, who knew the whole situation, believed the harassment was over too. So much so the deliriously happy scoundrel had married Fletcher's new Scottish bookkeeper and currently enjoyed a honeymoon in the South of France.

Perhaps Fletcher had grown lax—let his guard down too soon.

But why shouldn't he have done?

Convicted of attempted murder, arson, and a half dozen other crimes, Prescott rotted away in Newgate.

One thing was for certain.

He couldn't be behind this latest episode.

So, who was?

Perchance, Prescott hadn't acted alone as he vowed, and his accomplice had become emboldened once more.

Mouth tight, Fletcher searched his memory for unfamiliar faces when he'd made his final surveillance of the club last evening, just before midnight. The mental inventory did little good. New club members were as numerous and common as pigeons in London.

What set *De la Chance* and his other establishments, *Ivories & Aces* and *The Emporium Theater*, apart from other gaming dens and men's clubs was Fletcher's strict, unrelenting vetting of members as well as absolute intolerance for known cheats, rakehells—*present company excluded, of course*—and

randy men on the prowl making overtures toward Fletcher's female employees.

He employed over twenty of the best bodyguards in London to ensure the women remained unharried and the premises were as impenetrable as a cloistered virgin nun behind convent walls. Yet, somehow, someone had managed to not only sneak onto the grounds, but they'd found their way undetected to the private quarters on the club's other side.

Unlike many gaming hells, his upper rooms weren't available for liaisons with bit o' muslins on his payroll. Fletcher never had and never would employ prostitutes.

It must've been a guest who breached his inner sanctum.

But who?

Why hadn't one of his security team seen them?

Fletcher's nape hair stood on end, alerting him that he wasn't alone.

Slowly, he rotated toward the card room's entrance, prepared to defend himself with the ugly knife sheathed at his waist. Upon recognizing the small form sauntering through the opening, adorned on either side with heavy royal blue draperies held in place by a thick gold silk cord, he blew out a relieved breath.

Sean Kenney, a perpetually cheerful, if somewhat small and frail Irish lad of all work, gazed around the room with the chairs overturned on the tables that he was tasked with returning to the floor each morning. Unlike most of the club's other employees, Sean and a few others who tended to more menial tasks weren't required to wear all black.

Today, his delicate features wan, the lad seemed tense and distracted.

Nevertheless, he touched two slender fingers to his ever-present flat tweed cap.

"Good morning, sir. Howya today?"

"I am well." Physically, yes. But unrelenting worry niggled in the back of Fletcher's mind. He must find the culprit before

things became dangerous once more. He took another sip of coffee. “Yourself?”

He’d learned long ago that when he took a genuine interest in his personnel, not only did they work harder, but Fletcher could, with a great deal of accuracy, determine which of them would become loyal, long-term help. Consistency among his employees proved essential to keeping his establishments running smoothly.

What he couldn’t determine at this moment, however, was Sean’s age, though if Fletcher hazarded a guess, he’d suppose the lad was in his late teens. Perchance sixteen or seventeen.

Small for his age, likely due to malnutrition, the youth often conducted himself and spoke like someone older and more mature. His eyes often held a world-weary glint, and fine lines sometimes bracketed his mouth, suggesting he’d experienced much hardship in his short life.

Fletcher rubbed his nose with his free hand.

Reading people had come naturally to him for as long as he could remember—nearly his entire life. The ability was as ordinary as breathing. Much like his interest in medicine had been, which had compelled him to become a physician, only to leave the field disenchanted and haunted over a decade ago.

He’d always admire and respect the individuals who made the profession their life’s work. For him, the heartache of watching infants and children die despite his best efforts took a toll that seared his mind, scarred his soul, and left him drowning in defeat. It nearly drove him mad or to the bottle, hence his departure from the vocation before becoming an ape-drunk lunatic.

His expression downcast, Sean shifted his feet and covered a wide yawn.

“The truth is, sir, I’m knackered. My sister kept me up most of the night. Kimber’s sick with a nasty cough.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sean.” Fletcher scratched the back of his neck. “Does she need a physician?”

Sean hesitated for half a second before shaking his head.

“Nae. I think it’s just a summer cold. I left broth and a tonic. Paddy promised to keep an eye on her.” Sean raised a thin shoulder beneath his much too-large black coat. “Forgive my rattling. I’d best crack on.”

“Paddy is your brother?” Fletcher also made a point to learn something about his employees’ families—those that had families. Many didn’t, and it was truly sad knowing they had no one except fellow employees who often became their surrogate family.

“He is.” Strong and wiry, Sean pulled the gold velvet cushioned ebony chairs off the closest table with practiced efficiency. “Turned twelve last month. Kimber is almost eleven.”

A wonder the two children hadn’t been forced to find jobs as was the usual practice among the lower classes—probably due to Sean’s diligence in providing for them.

It couldn’t be easy for him.

Had Fletcher ever seen the lad without his coat or hat?

Even in July, the boy wore a plaid muffler around his neck.

In medical school, Fletcher had taken a few psychology courses. He suspected the boy’s outer garments acted as protection from more than the elements.

“Did you know I used to practice medicine?” Fletcher finished his coffee and set his cup on one of the tables. “I could look at your sister if you wish.”

Impossibly paler, Sean turned huge dark-blue eyes fringed with such lush lashes that women might become jealous.

“No, sir. That wouldn’t be right. I know how busy you are. I’m sure she’s on the mend already.”

Fletcher understood Sean’s distrust. Likely ashamed of his living quarters, the lad also probably didn’t have a penny to spare to hire a physician. The boy had no doubt learned the hard way that favors often came with strings attached.

Perhaps Fletcher would give the lad more responsibility, requiring a pay raise. Though he hadn’t been at *De la Chance*

long, only since the end of April, he performed his duties with diligence and cheer.

Mayhap he could tend to the hats, cloaks, coats, and other items for the members? Currently, a maid did so, but profoundly shy, Sally preferred working in the kitchen.

Sean would require a uniform for his promotion, of course.

An advancement was something to consider.

Fletcher had permitted Bernicia Dough, the head cook, to send leftovers home with the boy since he supported himself and his two younger siblings. Sean never mentioned parents, and Fletcher could only assume there weren't any, whether due to death, abandonment, or perhaps incarceration.

Or perchance the children had fled an abusive home as Primrose McKessick—now his brother Leonidas's wife—had done. Sadly, that often proved the case in London's seedier neighborhoods, where poverty, unemployment, and alcohol often led to violence.

In any event, sending along food and other supplies wouldn't put Fletcher out of business. The world was cruel to orphans without resources.

"Good morning, Mr. Westbrook. Sean." Fred Brindlecombe, the concierge, poked his head around the corner before continuing to the front counter without waiting for a response.

Smiling, Fletcher patted the boy's thin shoulder and couldn't help but notice his fine bones. He was much frailer than he let on and undernourished too.

Fletcher made a mental note to tell Mrs. Dough to add extra bread, cheese, meat, and milk to the supplies she sent home.

"At the very least, I can have Mrs. Dough prepare her infamous tincture and a poultice." When Sean opened his mouth to protest, Fletcher shook his head. "I shan't take no for an answer, and if your sister does not improve, promise me you'll allow me to look in on her."

Though Fletcher no longer practiced medicine, he could diagnose perfectly well and obtain and pay for a physician if the child needed one.

“Yes, sir.” Though Sean nodded, his guarded expression revealed he had no intention of accepting the offer. Nonetheless, Fletcher would persist for the child’s sake and his staff’s lest the illness prove contagious.

Fletcher turned to leave but pivoted back toward the boy.

“Sean? What time did you leave last night?”

Most people never took notice of the boy, moving about the club like a silent shadow. He might’ve seen or heard something untoward.

Tilting his face upward, Sean scratched his head. “About ten, I think. Maybe a little earlier. It was just after the fancy gent in the red coat arrived. The one with a ruby the size of my thumb in his neckcloth.”

“Lord Huxley?” A self-important dandified coxcomb if ever there was one.

Artemus Fogwell, the Viscount Huxley, and his wife’s presence had been a bit of a surprise. Huxley, the pompous windbag, had shown a decided interest in *De la Chance* several months ago—well over a year ago, in truth—but last night was the first time he’d graced the club with his presence until closing.

Surely, it was a coincidence that an ominous letter appeared afterward.

Wasn’t it?

Fletcher made a mental note to apprise Torrian of that interesting detail.

“Notice anyone suspicious wandering around the private quarters?” Fletcher planted his hands on his hips.

“Sorry, sir.” Sean shrugged again, causing his coat to brush the tops of his knees, one of which bore a neatly stitched patch. “But I left through the kitchen like I always do.”

Of course Sean had. So he could collect the leftovers and the biscuits Mrs. Dough baked for the youth and his siblings.

“Very well.” Fletcher narrowed his eyes, skimming his focus over the boy.

Perspiration dotted Sean’s cheeks.

The lad didn’t look at all well.

“Are you feeling quite the thing, Sean? I shan’t dock your pay if you need to go home and rest.”

“Not a bit of it, sir.” Sean pasted a bright smile on his pallid face as he placed chairs around the tables. “You can count on me.”

Morry Chandler, Fletcher’s head of security and second in command, strolled into the main gaming salon, his expression inscrutable. Wiry and bearing a scar on his forehead that paralleled Chandler’s right eyebrow, Fletcher trusted him implicitly.

“A word, Mr. Westbrook?” He slid the boy a brief glance. “Privately.”

That didn’t portend well.

Hopefully, Chandler might have information about the mysterious leaver of threatening notes.

Fletcher nodded as he crossed to Chandler.

“Do let me know if you see or hear anything out of the ordinary, won’t you, Sean?”

“Aye, sir.” His cheeks unnaturally flushed, the boy ducked his head.

The last thing Fletcher needed was for the lad to spread whatever ailed his sister and quite possibly himself amongst the other employees. Despite Sean’s reluctance, wisdom decreed Fletcher ought to take the boy home and check on his sister.

Yes. That was what Fletcher would do—right after finding out what Chandler couldn’t or wouldn’t say in front of the boy.

CHAPTER TWO

De la Chance's main gaming salon

A few tense heartbeats later

From beneath her eyelashes, Siobhan covertly watched Mr. Westbrook leave. Her breathing didn't resume a normal cadence until he'd disappeared, and the tension in her rigid shoulders eased.

She feared she'd given herself away this morning.

The way Mr. Westbrook probed her with his bottle-green eyes, she felt certain he could see all of her secrets—see behind her carefully constructed façade and realize she was a fully grown female at seven and twenty.

Thank goodness she'd inherited her mother's petiteness, and with her hair tightly braided and pinned under Father's cast-off flat hat, she passed for a boy.

Fletcher Westbrook held to a strict code of honor, and Siobhan felt certain he'd dismiss her if he discovered her secret. But the truth was, she'd tried finding employment as a woman for three months with no success other than disgusting offers from even more repugnant men. By that time, what little money Da had left behind was gone.

Desperation drove her to don Da's old coat and Paddy's trousers and to apply at *De la Chance*. She'd almost wept with relief when Mr. Westbrook had hired her. Now, at least, she could ensure her stepbrother and half-sister wouldn't starve,

and they had a roof over their heads, though the drafty single room they called home scarcely qualified as such.

Still, their humble accommodations were far better than the streets. If Siobhan scrimped, the food Mrs. Dough provided fed them and Siobhan's wages covered the rent and other necessities, such as a candle to teach her siblings at night.

Months ago, she'd given up hope that Da and Maura would return. Not for a second did Siobhan believe they'd abandoned her and the younger children. No, something awful must've happened. The not knowing was almost as bad as imagining all the dark things that had kept her beloved Da and kind stepmother of twelve years from returning to their offspring.

Only five years older than Siobhan, Maura had become the older sister Siobhan had never had, and she'd never resented Maura. Rather, it had pleased her that Da had found love again, after Mam had succumbed to a fever when Siobhan was eight. She adored having a little brother, and when Kimber came along, their family had been complete.

After Siobhan's parents' disappearance, Maura's sister, Finola Florry, allowed them to remain at her lodging house. Yet the gesture hadn't been entirely benevolent. She'd moved them to a single room rather than the two bedchambers and sitting area the family had occupied since arriving from Ireland last year. Finola insisted Siobhan also pay weekly rent, proclaiming she wasn't a charity—that she had bills too.

Kimber and Paddy performed chores around the boarding house for their maternal aunt: chopping wood, dishes, cleaning, laundry, and taking out slop buckets.

Finola said their unpaid work compensated for the low rent she charged.

What a load of manure.

Finola Florry exploited her young niece and nephew because they feared she'd evict them if they refused to do her bidding. It was as unlikely as the milkman delivering fresh

milk every morning that they could find other affordable accommodations.

After finishing arranging the chairs, Siobhan made her way to the kitchen.

In truth, she felt poorly and longed for a cup of tea, but that wasn't what had her nervous as a cat on hot coals.

She *had* seen something last night.

In fact, she'd invertedly become party to the offense—all because she'd been offered a pound in payment—a veritable fortune to a pauper like herself.

When the elegant lady withdrew the innocent-looking letter from her beautifully beaded reticule along with a pound note, Siobhan hadn't seen any harm in delivering it to Mr. Westbrook's office.

"I've admired him for so long, you see." The beautiful redhead blinked her big brown eyes, framed by charcoal-darkened lashes.

Siobhan conceded that with his wavy chestnut hair, bottle-green eyes, and tall, lithe build, her employer wasn't an eyesore.

"Naturally, Fletcher requires discretion, as do I." The beauty laughed, a tinkling, well-practiced chime. "My husband wouldn't approve. You would be doing me a tremendous favor, child."

Lady Huxley had bent over, purposely exposing more bosom than was seemly. Her cloying perfume had sent Siobhan into a sneezing fit.

Siobhan held a very different view of adultery than her ladyship. To her, marriage was a sacred institution. However, amongst the *ton*, infidelity was as common and overlooked as beggars on the street.

Besides, who was she to judge her employer, who she had gleaned in the short time she'd been at *De la Chance*, had quite a reputation as a rake? Half the women attending the

social club sent him coy smiles and blinked their eyelashes like the harlot Jezebel herself in blatant invitation.

“Naturally, I trust you won’t read the contents.” Lady Huxley curved her rouged mouth into a siren’s smile. “Such intimacies are not meant to be shared. But I don’t suppose you can read, so there’s no need for concern.”

Siobhan had procured a bland smile at the unintended insult.

She could read and write.

However, if the love note had only been to arrange an assignation, why had Mr. Westbrook posted extra security this morning? And why had Mrs. Dough tisked and tutted at the market earlier about strange happenings?

What have I done?

“I cannot lose this position,” Siobhan whispered, unwrapping the scarf around her neck to allow blessedly cool air to caress her hot skin. Since last night, her throat had become scratchier, and swallowing pained her. “I cannot, *must not*, become ill, either.”

She feared it might be too late for the latter, but she mustn’t go home.

Lost work meant lost wages.

Despite what she’d told Mr. Westbrook earlier, Kimber might well need a physician.

How much treatment and medicines would a pound cover?

Siobhan could save money by allowing Mr. Westbrook to examine Kimber. However, she couldn’t trust her siblings not to reveal the truth about her accidentally.

That must never happen.

It was one thing for a duke’s handsome, wealthy adopted son to show kindness and munificence toward Siobhan but another entirely for him to forgive her for betraying him.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Halfway to the kitchen, she stopped and dropped her chin to her chest.

She must tell Mr. Westbrook about the note and her part in delivering the scrap of paper.

It was the right thing to do, no matter the consequences.

Her conscience demanded it.

She wasn't, however, revealing her gender. There remained the tiniest chance Mr. Westbrook wouldn't sack her because she'd done the right thing.

And if wishes were whisky, everyone would dance jigs, as Da used to say.

After wrapping the scratchy scarf around her neck again, Siobhan pressed a hand to her waffy stomach.

“God save me. Greed brought me to this point.” Not so much greed but concern about Kimber. *Eejit*. “It's no more than I deserve.”

Regardless, it wasn't what Kimber and Paddy deserved.

Heaving a sigh, Siobhan changed directions and forced her feet to move forward. With each step, her head became foggier and her stomach more nauseous.

Outside Mr. Westbrook's door, she closed her eyes to regain her equanimity while reaching into her pocket and extracting the pound note. She might never touch this much money again.

Muted voices echoed from within.

Summoning every morsel of courage she possessed, she knocked.

“Come.” Mr. Westbrook's melodic baritone bid her enter.

She pushed the handle and stepped inside.

He sat behind his big desk, seemingly relaxed, though he exchanged a speaking glance with Mr. Chandler.

“Yes, Sean?”

It came out in a rush.

“Last night, Lady Huxley gave me a pound to deliver a letter to you with arrangements for an assignation.” Flames licked Siobhan’s cheeks, although whether from embarrassment or fever, Siobhan did not know.

At this juncture, she didn’t care.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

It was all she could do to remain upright.

“I should have refused and come straight to you, Mr. Westbrook, or you, Mr. Chandler.” She flicked the stern-faced head of security a short glance. His mien remained unchanged. “The truth is, sir, I honestly didn’t know if ladies regularly made arrangements to—ah—meet with you, and I only meant to be helpful.”

Was there a more delicate way to say arranged for a clandestine dalliance?

Mr. Chandler’s mouth twitched before he schooled his features into neutrality again.

She marched forward and laid the money on Mr. Westbrook’s desk.

Pray Kimber was strong enough to fight whatever ailed her.

“So you didn’t read the letter?” Mr. Westbrook leaned forward, steepling his fingers and veeing his sable brows together. “Do you know how to read?”

“I do know how.” Siobhan drew herself up, her pride stinging despite being at fault. “But I did not read the letter. It was sealed.”

As if that explanation clarified everything.

Besides, Mr. Westbrook could easily tell she hadn’t disturbed the wax.

“I made a stupid decision because my sister *is* sick and needs a doctor. But I am not dishonest.”

Well, she *was* dishonest—even now, Siobhan pretended to be a boy, but only because she had no choice. She would not

prostitute herself, and neither could she watch her siblings starve.

However, she did possess honor and integrity.

“That is why I am here.” She lowered her gaze partly from humiliation and partly because he might guess how ill she was. “I’m truly sorry. I know I betrayed your trust.”

Swallowing, she swayed and put a hand to her forehead, pushing her hat back.

Her head swam dizzily, and it felt like the very flames of hell licked her body.

“Sean?” Mr. Westbrook’s voice came from far away.

Had he stood?

This wasn’t good.

Not good at all.

She willed her feet to take her to the door, but they refused to obey.

Siobhan blinked, trying to focus her hazy gaze. “I feel so peculiar.”

Her voice sounded strange—frail and wispy.

“I believe the lad’s going to faint, Mr. Westbrook.”

Is that what this sensation is?

Then, she was falling, her cap tumbling from her head as she sank into blissful nothingness.

Mr. Westbrook’s voice raised in astonishment penetrated her stupor.

“My God, Chandler. *He’s a she.*”

CHAPTER THREE

A bedchamber at De la Chance

An hour later

Neck bowed and arms folded, Fletcher stood beside Miss Kenney's bed—or whatever her real name was—and listened to Doctor Philbourne's diagnosis.

"I cannot be positive, of course, without observing her longer. However, my initial examination suggests Miss Kenney is afflicted with the ague and is definitely malnourished and exhausted." He removed his spectacles and, after tucking them into his coat pocket, pulled two brown bottles from his well-used leather case.

"This tincture will strengthen her blood. A teaspoon once daily." He held up one bottle, then the other. "Give her a teaspoon of this every six hours. Administer hot compresses and poultices as needed when she is chilled, and cool sponge baths when her fever rises."

He passed the bottles to Fletcher.

That meant Fletcher would have to impose upon his female employees to take turns caring for her. They might refuse, and he wouldn't blame them.

He hadn't hired them to play nurse to a deceptive slip of a woman.

When Fletcher had risen this morning, serious concerns had niggled, but never would he have guessed the day's events

would bring him to standing over an invalid's bed. By now, all his staff would know Miss Kenney had misled him. He, who took pride in being able to *read* people, couldn't tell this woman wasn't a teenage boy.

How old was she?

Certainly not as young as he'd first believed.

One hand on his hip, Dr. Philbourne regarded the slender form, almost as pale as the sheets she lay upon. Her midnight braids, eyelashes, and eyebrows stood out in stark contrast to her transparent skin. The thick royal blue counterpane tucked beneath her arms almost hid her chest's shallow but steady rise and fall.

"She'll require complete bed rest for at least a week and as much food as she'll eat, Mr. Westbrook." The doctor glanced upward, a graying eyebrow quirked in either awe or disbelief. "You truly didn't know she was a female?"

"No." Fletcher shook his head.

More fool him.

Not only had Miss Kenney kept her hair hidden, but she'd also bound her small breasts. That explained why she wore that godawful oversized coat.

Regardless, now that Fletcher knew her sex, he could scarcely fathom he hadn't detected it before. Her bone structure was too delicate to be male. Her voice, though sultry, was too high. Her innate graceful movements, which he'd taken as weakness in a lad, also betrayed her.

She was a superb actress; he'd give her that.

When was the last time he felt such an utter, sodding fool?

Though Fletcher presented a calm outward facade, inwardly he seethed with supremely controlled fury at her betrayal. Not only had Miss No Name deceived him from day one about her gender, but she had been duplicitous about last night.

The former was exasperating—the latter unforgivable.

The fact that her guilty conscience had prompted her to come clean meant nothing to him.

Fletcher would not keep a traitor beneath his roof.

Except, he must for at least a week, but after that...

Even as enraged as he was, he wasn't cold-hearted enough to turn an ill woman onto the street. Not only her but her young sister and brother. He wasn't an unfeeling monster.

Hadn't he already sent his men and motherly Mrs. Dough to retrieve Paddy and Kimber? Fletcher could hardly leave the children alone to fret about their sister's whereabouts or send a note along, which would likely cause as much upset.

Besides, who would care for them while Miss Kenney convalesced?

No, the best solution and a way of assuring Miss Kenney cooperated fully was to have her sister and brother right here at *De la Chance*, particularly since Kimber was also ill.

Mrs. Dough told him that twice when Kimber and Paddy had come to the kitchen to collect their evening meal at Miss Kenney's behest, Mrs. Dough had offered the hungry children a warm bun and glass of milk. On both occasions, Miss Kenney had worked late and fretted her siblings would go to bed with empty stomachs.

Given her thinness, it appeared she'd done that herself many times.

To ensure her siblings had food the next day while she worked?

No wonder she had succumbed to the illness.

When Fletcher summoned two female employees, asking them to bring a nightgown, he'd expected raised eyebrows and questions. The looks on Suzannah's and Theresa's faces, after he'd revealed Sean was a female and they needed to assist her in donning the nightgown, might've been comical if he weren't so infuriated.

A knock rattled the door, and Fletcher opened it three inches.

Chandler offered a sympathetic upward sweep of his mouth.

He understood Fletcher's untenable position.

"Miss Kenney's brother and sister have been shown to a chamber to share. They are frightened and are asking about her. The little girl is quite ill. I left Mrs. Dough with them." Another partial smile kicked his mouth up on one side. "She's quite in her element, tending the ragamuffins. She's sent to the kitchen for hot chocolate and biscuits. I've ordered them baths."

"Very good." Fletcher nodded before glancing over his shoulder.

Miss Kenney remained perfectly still upon the bed as the doctor snapped his satchel closed.

"I want to wait here until she awakens," Fletcher told Chandler. "She is gravely ill, but I still intend to know her name and, if possible, what her intentions were."

Not that he intended to play nursemaid as she recuperated, for he did not.

He had three businesses to oversee, and now this nefarious situation with Huxley to deal with.

Fletcher would, however, post a guard outside Miss Kenney's door.

If she lied about her gender, what else had she lied about?

Her true reasons for wanting employment at *De la Chance*?

Was this the first time she'd acted on behalf of a Huxley?

No, he didn't trust Miss whatever her first name Kenney was any farther than he could throw her.

"Very good, sir." Chandler looked up and down the corridor. "I also spoke with your cousin about Huxley. He says he'll look into the matter and call upon you tomorrow."

Thank God for Torrian.

“Excellent.” Fletcher pushed the door wide. “Dr. Philbourne, may I impose upon you to examine Miss Kenney’s siblings? Her sister is also unwell.”

“Certainly.” The stout physician paced into the hallway.

“I’ll show you the way, Doctor,” Chandler offered with an easy smile.

As they strode away, Fletcher berated himself mentally for his gullibility.

“I can feel your rage from here.” Miss Kenney’s croaky thread of a voice scarcely carried across the room.

Fletcher spun around.

No more than thirty seconds ago, she appeared fast asleep.

Had she been feigning?

Nothing about her would surprise him.

“It’s radiating off you in scorching waves.” She regarded him warily but with admirable courage too.

Fletcher winced inwardly as her voice cracked and faded with each painfully articulated word. He’d not let her see he felt sorry for her. In truth, he was furious with himself for feeling anything but disdain and ire.

Compassion and empathy had no place here—had no business tempering his anger.

He kicked the door shut with a sharp bang, and she flinched.

Arms crossed and one leg raised with his heel planted on the wood, he leaned against the panel.

“I think I have reason to be angry, *Miss* Kenney. Or is it missus? Is Kenney even your real surname?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Several tension-filled seconds later

“*Y*es. I’m Siobhan Kenney. I’m not married.” She licked her dry lips before giving a weary sigh and plucking at the coverlet, the only outward sign of her nerves. “I regret that I deceived you.”

Swallowing, she gazed longingly at the water pitcher on a table near the window.

Hell’s clanging bells.

Fletcher stomped across the room, poured her a glass, and then tromped to the bed, where he thrust the water toward her. “Here.”

“Thank you,” she managed hoarsely.

She drank the entire glass before sinking back onto the pillows, her translucent eyelids closed. Her pulse beat a frantic rhythm at the juncture of her delicate throat and collarbone.

From fear or illness?

Did it matter?

Fletcher removed the tumbler from her limp hand.

She slowly opened her eyes, despair and defeat darkening them to navy blue.

Despite his anger, pity tried to rear her head.

Fletcher ruthlessly tamped the unwanted emotion down.

He was the victim here, not Siobhan. Although, if he were perfectly fair, she might be a victim of her circumstances. Nevertheless, that didn't give her the right to lie.

“Did I hear correctly? My brother and sister are here?”

So she *had* been awake.

He gave a terse nod. “They are.”

“Could you please stop looming over me?” She stared up at him, not nearly as intimidated or remorseful as she ought to have been. “I feel like you're an enraged panther about to spring, and I haven't the strength to defend myself.”

Guilt poked his ribs, and the tenderheartedness incensed him all the more. Nevertheless, he stepped backward two paces.

She stared at some point across the room.

“Have you ever been hungry, Mr. Westbrook?”

He pulled his eyebrows together.

“Have you ever wondered where your next meal will come from?” she asked, cutting him a brief glance before training her attention across the chamber again. She idly toyed with the sheet's edge. “If you'll have a place to live the next day? Or if your siblings will starve because your parents did not come home one day, and you still don't know what happened to them?”

Fletcher mentally ticked off each question with a silent “*No.*”

She sounded as if she'd gargled glass, so rough and hoarse was her lilting accent. Fletcher didn't doubt that emotion and grief also clogged her throat.

Now, at least, he knew why she and her siblings were alone. He made a mental note to ask Torrian and perhaps also Lucius to look into her parents' disappearance.

“Have you tried to find a respectable position in an unfamiliar city, and the only job offered was to become a harlot?” she asked, though every word obviously pained her.

Fletcher suspected she bloody well knew the answers before she posed the questions.

He shook his head, still not trusting himself to speak or to give her the satisfaction of being right.

In Miss Kenney's mind, she justified her behavior and dishonesty.

Nevertheless, Fletcher valued loyalty above all else. Her reasons might be valid to her, but it would be a cold day in Hades before he ever trusted her again.

"You might have told me the truth." He purposed to keep his tone gruff lest she believe she could manipulate him with her dire tale. "I would likely have found a position for you."

"You would have granted me an interview? A woman you don't know?" A winged raven eyebrow jettied high onto her forehead. "I have no notable skills. I've never held a position before. Pray tell me, how do you stay in business if all your employees are incompetent charity cases?"

She had him there.

Rather than give her the gratification of an affirmative answer, Fletcher grunted.

Siobhan shoved herself upward a fraction on the fluffy pillows, the effort costing her greatly. All the color drained from her face, and the hand she raised to shove a raven tendril that had escaped her long braids off her cheek trembled.

"You are angry, and justly so. I deserve a tongue." Her eyelids fluttered closed, and for a moment, Fletcher believed she slipped into slumber.

The next heartbeat, those fathomless blue orbs popped open again. "But when I tell you I had no choice but to impersonate a boy, I am not exaggerating."

God above, would she please stop speaking?

Fletcher expected her to spit up blood, so raw did her throat sound.

A glance at the window revealed the day would soon leave morning behind. Though he'd met with his staff earlier as was his daily practice, he must still have a word with his security before opening his establishments tonight.

"For months, I tried to find employment. May God strike me down dead if I'm lying." Raising anguished eyes to his, Miss Kenney released a harsh little laugh ending with a hiccupping sob. "You can judge me, but as you've never walked in my shoes or suffered what I've endured or feared for the wellbeing of others entrusted to your care, that makes you a judgmental hypocrite."

"*Judgmental?*" God help him. He was near his snapping point. "Someone could have *died*. Did that not cross your mind? I take the responsibility of protecting my staff seriously."

Each fury-tinged word cut through the air like the swipe of a saber. Though Fletcher appeared to be the target, that didn't mean others might not also get hurt.

"This is not a child's game, Miss Kenney. The peril is real."

Fletcher forced a calming breath into his lungs.

"*What* peril? I *thought* I was being helpful." Even in her weakened state, she glowered in defiance. "I knew you'd received previous death threats. But I understood that culprit had been apprehended, though you continued to implement an abundance of caution out of prudence."

How could Fletcher or Siobhan have known his nemesis had changed tactics?

Nevertheless, self-recrimination cudged him.

"I suggest you save your voice." Despite his determination not to let her pathetic story move him, distinct pricks of sympathy poked behind his ribs. Hunching a shoulder, Fletcher strode to the door. "The doctor said you needed to rest. You look about to swoon."

Had she been standing, he didn't question she'd have fallen flat on her face by now.

Regardless, he would bet she'd walk on coals before admitting how ill she was.

"I'll have someone bring you chicken soup," he said.

"What about my brother and sister?" Her voice had grown noticeably weaker, yet there was no denying the stubborn set of her jaw or the mutiny glinting in her ebony-lashed eyes. "When can I see them?"

"They are safe." Fletcher opened the door. "I shan't let you see them until I know exactly why you chose my establishment to defraud, Miss Siobhan Kenney."

"But they are innocents in all of this." Her exhaustion overtaking her, she sank further into the pillows. "Direct your ire at me all you wish, but I beg you, do not punish Paddy and Kimber for my actions. They yet grieve our parents."

His conscience whispered what an unconscionable cad he was into his ear.

This was why Fletcher had to leave medicine; he was too soft. Too empathetic. That was also why memories of his time as a physician still haunted his dreams.

Summoning his resolve, he raked her with an uncompromising glare.

"Be that as it may, I find it highly suspicious that you just *happened* to assist someone in delivering a threatening letter to me while pretending to be someone you are not."

"*Threatening?*" Siobhan puzzled her brow, the epitome of confused innocence. "It wasn't arrangements for a secret liaison?"

She was unswerving in her story.

Fletcher would credit her with her consistency.

"I do not dally with married women." His cryptic response earned him a skeptically raised arched eyebrow.

Widows, yes. However, husbands complicated matters, and he had no desire to feel a lead ball or sword pierce his flesh. Still, he didn't owe her an explanation.

“Then what did it say?” Siobhan appeared so confused and earnest that Fletcher waffled with telling her the truth.

However, she might be—probably was—playacting.

She’d already proven to be highly skilled in that area.

“It said, *It’s not over.*” He watched her closely for a reaction.

She didn’t disappoint.

Puckering her forehead further, she narrowed her eyes. “What’s not over?”

“That, Miss Siobhan Kenney, remains to be seen.”

Pale and surrounded by the large mattress, she appeared young and vulnerable.

“By the way. How old are you?” Most women flew into a dust-up when asked their age, but Fletcher was far past niceties.

Her glower suggested he could go straight to Hades. Finally, she sighed. “Seven and twenty.”

“That old?” She glared daggers at him then, and despite the gravity of the situation, a chuckle throttled up his throat. “I meant it as a compliment. You look younger. Most women would be delighted.”

“Well, as I’m sure you’ve gleaned, I am not like most women.”

“Indeed.” This petite sprite was unlike any woman he had ever met.

Then, before the sprouts of sympathy that had dared try to influence him had a chance to take root and grow, he slammed from the chamber.

What was he to do with her?

What a bloody conundrum.

CHAPTER FIVE

The same bedchamber

One week later – afternoon

Siobhan thought she might scream from boredom. She turned away from the window overlooking the bustling street and, folding her arms around her middle, paced across the gold and Persian blue Aubusson carpet once more.

The plush pile squishing beneath her toes felt divine.

This is only temporary, she reminded herself, lest she become accustomed to the luxury as she feared Paddy and Kimber had already begun to do.

She'd felt wholly recovered the past two days, yet that handsome, stubborn donkey's bottom who practically held her prisoner refused to let her leave her richly appointed chamber. In truth, Fletcher had ordered her to stay abed—doctor's orders, he said—but her muscles needed exercising.

Her mind as well.

Unaccustomed to idleness, Siobhan was ready to climb the walls of the lavish chamber furnished with a rosewood four-poster bed, armoire, dressing table, nightstands, sitting table, and two tufted gold brocade chairs.

Like the rest of *De la Chance*, royal blue, gold, and black accents decorated the bedchamber. The gold and blue brocade draperies perfectly complimented the blue velvet damask wallpaper and the trompe-l'oeil ceiling, complete with plump

cherubs. Rather than overbearing, the color combination created an air of understated elegance, which was undoubtedly what Fletcher Westbrook wanted.

Last evening, footmen and maids had delivered a much-welcome bath and fresh nightgown to Siobhan's chamber. She'd washed her hair and let the mass hang loose to dry.

After so many months of hiding her hair—her one vanity—Siobhan couldn't bring herself to plait the waist-length tresses again. Hence, the locks hung loose, swaying with her aggravated steps.

At least the beast had conceded to allow Paddy and Kimber to visit each morning and evening, though why he'd changed his mind, Siobhan didn't have a clue. Kimber's ailment was nothing more serious than a summer cold from which she'd recovered. Paddy remained unafflicted but had acquired a serious case of hero worship.

Both children sang Fletcher Westbrook's praises until Siobhan was hard put not to snap at them.

"Mr. Westbrook bought me new boots."

"Look at my pretty shoes."

"Mr. Westbrook has Mrs. Dough make us different biscuits every day."

"Mr. Westbrook says we might read in his private salon."

"Mr. Westbrook is so kind."

"Mr. Westbrook is so generous."

"Did you know Mr. Westbrook has six brothers and a sister?"

"Mr. Westbrook's father is a duke."

Siobhan knew the latter two facts because she had struck up a friendship with Primrose McKessick before the former bookkeeper had married Leonidas Westbrook.

A pang twinged in her chest.

She missed her only friend, even if Primrose hadn't known Siobhan was a woman.

Somehow, she thought the newest Westbrook bride wouldn't condemn her but, instead, applaud her boldness and resourcefulness.

Did Fletcher think to use her siblings against her?

“Oooh.” Growling in frustration, Siobhan fisted her hands. Moreover, the *roué* endearing himself to the children with gifts and attention could only lead to heartbreak for them later. Had he considered that at all?

On the one hand, while she'd been ill, Siobhan's siblings had fared well. On the other hand, she expected Fletcher to boot them all to the curb as soon as Doctor Philbourne declared her fit.

However, she would not pretend to be ill and frail to postpone the inevitable.

She would need to find another position.

Dismay bubbled behind her breastbone.

It would not be easy.

Not in a city whose streets teemed with beggars.

Neither could Siobhan take the children and return to Ireland.

Besides having no funds for the journey or relatives to rely upon once they arrived in their homeland, her gentle farmer father had confided that it wouldn't be safe. Something had happened to cause Da and Maura to pack their essential belongings, leave Ireland in the dead of night without looking back, and journey to London.

What that was, Siobhan did not know for certain.

She suspected it had something to do with the unsavory man who'd shown up on their doorstep several times. Da always refused him entry and ordered him from the property.

Fletcher also made a point of dropping in daily—supposedly to check on her wellbeing.

She snorted.

As if he truly cared.

Each time, he questioned her as if she were a notorious villain. No matter what she said, she could see the doubt shadowing his green eyes. His distrust distressed Siobhan, and she despised herself for caring about what he thought of her.

Until a week ago, she had admired Fletcher Westbrook.

He treated his employees with respect, paid fair wages, and worked hard. She'd never heard him raise his voice, he didn't drink to excess, and he enforced strict ethical protocols at his club. His one glaring fault was his reputation as a rake—one she'd come to suspect might be exaggerated.

Truth be told, she had wrongly believed him an honorable man.

However, after a week of being treated like London's most nefarious criminal, her estimation of him had dropped to somewhere between maggot and manure.

No, maggots *in* manure.

The imagery caused the merest upward sweep of her mouth.

Yesterday, desperate for a change of scenery, Siobhan had draped a blanket around her shoulders—her boy's clothing had *mysteriously* gone missing—and opened the door intending to see her brother and sister and perhaps borrow a book from Fletcher's library. Not that skulking around in nothing but a nightgown and blanket was the height of propriety, but on this side of *De la Chance*, midday, she mightn't even encounter another employee.

Fletcher had driven her to take dire actions.

However, Saul, the kindly guard assigned to ensure she remained inside her chamber, took his duties seriously. Compassion etched his face, but he'd shaken his head.

“Mr. Westbrook says you're not to leave your bedchamber, Miss Kenney.”

It had been all Siobhan could do not to give into her pique and slam the door in his sympathetic face. She hadn't even tried to leave her chamber today.

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

She'd considered escaping out the window, but up three stories and without a balcony or anything to hang onto, she'd likely fall to her death.

Then what would happen to Kimber and Paddy?

Releasing an annoyed huff, she paced to the door and pressed her ear against the panel.

Rustling and low voices outside the chamber almost sent her hurtling back beneath the bedcovers, but she'd had enough. Tilting her chin upward in defiance, she backed away until she stood in the room's center and faced the door.

No matter what happened, she would remain calm and poised.

Easier said than done when one stood in one's nightclothes.

With a soft squeak, the door swung open, and Fletcher sauntered in carrying several boxes and packages wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Two more of his henchmen followed him, each bearing a stack of similarly wrapped parcels, which they placed on the bed. They barely spared a glance in her direction before leaving on silent feet and closing the door behind them.

Humiliation and guilt scorched her cheeks.

What must everyone think of her?

She'd deceived them all, but she could not regret her action. Desperate times called for desperate measures and all that.

Fletcher took in her appearance, hair billowing about her shoulders and toes peeking from beneath her borrowed nightgown, and his expression didn't flicker a bit.

She liked that about him.

He never leered at his female employees.

“Excellent. You’re out of bed.” He angled his head toward the door. “Saul told me you tried to leave yesterday.”

In a break from his customary attire, which usually consisted of a black suit and crisply starched white neckcloth and shirt, he wore a hunter-green jacket today. The shade did amazing things—dangerous, alluring things—to his already too-beautiful eyes.

To distract herself from her wayward musing and to prove he didn’t intimidate her, which, of course, he did, Siobhan jutted her chin upward.

“I’m not your prisoner, Mr. Westbrook. I committed no crime. Had I done so, I doubt I’d have slept in this elegant chamber the past week.”

“True.” Fletcher nodded, his affability making her even more suspicious. Up until now, he’d treated her like a viper.

He also set his pile of packages on the tidily made bed.

“Why did you cease practicing medicine?” *Stop acting the maggot, numbskull*, she berated herself. She hadn’t meant to ask the question out loud she’d ruminated on for several days.

His features tautened, and he thinned his lips. Finally, he gave a small shake of his head. “I wasn’t cut out to watch people die, especially children and babies. With every death, I blamed myself even though I logically knew I’d done everything possible to save them.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” And she was. “I shouldn’t have asked. Forgive me.”

“It’s far past time I talked about it.” He lifted a broad shoulder. “For whatever reason, I feel comfortable doing so with you.”

Should Siobhan be honored?

The man didn’t even like her.

“I’ve made a decision.” He rubbed his nose with his bent forefinger. “Or rather, I’ve decided on a plan of action.”

“Really?” Siobhan raised an eyebrow, trying to appear poised despite standing barefoot in a nightgown. That Fletcher didn’t seem to notice or care rankled, which only caused her more confusion. “And how, pray tell, does that pertain to me?”

She braced herself, prepared to hear the words she’d expected for days.

Sure look. Everything shall be fine, Siobhan Moya Neasa Kenney.

Somehow, she and the children would survive.

There was always a chance that Finola wouldn’t evict them—at least not immediately *if* she hadn’t already let their room. Only a numpty would gamble on that fragile hope. Finola Florry hadn’t displayed a charitable nature thus far.

“You, Siobhan, and your siblings are going to help me catch the culprits who have been harassing me and vandalizing my establishments for over a year.”

CHAPTER SIX

Still in her bedchamber

“*I* beg your pardon?” Siobhan gaped, her mouth parted.

Fletcher might have announced they would have salmon for supper or drive to Hyde Park for an outing tomorrow for all the enthusiasm he showed.

“You. Are. Going. To. Help. Me,” he said, articulating each word as if talking to someone without full possession of their faculties.

That assuredly had not been what she’d expected to hear.

It took another heartbeat or two for her to comprehend precisely what Fletcher had alluded to. He had best rethink his plans because no force in heaven or on earth would ever compel her to agree to his bacon-brained scheme.

Bristling, she shook her head. “Absolutely not. I’ll not have my sister and brother endangered. You can get that out of your codpated skull right this minute.”

“*Codpated?*” Wearing an irritating, half-condescending and half-amused grin, he leaned his narrow hips against the foot of the bed. “You don’t even know what the plan is.”

“I do not need to know,” she snapped, tossing aside her earlier determination not to let him rile her. “Kimber and Paddy will not be a part of whatever hair-brained scheme you’ve cooked up.”

He seemed utterly unaffected by Siobhan's heated declaration.

Feeling suddenly vulnerable in the light cotton nightgown, though he had never regarded her with anything other than polite contempt, she swept the blanket she'd used yesterday off the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She tried a different approach.

"My sister and brother are all I have in the world, Fletcher. I am responsible for their safety."

"They will be perfectly safe."

He still wore that amused expression, and she was torn between curiosity as to why and slapping him until next summer to wipe his smug countenance off his face.

Where had the ogre of the past few days gone?

What had occurred to change his demeanor?

Narrowing her eyes, Siobhan breathed deeply, trying to decipher if he smelled of spirits. She leaned forward and sniffed. "Are you pished?"

Away with the fairies?

Crazy?

"No." Laughing, Fletcher shook his head, causing a chestnut lock to plop onto his forehead. "Not a bit of it. My, you are a suspicious little thing. Even more so than Clemmons."

Siobhan gasped in affront. "I'm suspicious? You've kept me imprisoned because you're convinced I conspired against you when I did no such thing."

Fletcher's secretary, Dawson Clemmons, wasn't suspicious. The man was superstitious to such an extent that it bordered on absurd. Last week, he'd exited the club and walked around to another entrance rather than walk beneath a ladder.

A knock rattled the door, and Siobhan took the opportunity to wrangle her emotions under control.

“Come in,” Fletcher bid without the slightest hesitation.

Awful presumptuous of him since it was her chamber, but then again, he owned the building, and she was logical enough to acknowledge she had no power here.

Saul opened the door, allowing a fresh-faced, slightly out-of-breath maid to enter, bearing a loaded serving tray.

“Please set the tray on the table,” Fletcher said, completely at ease, even though he stood in a lady’s bedchamber with the dishabille occupant. Probably not for the first time, which explained the maid’s indifference.

Why that knowledge vexed, Siobhan did not understand.

“We’ll see to the rest, Sally.” Fletcher flashed one of his stammer-causing smiles, and the girl blushed.

For pity’s sake.

Siobhan nearly rolled her eyes.

He was as transparent as glass. For a man who insisted on scrupulous behavior in his clubs, the hypocrite had no compunction about using his charm to manipulate willy-nilly.

If he snapped his fingers, did every female jump to do his bidding?

Siobhan would not be impressed that he knew the maid’s name. Something only a caring employer would make an effort to know.

“Yes, sir.” Once she’d done as bid and given Siobhan a curiosity-filled glance from beneath her lashes, Sally bobbed a curtsy and departed.

“Come, Siobhan.” Fletcher gestured to the table. “Have a seat, and while we dine, I’ll explain what I intend.”

The tiniest morsel of hope that he wouldn’t dismiss her forthright motivated Siobhan to cross the carpet and sit. That and she was so hungry, her stomach gnawed her spin. “I’m so famished, my belly thinks my throat has been cut.”

Fletcher threw back his head, exposing the strong column of his throat, and laughed heartily.

Transfixed, Siobhan stared as if bewitched.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the man was a feast for feminine eyes when he laughed, which he did often, given the fine lines framing his eyes. In point of fact, Fletcher Westbrook was quite easy to gaze upon at any time, but he seemed oblivious to his good looks.

After composing himself but still chuckling now and again, Fletcher lifted the first silver dome, and her mouth watered.

Roasted chicken with peas, carrots, and potatoes.

Another contained creamed asparagus. A third held steaming rolls. And the last displayed thick slices of custard pie. A bottle of wine, glasses, plates, napkins, and eating utensils completed the sumptuous spread.

What appeared to be genuine kindness crinkled the corners of his arresting eyes as he skillfully uncorked the wine bottle. Siobhan had seen green eyes often in Ireland but not Fletcher's clear-bottle green shade. It took a person's breath away.

Surely, she wasn't the only one to react so strongly to his potent, verdant gaze.

"I thought you might be hungry, given you haven't eaten much all week." He poured a generous portion of crimson wine into each glass.

"Ravenous." Siobhan couldn't prevent her grin as she seized a roll and veered her attention to the bed.

Despite herself, her attention kept drifting to the neatly tied parcels littering her bed.

She'd heard tales of English Christmas and birthday celebrations where children received stacks of gifts. She'd only ever received one small object for either. Perhaps a hair ribbon, bar of perfumed soap, or hand-knitted scarf.

"What is in the packages?" Siobhan could have bitten her tongue in two for speaking her thoughts aloud. Mortification's flames licked her cheeks as she forced herself to focus on the food before her.

“Gowns. Underthings. Shoes. Hairpins. Reticules. A brush. Soap.” Shrugging, Fletcher snapped his napkin open and placed it on his long legs. “Whatever else a lady might need for her toilet. I had the hostesses help with the shopping, so I’m not entirely certain what is there. I tasked Miss Rudgate with acquiring the essentials.”

Elora Rudgate, the serving and social staff supervisor’s extraordinary organizational skills, made up for her prudish comportment. Siobhan didn’t question that the packages contained every last item a young woman would require.

She sat back, the roll dangling from her fingertips.

“Just what *is* this plan of yours, Fletcher Westbrook?”

She expected to sleuth around darkened nooks. She’d have no need for new clothing for that.

Fletcher cut a generous slice of chicken and deposited it on her plate before adding a liberal portion of vegetables.

“You and your siblings are going to help me catch the Huxleys red-handed.” He glanced upward, catching her gaze with his. “If we succeed, I’ll overlook your indiscretion and not only provide you with a position but allow you and your brother and sister to live at *De la Chance*.”

Was he serious?

Why the change of attitude?

“I’ve already taken the liberty of having your things moved here. Your possessions are in the corridor. Paddy’s and Kimber’s are in their chamber.” The humor faded from his face, and exasperation replaced his previous jollity. “Paddy told me that the landlady is an aunt?”

Siobhan nodded. “My stepmother’s sister.”

“*Hmm*.” The sound rumbled in his strong throat like a provocative purr.

Just what did *hmm* mean?

“In any event,” he said, “she insisted you owed back rents and demanded I pay her before I could take your belongings.”

“That’s a colossal lie.” The fib caused something inside Siobhan to snap, and she stomped her foot. “I didn’t owe rent again until next week.”

He rolled his shoulder as he applied himself to his food. “I suspected as much. I thought it important for the children to have their things.”

Meager as they were.

As if sensing Siobhan’s continued hesitation, Fletcher raised his focus from his plate. The intensity in his eyes took her breath away.

“What do you say, Siobhan?”

What *could* she say?

He’d provided her a way to redeem herself in his estimation—something that shouldn’t be as important as it had become—as well as promised to furnish her with luxurious living accommodations beyond anything she could ever provide for her brother and sister. It was far more than she deserved, and she’d be an *eejit* to refuse this opportunity.

Which he likely counted on.

Her pulse quickened with exhilaration, yet wisdom demanded she tread warily. “All I have to do is help you catch the Huxleys in action? Nothing else?”

“*Uh-hum.*” Chewing, Fletcher nodded before taking a sip of wine. “However, we must gather enough evidence to convict them in a court of law.”

Did Siobhan dare add a stipulation to his magnanimous offer?

She angled her head.

“I don’t want Paddy or Kimber involved.” She rushed on before he could reply. “I’ll do whatever you request of me, but I shan’t allow them to be put at risk.”

Still holding the roll, which she had quite shredded in her agitation, and her stomach quivering with anticipation and hunger, she held her breath.

Leaning back, his eyes slightly narrowed, Fletcher tapped his fingertips on the table. At last, when Siobhan conceded he would refuse her demand, he sat forward and cut himself another piece of chicken. “Agreed.”

Relief washed over her, and she barely checked a joyful whoop.

Mayhap, just mayhap, everything would be all right.

And Siobhan would do her part, whatever it might be, as long as it wasn't illegal or immoral.

Surely, whatever Fletcher required of her couldn't be that difficult or perilous. Lady Huxley didn't seem dangerous, just coquettish, and from what Siobhan had seen of her dandified fop of a husband, Lord Huxley didn't appear as if he could intimidate a mouse.

Siobhan pointed her fork at Fletcher. “And I'm highly suspicious about your complete change in attitude. How do I know this isn't some perverse way of getting even with me?”

Something akin to displeasure darkened his face's contours. “I am not punitive or vindictive. Let's just say someone very practically pointed out that had our circumstances been reversed, I might've acted precisely as you have.”

“Who?”

“My brother, Darius.” Fletcher took a long swallow of the excellent wine. “He arrived in Towne late last night. He recently left His Majesty's Navy and is at loose ends until he decides what his future holds.”

Siobhan knew that detail.

Darius and Cassius had visited in May.

“Eat, Siobhan.” Fletcher swept long fingers toward her plate. “You're far too thin.”

A retort sprang to her lips, but instead of scolding him, she grinned and speared a carrot with her fork. She *was* too thin, and the realization she could eat her fill made her almost

giddy. No more going without and saving food for the children.

“You’d better be careful, Fletcher. I’ll be plump as a partridge in a trice.”

He returned her smile, which also made her realize, to her consternation, that she liked him.

Really liked him.

Clearing her throat, Siobhan asked, “When does this plan get put into motion, Fletcher?”

“In a week. It will give us time to prepare you.” He cut her a sidelong glance. “If you’re feeling fully recovered.”

She nodded. “I am quite well now.”

Though her curiosity demanded she ask what her new position would be, Siobhan decided prudence required restraint. She’d already pushed her luck by refusing to allow the children to be involved.

She bit into a tender, herb-seasoned bite of chicken.

Scrumptious.

Yes, she could become accustomed to this life.

“What, precisely, is my role in this plan of yours?” she asked.

Fletcher skewed his mouth to the side. “You will keep Lord Huxley entertained, plying him with drink and compliments, flirting and making yourself agreeable, while I do the same with his wife.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Still seated at the table in Siobhan's bedchamber

Fletcher squelched the chuckle rising to his throat at Siobhan's flabbergasted expression.

"But...but I do not know how to flirt," she blurted before flicking a hand up and down before her. "And in case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the epitome of alluring femininity."

Her honesty and lack of effect charmed Fletcher despite his week-long irritation with her, and he laughed at her protestations, which earned him a fierce glower.

With that mass of midnight hair and eyes so blue they rivaled the ocean at twilight, whether she knew it or not, Siobhan Kenney was a beautiful woman wrapped in a svelte, petite package. This spirited Irish lass reminded him of Primrose McKessick. Both small, vivacious women, they possessed initiative, courage, and tenacity.

"Granted, you're not curvaceous." Probably because she hadn't had enough to eat in ages.

Siobhan pulled a face. "Thank you for that ungentlemanly observation. Every woman likes to know she's lacking in the areas men find most appealing."

"*Uh, uh.* Don't get your feathers ruffled. Let me finish." Fletcher held up a staying finger. "Trust me when I tell you that men *shall* find you alluring." He wiggled his eyebrows

and lowered his voice to a seductive purr. “Even I find you quite tempting in an adorable weak kitten way.”

“Go away outta that.” Pink tinged her cheeks, and she snorted. “You’re jesting, for sure.”

Not entirely, and it was as much a revelation to Fletcher as her.

“I am not.” He canted his head toward the bundles atop her bed. “Those boxes contain the finest gowns, slippers, fallals, and accouterments that money can buy. Your hair arranged in the current fashion, a touch of cosmetics, a dab of perfume, and adorned with jewelry, you’ll have gentlemen lined up for the opportunity to make your acquaintance and dance.”

“*Um*, I don’t know how to dance.” She made a comical face. “Unless Irish jigs count.”

“*Hmm*, I hadn’t considered that.” He shook his head. “It’s of no consequence. I’ve never seen Huxley take to the floor. Bad knee or ankle, I believe.” Mayhap gout. “He prefers the gaming tables.”

“I do not play cards either.” A wistful look whisked across her pretty, pixyish features. “Are you sure this is the best plan? I *could* help abduct him.”

Fletcher burst into laughter again.

When was the last time he’d laughed this much?

“Why doesn’t that suggestion coming from you surprise or appall me? No need to fret, Siobhan. I only need you to keep Huxley distracted. It’s his wife I plan on getting the information from.”

“Won’t she be suspicious?” Siobhan took a sip of wine, and wonder momentarily brightened her face as she held the ruby-tinted glass up to the window light. “Oh my. That is quite delicious.”

Her joy at something so simple caused a weird sensation in Fletcher’s belly.

In all his years, he’d never met a woman as unpretentious as her, and he’d known many women. It wasn’t that he’d

believed her to be a male for the past several weeks either.

There was something about *her*—Siobhan Kenney—though he couldn't pinpoint what that undefined *something* was.

As the son of a wealthy deceased banker and adopted son of a duke, Fletcher had never known want or need. A large, close-knit, and loving family had always surrounded him. The closest he came to understanding Siobhan's need to provide for and protect her siblings was his concern for his employees' safety.

"We've considered that." He cut a bite of chicken. "Chandler and my cousin Torrian hatched a scheme to entrap the Huxleys."

In truth, wily and conniving, the Huxleys mightn't fool easily. Pessimism reared its gnarly little troll head, but Fletcher shoved it to the back of his mind.

Her expression unconvinced, Siobhan asked, "Which is?"

Fletcher arced his knife in the air.

"I'll tell Lady Huxley that my boy of all work mentioned he'd left me a note for a clandestine assignation but, regrettably, I never saw it. I'll tell her my secretary or one of the maids set it aside when they straightened my desk and fears they accidentally tossed it into the rubbish bin when gathering the news sheets. I'll claim that I don't want Samantha to think I ignored her message."

Siobhan gave a slow but doubt-ridden nod. "How will you convince her? You said yourself that you don't dally with married women."

"I'll persuade her that I'm interested in a flirtation and will make an exception for her." It shouldn't be hard to do. Samantha Fogwell, Viscountess Huxley, flirted with him outrageously whenever their paths crossed. Rumor had it Huxley was impotent, and his wife had strong carnal appetites. "Two years ago, before Samantha married Huxley, she propositioned me."

More than propositioned, in truth.

She'd practically begged Fletcher to have his way with her at a country house party—the last he'd ever attended. She wouldn't accept his refusal, and only approaching guests finally dissuaded her amorous attempts. He left the house party that night, convinced she'd have climbed into his bed in the wee morning hours had he not.

Less than a month later, her betrothal to Huxley appeared in the papers.

Siobhan's eyebrow shied upward, but she didn't feign shock as a society miss would have done. "That ought to make things substantially easier."

But then again, Fletcher wouldn't have had this conversation with a *haut ton* member in her bedchamber, let alone ask her to flirt with a married man. He'd have been slapped and probably called out for his audacity.

"I was involved with an actress at the time and declined Lady Huxley's invitation."

Fletcher might be a confirmed bachelor and rakehell, but he was faithful to women while he courted them. Besides, Samantha's desperation hinted at something ominous and unbalanced.

The cynical look Siobhan leveled Fletcher fairly shouted she didn't believe him. "With the club overrun with your men, how will you arrange a private *tête-à-tête*?"

Should he tell her?

Yes. She would need to know.

"There are hidden, private passageways."

"Oh."

She left it at that, and Fletcher was grateful.

They ate in silence for several minutes before she set her fork down.

"I'm full to bursting." Siobhan dabbed her mouth. "That was delicious. I must compliment Mrs. Dough."

“You need to eat more.” Fletcher eyed her still almost full plate and barely touched custard pie.

Giving him a starchy look, she shrugged.

“My stomach will only hold so much, Fletcher.”

Did she even realize she’d fallen into addressing him by his given name?

That might cause raised eyebrows amongst the other employees, but then again, everyone who worked for him knew his strict rule of keeping relationships at his businesses purely professional. “In time, with sufficient food, you shall be able to.”

She put a finger to her chin.

“As I see it, Fletcher, there is one major flaw with your plan. Everyone knows you don’t permit your female staff to consort with guests other than respectable dancing and conversation. No one will believe you’ve suddenly changed your mind where I am concerned.”

He winked as he lifted a forkful of custard pie to his mouth. “I don’t recall saying you would attend as an employee.”

That gave her pause, and suspicion tightened the corners of her mouth and narrowed her eyes. “Pray explain yourself.”

“You shall be Darius’s widowed guest because widows don’t require chaperones and are granted leeway with decorum that a debutante would not.” He circled his fork in the air. “No one will think twice about a woman he’s escorting. It’s also helpful that Darius went to university with Huxley’s younger brother, so he acquainted with the viscount.”

Because the Westbrooks were *so* important.

Siobhan opened her mouth to object, but Fletcher held up his hand. “Darius has already agreed to the plan.”

Shaking her head, Siobhan placed her napkin on the table. “It won’t work. I am not refined enough to pass as a *le beau monde* member, and you’re forgetting my surname. Everyone

at *De la Chance* knows it. Won't your other employees think it peculiar?"

Of course they would, but there was no help for it.

"Your surname presented a bit of a pickle until Darius suggested we change it to McKinney. As for the other staff, I'll apprise them of the situation, and they shall play along. They are tired of looming danger too."

To reassure her, Fletcher leaned forward and touched her hand on the table.

The gesture surprised her, and she widened her eyes. However, the jolt of sensation racing up his forearm to his shoulder nearly made him yelp.

"It's not the most elaborate plan, Siobhan, but I think it might work."

"You've worked it all out, haven't you?" She pulled the blanket snugger around her shoulders despite the July afternoon's heat. "I may not have a choice, but I still don't trust you."

Trust was a perverse thing, too easily given, and often proved a double-edged sword.

"Then we are well matched." Fletcher set his silverware down, the merest hint of exasperation in the abrupt gesture. "Because, Siobhan Kenney, I don't trust you either. However, we must put aside our differences and have faith in each other to pull this off."

She searched his face, all her doubts and misgivings parading across her features.

What would he do if she refused?

She mustn't.

"Agreed?" Fletcher extended his hand.

Her focus shifted from his hand to his face and back to his hand before, after another heartbeat, she slid her delicate palm into his. He could break the fragile bones by squeezing too hard.

“Agreed.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

De la Chance main gaming salon

One week later

Siobhan could scarcely credit the transformation in her appearance this past week or the treatment by the other employees when she'd entered the salon on Lord Darius Westbrook's arm.

"You're doing splendidly," Lord Darius said as he guided her to Viscount Huxley's table. Tonight, the viscount wore the most remarkable shade of eye-blistering yellow. He seemed to disdain society's dictates and wore whatever color he pleased. With his aquiline nose, paunch, and padded chest and shoulders, he resembled an oversized canary.

According to Fletcher, this made five nights in a row Huxley and his lady had attended *De la Chance*. He was certain their frequent presence portended something ominous.

Across the room, Siobhan met Fletcher's gaze.

The merest dip of his chin indicated it was time to put their plan in motion.

Lady Huxley, wearing a scandalously low turquoise gown accented by a diamond parure set and peacock feathers in her intricately coiffed hair, sent Fletcher a seductress's invitation with her eyes.

From beneath hooded eyelids, he returned her perusal and answered her bidding with a smoldering upward flare of his

firm mouth.

Siobhan's stomach performed a queer flip at the interaction.

I am not jealous. Absurd. Preposterous.

Fletcher's doing what needs be done.

That is all.

Lady Huxley's eyes flared wide as a pleased pout teased her mouth, and she glided forth like the proverbial moth to a flame. She had no idea she wouldn't emerge uncharred.

Her ladyship took the bait like a fat, brown trout gobbling a wriggling worm.

And thus, the plan to ensnare the Huxleys was launched.

Siobhan prayed silently that the scheme would work because she didn't know if she could pretend to be a lady night after night. She'd memorized an entire back story—all of which was absolute codswallop—in case Huxley or another guest became inquisitive. None of the details could be verified or dismissed.

That tidbit had been Fletcher's doing, and she had to admit it was wise.

He advised fawning over Huxley while saying as little as possible.

She couldn't fawn any better than she could flirt.

“My dear, please enjoy yourself. I'm certain Lord Huxley won't mind if you sit beside him.” Lord Darius released her elbow at Huxley's table, and as prearranged, a guest rose—one of his cousin Torrian's agents—and vacated a chair. “I beg your indulgence. I have an unexpected, urgent matter to attend to. I'll return when I can.”

“Oh, la. You needn't fret on my account.” Siobhan fluttered her hand-painted lace fan. “I'm sure these handsome gentlemen won't mind if I sit at their table, even if I do not play.”

The four other players—all men—gave her a preoccupied glance before returning their attention to the cards they held close to their chests.

Gambler's obsession.

The cards had the men well in their talons.

Huxley veered his gaze upward, but his attention froze when he focused on Siobhan. "Indeed, young Westbrook. I would be happy to entertain the lady. Mayhap she'll bring me luck. God knows my wife doesn't."

His sarcasm earned a round of droll, masculine chuckles.

"Heard you'd left His Majesty's service." Huxley shifted his focus to Lord Darius for a half second. Lord Huxley's comment seemed casual enough, but something about his tone raised Siobhan's nape hairs. "Plan on taking on an active role in your brother's clubs now?"

"Good Lord, no." Lord Darius shook his head, doing a splendid job of pretending horror. "My interests lie elsewhere. However, I'm not above enjoying myself for a spell."

Huxley grunted. "So who is this enchanting creature?"

"Forgive my manners." Contriteness puckering his face, Lord Darius put a hand to his chest. "Mrs. Siobhan McKinney, please allow me to introduce you to Artemus Fogwell, Viscount Huxley. Lord Huxley, Mrs. Siobhan McKinney. I'll allow you to introduce her to the others, my lord. She's newly arrived in London after two years of mourning her husband's passing. Her mother and my mother attended the same finishing school, and I've been tasked with introducing her to London's more respectable establishments."

Huxley made a noncommittal noise in his throat but nodded, his buggy eyes glinting with interest.

"Gentlemen." Lord Darius gave a short bow before departing.

Not one of the other men acknowledged his farewell, nor did Lord Huxley introduce Siobhan. Just as well because as fraught as her nerves had become, she would never have

remembered their names. She could barely recall her assumed name.

Until now, she had never understood why gambling and gaming entranced so many otherwise sensible people, but these men gave her the merest glimpse into the addiction.

Da had played dice.

Too much sometimes, according to Maura's late-night scolds.

"Irish?" Huxley's peat-brown eyes lit up. "My grandmother on my mother's side was Irish. She had the most beautiful singing voice. A tear still forms when I hear a ballad she used to sing."

"I am, indeed, Irish, my lord." Siobhan produced a siren's smile and fluttered her eyelashes. Lord, she probably looked like she was amid an apoplexy. "I'm flattered you noticed."

"Come, my dear Mrs. McKinney. Make yourself comfortable." Huxley motioned for her to sit.

"Thank you, my lord." With a swirl of silk, she sank onto the gold velvet cushioned chair. The same chairs she'd been responsible for putting in place each morning until a fortnight ago. Leaning the merest bit in his lordship's direction, she allowed him a whiff of her perfume. "You are *most* kind, my lord."

"Tell me, do you sing?" He darted her a sideways glance before examining his cards.

"Only on special occasions, my lord." She tipped her mouth upward. "But then any occasion to sing to a viscount would be *very* special."

Lord save her.

Only a dimwitted nincompoop would believe her gushing.

A pleased smile arched the viscount's mouth, but he said no more.

Several minutes passed as the players made bets, discarded cards, and collected new ones. Siobhan hadn't a bald notion of

how the game progressed, but Huxley threw down his cards with a satisfied hoot.

“I win!” Huxley scooped his winnings toward the table’s edge.

Disgruntled mutters echoed around the table.

Unexpectedly, after pocketing his haul, Lord Huxley scooted his chair backward and stood with his hand extended.

“My dear Mrs. McKinney, walk with me, would you? I’m fair parched.”

As half a tumbler of brandy remained where he sat, Siobhan doubted he was thirsty.

Swerving a nervous glance around the room, she forced herself to remain composed. She wasn’t supposed to have to accompany Huxley anywhere.

Not once had Lord Huxley spared a glance for his wayward wife, who still hadn’t reappeared. Neither had Fletcher.

Did that mean things were proceeding well?

Siobhan refused to consider just what that might entail.

Chandler met her roving gaze and inclined his head as he and another security guard inconspicuously maneuvered their way through the crowd in her direction.

Stalling for time, she dropped her reticule, intending to notice its loss when halfway across the room and forcing his lordship to retrieve the dainty pouch. It only contained a handkerchief, a few coins, smelling salts, a small jar of rouge, and one very sharp hat pin for protection.

“Mrs. McKinney, you’ve dropped your reticule.”

Huxley was more observant than Siobhan gave him credit for, and that disconcerted her.

She’d best not underestimate the man again.

“Why, yes, I have.” She pressed a hand to her chest and blinked at him. “How remiss of me.”

His lordship bent over and, wheezing like a winded racehorse, retrieved the scrap of fringed cloth. Once he'd returned it to Siobhan's care, he extended his arm. "Shall we?"

Her heart beating a frantic staccato, she placed her fingertips atop his forearm.

He mustn't detect her reluctance.

"What part of Ireland do you hail from, Mrs. McKinney?" He took a circumventive route toward the room's perimeter—in the opposite direction of the refreshments.

"Outside Dublin, my lord." At least that was true.

"Ah, there you are." Wearing a broad smile, Lord Darius approached. "Forgive me for deserting you, Mrs. McKinney and for imposing on you, Lord Huxley."

"I quite enjoyed myself," Siobhan lied.

Huxley gave her the willies.

"It was no imposition at all." Huxley puffed out his jowly cheeks. "I enjoyed Mrs. McKinney's company immensely. Will you return tomorrow, dear lady?"

Siobhan exchanged a glance with Lord Darius.

"I should like to very much." She gave the viscount a coy smile. "But only if you shall also be here, my lord."

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, she piled it on thick.

A familiar dark head across the room drew her eye.

Fletcher had returned.

Lady Huxley had not.

What did that mean?

Did Siobhan want to know?

He spoke to guests as he weaved his way toward them.

"Huxley." Fletcher nodded. "Your lady requests you take her home. She's developed a megrim."

"Of course she has," Huxley grumbled, not the least sympathetic to his wife's plight. "Never knew a woman to

suffer so from headaches, and half an hour later, she fully recovers.”

He bent over Siobhan’s hand and placed his thick, moist lips on the back of her glove.

She barely suppressed a shudder of revulsion.

“Until tomorrow, Mrs. McKinney.”

“I look forward to it, your lordship.”

Once out of earshot, Fletcher murmured, “Meet me in my office in fifteen minutes. I have acquired some rather interesting information.”

CHAPTER NINE

De la Chance – Fletcher’s office

Half an hour later

Sitting on the gold brocade sofa, Fletcher rotated the whisky glass as he stared into the fire, one leg crossed over the other. The interlude with Samantha Huxley hadn’t been unproductive, although he’d need more time with her before she confided in him.

The woman was petrified; that kind of terror only came from dire threats.

“Lady Huxley isn’t ready to talk freely yet, but she’s definitely hiding something. What’s more, she seems utterly terrified of her husband.” He glanced upward, a small frown veeing his eyebrows.

“You haven’t touched your brandy, Siobhan.” He raised one finger toward her glass. “It will steady your nerves.”

She’d performed remarkably well tonight. Better than Fletcher could’ve hoped, but she’d confessed her nerves had taken a pummeling.

She dropped her focus to the finger’s worth of amber liquid he’d poured into her tumbler. “I don’t care for the strong taste.”

“So we go through this charade again tomorrow?” Darius plucked the glass from her fingers and set it on the side table. He sat beside her and slung an ankle over his knee.

He seemed quite taken with Siobhan, not that he could blame his brother. Siobhan Kenney was a fascinating woman, nearer Darius's age than Fletcher's.

Not that, at ten years her senior, he was too old for her. But she was his employee in a manner of speaking and therefore utterly off limits.

That weird, undefinable feeling rooted around Fletcher's breast again.

He gave a contemplative nod in response to Darius's question before taking a sip of whisky. "I think we must. And every night until we've snared our prey. We mustn't let up. If you are up to the task, Siobhan."

"I suppose I must be." She mustered a brave smile. "The sooner the Huxleys are apprehended, the sooner my siblings and I can go on with our lives."

As yet, Fletcher hadn't decided on a permanent position for Siobhan. She didn't qualify for typical jobs at *De la Chance* or his other establishments besides a cloakroom attendant. Knowing her as he did now, she would find the work tedious and unfulfilling, but she would not complain. Respectable positions were few and far between.

Still, he'd prefer it if she liked what she did, and that brought him back to what the devil was he to do with her after Huxley's arrest? Thus, for the time being, he kept pushing the question to the back of his mind. So far, no brilliant inspiration had struck him.

Her transformation from a skinny boy of all work to a regal lady was more than he could've hoped for. She mightn't have been raised among England's upper ten thousand, but despite her protests, she bore an element of refined breeding.

For certain, Almack's peeresses would find fault with her speech, manners, or some other inconsequential detail, but Fletcher had been hard-pressed not to gawk at her like a callow youth all evening.

Whatever seamstress had sewn tonight's sapphire gown deserved an award. The silk swayed and swirled with each

step, giving Siobhan a graceful, confident air and accenting her gently rounded curves. The color brought out the blue hues in her midnight hair and caused something magical to happen with her eyes.

In a word, Siobhan Kenney was stunning.

Several men had murmured their approval, and a couple dared to voice an interest in approaching her with disreputable offers. Fletcher had succinctly squelched their immoral contemplations with a glower meant to eviscerate, and he'd instructed Chandler to have security keep an extra watchful eye on the brazen curs.

Perhaps it was time to reevaluate the men's memberships at *De la Chance*.

Huxley's acute and real interest in Siobhan was both a blessing and a curse.

Siobhan must tread carefully to retain his interest without leading him to believe she was willing to engage in a full-on dalliance. Fletcher, on the other hand, must convince Lady Huxley he *was* willing to engage in a romance without actually doing so.

It was a delicate game they played. One that could backfire and send their prey into hiding once more. Fletcher was tired of the intrigue and peril. He wanted the matter finished once and for all.

So far, Torrian hadn't been able to dig up a motive for Huxley's part in sabotaging and vandalizing Fletcher's businesses. The man was sly. Except for the note his wife had given Siobhan, he was always several people removed from the actual crimes.

What Fletcher hadn't anticipated and which needed careful consideration, was Lady Huxley's fear of her husband. She hadn't admitted Huxley was an abusive brute but confessed she was afraid to cross him and that he controlled her completely.

Except for her liaisons.

Lord Huxley didn't appear to give two farthings how his wife conducted herself as long as she remained discreet. Wouldn't her affairs incense a controlling brute? Nevertheless, men wishing to hide their abuse grew practiced at leaving marks where no one would see.

That truth put things in a different perspective.

Perhaps her ladyship carried out her husband's directives because he forced her to.

If Fletcher offered her a way out, an escape from the monster she'd married out of her lust for a title, would Lady Huxley be willing to reveal what she knew?

It was worth considering.

"I'm to bed." Darius rose and, after smothering a yawn, stretched his arms wide. "If you have no objection, Fletcher, I'd like to take Siobhan and the children to Gunter's for ices tomorrow. It will help build the illusion that I am showing her London's landmarks."

Fletcher's gut pitched at his brother's proposal.

Had Siobhan captivated Darius already?

Not a surprise. She was bewitching.

"Not a bad suggestion." Fletcher feigned indifference. "Except how do we explain the children's presence?"

Darius scratched his nose. "Could they not still be her brother and sister?"

Siobhan's face brightened. "Kimber and Paddy would adore an outing, but they don't know about my false surname. They might spill the beans."

Fletcher finished his whisky and then placed the tumbler on the side table. "I think I'd better tag along too and act as interference should anyone wish to engage in conversation. Unless you want to explain to Paddy and Kimber what our mission is?"

Siobhan shook her head with such vehemence that a curl tumbled loose and caressed her neck. "No. I still don't want

them involved. They are unused to subterfuge. Trust me when I tell you that they couldn't keep the secret. Deception is not their strong suit. I could tell them we are using a different surname to protect us from whatever Da ran away from in Ireland, but that might raise more questions I don't have answers for. Besides, I dislike being dishonest."

That was another thing Fletcher had learned about Siobhan. Despite months of pretending to be a boy, her integrity was paramount to her. When she had a choice, she would always choose honesty.

"Let me know at breakfast. I'm fair fagged and need to find my mattress. I planned on leaving at half three." Darius strode to the door and with a little wave, let himself out.

Fletcher risked angering her.

"I think you are underestimating your brother and sister, Siobhan."

She cocked her head. "Perchance. They are not little children anymore. Let me sleep on it, please. I shall give you an answer in the morning."

The mantel clock chimed half eleven.

Fletcher still needed to make a final walk through the club.

"Please excuse me. I'm quite tired myself." She rose and shook out her gown. "I'm unused to late nights and wish to look in on my brother and sister before I retire. I feel like I've neglected them these past days."

She had been rather overwhelmed with every kind of lesson and instruction Fletcher thought would make her ruse more believable.

"I'll walk with you." Fletcher ran a hand across his slightly rough chin. Not that he believed any danger lurked between his office and the sleeping chambers.

Still, it wouldn't hurt.

At least, that was the excuse he used to accompany her.

She shot him a surprised glance. "As you wish."

They ascended the two flights of stairs in companionable silence. Outside the chamber assigned to the children, she half turned, her mouth tilted upward into a tired smile. “Good night.”

“Do you mind if I come in?” Fletcher grew more attached to Kimber and Paddy with each passing day. Their presence at *De la Chance* brought playfulness and a light-hearted atmosphere that he liked.

Siobhan’s hesitation was so brief he might’ve imagined it.

She angled her head in affirmation before opening the door.

A lamp burned low on a table in the room’s middle.

She crossed to her brother’s and sister’s beds, situated side by side with a night table between them. In truth, they were of an age they should each have their own chambers, but not until this business with the Huxleys was dealt with.

They’d had too many changes these past months, not the least of which was their parents’ disappearance. Torrian had met with dead end after dead end so far in that regard, but undaunted, he continued to try to find out what happened to Maura and Tadgh Kenney.

Kimber slept on her side, a raggedy doll clutched in her thin arms and her unplaited hair almost as black as Siobhan’s spread upon her pillow. Paddy slumbered on his back with an arm tossed over his auburn head, his bedclothes rumpled across his waist.

Siobhan pulled the covers over each child’s shoulders before bending to kiss each of their foreheads.

Strong emotion tugged Fletcher’s heartstrings.

Was there anything as beautiful or touching as a mother’s love?

Or, in this case, a surrogate mother’s love, for that is what Siobhan had become to her brother and sister.

For the first time in his recollection, Fletcher longed for children.

His children.

Siobhan glanced over her shoulder, and her gaze locked with his.

“Fletcher, why are you looking at me like that?”

Slowly, she straightened.

“Because, Siobhan, I am again reminded what an extraordinary woman you are.”

He stepped nearer until only a few inches separated them. Seemingly of its own volition, his arm lifted, and he brushed a knuckle across one velvety cheekbone. “Every time I believe I have you figured out, you say or do something to astonish me and raise you higher in my estimation.”

He hadn’t meant to reveal his private ruminations, but just as he’d caressed her cheek, though it wasn’t wise, his deuced tongue insisted on betraying him.

“Since your opinion of me is below sea level,” she quipped, “I have a considerable distance to rise.”

There, she did it again.

Turned the tables and eased the tension by way of a witticism.

He slid an arm around her trim waist, drawing her nearer.

Her mouth parted, her pupils dilated, but she didn’t pull away.

“Not as far as you might think,” he whispered, his voice thick and husky.

Blister and blast. I’m in it up to my neckcloth.

He should march from the chamber straightaway.

Eyes wide with wonder, she searched his face.

“Are you going to kiss me, Fletcher?” Her breathless whisper sent a thousand frissons over his body.

“I want to.” Lord, how he craved the taste of those plump, cherry-tinted lips. “Would you object?”

“I should.” Biting her lower lip, she spared a glance toward her sleeping siblings. “It would complicate things immensely.”

Fletcher couldn't deny her insight.

But something told him it would be bloody well worth every complication. Every difficulty. Every impediment.

“True.” Regardless, he took a step closer, her perfume and heat beckoning him like water lapping the shoreline. “But I'm willing to take that risk.” More fool him. “Are you?”

She stared at him for several heartbeats, desire and hesitation vying for supremacy in her eyes. At last, she shook her head and skirted around him.

“No. I'm sorry.” Her small breasts rose and fell in her agitation. “You have nothing to lose by acting upon your desires. On the other hand, I have everything, and I am not willing to compromise myself, this mission you've embroiled me in, or the wellbeing and future of my siblings.”

With blue silk swishing around her ankles, she fled the chamber.

Fletcher lost track of how long he stood there, head bowed, and fingers curled against his thighs as he ruminated on her prudence-driven rejection and why it stung so fiercely. When he finally lifted his head, it was with renewed purpose and determination.

From this point forward, he could treat Siobhan like any other female employee, which meant she was off limits, or he could trust his instinct, which fairly shouted he should pursue her with all diligence.

And he must make his decision before he saw her again.

CHAPTER TEN

Carriage ride from Gunter's Tea Shop

Berkeley Square – Mayfair London

The next afternoon

Siobhan tried not to notice the many curious stares or shared whispers directed toward the elegant landau as Baldwin expertly guided the burgundy coach down a cobbled street. With Kimber sitting on one side of her and Paddy on the other, Siobhan pointed her attention to somewhere beyond Fletcher's head.

The temperate July sun bathed the carriage occupants in pleasantly warm rays, from which her pink silk and ivory fringed parasol protected her complexion. As if suddenly wearing wide-ribbed bonnets and holding a sunshade would erase the smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose.

This is a fairytale outing in a fairytale carriage, she reminded herself. This is not my life or the children's. Do not get caught up in the excitement and forget your humble origins, Siobhan Moya Neasa Kenney.

Kimber and Paddy thought it great fun to pretend to have a different surname to help Fletcher catch a criminal, but they were expressly forbidden to speak to strangers. Siobhan still held considerable doubts about whether it had been wise to be so straightforward with her siblings, but as Fletcher had pointed out, they weren't toddlers.

“The chocolate ice was delicious, but I want to try pineapple next time.” Paddy grinned and bent forward to catch his sister’s eye. “What kind do you wish to taste next, Kimber?”

“Lemon,” Kimber answered without hesitation, a small smear of strawberry ice at the corner of her lip.

Siobhan quelched the worry that tried to rise at their innocent assumption that there would be a next time. “Let’s be grateful for the treats we enjoyed and not want more already.”

The children could not become accustomed to a life of privilege.

Even if Siobhan continued to work for Fletcher after the debacle with the Huxleys was resolved, her little family must live within their means, and visits to Gunter’s for ices could not be indulged with any regularity.

And yet, this was the happiest Siobhan had seen her brother and sister since their parents’ disappearance. Fletcher had told her he’d asked his cousin to look into the matter, but since Siobhan had no information to impart to him regarding where Da and Maura had gone or who they had seen, she had little hope he would be successful.

“What about you, Mr. Westbrook? Lord Darius?” Paddy’s enthusiasm and broad grin proved catching.

“Oh, I always order bergamot.” Lord Darius winked. “I’ve tried all the flavors—coriander, cinnamon, violet, parmesan, and the rest, and nothing compares.”

“I disagree.” Fletcher turned his penetrating, verdant gaze on Siobhan. “I’m rather fond of vanilla.”

Which just so happened to be the flavor she and Fletcher had chosen.

A little thrill of delight tunneled through her blood.

A flush heating her cheeks, Siobhan glanced to the side. She immediately regretted it when two regal matrons in a passing carriage pointed at their landau, put their heads together, and spoke rapidly.

Fletcher didn't appear the least concerned about the attention they drew as the vehicle rumbled over the cobblestones. Likely as a duke's sons, he and Lord Darius had become accustomed to the rude gawking as if the Westbrooks should expect and accept people examining them in public like curious oddities on display at a museum, the circus, or a traveling show.

So accustomed to being invisible, Siobhan found it hard to keep her face impassive and feign indifference. She would never become accustomed to the scrutiny.

Thankfully, no one approached their carriage while they ate their ices beneath a maple tree's welcome shade. Fletcher's formidable frowns directed toward anyone who looked in their way might've accounted for that reprieve.

"Kimber darling, you have a bit of strawberry ice just here." Siobhan pointed to her mouth.

Kimber darted her tongue out and dutifully licked the spot clean. "Better?"

"Much." Siobhan patted her knee.

"Mr. Westbrook?" Kimber pumped her legs against the plum-colored seat.

"Yes, Kimber?"

Fletcher remained unfailingly patient with the children, and Siobhan fought to keep her resolve strong and her battlements raised against any foolish softening toward him.

Too late.

"How old were you when you ate your first ice?" the child asked.

He puzzled his forehead. "Four or five, I think. It was chocolate, and I remember getting it all over my face and shirt. My nurse was quite cross with me."

"Today was mine, Paddy's, and Siobhan's first time." The picture of innocence, she gifted him a brilliant smile. "Thank you for treating us."

Her pretty manners caused a small swell of pride to blossom behind Siobhan's ribs.

"You are most welcome." Fletcher met Siobhan's gaze across the carriage, and a scintillating current passed between them.

As much as this unexpected and new connection with Fletcher thrilled Siobhan, she was pragmatic, if nothing else. She'd heard the whispers circulating among the guests and female employees at *De la Chance*. He might be a wealthy, polite, and kind rakehell, but he was a rakehell nonetheless.

"It was my idea," Lord Darius teased. "Don't I get a thank you too?"

Her face scrunched in the way children do when they are in deep thought, Kimber considered his request.

"Yes. It was most thoughtful of you, Lord Darius, but I think you were as eager for an ice as Paddy and me."

Fletcher let out a hoot of laughter. "Smart child. She has you pegged, little brother. You have always been one for sweets."

Lord Darius released a good-natured chuckle and then winked.

Siobhan watched the exchange with a mixture of pleasure and bewilderment.

When she had disguised herself as a boy, she'd never for a single instance regarded Fletcher in any regard other than her employer. However, since her ruse had been exposed and she'd been permitted to be female once more, she couldn't seem to stop seeing him as a handsome man. Far above her menial station, to be certain, but an exceptional chiseled and muscled example of masculinity nevertheless.

She'd have to be blind not to notice or so ancient she didn't care.

She was neither.

He was also the rogue quickly wiggling his way into her brother's and sister's hearts.

And mine?



HAT ANGLED to keep the sun from his eyes and also permit Fletcher to regard Siobhan from beneath hooded eyes undetected, Fletcher observed the play of emotions across her face. She tried to maintain a neutral, impassive mien, but her expressive eyes gave her away.

It was truly a wonder or perhaps plain stupidity that he hadn't realized she was a female sooner. She'd avoided eye contact and kept her chin down those first weeks. He understood why now.

In truth, the outing to Gunter's initially had him on edge, but as the day progressed without issues, he allowed himself to relax a jot and enjoy the excursion.

When was the last time he'd indulged in something so frivolous?

There'd been no more ominous messages or riffraff loitering around the outside of his clubs and theater, as reported by Chandler that morning after Fletcher found the disturbing note.

It's not over.

What exactly did that mean?

The harassment wasn't over?

The threats, fires, and attempts on Fletcher's life?

He had both Huxleys monitored so closely they couldn't pass wind or belch without Fletcher hearing about it. He'd have to give the viscount credit for patience. The man wasn't in a hurry to show his hand.

Fletcher didn't believe for an instant his lordship had decided to cut his losses.

No, Huxley was up to something and merely bid his time.

But why target Fletcher's establishments?

London boasted dozens of other gaming and social clubs.

This attack seemed personal, but why?

Could Fletcher convince Samantha to confide in him before Huxley acted?

And how long could Siobhan maintain her fawning ruse before the viscount presumed to pressure her for more? She'd likely punch him in the nose or kick him in the rear for overstepping.

Fletcher waved a pesky bee away, drawing Siobhan's attention.

She curved her mouth upward before presenting her pert profile and watching the passing scenery once more.

He'd been unable to resurrect his ire toward her.

In fact, his desire to protect her and her brother and sister had become paramount, though until this situation with Huxley was behind him, he refused to consider why that was. Fletcher never should have convinced Siobhan to participate in the scheme to catch Huxley, but it was too late now, and there was no turning back.

Should Huxley become suspicious, he might well retreat and delay months to strike again.

Fletcher was good and done with waiting and worrying, which was why he'd decided to go on the offensive. Tonight, he intended to pressure Samantha to see if he couldn't break through her battlements. He had another trick up his sleeve too. One that was extremely risky, but if it played out as he intended...

He'd have to wait and see if his instincts were spot on.

It was probably past time to apprise Father of the ongoings.

Fletcher did not doubt that Huxley would attempt to use his position to escape consequences once caught. Having Father on board and exerting his influence might become necessary—which meant writing a letter to Father explaining

the situation and asking him to come to town because Fletcher could not leave London at present.

Too much was at stake.

The urgency thrumming through him to have the matter done once and for all had much to do with the three people sitting opposite—one spirited Irish lass in particular.

A confirmed bachelor who enjoyed the company of many women without regret, he'd begun to consider a much different future—one he'd never envisioned but which grew in appeal with each passing day.

A future with Siobhan—even if she didn't know it yet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Three evenings later

De la Chance's ballroom

Quarter past ten

Fletcher perused the teeming ballroom for a sign of either Huxley. Satisfaction ought to fill him at the number of people in attendance, but instead, frustration beat in unison with the pulse in his temple as he strode toward Siobhan seated along one wall.

As she didn't know how to dance—something he intended to rectify soon—she feigned a twisted ankle to explain her refusal to partner with the many men who approached her for the privilege. That way, she could still keep Huxley company should he put in an appearance.

Resplendent in an ivory and sky-blue gown, she fairly took Fletcher's breath away. With every passing day, he marveled at the captivating little bundle of femininity. He'd begun to find excuses to seek her out, and even Darius had taken note, though his brother merely raised a cocky eyebrow as he slid his mouth into an irony-filled grin.

Siobhan, on the other hand, though polite, remained aloof and reserved, watching Fletcher with her unfathomable blue, blue eyes brimming with doubt and mistrust. Somehow, he must overcome her hesitancy. A task not easily accomplished

after she'd witnessed his darker nature, but a mission he was determined to triumph at.

The Huxleys hadn't visited Fletcher's clubs since Siobhan met the viscount.

Fletcher's unease grew with each passing day.

He didn't doubt they were behind the machinations to run him out of business or that they'd hired Prescott to do their dirty work. Flexing his jaw as he strode across the sanded floor, he mulled over the possibilities that kept the Huxleys at bay.

Had Lady Huxley deduced he only pretended interest in her to glean information?

After hers and Fletcher's *tete-e-tete* the other night, had Huxley questioned her?

As taken as the viscount seemed with Siobhan, his continued absence might well portend a significant problem. In truth, a part of Fletcher felt nothing but relief that she wasn't subjected to the libertine's company. He never should have involved her in the scheme to catch Huxley, and now that he had, he seriously considered calling it off and figuring out a different way to catch the wily blackguard.

Fanning herself as she spoke to the matron seated beside her, Siobhan glanced upward at Fletcher's approach and gifted him such a radiant smile that he momentarily forgot why he wanted to speak with her.

Lord, she was a vision, but her loveliness didn't solely cause the warmth spreading through his ribs and tunneling into his heart. However, now wasn't the time to examine the growing sentiment. Later, when Huxley was dealt with, Fletcher would allow himself that luxury.

For now, he'd cherish Siobhan's geniality.

Seldom did she welcome him with such earnestness.

"Might I have a word with you, Mrs. McKinney?"

"Of course, Mr. Westbrook." She turned toward the elderly woman attired in a vibrant maroon and silver gown she'd been

chatting with. An out of fashion mouche on the dame's papery cheek quivered with her movements like a fly in the throes of death.

"Mrs. Partridge, I have enjoyed our conversation. I do hope your little Miss Mousetail is feeling better soon."

"Thank you, my dear." Mrs. Partridge patted Siobhan's hand. "You've been kind to an old woman."

"Good evening, Mrs. Partridge." Fletcher swept into a bow before kissing her knobby knuckles. "As beautiful as ever."

"Flim flam, young rascal. Your compliments are wasted on me." She turned her watery gaze toward Siobhan. "Save them for this young lady. She's a breath of fresh air in an August afternoon fish market."

Fletcher laughed at the apt comparison. "She is indeed."

Taking care to remember her *sore* ankle ruse, Fletcher extended a hand to Siobhan to help her stand and once she was upright, looped her hand through the crook of his elbow so she could lean upon him.

It didn't bother him in the least to have her nearby. In truth, he quite relished the closeness.

As he guided her toward a private corner, he permitted himself the indulgence of enjoying her subtle perfume with a hint of peony, if he wasn't mistaken, and the way her raven hair shone under the illumination of dozens of beeswax candles in the crystal chandeliers overhead.

He leaned down. "Who, might I ask, is Mousetail?"

"Her cat. She's been ill, and Mrs. Partridge is quite frantic about her health. Lonely too, I think." Siobhan glanced upward through that sweep of sooty lashes. "What is it you need to speak with me about?"

Stopping near a potted fern and turning his back to the assembly, Fletcher glanced around to ensure their privacy. This wasn't a conversation he wanted eavesdropped upon.

"The Huxleys arrived a few minutes ago, Siobhan."

“Oh.” She darted a swift glance past his shoulders.

“Chandler informed me at once,” Fletcher said. “I haven’t seen them in the ballroom, and Huxley might choose to spend the night in the card room as is his preference, but I wanted to make you aware. Continue your ruse of a sprained ankle to dissuade Lord Huxley from trying to get you alone should he venture here. I intend to find Lady Huxley promptly, so if you don’t see me for a time, do not become alarmed.”

She gave a little nod, but he didn’t miss the flicker of unease flashing across her features.

“I hope you get the information you need soon, Fletcher. I’m not comfortable with this charade or with Lord Huxley. He gives me the shivers.”

As well he ought.

“I know. Neither am I.” Fletcher shifted a few inches closer. “I’ve made sure you shan’t be alone. At least one of my men will be near you at all times. Just don’t leave the ballroom.”

“I shan’t.” She tightened her grip on his arm as she peered up at him. Genuine concern deepened her eyes to navy blue, and it was all he could do not to draw her into his arms and assure her that all would be well.

“Be careful, won’t you Fletcher? I’m not convinced that her ladyship isn’t capable of great deception. I do not trust her.”

Siobhan cared about him.

His heart swelled near to bursting at what she’d unintentionally revealed.

“We are of the same mind there.” Fletcher rotated them toward the dancers. “Do you want to return to where you were sitting? It seems Mrs. Partridge has left.”

The dame seldom stayed past eleven.

Siobhan shook her head. “No, that bench just there is fine.”

She pointed to a tufted gold and royal blue bench between two more potted plants.

After seeing her settled, Fletcher braced his hands on his hips. “Would you like anything before I go? Lemonade? Ratafia?”

A kiss?

Her comfort, safety, and happiness had become paramount to him these past days. It wasn't wise, of course, but this feeling prompting Fletcher—almost against his will and logic—to pursue and care for Siobhan was unlike anything he—a practiced rake—had ever experienced.

Even he recognized the rarity and need to treasure whatever this thing was blossoming between them. It was almost as disturbing as the threat to his establishment but in an exhilarating, anticipatory way rather than dread and apprehension. Self-derision tried to skew his mouth upward, but fearing Siobhan would misinterpret, he kept his face neutral.

“No. I am fine. Oh.” She looked beyond him, her expressive eyes telling him who was there before she spoke the words. “Lady Huxley approaches.”

“Remember what I said, Siobhan.”

“I shall.”

Fletcher pivoted and crossed to meet her ladyship. He didn't want her near Siobhan, not that he believed she'd recognize the refined young woman as the ragamuffin to which she'd given a note.

He could scarcely see the resemblance any longer.

“My lady. It is wonderful to see you.” He bent into a toady's bow. “I missed your company.”

Always one to love attention, Viscountess Huxley preened at his fawning.

Fletcher swore she'd dampened her crimson gown, leaving little to the imagination. Rubies and diamonds glittered at her

throat and ears, complimented by dual bracelets at her wrists. A velvet, fringed reticule also hung from her wrist.

“Dance with me?” He extended his elbow.

Lady Huxley wasn't of a mind to cooperate.

“Mr. Westbrook,” she murmured in greeting as she continued past Fletcher, straight toward Siobhan.

Bloody, deuced perfect.

Fletcher had no choice but to fall in step beside her. He wasn't leaving Siobhan to the woman's viperish tongue or mean-spirited antics.

Forming a moue with her rouged mouth, Lady Huxley turned her pouting gaze on him.

“Introduce us, Fletcher darling, won't you?”

He'd rather eat boiled slugs. Centipedes. Scorpions.

Still, what choice had he?

He must have Lady Huxley's cooperation.

“Mrs. McKinney, may I introduce Samantha Fogwell, Viscountess Huxley? Your ladyship, Mrs. Siobhan McKinney.”

What was her ladyship up to?

Had Huxley put her up to this?

For what purpose?

The viscountess made a pretense of looking around. “Your husband is not present, Mrs. McKinney?”

Siobhan appeared suitably sober. “I am widowed, your ladyship.”

“Oh, that's right. Forgive me. My husband mentioned that the other night.” Lady Huxley gave an artificial laugh. “How silly of me to have forgotten.”

Why would Huxley make a point of informing his wife about Siobhan? Particularly if he'd formed a romantic interest in her?

To boast? Gloat?

From all accounts, he was a warped ponce.

Lady Huxley sidled closer, inspecting Siobhan with an intensity that made Fletcher's nape hairs stand on end.

"You seem familiar to me, Mrs. McKinney. I feel quite sure we've met before."

Hell's bells.

"We could not have done." Forming a small smile, Siobhan remained admirably composed. "I have only recently arrived from Ireland, and Lord Darius has been charged with showing me the sights as a favor to our mothers."

"*Hmm*, I could have sworn." After a final lingering look, Lady Huxley clasped Fletcher's arm. "Let's have that dance, shall we?"

Without a word, he swirled her onto the dancefloor.

"She's a pretty little thing but too thin and pale." Lady Huxley couldn't quite conceal her jealousy. "I know *you* prefer your women voluptuous and exotic."

He had. *Until Siobhan.*

"Mrs. McKinney?" Fletcher puzzled his forehead but refrained from glancing toward Siobhan. "She twisted her ankle earlier. Likely, that is the cause of her pallor. I was checking on her when you arrived."

"Your brother couldn't have done so?" There was the jealousy the viscountess unsuccessfully tried to hide.

"He ate something that didn't agree with him and excused himself to lie down for a while." In truth, Darius was perfectly well and, hopefully as planned, at this very moment, offered Huxley's driver a flask of whisky to loosen his tongue. "I imagine they will call it an early evening."

"She rather looks like a waif sitting there." Her ladyship tightened her mouth. "Huxley seemed quite taken with her, but I confess, I do not see the appeal."

That she could casually speak about her husband's fascination with another woman said much about the state of the viscountess and viscount's marriage.

"I feared you weren't returning and confess, felt great regret that it might be so." Rather than respond to her criticism, Fletcher side-stepped a couple, displaying more exuberance than dancing skill. "Are you well?"

Lady Huxley gave a wary glance around, then nodded.

"Fletcher, Huxley is suspicious. We must tread carefully."

That complicated things to no end.

"You know I want to help you, Samantha," Fletcher murmured for her ears alone. "I cannot unless you trust me."

"He beat me. I am covered in bruises, though he makes sure they are where no one can see them. That's why we haven't been in attendance." She raised misty eyes to him as they turned upon the floor. "He's not sane. He's sworn to destroy you."

And Fletcher still didn't know why.

He must get her away from her husband, but not until he had concrete proof. Somehow, he must persuade her tonight to tell all.

Fletcher glanced over her head, then around the ballroom with the guests swathed in their evening finery. "After the dance ends, pretend to go to the ladies' retiring room. I'll meet you. There's a back way to my office from there. We can form a plan to secure your safety."

After hesitating, she dipped her chin in a shallow nod.

When the dance ended, she slipped away without a word.

After ensuring Huxley wasn't in the ballroom and hadn't observed his wife's departure, Fletcher exited through another doorway.

If Huxley had grown suspicious this quickly, there was no time to waste.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A few minutes later...

Still in the ballroom

Tension radiated throughout Siobhan, tensing her muscles, cramping her lungs, and keeping her on the edge of the bench she sat upon. She couldn't shake the feeling that something about Lady Huxley's presence tonight wasn't right. Her disturbing questioning, constant shifty glancing about, and artificial smile unnerved Siobhan no end.

She didn't trust the pampered beauty.

Without intending to, she observed Fletcher's and her ladyship's progress around the dance floor. He seemed attentive to the viscountess but frequently swept his astute gaze over the assembled guests.

Fletcher always knew exactly what went on in his club.

So far, Lord Huxley had not appeared in the ballroom, not that the welcome respite eased Siobhan's edginess.

According to Fletcher, the man had a bad leg, so he'd likely made straight for the card room, which seemed to be the viscount's preference. Nonetheless, Fletcher had insisted she pretend to have twisted her ankle in the unlikely event his lordship asked her to dance.

Fletcher still had no idea why Huxley targeted him and his businesses.

Over the past days, Siobhan's concern for Fletcher's safety had increased until it became a thrumming accompaniment to her pulse. Her growing concern made no logical sense.

He was her employer, and it was the worst sort of foolishness to entertain a notion of anything else between them. In her head, she knew that, but her silly heart seemed to have developed a mind of its own.

Yet, she wasn't so stupid as to act upon these newfound feelings.

She had a brother and sister to care for. Her life, her choices, weren't her own. Her actions and decisions must always take into consideration what was best for them. Still, when she lay alone in her beautiful bedchamber, she couldn't stop thinking about Fletcher.

The way he tilted his mouth boyishly when he smiled. The breadth of his shoulders and how the muscles flexed when he moved. Or the way his chestnut hair shone in the sunlight. The rich baritone of his voice...

Yes, he captivated her, but she was not—could never be—a captive to her emotions.

Siobhan shifted, leaning slightly to the side to keep Fletcher and the viscountess within sight. Across the ballroom, two smartly dressed gentlemen watched the couple with more than casual interest.

Fletcher's men spoke in low tones on the ballroom's other side.

A shiver juddered her spine.

A menacing undercurrent infected the merriment and cheer within the ballroom.

Did anyone else sense the disturbance?

The string quartet played the waltz's last notes, and with a speaking glance to Fletcher, Lady Huxley drifted away.

From beneath her eyelashes, Siobhan observed the viscountess's progress as she left the ballroom, and then Siobhan shifted her focus to Fletcher, who had crossed to the

other side. He swept the ballroom with his intense, verdant gaze, his attention resting on her for a brief moment, and then, with an almost indiscernible nod, he also departed.

Hopefully, his efforts with Lady Huxley tonight would prove successful, and this farce could end.

The gentlemen observing Fletcher and her ladyship separated, one strolling after Fletcher and the other in the direction Lady Huxley had gone. To the casual observer, nothing seemed the least peculiar about their behavior.

Siobhan searched the ballroom for Fletcher's men.

Chandler slipped from the ballroom.

Not good. Not good at all.

She straightened, uneasiness turning her stomach.

A pair of plump matrons had crowded onto the bench she sat upon. Heads together, they gossiped and tittered endlessly. Siobhan eyed the wall she'd been sitting along earlier, but guests occupied those chairs.

Lord Darius had yet to return as well.

Another shudder rippled down her spine, leaving her chilled, and a knot formed in her lower belly. Even as she considered disobeying Fletcher's directive to stay put, Lady Huxley reappeared at the entrance.

So she hadn't sneaked off to meet Fletcher, after all.

With a furtive glance, the viscountess angled her head toward the suspicious gentleman loitering near the doorway. After a disinterested glance around, he strolled nonchalantly after her.

Siobhan bit her lower lip as she flashed cold, then hot, then cold again.

"My dear? Are you quite well?" One of the matrons squinted at her. "You appear most pale. Perhaps you should lie down in the retiring room for a spell."

The other woman eyed the sliver of bench Siobhan sat upon with open envy. "We could save your seat."

Take it, you mean.

She was as subtle as a highland cow mincing down Bond Street wearing the crown jewels.

In that instant, Siobhan made her decision.

“Yes. Perhaps you are right.” She stood, and after making certain Fletcher, Lord Darius, or one of the many guards on duty wouldn’t come charging across the floor to scold her, she carefully picked her way toward the door Lady Huxley disappeared through with just enough of a limp to put off anyone asking her to dance but not so much that she drew others’ concern.

Once outside the ballroom, she drew a deep breath and tried to determine what to do next.

Movement and a flash of scarlet farther along the corridor decided for her.

She would follow her ladyship and see what the woman was up to.

With a swift, stealthy glance around to ensure no one watched her, Siobhan lifted her skirts and hurried in the same direction sans her limp.

No one intent on meeting her paramour for an assignation—in this case, Fletcher—did so accompanied by another man—a scoundrel from Siobhan’s amateur assessment who portended no good.

A swift peek over her shoulder revealed none of Fletcher’s men followed her.

She skewed her mouth into a small grimace.

So much for not being left alone.

Her heart hammering so hard the organ threatened to escape the confines of her chest, she passed several closed doors, including the room reserved for ladies, before peeking around the corner.

Empty.

Forehead puzzled, she took several steps into the vacant passageway.

Where had the viscountess gone?

Had she slipped into the ladies' retiring room after all?

Siobhan glanced behind her.

Three giggling women exited the chamber reserved for women's personal needs.

Just as she turned around to retrace her steps, Lady Huxley's sultry voice rooted her in place. "Why are you following me?"

Dread drying her mouth, Siobhan slowly turned around, favoring her supposedly injured ankle.

Expression haughty but etched with satisfaction, Lady Huxley raised an overly plucked eyebrow as she brushed her gloved fingers over the marble-topped table to her left. "Well?"

Where was that man?

Even now, did he observe Siobhan from the shadows?

And where was Fletcher?

The secret passage to his office was mere inches from where the viscountess stood.

"I wasn't, following you, that is." Siobhan fluttered her hand, pretending stupidity. "I fear I have lost my way. I have no sense of direction."

The viscountess's disconcertingly sudden appearance troubled her.

One moment, she hadn't been there, and the next, she was.

Equally alarming was Fletcher's men's peculiar absence.

Tasting fear on her tongue, bitter and acrid, Siobhan fisted her hands against the urge to turn tail and run.

Why hadn't she listened to Fletcher?

Because she'd been unable to shake the feeling he was in danger.

“And your wanderings just happened to be along the same path I took?” Lady Huxley certainly was a suspicious sort. With good reason, but she didn't know that.

“I meant to use the ladies' retiring room to lie down and rest my ankle. It throbs something fierce, but I seemed to have become turned around.” Siobhan mustered a wobbly smile. “Perhaps you could point me in the right direction?”

A nasty smile arching her rouged mouth, Lady Huxley shook her head.

“Did you truly think I would not recognize you?” She pointed her attention toward a wall sconce before flicking it back to Siobhan. “It was a corridor much like this where I passed you the letter to deliver to Fletcher.”

Siobhan barely suppressed a gasp.

A sneer contorted her features. “You clean up well for a street urchin.”

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Lady Huxley *had* recognized her.

What game did the woman play?

“As I said before, you are mistaken.” Siobhan lifted her chin. She would not give this addled woman the satisfaction of knowing how frightened she was. “Excuse me.”

“Fire! Fire!” a man bellowed from the ballroom's direction. “There's a fire next door.”

Paddy! Kimber!

A deafening cacophony of shrieks and cries followed the unknown man's announcement as chaos erupted immediately. Everyone knew the horror of the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Siobhan didn't hesitate a heartbeat before spinning around, prepared to dash back into the ballroom. To get Paddy and Kimber out of the building. To find Fletcher.

This was why the Huxleys were here. The fire was what those men had been about. The monsters had planned this bedlam.

Why?

As a distraction?

That must be it.

Where was Lord Darius?

The other guards?

Fletcher?

Lady Huxley laughed, a maniacal cackle that turned Siobhan's blood to ice in her veins as she lifted her skirts, prepared to tear down the passageway.

What if the fire spread to *De la Chance*?

Oh, God. Please.

It might already be too late for Fletcher, the club, her sister, and her brother.

A wail nearly tore from Siobhan's tight throat.

SHE ONLY MADE it three steps before a large hand clamped onto her arm, jerking her to such an abrupt halt her teeth clattered together, and her neck snapped backward.

"Let me go." Siobhan yanked ineffectively at the steely grip bruising her arm as the viscountess's henchman dragged her toward the crazed woman. "We need to leave at once. Didn't you hear? There's a fire."

I must get Paddy and Kimber out.

Still wearing that insane smile, the viscountess pressed the secret door's hidden latch, and the door creaked open a couple of inches.

Terror momentarily stalled Siobhan's heart.

Lady Huxley knew about the secret passage.

But how?

“Oh, rest assured. I’ll be leaving in good time.” Releasing a dramatic sigh, Lady Huxley flung an arm across her ample bosom. “You, however, will tragically be lost in the fire. As will Fletcher and this miserable club.”

Renewed dread slammed into Siobhan.

She might be small, but by all that was holy, she wouldn’t concede without a fight.

She dug in her heels, not that it did much good. The ogre towing her along was at least a foot and a half taller and double her weight. Nevertheless, she renewed her struggles. “I shan’t go with you.”

“I beg to differ.” A snide smile quirked the viscountess’s mouth upward, and madness glittered in her eyes. Pulling a small, ornate pocket pistol from her reticule, she toed the door open further with her beaded crimson slipper.

Just inside the threshold, Fletcher lay unconscious on the floor, a wicked-looking cut lashing his cheek and another splitting his lip.

No. No.

Please don’t let him be dead. Please.

Pale as milk, he lay perfectly still.

Siobhan couldn’t detect the rise and fall of his chest, and anguish eviscerated her.

He cannot be dead. He cannot.

Inside the dimly lit passageway, a pistol tucked into his waistband, Chandler appeared as smug as a cat with a fresh bowl of cream as he stood beside the other henchman.

“Traitor,” Siobhan hissed. “How could you?”

“For her and money, of course.” Grinning, Chandler shrugged. “I can retire with Samantha in style now—someplace warm and away from this stinking, dreary city. No more groveling for the likes of Westbrook, Huxley, or the

myriad of privileged sots who look down their noses or ignore me.”

His tone became increasingly clipped and ominous with each syllable as he no longer attempted to hide his hatred and animosity.

“Yes, yes, darling. You shall have your revenge.” Lady Huxley soothed him like one would an irascible child. “Didn’t I promise you when you agreed to help me, dearest?”

Insanity flashed in Chandler’s eyes and contorted his features.

Heaven help me.

He was as demented as the viscountess—perhaps more so, *the devil’s spawn.*

“You’ll come along, or I’ll shoot Fletcher now.” Her ladyship pointed the gun at his head and, with blood-chilling calm, said, “It makes no difference to me if he dies now or in a few minutes. However, I think it makes a great difference to you, Siobhan.”

He isn’t dead.

Simultaneous relief and renewed terror hitched Siobhan’s breath.

“No! Don’t.” Tears streamed from her eyes. How badly hurt was Fletcher? “I’ll come with you.”

“I thought you’d see it my way.” Lady Huxley stepped over Fletcher’s prone form as if he was an old house slipper or newssheet.

She was utterly mad.

Once Siobhan entered the secret passageway, her ladyship pressed another hidden latch, closing the door.

Apparently, Chandler had revealed everything to her, the rotten traitor.

Then why hadn’t *he* delivered the note Lady Huxley had given to Siobhan?

So much of this debacle didn't make sense.

The brute holding Siobhan released her, and she dropped to her knees. Cradling Fletcher's head in her lap, she tried to assess the extent of his injuries. Blood spattered his neckcloth and coat. His chest rose and fell evenly, though his pallor resembled death and his breathing was shallow.

"Fletcher? Can you hear me?" she whispered near his ear. "Please don't die." She clutched his coat. "You cannot die. I haven't told you how I feel about you."

At this moment, Siobhan didn't care who knew her judiciously guarded secret—she loved Fletcher.

She brushed his hair off his forehead, wincing when the movement revealed another nasty gash. He hadn't gone down without a fight.

"Bring them along," Lady Huxley ordered as she slid her gloved hand into Chandler's bent elbow, still brandishing the pistol in her other hand.

Her beastly henchmen grabbed Fletcher beneath his arms and hauled him down the narrow passageway, his head lolling to one side and his heels dragging.

Siobhan jumped to her feet and followed.

A plan.

She must come up with a plan.

But what?

She was absolute rot at this sort of thing.

God, please protect Paddy and Kimber, and please help Fletcher and me. And please, please don't let the fire spread to De la Chance.

As Siobhan trudged along, she kept her focus riveted on Fletcher, silently willing him to wake up.

He cracked an eyelid open and, winking, formed his lips into a silent "*Shh*" before feigning unconsciousness again.

Siobhan gasped, causing the smaller blackguard to turn and glare at her.

“Spi-der,” she stuttered and gave an exaggerated shudder. “I saw a spider.”

He rolled his eyes in disgust.

The tiniest morsel of hope sang along her blood.

If God heard her prayers, *if* fate smiled upon them, *if* Fletcher had a plan, she and Fletcher might get out of this alive after all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fletcher's office

Five minutes later

Time crept by interminably slow as Viscountess Huxley, yet wielding the ivory-handled pistol, paced back and forth in Fletcher's office. Agitation fairly radiated off her as she muttered under her breath.

Though only five minutes had passed, each second lengthened into what felt like an hour. Smoke's choking stench and the frantic sounds outside filtered through the drawn draperies.

A myriad of questions pummeled Siobhan.

Where were Paddy and Kimber?

Had someone made sure they made it outside?

How big was the fire?

Had it been extinguished?

Was *De la Chance* at risk?

Were others still in the club and in peril?

Were she and Fletcher going to die at the hands of these lunatics?

Do not think about it.

She grazed her fingertips across Fletcher's forehead and down his cheek. Only to reinforce the ruse he played at, of course. Not because Siobhan couldn't help reassure herself that he was alive and, though bruised and cut, would be all right.

If they managed to escape the demented curs holding them prisoner.

That was a very big if.

The fact that none of Fletcher's security team or his brother had appeared didn't portend well.

Siobhan forced her thoughts elsewhere, for if she dwelled on the danger, she'd become paralyzed with fear, and Fletcher needed her to have her wits about her to assist him in whatever he had planned.

He'd best get to it, however.

If the blaze spread to *De la Chance*...

Setting a fire.

What a stupid and reckless scheme. However, it wasn't the first time her ladyship had employed the method.

It spoke to the absolute insanity of the Huxleys. Their accomplices too.

Through half-lowered lashes, Siobhan observed the viscountess and Chandler. Both appeared peculiarly at ease given the perilous circumstances. On the other hand, the brutes Lady Huxley employed glanced around like a nervous mother dog with newborn pups.

Fletcher lay insensate upon the sofa where Lady Huxley's thugs had unceremoniously dumped him. Pulse racing in anticipation of what he had planned, Siobhan had sat on the sofa and slipped his head onto her lap, only too happy to aide in his deception.

Why he pretended unconsciousness, she couldn't guess. And how the two of them could ward off the four menaces in his office also eluded her. Nevertheless, she trusted Fletcher implicitly.

The realization gave her an internal start.

She caressed his beloved face with her gaze.

She did trust him.

Wholly and without reservation.

When had her wariness and distrust changed?

Probably when she'd acknowledged to herself that she cared for him—no, not just cared for him.

Siobhan loved Fletcher.

She wasn't supposed to. She knew better. She'd tried not to. She really had.

Nonetheless, the emotion had proved too potent and intoxicating to resist.

She loved him so completely, unreservedly, irrefutably, and irreversibly that her heart could scarcely contain the emotion, and her mind could hardly comprehend the truth. Surely, her love must be apparent to everyone, for how could she hide something so powerful?

“Where is my useless, mincing fop of a husband?” Her ladyship sent a seething glower toward the door. It was a wonder the panel didn't burst into flames. “I swear. The man's incapable of even the simplest of feats. I must explain every detail to him, thrice over.”

“Never fear, my love. You shall be rid of him soon enough,” Chandler soothed before kissing her forehead.

Siobhan hadn't a doubt now that Lady Huxley had been the mastermind behind the crimes perpetuated against Fletcher and his clubs with her husband's and Chandler's assistance.

Did Huxley know his wife and Chandler were having an affair?

Had Fletcher ever suspected his head of security's disloyalty?

“Why are you doing this?” Siobhan asked.

What could motivate a person to be this evil?

The viscountess stalked across the carpet until she stood directly before Siobhan and Fletcher. “Revenge, of course.”

“Revenge?” Siobhan puzzled her forehead. “For what?”

With a convincing groan, Fletcher stirred and fluttered his eyelashes before slowly opening his beautiful green eyes. His gaze meshed with hers as he silently begged her to trust him.

And she did. Without hesitation.

Groaning again and holding a hand to his head, he slowly angled upward until he slumped upright on the sofa.

Siobhan prayed he only acted and wasn’t in as much pain as he appeared.

“I’m sure Fletcher can answer that question,” the viscountess purred as she leaned over him. “Why don’t you enlighten the skinny waif? She’s obviously in love with you.”

She practically spat the last words.

A flush heated Siobhan’s cheeks, but she refused to refute the accusation. If she were about to die, she would do so with Fletcher knowing the truth.

He grasped Siobhan’s hand in his much larger palm. He gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze, and she gripped his in return. Somehow, and as irrational as it seemed, his big, warm hand encompassing hers made her feel as protected and invincible as a wall of armored soldiers with shields raised.

A hoarse shout somewhere in the club drew Siobhan’s attention. The clamor outside made it impossible to tell where the cry came from.

A sinister smile twisted the viscountess’s mouth upward.

“That makes my vengeance that much sweeter.” She tapped her chin, switching her attention between Fletcher and Siobhan. She aimed the gun at Siobhan’s chest. “I shall quite relish your anguish, Fletcher, as you watch her bleed to death, knowing you are helpless to save her and that you brought this end not only on yourself but on her—an innocent victim.”

“All because I rejected your proposition two years ago?” Raspiness threaded Fletcher’s voice as he affected weakness. “Is this what the vandalism, fires, and sabotaging have been about? Vengeance because I didn’t jump into your bed when you crooked your finger?”

Arms folded and one hip resting on the desk, Chandler remained oddly impervious to the conversation. He’d undoubtedly heard the tale before from Fletcher’s and the viscountess’s perspectives.

One of Lady Huxley’s collaborators occasionally lifted the drapery’s edge while the other stood near the door. The entrance to the secret passage gaped open a few inches, though whether from an oversight or because her ladyship was confident no one would intervene, Siobhan couldn’t discern.

And it appeared no one would come to hers and Fletcher’s rescue.

Not knowing if Paddy and Kimber were safe cleaved Siobhan’s heart in two. She didn’t mind dying. Everyone did, eventually. She did, however, object to being murdered before she’d ever had a chance to tell Fletcher she loved him and before ensuring her brother’s and sister’s futures were secure.

“I was pregnant.” The viscountess loomed above Fletcher, her eyes narrowed and mouth thinned. “I wanted to marry *you*, not that doddering, simple-minded fool! Huxley, the impotent sod, wished to claim the child as his.”

The unscrupulous tart had thought to entrap Fletcher into marriage and didn’t have a qualm about admitting her subterfuge. What made a person that wicked?

Siobhan risked a glance toward Chandler.

Her ladyship’s confession couldn’t be easy for him to hear.

His expression remained stony and inscrutable.

Anguish crumpled Lady Huxley’s features. “I lost the babe, and the physicians say I shall never bear a child. You robbed me of the chance to be a mother, Fletcher.”

Had grief caused her tumble into lunacy?

“I’m truly sorry, Samantha.” Fletcher kept his tone kind and comforting. “The loss of a child is tragic, no matter the circumstances. But surely you must know, deep in your heart, that had we married, there is no guarantee the child would’ve survived.”

“That’s not true,” she railed, completely unhinged. “It *is* your fault, and I determined you would pay. You would grieve as I have. I’d strip you of everything important to you.”

“But why would Lord Huxley agree to this madness?” The question left Siobhan’s lips before she could stifle it.

“Because the fool loves me and would do anything I ask of him.” Lady Huxley cackled. “Love does that to a person. Makes them do things they never believed themselves capable of.”

Was that why Chandler helped the viscountess, or was his motive purely greed?

Did love cause one to toss aside morals, decency, and honor?

Siobhan could not conceive it.

She loved Fletcher so much that it consumed her, but she wouldn’t have committed crimes to appease him. True, sacrificial love made a person better, not worse.

Another chorus of dramatic shouts drew everyone’s attention, and they glanced toward the closed draperies.

The next instant, chaos erupted.

Men burst through the windows, charged through the secret passageway, and kicked down the office door. In moments, Lady Huxley’s outnumbered thugs were overtaken and subdued.

Without a second thought, Siobhan levered a forceful kick and dislodged the gun from Lady Huxley’s hand.

“No!” the viscountess shrieked as she frantically turned this way and that, searching for her pistol. “Chandler. Kill her! Kill them both.”

Fletcher yanked Siobhan to her feet and placed himself between her and the frothing viscountess.

Gun in hand, Chandler charged across the office, straight toward Fletcher, but at the last second, veered toward her ladyship and pointed the gun at her instead. “I don’t take orders from you.”

Jaw unhinged, Lady Huxley gaped before erupting into an ear-scorching string of foul oaths that would’ve made a seasoned sailor blush.

“Well done, you.” Fletcher clapped Chandler on the shoulder as another man seized the viscountess’s arm. “You almost convinced me you were abetting her. I think a substantial raise is in order, my friend.”

What?

It had all been an act?

Siobhan looked between them, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

Chandler wasn’t a traitor?

Pain sluiced Siobhan’s heart as the unmitigated truth hit her.

A scream of denial tried to throttle up her throat, but she swallowed it.

Fletcher hadn’t trusted her enough to tell her this part of his scheme.

What if this madcap plan had gone wrong?

They might’ve been shot at any moment.

Her hurt swiftly became scorching anger.

It was one thing to jeopardize his life and hers, but Paddy’s and Kimber’s?

Such fury heated her blood that she fisted her hands to keep from slugging him.

How dare he?

Fletcher didn't trust her as much as she did him, and that knowledge stung—no, it gutted her.

It was good that Siobhan hadn't declared herself to Fletcher and had no idea how he felt about her. It didn't matter now. She might love him, but the last few minutes made it abundantly clear love was insufficient. Love and trust were opposite sides of the same coin. A healthy, thriving relationship required both.

"I confess I grew a bit apprehensive for a spell, sir." Chandler swiped his forearm across his moist forehead. "And don't ever ask me to hit you again. I shall refuse. I nearly gave myself away more than once."

Was the private conversation Chandler insisted on having with Fletcher all those days ago related to what had just occurred?

How long had Chandler and Fletcher been in cahoots?

"Siobhan, may I introduce my cousin, Torrian Westbrook?" Fletcher indicated the man holding Lady Huxley's arm as the viscountess squirmed and swore. "He's a private detective. Torrian, this is Siobhan Kenney, the bravest woman I know."

Brave but not trustworthy.

"Miss Kenney." Torrian dipped his strong chin. "I've had news of your parents."

Siobhan froze, afraid to hear more.

Fletcher drew his eyebrows together. "Now isn't the time, Torrian."

"Normally, I'd agree with you, Cousin. But I've learned they will be deported to Australia on a convict ship in three days. They were accused of stealing a toff's purse and have been rotting in Newgate Prison all this time. Interestingly, their accuser is also Irish."

"They would never have stolen anything." Siobhan knew her father and stepmother. They were not thieves. "Da fled

Ireland and wouldn't tell me why. I bet this man who has falsely accused him is the reason."

And she'd bet he was the same unwelcome brute who'd called at their house those times in Ireland. She darted glance toward the door. "I must go to them. Take them food. Clothing. Medicine."

Fletcher touched her forearm. "Do not fret. I shall have essentials sent to them tonight, and Torrian and I shall visit the prison tomorrow."

"I am coming with you." Nothing could stop her.

"Of course. Your parents shall not be deported, Siobhan," Fletcher assured her. "By this time next week, I promise you shall be reunited with them."

"How can you be so sure?" His confidence was admirable, but was it misplaced?

"My father is a duke." He exchanged a wry glance with his cousin. "A powerful duke. I've already written him and asked him to come to London. I would vow we'll be able to expose the truth and that the blighter who accused your parents bribed someone to toss them into prison. Unfortunately, it happens frequently."

At least they weren't dead.

Siobhan wouldn't tell Paddy and Kimber until Da and Maura gained their freedom.

Torrian turned toward the viscountess. "I'm sure the authorities are eager to interview you, Lady Huxley."

He angled his head toward two agents who immediately took either of her arms and removed the screaming, thrashing woman from the study.

An asylum would likely be Lady Huxley's residence rather than prison. The woman was inarguably insane.

Other agents escorted her defeated accomplices.

Desperate to put some distance between her and Fletcher before he recognized how much his actions had devastated her

or before she dissolved into a weeping mess, Siobhan edged toward the door. The tumult in her mind and the maelstrom of her emotions made it almost impossible to think clearly.

And on top of tonight's event, she'd learned Da and Maura were in that foul hell-hole.

It was more than she could bear.

She must get away—must sort through this mess.

Must determine what to do next.

Staying at *De la Chance* was out of the question now.

Loving him as she did, Siobhan couldn't be around Fletcher every day. The pain would drive *her* mad. Though he wouldn't likely see it as such, his betrayal proved as excruciating as if he'd driven a rusty, serrated blade into her heart.

At least reuniting with Da and Maura would avert destitution.

In truth, Siobhan was as angry with herself as Fletcher.

She'd allowed her defenses down, and this was what came of that stupidity.

Fool. Fool. Fool.

Never again.

She had learned her lesson well.

“Huxley?” Fletcher gingerly fingered his jaw.

“Singing like a canary.” Torrian Westbrook grinned. “I think we can safely assume the instigators behind the harassment have finally been apprehended.”

Fletcher finally noticed her gradual retreat.

“Siobhan? Where are you going?”

She jutted her chin upward. “To my sister and brother. Where do you think?”

“They aren't in the club. Nor are any staff that weren't essential to this mission.” He stepped toward her but paused,

confusion whisking across his face when she glared at him. “I had the children removed to a safe location until this was over. Darius is with them. Surely, you know I wouldn’t put them at risk.”

But he’d put *her* in danger?

Led her to believe he had been beaten and might die?

Allowed a madwoman to point a gun at her?

She snorted.

“Do I?” She refused to meet the eyes of the men, including his cousin, after giving her a compassionate look as they quietly exited, leaving her and Fletcher alone. “I don’t know you at all, Fletcher Westbrook.”

Then, before she burst into tears, she fled the office.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Quarter of midnight

That same night

*F*air still damp after bathing and tending his battered face, Fletcher approached Siobhan's chamber. Eager to speak with her, he only wore trousers, an untucked shirt, and the house shoes he'd slipped on at the last minute.

A golden glow beneath her door revealed she hadn't yet gone to bed.

A self-deprecating smile bent his mouth upward.

His nightly rounds through his club might've also included passing hers and the children's chambers. To reassure himself all was well with them. Thus, he'd learned her habits.

She didn't sleep with a lamp lit. Probably a luxury her family couldn't afford.

His efficient staff reported that Siobhan had seen her siblings settled into bed after a cup of hot chocolate. She'd bathed but refused the tray he'd asked Mrs. Dough to prepare for her.

Siobhan's anger wasn't unexpected.

After all, her spirit was much of what Fletcher admired about her.

In truth, he'd anticipated her fury but had gambled that she would eventually forgive him.

He might've lost that wager, and it gutted him that he'd hurt her.

The devastation she'd tried to hide in his study earlier tonight lashed him like a saber.

Fletcher also hadn't counted on her whispering that she hadn't told him how she felt about him or Lady Huxley proclaiming Siobhan loved him. Already prepared to give his life to protect her, everything had shifted after that.

He'd become determined to live, to confess his love for her too.

In the ensuing days since discovering she was a woman, though he'd fought it with every bit of integrity and common sense, he'd done the untenable and fallen in love with his Irish lass. Sensing she wasn't ready for his declaration and hadn't come to trust Fletcher yet, he'd determined to bide his time.

However, tonight changed everything.

Looking down the barrel of a gun swiftly convinced him that life was too short to dawdle when it came to matters of the heart. He must tell her his feelings and convince her he'd kept the truth from her to protect her.

The latter would be far more difficult to do.

Tonight was no longer about apprehending the viscountess and her mealy-mouthed wimp of a husband who had been all too willing to toss his maniacal wife under the proverbial carriage if it meant a less severe penalty for him. No, this night had become about forging a future with the most remarkable, delightful, and magnificent woman Fletcher had ever met.

Having stopped praying when he left the medical profession, he paused outside her door and bowed his head.

I don't deserve it, but I need your help, Lord. Please give me the words to say.

If his brothers could see him now, they'd howl in mirth.

Holding his breath, he rapped once.

“Siobhan? I need to speak with you.”

Rustling on the other side suggested she'd risen from bed or perhaps an armchair.

"Why?" Her distrustful voice filtered through the walnut door.

He leaned his forehead against the cool wood. "Because I hurt you, which was the last thing I intended to do."

"Did you set the fire too?" The wood muffled her words but not the accusation behind them.

He sighed. She might as well know everything. "Yes. I had my men stage a fire in the building next door in a fireproof container so it would not spread, and it was my man who announced it in the club. All the hullabaloo outside was also fabricated. Armond Chambeau, my theater director, recruited actors and actresses. Chandler convinced the viscountess the plan was his idea."

He'd staged the entire thing to entrap the Huxleys—specifically Lady Huxley.

Siobhan's voice, a mere thread of sound, penetrated the thick door. "We might've been shot, Fletcher. Did you not consider that?"

A hint of her earlier ire raised the pitch of her voice.

Wincing, he laid his palm flat against the door.

He'd done this to her. Made her fear for her life and his—likely her brother's and sister's too.

"Chandler removed the ball from Lady Huxley's pistol. Only he had a loaded gun."

A long pause ensued.

"Siobhan?"

"It seems you thought of everything." Sadness and resignation laced her low tone. "I'm happy you were able to catch Lady Huxley. What made you suspect her?"

"She was receptive to Chandler's complaints about me. That is why we decided on the course of action you witnessed

tonight, although I still wrongly believed Lord Huxley was behind everything until a few days ago.”

“That is what Chandler wanted to discuss with you privately that day I fainted, isn’t it?”

“It was.” Fletcher smoothed his fingers across the wood, wishing it was her he comforted. “Open the door, sweetheart. Please.”

Silence reigned for several heartbeats.

“Why?”

Because I love you. I want to take you into my arms and assure you you’ll never have to be afraid again. I long to taste your lips in a soul-searing kiss. To convince you that you are the most precious thing in the world to me.

Instead, he whispered, emotion clogging his throat. “Because I desperately want to see your beautiful face and to apologize for not including you. It was stupid of me.”

Several more gut-wrenching moments passed before the key scratched into the lock.

However, Siobhan didn’t open the door.

Taking a deep breath, Fletcher pressed the latch down, and the panel swung open.

His entire future rested upon what happened in the next few minutes.

She’d retreated to the window, her virginal nightgown enshrouding her like an angel, her ebony hair falling past her shoulders. She glanced at the bedside clock.

“It’s almost midnight, Fletcher. Say what you need to say, and let me seek my bed. I’m exhausted.”

Her blue eyes round and wounded, she regarded him as an injured doe would have done, leery and ready to flee.

“I’m sorry, my love. So very sorry.” He held out a hand in entreaty. “I can bear anything, punishment or pain, except knowing I’ve hurt you. I thought it was for the best, but now I know I should have told you everything.”

Twisting the gown's fabric with her fingers, she bit her lower lip and averted her gaze. Not, however, before Fletcher saw tears pooling in her incredible eyes.

He spread his arms.

“Can you forgive me, Siobhan? Please?”

With a small cry, she flew into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him as if her very life depended upon it, her small breasts burning dual holes in his chest. Honeysuckle and jasmine wafted from her freshly washed skin.

Fletcher's soul took to wing in exaltation, singing with joy that this tiny woman with her big heart could forgive his foolhardiness and inconsideration.

“I was so afraid,” she whispered into his neck. “Not for myself, but for you. Paddy. Kimber.”

“I know, my darling.” He kissed her crown, inhaling her intoxicating warmth and essence. “I vow I shall never keep another secret from you as long as I live.”

She leaned back, searching his face. “That's an awful long time.”

“Hopefully, several decades.” Grinning, he slid his fingers into that silky mane of midnight hair that had entranced him for so long. “I suppose you shall have to marry me to ensure I keep my word.”

Moisture glistened in her eyes.

“Do you love me, Fletcher?”

“More than life itself. More than I ever conceived was possible to love another person. I want you to be the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning and the last thing when I fall asleep. I want to experience all that life offers with you, Paddy, and Kimber.” He winked and patted her delectable bottom. “And our children, of course. Lots of them.”

“I love you too.”

A brilliant smile blossomed on her face, humbling him that she could love him, a scoundrel and a rake.

Somewhere in the club, a clock tolled midnight.

Siobhan pulled his head downward and lifted her chin. “Kiss me.”

The world stood still as he explored her mouth and swept his hands over her gentle curves. When at last he lifted his head, she stared up at him, lips plump and red.

“I think we should marry straight away,” she said breathlessly.

“Now *that* is a grand plan.”

EPILOGUE

A fortnight later

D la Chance's private salon

With a hand on her new husband's arm, Siobhan fairly floated on air. All Fletcher's immediate family had come to London for their simple wedding except for Leonidas and Primrose, still on their honeymoon. His cousins Torrian and Cortland Marlow-Westbrook and Cortland's family also attended.

Never could she have dreamed when her family moved to London, and she'd been forced to impersonate a boy that she'd become Mrs. Fletcher Westbrook. Nor could she have imagined the warm welcome to the large family that she'd received.

Most surprising was the Duke and Duchess of Latham's genuine cordiality which they had extended toward her since their timely arrival in London nearly two weeks ago. Neither of their graces seemed the least concerned that their son had married an Irish commoner. But then, their other daughters-in-law were Spanish, French, and Scottish.

The Westbrooks seemed to enjoy turning society on its head with their unique brides.

Both Huxleys currently resided in Newgate Prison. Lord Huxley had believed he'd fare better than his lunatic wife by turning on her, but his hands were too soiled to walk free.

Lady Huxley probably ought to have been committed to an insane asylum, but such things took time, and in the meanwhile, she been placed where all attempted murderesses warranted.

Fletcher had petitioned the courts to have the undesirable pair sentenced to a penal colony in Australia for life rather than hang for their offenses. He'd come by the idea after learning of her parents' unjust sentence.

Only time would tell whether his plea for mercy would be honored.

Siobhan wasn't certain she'd have been able to extend such benevolence.

Across the crowded room, Rémi and Nathalia Lemieux, Aurelie, Marchioness of Edenhaven's niece and nephew, played marbles with Paddy and Kimber.

True to his word, Fletcher had managed to free Da and Maura from Newgate. He'd offered Da a position too. Da was now the head of security at *Ivories and Aces*. He, Maura, and the children occupied a suite at *De la Chance* for now.

Thin, but their faces beaming with pride, Da and Maura stood to the side, slightly overwhelmed at the grandeur and the presence of so many nobles. Cormac O'Doherty, the villain who'd had them arrested in London, had also framed Da in Ireland for murder after losing a dice game, which is why the family had fled.

A servant approached with a tray of champagne.

Fletcher selected two flutes.

Clearing his throat, he raised his glass. "I wish to propose a toast."

Around the room, their family and friends also accepted champagne from the servants and faced him expectantly.

"To my wife. The most exceptional and courageous woman I have ever met. I am humbled she'd take a reformed rake like myself as her husband. To Siobhan. To happy ever after."

“Here, here.”

“To Siobhan.”

“To happy ever after.”

Taking a sip, Siobhan blinked rapidly to dispel the tears pooling in her eyes. She didn't miss the intimate looks between Fletcher's parents or his married siblings and their spouses. The Westbrooks weren't the least bashful about expressing their love.

Siobhan rather liked that.

“Tis I who is blessed.” She met his amorous gaze and blushed. “You shouldn't stare at me like that.”

“Like what?” If anything, Fletcher's smile became impossibly more smoldering.

Little tremors of excitement skittered up her spine and sent butterflies fluttering in her belly. “As if you'd like to gobble me like a piece of barmbrack.”

Winking, he bent near her ear. “I have no idea what barmbrack is, but I definitely want to gobble you up.”

Then the daring devil nipped her earlobe, causing all her bones to turn to pudding.

Good Lord, on Sunday.

Siobhan clutched his arm to stay upright.

“What say you, Mrs. Westbrook, if we leave the celebration early?”

Fletcher waggled his eyebrows.

She brushed a kiss across his firm mouth, gratified to see sparks ignite in his green eyes. Two could play at this game of seduction.

“I'd say, what are you waiting for, Mr. Westbrook?”

Hand in hand, Siobhan and Fletcher ran from the parlor, the laughter and hoots from their families following them down the corridor. At the foot of the stairs, Fletcher swept her into his arms.

“I love you, Fletcher.” She cupped his cheek, and he pressed his face into her palm as he effortlessly carried her up the stairway.

“Not nearly as much as I love you, my darling Irish lass, and I intend to spend a lifetime proving it.”

Looping her arms around his neck, Siobhan nipped his earlobe, curving her mouth into a gratified smile when he groaned.

“Minx.”

“I learned that from you, husband.”

They’d reached her chamber, and still holding her in his arms, he opened the door. “I cannot wait to teach you much more.”

“Neither can I.”

THE END

NOTE FROM COLLETTE CAMERON

Thank you for reading *TO KISS A RAKE AT MIDNIGHT*, *Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides Series*. Fletcher Westbrook had me puzzled for the first few books in the series. I knew what motivated him and what he most feared, but I didn't know who his perfect heroine would be until I wrote Sean/Siobhan into *MINUET AT MIDNIGHT*. I instantly knew she should be his soulmate. They are opposites in so many ways, but opposites do attract.

Though it's not an uncommon trope, Siobhan is my first heroine to pretend to be a man. Life for women without means or family was difficult in times gone by, and desperation frequently forced women into prostitution.

I mentioned a few ice flavors Gunter's Tea Shop served. The ices were very similar to modern-day ice cream, except we wouldn't consider many flavors popular then for our sweet treats now. I don't think I'd enjoy a parmesan ice.

Readers always ask me how to pronounce unusual names like Siobhan's, which is an Irish name. Hers is pronounced Shiv-on.

To stay abreast of the releases of the other books in the *Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides* and my other upcoming releases, subscribe to my newsletter (the link above) or visit my author world at *collettecameron.com*.

I hope you enjoyed a romantic historical escape to times gone by for a few hours with Fletcher and Siobhan. If you

liked their story, please consider leaving a review. I would appreciate it so much.

Hugs,

Collette

ABOUT COLLETTE CAMERON

USA Today Bestselling author COLLETTE CAMERON® is renowned for her Scottish and Regency historical romance novels featuring daring rogues, scoundrels, and the strong heroines who capture their hearts. Her stories are filled with inspiration and humor, making them the perfect escape for fans of *Sweet-to-Spicy Timeless Romances*®. Living in Oregon, Collette is a confessed chocoholic and dreams of living in Scotland part time. From the rugged highlands to the refined drawing rooms of Regency England, Collette's stories transport you to another time and place, where love and adventure are just a page away.

Connect with Collette!

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A LOVE LETTER IN
AMELIA'S RETICULE

BY USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR - MEARA PLATT

A LOVE LETTER IN AMELIA'S RETICULE

While at a weekend house party, Lady Amelia Harcourt finds a love letter in her reticule. She is certain the letter cannot be for her since she is a wallflower and had a disastrous first Season. The love letter is obviously a mistake, but she has no idea who the sender or true recipient is supposed to be. A hopeless romantic, she is determined to spend the weekend figuring out who sent it and which young lady is the object of this gentleman's ardent affection. She is not certain where to start, but their host, the swoon worthy Duke of Marston, has kindly obliged to assist in her quest.

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CHAPTER ONE

Cotswolds, England

September 1817

“*T*here is nothing so charming as a weekend house party,” Lady Amelia Harcourt’s aunt, the dowager Duchess of Redfern, cheerfully proclaimed while being helped down from their carriage in front of the Duke of Marston’s magnificent country estate on this sunny afternoon in autumn.

Amelia sank back against the squabs to stare out the window of their conveyance as she took in the sight of Marston Hall, a grand manor built of golden stone known as Cotswolds stone. It stood amid landscaped park grounds designed to blend in with its natural surroundings. She liked to walk and also liked to read, so she hoped the duke had a library in his home, for this is where she planned to hide whenever she could not sneak outdoors to admire the reds and golds of the changing leaves.

Not that she disliked company. Indeed, she had many friends, but they were not *ton* and did not stride about with their noses in the air. She was going to be a fish out of water throughout the entire affair.

It turned out her aunt had not been speaking to her when remarking upon the charm of a house party, but to the handsome gentleman assisting her. He now responded in a deeply resonant voice that immediately drew Amelia’s

attention. “Welcome to my home, Rosie. I hope your journey was pleasant.”

“It was indeed, Callum. My dear boy, it is so good to see you. Come, give us a kiss.”

This Callum fellow dutifully kissed her aunt’s cheek, and then peered inside the carriage. “Ah, good,” he said, casting Amelia a smile she could only describe as charming. “I see you have brought your niece along. I have a friend or two eager to meet her.”

Amelia’s heart shot into her throat.

Who would care to meet her?

She had spent her entire debut Season as a wallflower, overlooked by even the most desperate of fortune hunters. Indeed, if awards were given out for the most unremarkable debut of the decade, she would win first prize.

But this is what came of growing up forgotten, for her parents had never meant to have children and did not know what to do with her when she inconveniently came along. Her upbringing was left to a veritable stream of nannies, governesses, and tutors. Lots of tutors before she was finally sent off to an exclusive girls school, deposited there and left to fend for herself amid the empty halls whenever the school officially shut down for term break.

If it wasn’t for her Aunt Rosie blowing into her life like a maelstrom and taking charge of her several years ago, she would have melted away to nothing, disappearing as surely as a snowflake in summer.

“Hullo, there,” the handsome fellow her aunt had referred to as Callum said with ingratiating cheer.

Amelia smiled back at him. “Hullo. I am Amelia.”

She was now here at Marston Hall because her wonderful aunt had taken charge of her upon the untimely death of her parents and insisted on taking her wherever she went. In the blink of an eye, Amelia had gone from being shunted aside to hurled into the whirlwind of balls, soirees, musicales, and house parties with almost no preparation.

One of the lovable things about Rosie was that she saw life through an optimistic tint and could not see a single flaw in Amelia. “You are smart, beautiful, and you don’t talk too much,” her aunt would always tell her as she was about to toss Amelia into the choppy seas of these social affairs. “What bachelor with any brains will resist you?”

They all had.

But Amelia did not have the heart to tell her aunt that no one saw her as the diamond her aunt insisted she was.

So she endured these affairs with a smile and never a complaint, just as she would endure this one.

An older gentleman, who had been standing on the steps watching her and her aunt greet the handsome gentleman, now stepped forward with a boisterous shout. What was it about these cheerful fellows? “Good to see you again, Rosie! It has been far too long.”

“Indeed, Danvers. You are looking quite fit.”

They disappeared into the house, leaving Amelia with the younger gentleman, Callum. “I am Marston, by the way,” he said, reaching into the carriage to assist her. “Although you might have guessed by now.”

Heat shot into her cheeks. “You are the duke?”

“So they tell me.” He took hold of her hand while helping her down, his gaze sharp as a hawk’s as he assessed her. “I hope you are looking forward to our weekend, Lady Amelia.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Her heart felt as though it was about to burst. This was the duke? She ought to have guessed immediately, for no footman would ever dare address the Duchess of Redfern as Rosie, and had he not just welcomed them to *his* home? “Very kind of you to invite me.”

“It is my pleasure. Your aunt has spoken highly of you.”

She cast him a wry smile. “My aunt probably begged you for help with me because she considers me hopeless and bound to die a spinster.”

Not that she was a dimwit or hideous to look at, just painfully shy when among this sort of elevated gathering. Much as she tried, she could never think of anything clever to say to the gentlemen who approached her, for she had little in common with them. They would go on about their exclusive clubs, their racing horses and phaetons, and their latest hunts.

She was not an accomplished rider, could never bring herself to cruelly trap a fox, and she was an atrocious dancer on top of it all.

“Rosie said nothing of the sort. She assured me you were charming and delightful.” Her aunt was a *ton* favorite. Everyone who knew her simply adored her, for she was lively and genial, and knew how to put people at ease.

Amelia nodded. “She is quite fond of you, as well.”

He returned her smile with another devastatingly glorious one of his own.

This man also had a way of putting people at ease. He was much younger than she expected him to be, somehow envisioning the Duke of Marston as elderly because of his close friendship with her aunt. But he was not quite thirty, judging by the look of him.

She took a moment to study him more closely now that she had descended the carriage.

He was tall and muscled, had a full head of dark hair and captivating, slate blue eyes. His looks alone would have been enough to put the ladies in a swoon, but when added to his wealth and title, the man was irresistible.

Not to her, of course.

She judged people by their character.

Besides, now that they had met, she doubted he would speak to her again. Several *ton* diamonds were to be in attendance, so *Duke Handsome* would forget her fast.

“Rosie tells me you have a love of antiquities.” He placed her hand on his arm to escort her into the house.

She nodded, trying to suppress a tingle as she clutched his solidly muscled arm. “Yes, I do. But I am allowed little other than attending lectures at the Royal Society. I would love to join as a member, but it is a male-only bastion, and contributions from bluestockings such as myself are neither appreciated nor encouraged.”

He cast her an odd look.

She groaned lightly, recalling the duke was a Fellow in the Royal Society and probably sat on its board. “Forgive me. I did not mean to prattle. You were only seeking a simple yes or no, and I pounced on it as a reason to gripe. Well, the simple answer is yes, I do enjoy the study of antiquities. Ancient civilizations and their relics fascinate me.”

“Then once you are settled, come down to my study and I will show you my family’s private collection.”

Her eyes lit up and her smile broadened. “Truly? I should love that.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Your aunt warned me this would be your response.”

“Oh.”

“Now I have made you blush.”

“It seems my aunt went into some detail about me, so you must know how witless I am socially. It is true. I never know what to say to the elegant gentlemen who approach me, and I am completely incompetent when thrust into a crowd.”

He cast her a surprisingly gracious smile. “The Marriage Mart can be daunting. But these country parties are meant to be more of an easy enjoyment. Just come to me if ever you feel overwhelmed. As your host, it is my duty to see that you are made comfortable. Are you a cards player?”

She nodded.

“Good, then you and I shall partner at cards whenever we play.”

She glanced up at him. “But you don’t know whether I am any good.”

“It does not matter. The games are for the entertainment of my guests. We are not in competition with the other players.”

She paused, her hand still tucked in the crook of his arm, and studied him more openly. A light breeze swirled around them, billowing her gown and ruffling his wavy hair. He still managed to look splendid with his hair slightly windblown. “You are being awfully nice to me, Your Grace. Has my aunt put you up to it?”

His chuckle was rich and resonant. “She merely warned me of your shyness. It is my bright idea to take you under my wing and look after you.”

Amelia let out a breath and smiled at him sincerely. “I can see why my aunt is so fond of you. That is very kind and much appreciated. I will try my best not to be a bother to you since I am sure everyone will be clamoring for your attention. An unmarried duke is a prize not to be passed up.”

He arched a dark eyebrow. “And you, Lady Amelia? Is this what you think of me?”

“That you are a prize? Yes, for certain. But not for the reasons you think.”

“What are your reasons?” He was frowning at her now, obviously displeased with her response. No doubt he assumed she was going to spout off about his wealth, title, and good looks.

“I can only speak to my first impression of you, but I expect it is fairly accurate. You are a prize because you are kind and intelligent.” She tossed him a wry smile. “Although I am not sure your offer to take me under your wing was very bright on your part. Now I will be constantly underfoot while you are trying to court the lovely ladies you have invited.”

“Do you not consider yourself one of those lovely ladies?”

“Me?” She shook her head and laughed merrily. “Dear heaven, no. I could never compete with those beauties.”

“How are you not their equal?”

Her eyes widened as she stared at him, for he appeared genuinely bewildered. Even while frowning in thought, he was ridiculously handsome. “Their equal? How can I possibly be mistaken for one of them?”

“You are of equal rank to any of them.”

“Yes, but that is where any resemblance ends. I cannot dance. I am an inept flirt. And even more inept at holding a conversation of any length. I do not know how to bat my eyes prettily or laugh charmingly. Most of all, I am hardly a beauty, certainly not in any classical sense. My hair is brown and my eyes are gray. My mouth is too broad and my nose is too pointed. So are my ears, pointed, that is. I think I have rabbit ears.”

He chuckled again in a warm manner that melted her bones. “Do go on, Lady Amelia. How else would you describe yourself?”

She was not certain this was an appropriate conversation to be having with a duke she had just met. Indeed, it was a nonsensical conversation since he could obviously see her and did not need anyone explaining her features to him. “There isn’t much more to say. I am remarkably average in every other way.”

Well, this is how she had been made to feel by her parents.

No matter how hard she had tried to impress them on the rare times she saw them, she always failed. They were never cruel or demeaning, but were best described as indifferent. Sometimes, that hurt most.

The duke pursed his lips as he escorted her into the parlor where her aunt was already seated with several other guests. Footmen were hovering over them, offering tea, lemonade, sherry, and light refreshments while their bags were being brought up to their rooms.

“My housekeeper will lead you upstairs in a moment, but let me say this about you before we are surrounded by others and do not have the chance to speak alone again. Your hair is not brown but a rich chestnut color. Your eyes are not gray but

moonlight silver. Your lips are full and your mouth has a graceful arch to it. Your nose is exactly the right length for your face. If I have to look at one more button-nosed debutante, I shall hang myself. And as for your ears,” he said, his mouth twitching at the corners in the hint of a smile, “they do stick out a little, just as you say. But they suit your face and soften your appearance because you are a very serious young lady otherwise.”

She shook her head. “I am not all that serious. What you notice is me being tense around those in the Upper Crust. But I want to thank you because you have put me very much at ease. I am enjoying talking to you. It is having to talk to everyone else that has my stomach in a churn.”

“I am here if you ever need me.” He gave her hand a light squeeze. “Let me introduce you to my uncle, Lord Danvers, and my brother — my favorite sibling, by the way — James. Of course, he is my only sibling, so he doesn’t have much competition for that honor.”

She laughed, surprised by his small jest.

She ought to have added he had a sense of humor, something she found lacking in many of the noblemen she had met over the course of her Season.

“You will find my family good-natured and jovial,” he continued. “They also adore hearing themselves speak. So, all you have to do is smile or nod on occasion and they will consider you excellent company and compliment you to no end.”

He introduced her to his uncle and brother, made certain she and her aunt had all they required, and then moved on to greet more newly arrived guests. Amelia noticed he was soon surrounded by young ladies, including at least two *ton* diamonds, and all of them were vying for his attention.

To her relief, Lord Danvers and her aunt dominated their conversation, so she was not put on the spot. The duke’s brother interjected a comment a time or two, but all she had to do was smile on occasion or nod, just as the duke had suggested.

A few minutes later, a footman approached to escort them upstairs to their guest chambers.

“Yes, how lovely. I could do with a nap before supper,” her aunt remarked. “Come along, Amelia.”

The gentlemen rose, and Lord Danvers declared her to be charming.

She smiled graciously. “It was a pleasure chatting with you.”

The duke’s brother, properly referred to as Lord Marston, cast her a knowing grin, obviously aware she had spoken not a word in all that time.

The duke was still surrounded by his admirers, so Amelia realized he would not be able to break away any time soon to show her his antiques collection.

Well, perhaps tomorrow.

To her surprise, the footman addressed her just as they were about to be handed over to the housekeeper. “Lady Amelia, His Grace has asked me to remind you to meet him in his study once you are settled.”

“Oh, thank you. Yes, I will be down in half an hour.”

“Very good,” he said with a nod. “I shall advise His Grace.”

“What was that about?” her aunt asked.

Amelia shook her head, in truth not quite certain why the man would have singled her out for attention. “I am to get a tour of the duke’s collection of ancient artifacts. Aunt Rosie, is it as marvelous as rumored?”

“Yes, my dear. His is one of the finest assemblage of relics in all of England.”

The housekeeper, Mrs. Lester, now took over the task of seeing them settled and hastened to agree with her aunt. “He has offered to show you his collection?”

Amelia nodded.

The woman eyed her speculatively. “He must think quite highly of you then.”

“Oh, he hardly knows me. We have not exchanged more than a few words with each other.”

Her aunt shook her head. “He easily spotted your intelligence, Amelia. Most young ladies flutter around him like silly geese.”

They parted ways as each of them were shown to the bedchambers they were to occupy for the weekend. Amelia’s was splendid, as though the duke understood exactly what she preferred and endeavored to provide it for her.

Well, this was likely Mrs. Lester’s doing.

She thanked the woman for this perfect choice.

The room was cozy rather than large, and cheerfully decorated in hues of yellow and blue even down to the flowers in a vase atop her bureau.

“It is my pleasure, Lady Amelia. I am glad you find it suitable. Just ring for me if you require anything more.”

A ladies maid soon came in to assist her in washing up and changing out of her travel clothes. The maid was also helping to unpack her trunk, and was in the midst of putting her gowns away when she paused and held up one of them. “Oh, Miss Amelia. This one is a lovely color on you. I think it will be perfect for this afternoon’s entertainments.” It was a dove gray silk her aunt’s modiste had insisted would enhance the silvery color of her eyes.

Amelia readily agreed. “I gladly defer to your superior wisdom, Betty. I think you have an excellent eye for color and style.”

“Thank you,” Betty said, giving a little curtsy.

She then fixed Amelia’s hair in a simple chignon with a few soft curls to frame her face. “His Grace will not be able to take his eyes off you.”

Amelia shook her head. “Oh, Betty. I’m sure that is not so.”

But Amelia thanked her again for all her help. “You’ve done a beautiful job. In truth, I have never felt prettier.”

As she made her way downstairs, she happened to see the same footman who had given her the duke’s message. She approached him to ask for directions to the study.

“This way, my lady.” He led her there and gave the door a sharp knock.

“Enter,” the duke called out, his voice quite commanding.

The footman opened the oak-paneled door and then stepped back to allow her into the exquisite room which exuded warmth because of all the polished rosewood cabinetry and the stunning carpet of oriental design.

To Amelia’s surprise, she was left alone with the duke. Well, his footman had left the door open, no doubt on the duke’s standing orders. The Duke of Marston was not about to make the mistake of being caught with a young lady behind closed doors. “Ah, Lady Amelia. Don’t you look lovely.”

He rose and came around to the front of his desk to greet her. “Are you ready for your tour?”

“Yes. Looking forward to it.” She glanced around. “Will no one else be joining us?”

“No. I did not think you wanted company.”

She nodded. “I appreciate it. You are all the company I can handle.”

“Have I not put you at ease?” he asked, arching an eyebrow as his expression turned to one of concern.

“You have,” she rushed to assure him. “Well, as much as it is possible. You are quite daunting, you know.”

“So I have been told. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. I promise you, I do not bite.” He smiled wryly as he took in her appearance. “Most young ladies fuss and flutter when they are around me. They try too hard to gain my notice.”

“Dear heaven, you need have no worry on that score. That is not me, at all. I close up tighter than a clam and try to disappear. My aunt often despairs because all I wish to do is hide away until this ordeal of my come-out is over and done.”

“Then I shall enjoy taking you under my wing and not having to worry about your motives.”

“Please be assured, I have no motives other than to get through this weekend without embarrassing you or my aunt.”

“You won’t, Amelia,” he said gently, his gaze resting on her a moment longer.

He truly had beautiful eyes, a mix of soft blue and light gray that matched the quarry slate found not far from her Devonshire home.

Dangerous eyes, she realized, also noting the glint of steel behind them.

Was it a mistake for her to wander off alone with him?

Well, there were servants and guests roaming everywhere.

She saw clearly he was a gentleman to be trusted.

He said he would not bite, meaning it only as a jest. And yet, he truly overwhelmed her senses. If she wasn’t careful, this duke could take a very large bite of her heart.

How was she to avoid it?

CHAPTER TWO

“*M*y medieval ancestors acquired most of this collection,” Callum said, stifling a grin upon noting Amelia’s expression of wonder as he led her through this private room just off his study. “My grandfather, father, and I have since added pieces to it.”

“This is incredible.” Her voice was a soft, breathless whisper and her eyes lit up like sparkling stars as she slowly walked from one glass display case to another. This room was the family’s private museum and filled with treasures. For this reason he kept it under lock and key at all times.

Only a privileged few were ever permitted inside. These relics were priceless and not to be handled by just anyone, certainly not the silly geese everyone considered *ton* diamonds.

Amelia was another matter entirely, quite the perfect blend of beauty and brains.

Any man courting her would be fortunate if she looked at him with the same glorious sparkle as she now looked upon his thousand-year-old relics.

It was as though her heart simply opened up.

She radiated wonder and awe.

“Most of these pieces date back to the time of the Crusades,” she remarked, bending forward to peer closely at the objects in one of his exhibit cases. “Some even earlier.”

“Yes. Several of my ancestors were knights who followed King Richard to Jerusalem.”

“Outstanding.” She was still bent over, her nicely shaped derriere wiggling slightly as she moved around the display case.

“Yes, I think so.” Of course, he was referring to her.

She moved to the next case to study the ancient manuscripts enclosed within it, and pressed her nose to the glass. “Magnificent.”

“I heartily agree.” Lord, he had to stop tossing these stupid, rakish comments. They went completely over her head and he found her obliviousness endearing. He also tried not to stare at her delicious derriere, but how could he resist? She was far prettier than she gave herself credit for.

No man could overlook any of her attributes.

Truly, this girl had no understanding of her appeal.

She now moved on to another glass case, this one displaying ancient coins. “Exquisite.”

“I would say so.” He studied her with an avid interest that surprised him. Perhaps it was the lively intelligence in her eyes or the warmth of her smile. Her lips had a slightly upward tilt that made her appear to be smiling even when her expression was simply at rest.

She moved to yet another of his displays, this one comprised of early mathematical manuscripts. Suddenly, she placed a hand over her bosom. “Oh, my heart!”

“What is it, Amelia?”

“You have a papyrus. Is it *The Mesopotamia Papyrus*? The oldest known writing on the principals of mathematics?”

He was stunned, not only because she recognized it, but because she understood its importance to the field of mathematics and was excited by it. “You certainly know your relics. Mine is but a small piece of the text. The British Museum is hoping to acquire it in order to exhibit it with pieces in their possession.”

“I am sure those old fossils at the Royal Society are salivating for it, too. I hope you won’t give it over to those horrid—” She sighed and shook her head. “Sorry, I’ve done it again.”

“Not at all, I fully understand your frustration. But not even I have enough influence over the Fellows to make them change their rules.”

She returned her gaze to the papyrus, completely enraptured.

Would she be in such a swoon if he kissed her?

He moved to stand beside her as she continued to stare at this object of fascination. It was fragile and would easily shred if handled with less than expert hands. Most of these treasures were extremely fragile. For this reason, he had to keep them sealed in glass and, of course, always under lock and key. “The papyrus beside it holds the earliest known text making mention of Pythagoras.”

She straightened immediately and turned to gape at him. “Your collection is magnificent. I feel as though I am walking in a dream.”

He loved the shimmer in her eyes.

Crystal and starlight.

Her smile was genuinely sweet.

He could not imagine a single one of this other guests appreciating these artifacts as she did. Not one of them would have any understanding of their importance. These scraps of papyrus represented the foundation of mathematics.

If he spoke of these treasures to any of the *ton* beauties visiting here this weekend their eyes would glaze over. They came here to dance and catch a husband, notably himself.

He was about to compliment Amelia on her discerning taste when they were distracted by a young lady giggling in the doorway. “Why there you are, Your Grace. We have all been searching the grounds for you. Lady Amelia, it is most unfair of you to abduct our host.”

“Ah, Lady Dorothea.” Callum immediately strode to the little goose, not to be polite but to keep her out of this room he considered a historian’s sanctuary. “We were just finishing our tour. Lady Amelia and I shall join you and the other guests in a moment.”

She now regarded Amelia with a waspish eye.

Callum was all too familiar with little schemers like this *ton* diamond.

Dorothea was one of those young ladies with classically beautiful features, deep blue eyes and lovely golden curls. Indeed, there was no denying the girl was stunning. But she knew it, which in his view detracted from her appeal.

She was now fluttering her eyelashes at him and giving him a practiced smile that showed off her dimples. This girl must have sat in front of a mirror for hours, figuring out just how to show herself off to greatest advantage.

Amelia was paying no attention to the *ton* diamond, instead staring with longing at an almost thousand year old treatise on the existence of zero as a mathematical function. “Lady Amelia,” he said, trying hard to hold back his laughter, “we shall continue our tour another time. My guests require attention, and you must understand why I cannot leave this room open for just anyone to wander in.”

“Yes, of course. How thrilled your ancestors must have felt as they came upon these wondrous pieces and acquired them.” She turned to Dorothea and pointed to an ancient text. “This one is a particular marvel of a treatise. It is one of the first writings found on the proof for the existence of zero. Can you imagine?”

Dorothea stared at her with a blank expression. “Amelia, you must be joking. Are you purposely trying to put us all to sleep?”

Amelia sighed and turned back to Callum. “You wouldn’t happen to have an early papyrus on the proof for infinity, would you?”

“In fact, I would.”

Her eyes lit up again.

He chuckled. “I will make a point of showing it to you on our next tour.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said, sounding a little breathless.

Her smile was glorious.

So were her eyes.

How could she doubt that she was anything less than stunning?

Dorothea huffed with impatience when Amelia attempted to explain about Pythagorus and other early mathematicians. “Nobody cares, Amelia. Good grief, what are you going on about? Save it for your circle of spinsters.”

She had the audacity to take Callum’s arm and give it a light tug. “Come, Your Grace. Let me pull you away so you might have some respite from her drivel.”

“You are quite mistaken. I was enjoying my time with Lady Amelia.” Callum eased out of Dorothea’s grasp and took a moment to lock the door behind them now that Amelia had reluctantly followed them out.

He smothered a grin, for Amelia looked adorable in her dismay. Even her little rabbit ears seeming to curl downward in disappointment.

Dorothea stepped between him and Amelia. “I understand we are to have a scavenger hunt tomorrow.”

Callum nodded. “Yes, my uncle enjoys mysteries and puzzles. He will not tell me what he has devised, only that we are to be partnered, and the team gathering the most clues will claim a prize.”

“Partners? Your Grace, does this mean you will be participating?” The girl’s eyes turned beady, and he knew he had to cut her off before he was stuck with her throughout the game.

“I will be participating. Alas, I have already promised the Duchess of Redfern to partner with her niece.” He motioned toward Amelia, who was paying no attention whatsoever to their conversation and instead staring with longing at the now locked door.

Lord, he liked this girl.

Dorothea openly glowered at Amelia. “You must give him up, Amelia. It is not fair of you to take all the duke’s attention. And now he is saddled with you for the scavenger hunt. You must bow out and give another young lady the chance. Amelia, are you listening to me?” She stamped her foot. “Amelia!”

“What?” She turned away from the door that was obviously more fascinating to her than either of them.

Callum laughed. “Come along, Lady Amelia. It is time we joined the others.”

Women were in the habit of hanging upon his every word. Indeed, there were times he was sure the bevy of beauties constantly surrounding him would break into a round of cheers and congratulate him on his brilliance if he so much as sneezed.

That false adulation was insufferable and irritating.

He would have none of that from Amelia, whose mind was still on those ancient treatises.

He took her hand and wrapped it in his arm.

Dorothea immediately grabbed hold of his other arm and began babbling about the evening’s activities. “I must have at least two dances from you, Your Grace. I shall expire from grief if I have less.”

“Perhaps tomorrow night. I am already engaged to play cards this evening.”

“No, no, no! Oh, I know you are a cards player. But you must sit out a few rounds to join those of us who prefer dancing. Say you will. You must. It is too cruel of you if you don’t.”

She kept up her theatrics the entire length of the hall. “Too, too cruel. I shall be in tears the entire weekend if—”

He groaned. “You shall have your two dances tomorrow night, Lady Dorothea. I give you my word. I shall take time out from tomorrow’s card games to partner you. Tonight’s festivities will be quite tame since most of my guests are still exhausted from their travels and will likely retire early.”

“But you are certain about tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’ve given you my word.”

Gad, anything to shut her up.

Callum walked the two ladies onto the terrace where a full tea service had been set out beneath the shade trees. Amelia excused herself to return inside to see to her aunt who had already been served her tea and cake, and now remained in the parlor with her friends to munch and chat.

He suspected Amelia’s quick escape was more of an excuse to be away from Dorothea’s inane babbling than from any concern over Rosie, who was more than capable of taking care of herself.

Blast.

He was now left on his own with this *ton* darling who had not stopped prattling from the moment she had found him. But the wonderful thing about Dorothea was that she did not give a fig about other people’s feelings. Now that she had his agreement on tomorrow’s two dances, she had no more use for him at the moment and went on her merry way.

Unfortunately, not far enough away.

He heard her boasting to her friends about her coup.

Indeed, she grabbed hold of every young lady who drew near, reveling in their disappointment since he had not promised himself to any of them.

“He is not going to dance with anyone else,” she declared. “He is otherwise engaged for cards and is making the concession only to me.”

He made his way back inside, but Dorothea and her circle of friends soon followed him in.

Dorothea called out to him again.

Dear heaven, was she not done with him yet?

“Your Grace, are we to have dancing every night?”

“Tonight is the welcome supper for all my guests and quieter entertainments for afterward. There will be a pianist for those wishing to partake in dancing, but it is a side thing and will not go on very long. But the rest of the weekend, yes. It will be the featured entertainment and I have engaged an orchestra for it. All has been arranged.”

The ladies and gentlemen around her cheered.

“And a formal dance to end the weekend? You must have planned one or my modiste will be quite put out.”

“Your modiste? Why should she care?”

“I made the most terrible fuss about her finishing my gowns in time for your weekend party. She will be impossibly angry if she finds out I did not have the chance to wear them all.”

He nodded. “Your modiste will not scold you. There is to be a formal dance this Saturday evening.”

“Oh, I am breathless with relief.” She patted her bosom in a practiced manner designed to lure his gaze to her comely chest.

Amelia had done the same, but not intentionally.

Therein lay Amelia’s charm.

She was a beautiful girl coupled with a charming, academic absentmindedness. However, she was not scattered or dotty. Her hours were spent puzzling out the mysteries of the world instead of schemes to trap a husband.

He doubted Amelia realized he found her delightful or that he was among the men who were eager to meet her.

In truth, he was the only one interested in meeting her.

Rosie had been shocked when he had inquired about her.

But he had noticed Amelia at several Royal Society lectures in addition to various *ton* parties, even though those parties had been a crush and friends were difficult to find even if one hunted for them. However, all Amelia ever wanted to do was hide. If she could have turned herself into wallpaper and hung upon the wall at these *ton* affairs, she would have done so.

He had often considered approaching her to claim a waltz, but thought better of it. The girl did not want to be seen, and dancing with London's most eligible bachelor would have put her under the discerning, and often cruel, attention of society's elite.

Amelia was obviously a girl who did not want to be talked about or fussed over.

Dorothea, on the other hand, would not leave him alone.

He once again disengaged himself from her and her friends, leaving them to their inconsequential chatter about modistes. Lord, help him, could they choose a duller conversation?

He continued to make his way around the room, shaking hands and chatting briefly with his other guests. He had been free no more than five minutes before Dorothea returned and insisted on clinging to him like a barnacle for the rest of their tea time.

He allowed it because it was easier to bring her along than try to detach himself.

She chattered away with the ladies, their conversations quickly turning to talk about their difficulties in finding a capable modiste. Again? Lord, was there no other topic in her head? She flirted with the gentlemen who all found her dazzling as she showed off her gown. "My modiste says—"

Callum felt his head explode.

His gaze drifted to Amelia with desperate longing for a conversation that would not leave him catatonic.

She had remained seated beside Rosie and a group of Rosie's old friends, enjoying a cup of tea and not minding that she was the youngest person in that group by about thirty years. James and their uncle now joined Rosie's circle, James taking a vacated seat beside Amelia.

When Callum glanced again, he saw James and Amelia chatting away like a pair of magpies. What in blazes were they talking about?

"Your Grace," Dorothea said, tugging on his sleeve to regain his attention. "Is it not shocking?"

"Forgive me, I missed what you said."

"I asked you about Lord Haroldson and the brazen way he is pursuing Lady Fullbright under her husband's very nose. Is it not appalling?"

"I try not to stick my nose in other people's private affairs."

"Would you be open to private affairs?" one of the ladies in Dorothea's circle asked quite brazenly.

The ladies around him tittered inanely.

He was not getting drawn into that conversation, so he ignored the question knowing Dorothea and her little circle of followers would move on to chatter about something else since none of them seemed capable of holding a thought for more than a minute unless it had to do with them.

Perhaps he was being harsh in his assessment, but no.

Dorothea's modiste came up in conversation again.

Shoot me now.

Then one of the ladies dropped her fan.

He bent to scoop it up and return it to her.

He was met with an openly inviting smile. "Here you go, Lady Veronica."

Her hand wrapped around his a moment before taking it from him, the suggestion unmistakable that she would be

willing to wrap her hand around another part of his body if he visited her tonight.

Another lady dropped her lace handkerchief a few minutes later.

Of course, ever the gentleman, he picked it up and handed it over to her. “And here is yours, Lady Margaret.”

She stroked her fingers along his hand in a suggestive manner, and smiled in similar invitation.

He was not going to visit either young lady in her bedchamber.

House parties were notorious for these midnight liaisons, but he was not about to be trapped by any of these supposed diamonds. They would do well enough for themselves in finding a husband, for they knew how to play the game.

Amelia did not even understand there was a game to be played.

He watched her still chatting away with his brother.

Well, his brother was now doing most of the talking.

She was merely smiling and nodding on occasion.

Still, it irked him

Amelia was his to look after.

What did James want with her?

He asked his brother once they were finally alone.

James shook his head and laughed. “I don’t believe it.”

Callum frowned at him. “You don’t believe what?”

“You like Amelia.” He held up his hands in mock surrender. “Admit it, you do. More than merely like her since I’ve never seen you turn into a jealous ape over anyone before.”

“I...no, it...” He rubbed a hand along the nape of his neck. “For pity’s sake, I am not jealous.”

“You have not taken your eyes off her since she arrived.”

“Not so. I’ve hardly had a moment alone with her because—”

His brother burst out laughing. “You have no idea how long the two of you were touring the Marston private collection, do you? Well, I’ll tell you. It was easily an hour.”

“Impossible.”

James arched an eyebrow. “But it felt like mere minutes, didn’t it?”

Callum sighed. “It could not have been an hour.”

“Do you know how long you were standing with Dorothea and her group of friends?”

“Now, that felt like an eternity,” he said with a shake of his head.

James cast him a most irritating grin. “It was less than ten minutes.”

“What are you suggesting?”

His brother rolled his eyes. “You know very well what this signifies.”

Yes, he knew.

But could it be?

Was he was falling in love with Amelia?

CHAPTER THREE

Amelia realized she must have had a perplexed look on her face when the Duke of Marston approached her the following day.

Dear heaven.

Did the man always have to look spectacular?

“Is something wrong, Lady Amelia? You appear distressed.”

“Not distressed so much as confused.” It was late morning and everyone had gathered in the parlor to receive their first clues to start the scavenger hunt. However, she had discovered something in her reticule that now had her completely distracted.

“Care to tell me what has you so obviously befuddled?”

She handed him a folded paper. “You see...I found this note in my reticule a few minutes ago, and clearly it must be a mistake. I cannot think when it might have been slipped in there. Perhaps upon our arrival yesterday when we ladies set aside our gloves and reticules while waiting for our bags to be brought up to our rooms.”

“Could someone have placed it there this morning while you were down to breakfast?” He unfolded the note, pleased she had come to him with it and not her aunt.

“Yes, it is also possible. But that would mean the person purposely entered my bedchamber to leave it for me. You will realize the notion is preposterous once you read it.”

He took a moment to peruse the note, and then grinned. “Why Amelia, you have a secret admirer. This is a love letter.”

She blushed. “So you see, it must be a mistake.”

“Why must you deny the obvious? Someone likes you.”

She shook her head with vehemence. “Forgive me, Your Grace. But there is not a man here who has ever given me the time of day. This is either a jest designed to make a laughingstock of me, or it is an entirely innocent error by a love-struck swain who chose the wrong reticule. So, I think I must find out who has a reticule similar to mine, for that is the young lady who is meant to receive this letter, assuming it is not a jest.”

He frowned lightly. “I don’t know why you insist on diminishing yourself. You are as pretty as any of the young ladies here. In fact, far prettier.”

She glanced up at him in surprise. “You really do not need to flatter me. I know my looks are decent, but they are not the *ton* ideal of beauty. So I doubt I was the object of this gentleman’s affection. Do you think you might help me discover the identity of the sender? Or the intended recipient?”

He nodded. “All right.”

She smiled in relief. “Thank you. Perhaps you might discreetly ask your gentleman friends if any of them wrote it.”

“I will, after the scavenger hunt.” He tucked the note into his pocket. “My uncle is handing out the clues for each team. Are you ready...partner?”

She laughed.

Amelia knew she was the envy of every young lady at the house party. The duke had let it be known he was partnering her at the request of her aunt, but she knew it was not true. First of all, Rosie assured her that she had made no such request.

Nor did the duke appear to be someone who could be pushed into agreeing to anything he did not wish to do. In all likelihood, he had selected her because she was safe. Unlike

most of the other young ladies present, she was not going to pain his ears with inane chatter or plot to have him compromise her.

She did not mind being in the company of the handsomest man at this party. When he stood close, she caught the subtle scent of sandalwood on his skin.

Yes, this man was divine to all her senses and made her heart flutter.

She supposed this was every young lady's response to him.

"Each team has a different set of clues," Lord Danvers intoned, regaining her attention as he set out the rules, "so do not think to follow each other. You have until four o'clock to return to this parlor. The team with the most items gathered wins. Anyone returning after four o'clock shall be disqualified immediately. The items are planted on this estate and throughout the village of Marston, but nowhere beyond. I hope you ladies have on sturdy walking boots."

Each pair of scavenger hunters received a basket into which they were to put the items they collected. They also received ten written clues, each set down on folded sheets of paper that were numbered from one to ten. There was a twist to each clue because it was posed in the form of a riddle to be solved.

If they could not solve the riddle, they would not find the item to be collected.

"What is the prize for the winning team?" someone called out from the crowd.

The gentlemen participating were all bachelors and they had each been paired with an unmarried young lady. It came as no surprise to Amelia that the lady who won was to be rewarded with a kiss from the duke. The gentleman who won was to be rewarded with a kiss from any young lady of his choosing.

Dorothea cast a gloating smile as several gentlemen declared their desire to kiss her.

None of them expressed the slightest desire to kiss Amelia, not that she cared in the least. As far as Amelia was concerned, those gentlemen were welcome to the *ton* diamond.

“Are we really going to play this game to win, Your Grace?” she asked as each couple started off on their quest. “After all, you are not only our host but the scavenger hunt prize.”

“We are absolutely going to play to win. I have no idea what the clues say or where my uncle planted the items, so it is a fair game for all of us. Do you not wish to win?”

She laughed. “So I may claim a kiss from you? That will really upset the other young ladies. First to have you as my partner and then to have your kiss? They will come after me with hatchets and daggers.”

He arched an eyebrow and took her by the hand to lead her onto the terrace. “We certainly will not win if we stand here chattering. Let’s read our first clue.”

Amelia removed the folded square of paper marked with the number one from their basket and read it aloud. “I am slow to approach, but quick to pass. Once passed, I can never be reclaimed.” She pursed her lips and gave a moment’s thought. The distant church bells happened to ring at that moment to signal the eleven o’clock hour. “Oh, how silly of me. This is a reference to time. Slow to approach. Quick to pass. One can never reclaim the past.”

“Well done, Amelia. There is a clock tower in the village. Let’s see what we can find there.”

They walked to the nearby village of Marston under a cloudless blue sky and a warming sun. The breeze was light and held the trace of a chill, but Amelia had worn her pelisse so she was quite comfortable as they strolled down the lane.

Other couples were ahead of them and some lagged behind. The duke’s brother had partnered with Lady Dorothea and they were in the lead. Of course, that girl wanted her kiss from the duke and would not let anything or anyone stand in her way.

Amelia did not care one way or the other.

She would not mind being on the receiving end of a kiss from *Duke Handsome*, but not in front of everybody.

She had never been kissed before.

Everyone would surely know it when she fumbled uncertainly and her face caught flame.

The moment would be too humiliating.

She shook out of the thought and concentrated on the game.

The village was named after the duke's family. His country estate had been given the name of Marston Hall. There was no mistaking the influence he and his family held in the surrounding area, an influence that had lasted close to a thousand years.

No wonder he was so daunting.

It was not merely his handsome appearance.

The man oozed power.

It was in his stance and in his every movement.

It was in the command of his voice and his every expression.

The woman who claimed his heart would have to be quite special in more ways than simply good looks.

Indeed, she could not imagine him settling for someone like Dorothea. However, what did she know about men? Perhaps they all adored these frivolous ninnies and wanted exactly this sort of woman as a wife.

There was a boy seated in front of the clock tower as they reached it. "Good morning, Leo," the duke said, bending on his haunches to speak to him at his eye level.

The lad's face lit up with excitement. "Morning, Yer Grace. I suppose ye are looking for yer first trinket." He looked so proud as he handed the duke a watch on a fob. "Ye may now move on to yer second clue."

He ruffled the boy's hair. "Thank you, Leo."

"My pleasure, Yer Grace. Enjoy yer day."

"You, too." He tossed a shilling to the boy. "Are you permitted to leave your post yet?"

"No'm, not until all ten teams find me."

"All right. Well, you stay at your post, but when your assignment is done, go have a slice of pie at the tea room and tell Mrs. Blake she is to put it on my account. Is your sister also working these clues?"

The boy nodded.

"Have Mrs. Blake put her pie on my account as well."

"You treated the boy very kindly," Amelia said as they walked out of young Leo's hearing.

He grinned and took the basket from her hand to carry it himself. "By your smile, I gather this has met with your approval."

"Of course, it has. You made that boy feel so proud of himself. I sense his family circumstances are difficult. Gaining your notice and being rewarded with a pie for him and his sister will have him smiling all day."

"It is a small gesture."

"No kindness is ever too small," she insisted, no doubt thinking too much about her own neglected childhood.

"That family will need a good deal more than a tossed shilling and a day's treat, but I will look after them."

"Well done, Your Grace. Truly." She opened up their next clue. "What goes up when it rains and down when it stops?"

The duke's grin broadened into a smile. "By the look on your face, Amelia, I would say you know the answer to this one, too."

She nodded. "I think it is an umbrella. But this is a common item. Whose umbrella are we to take?"

“There is a local haberdasher where I expect we shall find the one we are to collect.”

They walked down the High Street toward the shop where the owner, a portly, older man by the name of Mr. Cuttle, was seated outside his shop door in wait for them.

The duke nodded to him. “Good morning, Mr. Cuttle.”

He scrambled to his feet. “And to you, Your Grace, and your lovely companion.”

“We are here to collect our umbrella,” Amelia said with cheer, rather enjoying this scavenger hunt.

The man went inside and brought it out. “Here you go. Good luck to you. Your Grace, your uncle has the entire village enlisted in the game. You had better pick up your pace if you hope to win. Your brother and Lady Dorothea are already onto their fourth clue.”

Amelia arched an eyebrow. “They are?”

She was not competitive by nature, but the thought of that goose beating her out just rankled.

The duke laughed as he led her away. “Why Amelia, you are quietly seething.”

She grinned. “No, not at all. But I do find it galling that Lady Dorothea is proving to be better at this game than we are.”

“I’m sure she is every bit the irritating fool you believe her to be. It is my brother who is solving their riddles. She is not intelligent, just an expert in the art of conniving. Also, she is determined to be the one I must kiss.”

“You are grimacing. Would it be so awful if you had to kiss her? She is beautiful.”

“That is undeniable, but she is also petty, selfish, and not at all compassionate.”

Amelia arched an eyebrow, surprised he saw so clearly beyond her pretty facade. “Who do you hope to kiss, Your Grace?”

“You, of course. Is it not obvious? Knowing who Pythagoras is and appreciating his work has certainly earned you a kiss from me.”

She laughed and read off the third riddle as they walked away from the haberdasher. “I walk on four legs in my youth, on two legs in my prime, and three legs in old age. Find my third leg.”

“I know this one,” he said. “It is the ages of man. An infant who crawls on hands and knees, that’s the four legs. A grown man who strides, that’s the reference to two legs. An elderly man who requires a cane to walk. That’s the third leg. Come on, no wonder Mr. Cuttle had such a smug grin on his face. He sells canes as well.”

“Ah, back already, Your Grace?” The man grinned as he rose from his chair.

“Yes, Mr. Cuttle. We are here for our cane.”

“Right away,” he said and hurried inside to retrieve it. “Move on to number four.”

By this point, couples were running up and down the High Street, merrily calling to each other as they scrambled to find the answers to their clues.

Amelia now opened up the fourth clue. “I am broken the moment my name is uttered.”

The duke scratched his head. “What in blazes does that mean?”

She waited patiently for him to figure it out, then cleared her throat. “Well, I think I know the answer.”

“Of course,” he said with a chuckle. “All right, I give up. What is it?”

“The answer is silence. Silence is broken the moment someone speaks. But how does one find silence? It isn’t something you can grasp in your hand.”

“You are a clever thing,” he said with open admiration. “Well, let’s see if I can make a contribution to this hunt. A

church is the only place I can think of where we are meant to be silent. Let's start there."

She nodded.

There was a quaint church built of Cotswolds stone at the end of the village. It was small, but had a towering spire. Much of the building was shrouded in ivy, and Amelia thought the blend of gold stone and ivy greenery was the most beautiful thing.

Indeed, the entire village of Marston was quaint and appealing. This was a place where someone could be happy, for everywhere she turned, she was surrounded by the beauty of nature and yet also within easy reach of the small comforts one might need. London was nothing to this charming village.

Beside the church was a cemetery. "Oh, one would also find silence in a cemetery," she commented as they approached the church and were about to go in.

He glanced toward the open field dotted with crosses and tombstones. "I don't see anyone out there. Let's try the church first."

The vicar was waiting for them and handed them a card with the words *I now pronounce you man and wife* inscribed on it. "Your uncle wrote this one especially for you, Your Grace," the vicar said with a laugh. "Make of it what you will. But you now must move on to your fifth clue."

They walked out and Amelia could not resist grinning with mirth. "Seems your uncle is eager to see you married. That was a not so subtle kick in the pants."

He gave a jovial wince. "Indeed. We are not known for subtlety in my family. Hide that card from Dorothea or she will have me tied and trussed like a Christmas goose as she hauls me to the altar."

"Oh, I think you are quite a clever man and will find a way to escape her clutches. But she will certainly come after you." She sighed and then began to read their next riddle. "I am a ship that does not sail."

“Gad, I am going to throttle my uncle once we are through.”

She brushed back a curl of her hair blown loose in the stiffening breeze. “What a clever man he is to have come up with a hundred of these riddles. Ten for every couple, and we are ten teams.”

“No, he simply needed to switch the order of the same clues to have us all running in opposite directions. Our first clue could have been someone else’s fifth clue.”

“Oh, you are quite right. Still, he had to come up with at least ten riddles. What sort of ship does not sail?” She began to think aloud. “A ship still in dry dock. But we are landlocked here, so where would we find a dock within the confines of this village?”

“We wouldn’t. There are none.”

“Um, then a boat with a damaged hull? Something small that fits on a lake.”

“No lake, either. I have a pond that is too small for anything other than swimming, and a stream that runs behind my property but it is only good for fishing. The closest lake of any note is two towns over.”

“And a ship brings to mind something larger than a punt or raft or sailing skiff. So I think the meaning has to be something other than sailing vessels. But what?”

He shrugged. “No idea. You’ve done the lion’s share of the work so far. I have contributed shockingly little.”

“Not at all. I think we work rather well as a team. But this clue has me stumped. Your Grace, would you mind if we stopped in at Miss Blake’s Tea Room?” She pointed to the prettily decorated shop across the street. “I could do with a lemonade. I am thirsty and my head is obviously a little clouded.”

He took her hand and smiled in triumph. “You shall have your lemonade, but not at the tea room.”

“Then where?”

“At the Friendship Tavern. Get it? What is a ship that does not sail? *Friendship*.”

She laughed. “Brilliant deduction, Your Grace.”

“Glad I could contribute. You are the brilliant one, Amelia. You’ve solved most of these riddles.”

“Are we counting? I think we are fairly even.”

“Perhaps over the span of these ten clues we shall be. But you are well ahead of me right now, I feel. By the way, I am not put out by it at all. I like the clever way you think.”

They walked to the other end of the High Street where the tavern was located. Several teams had already stopped in and ordered a bite to eat as well as something to slake their thirst. “Amelia, are you hungry? We do have time to eat. After all, the rules only require us to return by four o’clock. There are no extra points for finishing fastest.”

“Your Grace, what happens if all the teams come back with their ten items found? Does that mean we all win?”

He nodded. “It is a house party game, Amelia. The object is to enjoy oneself. If all are winners, then I shall kiss all ten ladies, and the other gentlemen shall each have their choice of a lady to kiss.”

Her eyes rounded in surprise.

He placed a hand over hers. “We shall keep it tame and proper, all in good fun. If any improper activities take place, they shall occur discreetly after midnight when we are all tucked in our beds.”

By improper, she knew he meant bed hopping.

Of course, he would have his choice of young ladies. She had noticed at least four of them make suggestive passes at him yesterday.

Perhaps he would choose a different lady for every night.

This weekend party stretched from Thursday to Sunday, so he must have dallied with one willing lady last night. This left

three more nights with similar opportunity, and she knew he had only to crook his finger to find another willing taker.

He must have understood where her thoughts were leading. “Amelia, I do not intend to frequent anyone’s bed but my own. Alone. Not that it is any of your business. But I do not want you to think this is how I would behave.”

“I expect you are discreet about *that* sort of thing.”

“Everyone has their eyes on me day and night. Most of these young ladies would love nothing better than to have me compromise them. I have been avoiding their wives for years and do not intend to make a mistake now. They may indulge in such activities with my other guests. Indeed, they may compromise themselves to their heart’s delight. But not with me.”

He led her to a table in the corner and ordered lemonade for her and ale for himself. He also asked the proprietor for their scavenged prize. “Right away, Your Grace. Would you and the lovely lady care for something to eat?”

“Just the lemonade is perfect for me,” Amelia said.

The duke nodded. “Just drinks for us, Martin.”

The man bustled off.

Amelia sighed. “I did not mean to speak out of turn.”

The duke arched an eyebrow. “You didn’t speak at all, but your thoughts were transparent. I apologize if I sounded harsh. Having to constantly keep my guard up gets to me sometimes. I am not a person to them but a golden chalice. I do not mean to sound full of myself, but this is what I am to them. Once they have me, what are they to do with me? They want the wealthy duke...that golden chalice, but they do not want *me*.”

“It must be so frustrating for you.”

“At times, it is. I cannot dance with a young lady without speculation abounding. If ever I dared request the supper dance, the gossip rags would go wild proclaiming I have fallen in love. This is why Rosie is often my supper companion. Nobody cares about my dining with a woman old enough to be

my mother. They are only interested in the young ones, for they know I must sire heirs. I would not have a moment's peace if I dared escort anyone under the age of forty."

"Are there any young ladies here this weekend you find interesting?"

"Other than you?"

"I mean romantically interesting. I know my intellectual capability meets with your approval."

She never received her answer, for the proprietor returned with their drinks in that moment along with their prize which turned out to be another note from his uncle which said: *Have you set the wedding date yet?*

Amelia laughed. "You look ill."

"My uncle does not know the meaning of subtlety."

He had just tucked the note in their basket when James and Dorothea joined them at their table. "We've got eight so far," James said, tossing her wink. "How are you faring, Amelia?"

She laughed. "Oh, dear. Quite poorly in comparison. We are only starting on number six next. How are you tearing through these clues so quickly?"

"Are you accusing us of cheating?" Dorothea snapped.

Amelia's eyes rounded in surprise. "Not at all. Why would you think such a thing?"

Dorothea tipped her head up and cast her that peering-down-one's-nose look of disdain. "Well, we didn't cheat."

"Lady Dorothea," the duke intoned. "No one is suggesting you did. My brother is quite clever and more than capable of figuring out clues, although one would never guess it by looking at him."

James burst out laughing. "You rotter. That's the most backhanded compliment I've ever received. You are peeved because I am kicking your arse in this game."

"Nonsense. Amelia and I are merely pacing ourselves."

Amelia took a sip of her lemonade and nodded. "Surely you have heard of the parable about the tortoise and the hare."

Dorothea was obviously looking for any reason to take offense. "Are you comparing me to a tortoise?"

"No," Amelia said calmly. "I was comparing His Grace and myself to the tortoise. You and his brother are the hare."

The *ton* diamond looked over at James to see his reaction, then let the matter drop with a disgruntled huff when she saw he was grinning and not in the least offended. She now smiled at the duke and batted her eyelashes in obvious flirtation. "I look forward to receiving my kiss from you."

Did she think the duke forgot she was snapping and disdainful only a moment ago? Surely, she could not be so shortsighted as to believe he would forget her behavior and immediately fly into raptures over her beauty.

Other men might, for they too often thought with parts other than their head. But the duke was a cautious man and not prone to fickle infatuations.

When this man fell in love, it would be a deep and abiding love.

Amelia finished her lemonade and sat back quietly as Dorothea continued to flirt with the duke, and as he and his brother continued to poke at each other in brotherly fun.

She liked these brothers.

Especially the duke, for he was someone quite rare.

Had he ever been in love?

She glanced at the couples who were relaxing in the tavern before continuing their scavenger hunt. There were several lovely ladies among them, for they were not all as shallow or conniving as Lady Dorothea.

He must have invited them because they were suitable marriage prospects.

Was he considering one in particular?

CHAPTER FOUR

The teams all returned to the manor house by four o'clock, each carrying a basket loaded with items. Callum groaned when his uncle declared them all winners, for the only young lady he wished to kiss was Amelia.

Well, at least he would get a turn with her.

The ladies cheered when he stepped forward to kiss each one.

“Me first,” Dorothea insisted, pushing her way forward.

Callum stifled another groan.

He gave her a kiss and then moved on to do the same for the other ladies, purposely saving Amelia for last.

Dorothea and her circle of friends took it as a sign of his reluctance to kiss the bluestocking, but quite the opposite was true. He wanted her lips to be the last ones he tasted on his mouth.

Amelia looked scared as he came toward her.

“I don't bite,” he whispered in her ear, not certain if she heard him over the raucous cheers and whistles of the spectators. “Just close your eyes.”

Her eyes fluttered shut and she held her breath as he cupped her face in his hands and pressed his mouth to hers.

Her lips were soft and lovely, as honey-sweet as he knew they would be.

He sank his mouth deeper onto hers.

However, he did not allow himself to explore as he wished, instead counting slowly to three and then drawing away because he dared not take a moment longer or tongues would wag. “Open your eyes now, Amelia.”

She opened them wide and looked up at him.

He smiled back at her. “It is over. You have survived. See? It wasn’t that difficult.”

The gentlemen, being declared winners themselves, now rushed forward to claim a kiss from their favorite young lady as reward.

Dorothea, of course, was the most desired and relished all the adulation.

Callum was glad everyone had their attention fixed on that empty-headed debutante and not on Amelia. This allowed him a moment alone with her. He cast her a reassuring smile. “Our kiss was not nearly long enough. I’m sorry for that, especially since it was your first.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You could tell?”

“Only by how intently you were watching as I kissed the other ladies. It was obvious you were trying to figure out how it was done so as not to embarrass yourself when your turn came around. I’m truly sorry I could not kiss you as I wished, but I dared not be too obvious. I know how you detest attention being drawn to you.”

“I understand and appreciate your consideration.”

The others were laughing and clapping as the men began to chase the ladies of their choice around the room.

Several were chasing Dorothea, and she was delighting in all of it, squealing and playfully shrieking. This had everyone concentrating on Dorothea who continued to make a noisy fuss as the gentlemen lined up to kiss her.

Callum remained by Amelia’s side. “How was the kiss for you, Amelia?”

She cast him the sweetest smile. “Very nice, Your Grace.”

“Yes, I thought so, too. By the way, I hope you will call me Callum whenever we are not in company.”

“Because you kissed me?”

“No, you know that is not why. I’ve kissed all the ladies and have no intention of permitting them such familiarity. Thank goodness that is done and over. You may call me Callum because I respect and value your friendship.”

Although surprised, she nodded. “All right. Thank you. I am honored.”

They spoke no more as he was drawn away and once again surrounded by eager young ladies. He had enjoyed his hours with Amelia and would seek her out again after supper. There was something about her, about the way she made him feel at ease whenever in her company.

Dorothea tugged on his sleeve. “Your Grace, did you see how every man lined up to kiss me?”

She batted her eyelashes once again, a flirtation he was coming to find quite irritating. “Yes, it was hard to overlook.”

“Are you jealous?” She cast him a dimpled smile. “Yours was the first and best.”

“I am vastly relieved.” He tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, but this girl had such a grating manner about her. Perhaps he was being too harsh, for all he wanted to do was spend more time with Amelia and leave the others to themselves.

As his staff set out tea and refreshments, he glanced around the room for sign of Amelia, but she had disappeared.

James came up to him. “You will find her in the library.”

Callum sighed. “What makes you think I am looking for her?”

“Other than the fact you just spent five hours alone with her on the scavenger hunt and still cannot seem to drink enough of her in? By the way, you owe me for taking Dorothea off your hands. I was ready to leap off the clock

tower after ten minutes in her company. I hope Amelia is worth the monumental sacrifice I made for you.”

“She is,” he said quietly.

James gaped at him. “Blessed saints. You really are serious about her. Partnering with her was never about doing a favor for Rosie, was it?”

“No, I merely made up that excuse.”

His brother’s jaw dropped even lower. “You made it up?”

“I had to for Amelia’s sake. If it became known I was singling her out for attention, speculation would have been rampant. She hates to be fussed over and would have run in the opposite direction.” He patted his breast pocket. “By the way, she may have another suitor. She found a love note in her reticule.”

James laughed. “Oh, this gets better and better. Did you write it?”

“No, you know how cautious I am. I would never put such thoughts down on paper.”

“Then you have a genuine rival?”

“I don’t know. Amelia thinks the gentleman stuck the note in her reticule by mistake. She thinks the fellow believed the reticule belonged to another young lady. Will you ask around for me? Try to be discreet about it.”

“Let me see the note.”

Callum slipped it out of the breast pocket of his jacket and handed it to his brother. “Recognize anything in it?”

“No, not a clue. Why don’t you show it to Rosie? She’s awfully sharp about these things. Women have a way of noticing subtleties in a man’s behavior. Anyway, she ought to be told since it involves her niece.”

“I suppose. Ask the gentlemen first. I’ll take it to Rosie if none of them admit to writing it.”

He left his brother and went off to mingle with his guests. But as he strolled from one circle of friends to another, he

noticed Dorothea in a corner talking to one of his long-time friends, Lord Pennington. At first, he thought nothing of it until Pennington looked around furtively and then slipped out of the parlor.

When Callum returned his gaze to Dorothea, she had a beady look in her eyes and a smirk on her lips.

Gad, the girl was up to something.

He trusted Pennington, but had absolutely no faith in what Dorothea might have told him. Was the girl plotting something against Amelia?

He extricated himself from his guests, irritated it had taken him several minutes to do so, and strode to the library.

Amelia was a beautiful girl.

What poison had Dorothea been whispering in Pennington's ear?

"What are you doing in here?" Callum tried to stifle his anger when he found his friend leaning over Amelia as though curious about what she was reading.

His lips were far too close to Amelia's lovely neck.

Amelia, of course, seemed completely unaware of Pennington's intentions.

"Ah, Marston." He straightened immediately and stepped away from her. "Nothing untoward, I assure you. All quite innocent. I was merely curious about what Lady Amelia found so fascinating in that book."

"All well and good, but why are you in my library in the first place? Everyone is in the parlor."

Pennington held out his hands in a supplicating gesture. "Are your guests not allowed to explore the house for themselves? Or slip away to read as Lady Amelia is doing?"

"She is reading. I'm just not sure what you are doing here." Callum's friendship with Pennington went back to their days at Eton, so he knew the man rather well. He was a decent fellow, but also a bit of a scoundrel who often boasted of his

prowess with women. Just the sort Dorothea would seek to trick into...he knew the vixen had filled Pennington's head with lies about Amelia.

And Pennington was just puffed up enough to believe Amelia was hoping for an assignation with him.

Callum wanted to flatten the man.

He would if Pennington dared lay a hand on Amelia.

Amelia looked up from her book and now listened to their exchange with interest.

Pennington cleared his throat. "Honestly, Marston. You are misreading the situation entirely."

"Am I?"

Pennington nodded. "What did you think I meant to do?"

Callum folded his arms over his chest. "I don't know. What did Lady Dorothea suggest you do?"

His friend chuckled. "Ah, that. You noticed our exchange, did you? If you must know, she made some absurd claim that Lady Amelia was infatuated with me and hoped I would meet her for a...um, rather spicy romantic interlude."

Amelia's eyes rounded in surprise. "Here? In the library? With you, of all people? Indeed, what an absurd notion. Are you serious?"

Pennington winced. "Ouch, you know how to deflate a man."

Callum chuckled. "I think our darling Dorothea was up to a bit of mischief."

"Obviously," Pennington said and then turned to Amelia. "You were never in any danger from me. I quickly saw I had been duped. I am experienced enough to know when a lady is in a library because she is hungry to seize hold of my body or when she is in a library to actually read a book. You, Lady Amelia, were clearly enthralled by your book. However, I approached you because I was curious as to the reason Dorothea wanted to send me in here."

Amelia looked from Pennington to him and then back to Pennington. “And?”

“Is it not obvious? She wished to discredit you in the eyes of the duke in the hope of knocking you out of competition.”

Amelia frowned lightly. “What competition?”

Pennington glanced at Callum. “Him, of course. You are clearly his favorite.”

Amelia smiled as she turned to Callum. “Goodness, what an odd conclusion. I have never been anyone’s favorite before.”

Callum returned her smile. “Well? How does it feel to be mine?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “It feels... interesting.”

Pennington laughed. “Well, that was hardly a glowing recommendation.”

“I meant no insult to His Grace. I think I am very poor at these house party games, or should I call them intrigues? In truth, I wish I knew how to flatter and flirt. But it simply does not come naturally to me. Your Grace, you have already told me I am far too serious. I suppose this proves it.” She held up the book she was reading. “It is a translation of Euclid’s *Elements*.”

Callum burst out laughing.

“Dear heaven,” Pennington muttered. “This is your casual reading matter?”

Amelia nodded.

Pennington rubbed a hand across the nape of his neck and grinned. “I may fall in love with you myself. No wonder Dorothea considers you competition.”

“Because I can read?”

“Because you are intelligent and beautiful. I will admit, it has taken me a while to realize just how pretty you are. Or how intelligent you are. My apologies for being slow to come

around. But a man's head spins when introduced to so many lovely ladies in their pretty silks. They are all distracting pieces of candy. One tends to lose oneself in the soft pink of their smiles and lush gold of their curls."

Callum cleared his throat to regain his friend's attention before the bouncer began spouting love verses to Amelia. "Go back to the parlor, Pennington."

"Would you mind terribly if I waited around?" He drew out his fob and checked the time. "I expect Lady Dorothea will be leading her army of confederates on a march to the library about now. They ought to arrive at any moment."

Callum nodded. "Amelia, I expect you have caught on to her purpose by now. She hoped to catch you alone with Pennington and have you discredited. This should be jolly good fun. She'll explode like a fireworks display when she realizes her scheme has failed."

Amelia set her book aside and rose. "This is all my fault. I should not have slipped away to be on my own. I'm sorry to have put either of you in this awkward situation. I truly did not think anyone would notice my absence or even care that I was gone had they noticed."

"No harm done." Callum dropped his hands to his sides. "However, I suggest you run up the back stairs now so that only Pennington and I are found in here. Quickly, I hear the sound of her satin slippers on the marble."

"Slippers make a sound on marble?"

He sighed. "Amelia, this is no time for scientific quibbling. I do not need to hear her footsteps to know the delightful Dorothea is at this moment leading a parade down the hall."

Amelia scurried away.

No sooner had she disappeared than Dorothea burst in with half a dozen friends beside her and a ready accusation on her lips. "Oho! I—"

She looked around, puzzled to find Pennington seated behind the desk with Amelia's book in his hands. Callum was

in the corner about to pour each of them a brandy, but set the bottle down as Dorothea's little show unfolded.

"Where is Amelia?" Her beady eyes honed in on Pennington.

He looked up and shrugged. "Haven't seen her."

She frowned. "And you, Your Grace?"

He cast her a warning glower that sent a noticeable shiver up her spine. "Are you interrogating me?"

"No...no, of course not. I...do forgive me. We were worried about dear Amelia when we saw her slip away from the parlor."

"How considerate of you," he said with a coldness designed to turn the conniving girl to ice. "But I suggest you concern yourself with your own affairs and leave Lady Amelia to hers."

Dorothea and her friends now backed out of the library and were preparing to return to the parlor when Amelia traipsed down the main stairs.

Dorothea gasped. "Where were you? You were supposed to be in the library."

"Me?" Amelia patted her hair. "I merely went upstairs to fix a few pins that had loosened. Why?"

"No reason." But she stared at Amelia with venom in her gaze.

Callum realized he would have to keep Amelia close for the duration of the house party. Not that he minded in the least, for she was stealing his heart.

Unfortunately, Dorothea sensed it.

Pennington's eyebrows shot up as he, too, noted the exchange between Dorothea and Amelia. He sidled over to Callum. "Trouble brewing?"

Callum nodded. "Remind me not to host any more house parties."

“It isn’t the parties that are the problem. It is the quality of those invited.” He shook his head and sighed. “That girl is Machiavelli reborn. Makes me rethink my marriage quest. I shall have to pay more notice to the quiet, unassuming wallflowers.”

Amelia had now joined them and heard Pennington’s comment. “Stop placing us in your neat, little categories and just talk to us. You might find an intelligent diamond or a sparkling wallflower in our midst. But you’ll never figure it out if you only regard us as candy.”

“They teach us mathematics, science, history, Latin and Greek at university,” Pennington said with a light groan, “but they really ought to provide intensive lectures on women. We are sent off into the world completely ill-equipped to deal with them, and yet our lives can be a misery or bliss depending on the one we choose. Makes a man shudder.”

“It is worse for women, Lord Pennington,” Amelia said. “We are not only trapped if we choose unwisely, but we have also lost any assets we bring to the marriage. What recourse do we have when all the laws favor men? We cannot even keep our children without our husband’s consent if the marriage falls apart. It is barbaric to deprive a child of a mother’s love.”

Pennington groaned again. “Lady Amelia, now you are depressing me. I hope I shall never be such an ogre to the woman I marry.”

“I am certain you will be fair, but not all men are honorable.”

“Nor all women,” Callum added, holding out his arm to Amelia to escort her back to the parlor. “This is why the Marriage Mart is a battleground. One needs to know who one’s allies are and who are the enemies. One needs to prepare for surprise attacks and be alert to ambushes.”

“Dorothea almost ambushed me just now, didn’t she?”

Callum nodded. “She tried. I think there must be no more library adventures for you, Amelia. I want you to stay close to me as much as you can.”

“But won’t that rile her even more?”

“This is not about her. It is about protecting you. Just don’t walk anywhere on your own. Let me know if you must leave for any reason.”

The three of them followed Dorothea and her disgruntled pack to the parlor.

Pennington excused himself, muttering assurances he was determined to search for a wife who was more than mere candy for his eyes.

Amelia also excused herself. “You do not need me hanging on your arm as you move about the room to chat with your friends. I am duly chastened and shall remain with my aunt for the remainder of the afternoon.”

Callum watched as she settled beside Rosie and her circle of elderly friends. The girl was charming and engaging when she wanted to be, but this marriage business had her tied up in knots. Yet, when she was not concerned with it she radiated beauty.

That evening, he escorted one of Dorothea’s friends to supper, his purpose to sow discord among her band of schemers. The young woman, Lady Alice, was another *ton* diamond, a bubbly blonde with pretty dimples and not a lick of brain matter between her ears.

Amelia was seated between his uncle and his brother, and all of them appeared to be having a grand time, enjoying lively conversation as the courses were served. It was a lavish meal starting with a white soup and ending with an elaborate array of Viennese cakes rich in raspberry and chocolate sauces. The main courses consisted of roasted game fowl and fish pies.

While his friends *oohed* and *aahed* over each elaborate tray brought out, and enjoyed a refreshing bite of each *amuse-bouche* designed to clear the palate, all he could think of was having the interminable meal draw to a close so he might be near Amelia again.

His breath caught when Amelia glanced down the table at him and graced him with a dazzling smile.

Is this how it felt to be in love?

He had been aware of the girl for months, but they had never spoken until this weekend. Gad, they were hardly more than acquaintances.

Yet, he felt as though he had always known her.

After supper, the men remained behind to enjoy their port while the ladies retreated to the parlor for tea and sherry. He and his brother took the opportunity to quietly ask each bachelor about the love letter Amelia had received.

No one owned up to writing it.

Callum was now shaking his head in bemusement as he and James compared responses. “Amelia was certain it was a mistake and not meant for her. But nobody confessed to writing the letter for any young lady. This makes no sense, James.”

His brother shrugged. “We only asked the bachelors. What if the love letter was written by one of our married friends?”

“Then we will never have a truthful answer from the culprit. What married man would ever come forward for fear word will get back to his wife? Still, I cannot believe any of the husbands here this weekend are the sort to stray...and with Amelia? It is not possible.”

“This might be one puzzle never solved, Callum. Perhaps it no longer matters. If it was meant for Amelia, she is going to refuse his advances. If it was meant for another young lady, I’m sure the fellow will have dropped hints to this woman of his dreams by now. Do you think he would be so foolish as to follow up with another love note?”

Callum grinned. “Let’s hope he gets the right reticule this time. Come on, we ought to join the ladies before they grow impatient with us. They must be eager for the dancing to start.”

He had engaged a pianist last night to play for those wishing to partake of this livelier entertainment, but tonight they would dance to the strains of a full orchestra. His staff had rolled up the carpet in the music room and set out chairs

along the walls for those who wished to sit out a dance or merely watch.

Card tables were set up in the summer parlor for those who preferred to play cards. He was looking forward to partnering with Amelia and intended to seek her out, but Dorothea intercepted him as soon as he walked into the parlor. "You promised me two dances, Your Grace."

"I have not forgotten," he said, trying to stem his impatience. "You shall have them later."

She was not pleased to be put off, perhaps hoping to open the dancing with him. This was no formal ball and he had no intention of doing so.

Pennington swooped in and took Dorothea into the music room, sparing a moment to cast Callum a look of contrition for his earlier encounter with Amelia in the library. No harm had been done, but his friend was trying to apologize for any misunderstanding by taking Dorothea out of his hair.

This now left him free to seek out Amelia. "Ready for an exciting game of whist?"

She laughed. "I'm sure this passes as tame entertainment for you, verging on the boring. But I am ready for our game and look forward to it."

He held her back a moment as the last of his guests sauntered toward the activity of their preference. "James and I made discreet inquiries about that letter you found in your reticule. No one has owned up to writing it. We can pursue the matter further if you wish, but—"

"No, let it go. It wasn't meant for me and I expect the man who wrote it realizes by now he delivered it to the wrong lady. My concern was that his mistake would interfere with a budding romance. It is sad to think the gentleman might have given up on the lady he loves because she did not respond to a letter he thought she had received."

"Amelia, I do believe you are a romantic at heart."

She cast him a delicate smile. "In truth, I am. Even bluestockings wish for love. It would be quite a thrill to have a

dashing gentleman come along and sweep me off my feet. The only difference between me and Dorothea is that I am content to occupy myself with academic pursuits until that special someone comes along.”

“While she puts her mind to plotting and scheming.” He sighed and held out his arm to her. Most of the players who were settling in for a night of cards were his older guests. All the young ladies, other than Amelia, preferred to dance. So did most of his bachelor friends.

Amelia regarded him thoughtfully. “You do not need to stay with me if you would rather join the dancers. I’m sure I can find another whist partner.”

“I can think of nothing more terrifying than being in the music room with all those young ladies coming at me.” He glanced toward the door and laughed. “Dorothea already has me down for two dances. Dear heaven, how I dread it.”

“One must give her credit for her tenacity. I think she would have made a fine battlefield general, don’t you think? I would not underestimate her ability to plot a military offensive.”

“She has an alarmingly devious mind. Hence her attempted ambush of you. Fortunately, it failed. I’m certain she will try again.”

“I think all her scheming does not serve her well. She is so busy trying to bring down others, she forgets that at the end of the day, it is her qualities that count most. Perhaps finding true love will soften her. I hope she does find it. I believe there is someone out there for each of us. She might be nicer to others if she were happier for herself.”

“You are too kind toward her, Amelia. Nothing and no one will ever satisfy a girl like her. I’ve seen others such as Dorothea over the years, young women with extraordinary beauty and secure in wealth. But they are never content with what they have. Their envy always gets the better of them. They seek to destroy what others have because of their own petty jealousy.”

“That is rather a harsh assessment, don’t you think?”

“It is accurate.”

“Then I am sorry for her. She will never recognize happiness when it is offered to her. That is terribly sad.”

“And you, Amelia. Will you recognize happiness when you come upon it?” As they spoke, he guided her toward the summer parlor and the tables where they were to play.

“I hope so.” She shook her head. “I can be rather dense oftentimes. Most of my learning comes from books and not from experience with others. I often don’t trust my instincts because I have been out in the world so little.”

“What do your instincts tell you about me?”

She blushed. “I dare not tell you, for your head will swell to enormous proportions.”

He laughed. “Ah, is that so? Then you must tell me. I am about to sacrifice myself to two dances with Dorothea. Does this not earn me some favor?”

“All right,” she said with a grin. “I suppose it does. My instincts tell me that you are a man of rare qualities. Intelligent, compassionate, strong, but kind in that strength. Add this to the fact you are very good looking. Is it any wonder the women all want you?”

He had not expected her to toss him such a fine compliment. “Most women do not look beyond my title and wealth.”

He held out a chair for her and then took the one across the card table from hers. They were the first to sit, so they had a moment longer to speak before the other players arrived.

“You sell yourself short, Your Grace.”

“You can address me as Callum. There is no one close by to hear us.”

“Oh...um, Callum...um...yes.” She cast him a ruffled smile before continuing. “The bachelors you have invited to this house party are titled and of decent wealth, too. Most of

them are also nice looking. This is not what distinguishes you. It is your natural abilities that set you apart. Your leadership, your intelligence, and the power you exude.”

“Exude?” He grinned.

“Yes, that is the right word for it. That daunting sense of power oozes out of you.”

He burst out laughing. “I ooze and I exude? Sounds like you are describing a moldy cheese left out in the sun too long.”

Her eyes lit up with mirth. “Now you are making fun of me because I am neither glib nor flirtatious. Do not mock me for being honest.”

“Not at all. I am enjoying your description of me. It may sound perverse to you, but I much rather prefer to be described as moldy cheese than a golden chalice. Do go on.”

“Haven’t you heard enough?”

“No, pray continue before the others arrive and we must start our game.”

“As I said, you have strength and intelligence, and a good bit of conceit if that gloating smile is any indication,” she teased. “In all seriousness, if I were in danger and needed protection, there is no question I would look to you first.”

“I am not the strongest man present.”

“True, Lord Wellbridge is a beast of a man. He seems quite nice. However, I would always choose you because I think you would honor your duty to protect me above all else. I do not get that feeling with any of the other gentlemen. I think they would be quick to toss me out to the enemy.” She gestured with her hands. “Here, take her. She is cannon fodder. Now go and leave us alone.”

“Amelia, the friends I have invited here are quite honorable and would never sacrifice a lady to save their own hides. But there is a reason you feel most comfortable with me.”

She nodded. "I know. You have looked out for me from the moment I arrived. It feels nice to be taken under your wing. However, I do not wish to hold you back."

He wanted to assure her that she wasn't holding him back from anything. In truth, he ached to spend more time with her. He liked being around her, and this was quite a new feeling for him.

He said no more as his uncle and Rosie joined them.

His uncle had a devilish look about him, so Callum knew immediately the old codger intended to cheat. Well, let him have his fun. This game was only for sport anyway. He knew his uncle would never cheat at a serious game of cards.

"Lord Danvers," Amelia said with a giggle, watching his uncle shuffle the deck and begin to deal the cards. "I do believe you are dealing yours from the bottom of the deck. And Aunt Rosie, how many aces have you concealed up your sleeve?"

"Bollocks," his uncle said with a chuckle. "We are caught already, Rosie. We must be losing our touch." He winked at Amelia's aunt. "Ah, well. We shall have to play an honest game now. Where's the fun in that? You are awfully sharp, Amelia."

She sighed. "Only when it comes to cards. I am abysmal with men."

Rosie patted her hand. "It only takes one man...the right man."

"And I think he's staring at you right now," Callum's uncle remarked, turning his gaze to Callum. "Am I wrong?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Callum did not like being put on the spot, and his uncle's pointed question certainly had done that. Yes, he liked Amelia. Possibly was falling in love with her...well, he was in love with her.

But whose business was it other than his or Amelia's?

"Lord Danvers, your nephew has a highly developed sense of honor," Amelia said lightly, hoping to defuse the sudden tension crackling between Callum and his uncle. "It is more than I can say for you and my aunt who are shameless card sharps. Kindly do not make too much of his attentiveness. He worries about me because I am so inept in the social graces. But I am not inept at cards and you've just palmed an ace."

Callum laughed. "You will not put anything past Amelia, you old goat. But I see this game is not going to be honest. Even so, I am certain Amelia and I will beat you."

"Care to wager on it?" his uncle said, the tension between them now eased due to Amelia's remarks.

She was shy about men, but quite clever in every other way, this much was obvious to Callum. "Yes, Uncle. First team to reach five points wins. Deal the cards."

Amelia shook her head. "But what is the winner's prize to be?"

"A kiss from you," Lord Danvers suggested.

"Me? More kisses? Can you not think of a more interesting prize?"

Callum, who had been frowning at his uncle moment's earlier, now grinned at him. "A kiss from Amelia suits me just fine."

"Do I not have a say in the matter?" she asked, frowning at both men whose smiles were so stretched they looked like grinning hyenas.

Her aunt kicked her under the table. "Ouch!"

"Stop griping, Amelia, and loosen up a little." Her aunt tossed her a pointed look. "Honestly, child. Must you always be so buttoned up? The duke wants to kiss you, so sit back and enjoy the win."

"We haven't even played a hand yet. How can you be sure our team will beat yours? Especially if you insist on cheating?" But she said the last with a laugh and resigned herself to the chaos this game of whist was about to become. Well, they were playing by house party rules which meant no rules at all.

They lost the first set because Callum's uncle rigged the trump suit and dealt Rosie mostly cards in that trump suit. "That's two points for us," his uncle exclaimed proudly when the tricks were tallied.

"My turn to deal," Callum said, now showing off his prowess with sleight of hand. Their trump suit was hearts and he chuckled at Amelia's expression when she looked at her hand and saw mostly hearts.

Needless to say, he and Amelia won their tricks handily.

"Two points for us," Amelia said, faking a cough to suppress her laughter.

Her aunt dealt next, but Rosie was no card sharp so their round was honest. It was an even match, each of them taking the same number of tricks because the deck was suddenly short enough cards to make the final trick which would determine the winner impossible. "One point for each," Callum declared. "Amelia, your turn to deal."

She shuffled the deck thoroughly and dealt out the cards, casting Callum a look of surprise when the missing cards

magically reappeared.

He winked at her, for he had palmed them to ensure his uncle did not have more mischief up his sleeve.

“Trump suit is spades,” she said, casting him the softest smile as she turned over the last card.

Callum looked at his cards and laughed.

He had a handful of spades.

The girl was a card sharp!

A better one than he or his uncle since neither of them had seen her cheating. Yet, she had. There was no way he could have been dealt this hand legitimately.

They took every trick.

Callum swept up the last hand. “Two points for us. That adds up to five. Game won. Come with me, Amelia,” he said with a soft growl.

She blushed to the tips of her ears. “Why must we go anywhere? Can you not just kiss me here? Everyone will understand it is a silly, harmless wager.”

He cast her a look that warned his kiss was not going to be harmless.

She coughed. “Um...Aunt Rosie, are you going to allow this?”

“My dear girl, I shall tackle anyone who attempts to stop you.”

“This cannot be right,” she muttered, shaking her head.

Callum took her by the hand. “Amelia, you must trust me.”

She nodded. “I do.”

“Good.” He led her onto the terrace. Torches were lit at either end of the balustrade to cast a fragile, golden light upon the terrace steps. But he continued down those steps into the darkened garden.

He made certain to take secure hold of Amelia’s hand in order to keep her close, for there was only moonlight to guide

them now that they were away from the house.

She had a soft, delicate hand.

Her lips would be just as soft and delicate.

He meant to thoroughly ravage them.

Amelia grabbed onto his arm, attempting to hold him back.
“Where are you taking me?”

“It isn’t much farther.”

“Is this not too far already?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

He led her into the gazebo, and then immediately put an arm around her waist to draw her up against him. Her breaths were light and fast, and he could feel her heart racing.
“Amelia, I only intend to claim a kiss.”

“You make it sound harmless, but this seems far worse than an assignation with Lord Pennington in the library. What are you going to do if we are caught and I am compromised?”

“Marry you.”

She inhaled sharply. “Oh, ha. Very funny. The duke every *ton* diamond has been chasing for years will now willingly head to the altar with me? You do realize Aunt Rosie will insist on this very thing if you take this kiss too far. Indeed, her willingness to push me into your arms is because she hopes you will marry me. Why are you so casual about it?”

“I am not in the least casual about it and fully understand the possible consequences.”

“You would marry me? Dear heaven, you are completely out of your senses.”

The moon’s silver light shimmered across her lovely face.
“I think I am being quite sensible.”

“You are awfully full of yourself to assume this is what I would desire.” She swallowed hard and then sighed.
“Irritatingly, it is. Of course, it is. You are irresistible and I am

not averse to marrying you. But I would never want it to occur like this. How do you think I would feel if you were forced to the altar?”

“The risk is minimal. The only ones who care and would tattle are all busy dancing in the music room. Your aunt and my uncle are not going to say a word, nor will the others in the cards room who are actually engaged in honest games and concentrating on the hands they have been dealt.”

He guided her into the center of the gazebo. “Now you shall have your proper kiss. The one I’ve longed to give you.”

She shivered.

He owned it up to the cool night air and her anticipation of what was to come. But he took his time wrapping her in his arms and drawing her into his embrace because he wanted to give her the chance to object if she really did not want this.

He smiled as she leaned into him and tilted her head upward. “I am not going to run from you. My legs are already too wobbly and my heart is aflutter.”

“Thank you, Amelia,” he said and closed his mouth over hers.

Her honey lips were as soft as he recalled.

Their first kiss had been far too short, leaving him aching for more. Leaving him, much to his surprise, in utter agony. But even this lengthier kiss would not be enough to satisfy his yearning for the girl. What was it about her that felt so right to him?

She was shy and did not know the first thing about tempting a man, and yet she had his body on fire.

What else could he do but deepen the kiss and put some heat behind it, for he wanted her in flames as well, the two of them burnt to cinders in each other’s arms. Well, perhaps it was a little too much to ask when he dared not seek more than this one kiss.

But it was an effective kiss, and he was quite pleased when she let out a breathy whimper.

He ran his tongue across the seam of her tempting lips to part them, although what he really wanted to do was part the ties of her gown and taste the softness of her skin. But the depth of his desire would only frighten her and this was never his intention.

In truth, his intense craving for her had him thrown off balance.

It was an easy thing to give a woman pretty trinkets, but quite another to give a woman his heart. This is what he meant to do with this kiss, put his heart into it because this — and not his wealth or title — is what Amelia wanted.

Nothing less would win her over.

He parted her lips with his tongue and probed the warm cavity of her mouth. Her sweet acceptance brought him to the edge of his restraint. He wanted to ravage her mouth. He wanted to ravage her. But he had given Rosie his oath not to take more than this one kiss.

Well, he was going to make it memorable.

He kissed Amelia as though she was the breath of life to him.

Perhaps she was, for he loved everything about her. The books she read, her little rabbit ears, her fragile smile.

Her trust in kissing him now.

Was this love?

Were they in love with each other?

He thought they might be. He certainly was, for he could think of nothing more appealing than holding her lithe, little body against him forever.

Nor had he tasted anything sweeter than her lips.

She responded with genuine ardor, giving herself over to him completely.

This was everything he had hoped for in their kiss and more.

She clutched the lapels of his jacket as though holding on for dear life.

He understood these sensations were new and confusing to her, spinning her off balance. Amelia was a sensible girl, another thing he loved about her. But love did not proceed sensibly, it just hit you all at once.

He had meant this kiss for her, but he was no less affected and now knew what he felt for her was real. He was going to propose to her when the house party weekend was done.

He wanted her as his wife.

Groaning, he drew his lips off hers to end the kiss before his hands roamed where they should not and he slipped the gown off her. “Amelia, I’ve wanted to kiss you like this from the moment you stepped down from your carriage.”

She rested her head against his chest, still clinging tightly to his lapels. “I had no idea a kiss could ever feel so good. My limbs are tingling and my blood is on fire. Did this really just happen?”

“I hope so,” he said with a chuckle. “Yes, Amelia. This is quite real.”

She sighed. “Your kiss was exquisite.”

“It was, wasn’t it? Now you will think I am full of myself. What made it exquisite was the way we responded to each other.”

“Heavens, I am still responding.” She looked up at him and gave a lilting laugh. “May we stay out here a moment longer? I am not yet recovered.”

He felt her soft breaths against his chest. “As long as you wish, Amelia.”

He had his arms wrapped around her and was in no hurry to ever let her go. But he knew they could not remain out here beyond another minute or two. Rosie may have been keen to see her shy niece experience a splendid kiss, but she would never allow him to take a step beyond or she would come down on him like a reign of fire. “Come along, my lovely

one,” he said after a moment. “Your aunt will gut me if I do not return you to her now.”

“All right.” She eased out of his arms, and laughed softly. “You have now ruined me forever for the game of whist. I shall never be able to keep a straight face as the cards are dealt. Nor shall I ever stop thinking of your wager with your uncle. My mind will always wander to this moment and I will botch every trick.”

“I’m glad. The kiss affected me, too.” He led her back to the terrace, easily guiding her by the gleam of a full moon. The wind was cooling, a sign of the colder weather to come. The days were still warm enough, but the air turned quickly once the sun went down, which it did earlier now that summer was over.

Amelia held back as they were about to return indoors. “You go in. I dare not walk in just yet. My face is still in flames.”

“I’ll stay with you.”

“You needn’t. I will remain in sight of the cards room. I just need another moment to compose myself. I never knew a kiss could be like this. I am completely...unsettled. In a good way, of course.”

He removed his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “I’ll keep my distance. Anyone who peers out will just see us talking. Perfectly harmless and proper since we will be in full sight of everyone.”

“This is going to set Dorothea off again.”

“There is nothing she can do to you that would have me doubt you, Amelia. If she has a lick of sense, she has likely realized it by now. Besides, I am staying close to you for the duration of this house party because I enjoy your company and see no reason to deprive myself.”

“The other young ladies will be bereft.”

“They’ll turn their attention to the other bachelors, as well they should. Unlike you, these young ladies are fully aware they are on a battlefield with limited time and resources to

gain their objective. They will not bother laying siege to an impenetrable fortress when easier spoils are available to them.”

“I suppose you are right. It is such an unpleasant way of looking at this marriage game. But it really is not a game for us, the fairer sex. And yet, I hope that any proposals arising from this weekend also involve some feelings of love.”

He nodded. “For most, the primary consideration will be forging advantageous alliances. But I am sure there will also be some who find both love and good advantage.”

“Shall we go inside now? I think I am better.” She handed him back his jacket that now carried the light lavender scent of her skin. “Besides, Dorothea will come after you to claim her two dances any moment now.”

He donned his jacket. “I suppose. Will you come into the music room with me?”

“No,” she said with a wincing laugh. “Perhaps for a little while later on. If I do come in, you must not ask me to dance.”

“Why not? Dorothea—”

“It has nothing to do with her. I am an atrocious dancer. It is me I am concerned about. Why do you think I try to stay pasted to the walls at any ball? I cannot dance. It is my Achilles heel and does me in every time.”

“You simply haven’t had the right partner.”

“Oh, so now you think you can turn me into a graceful gazelle in your arms? You may have melted me with your kisses, but dancing with me is a futile endeavor. Your shins might never recover from the ordeal. Truly, I am that bad.”

“Well, that tears it. I can never have you as my duchess if you cannot dance. Gad, I am jesting, Amelia,” he said with a laugh when he noticed her look of dismay. “Do you think I care whether you can twirl about a ballroom? That is the least of my concerns in selecting a wife.”

He escorted her back to Rosie, and then left them to claim his dances with Dorothea, eager to attend to that chore and be

done with it.

Dorothea was an excellent dancer, but there was nothing sweet about her features or her gloating smile. She was not dancing with him for the pleasure of it, but to poke her thumb in the eye of every other young lady present.

To add to his irritation, she took every opportunity to rub her body against him, as though that would ever tempt him. He was well beyond his days of youthful misadventure when all he cared about was conquest.

He claimed his two dances one after the other, hoping to get over the misery all at once. Then he shared dances with several other young ladies, something Dorothea was not too pleased about. Did the girl think she had some claim to him?

If so, he intended to dispel that notion.

He sensed Amelia's presence the moment she walked in. As expected, she took a seat along the wall. He strode toward her as the next dance was about to start.

The orchestra began the strains of a waltz, and he did not want anyone but Amelia in his arms.

He noted the panic in her eyes as he approached.

He took her hand, not asking her permission since he was going to dance with her whether she wished it or not. Yes, it was incredibly highhanded of him. But he did not care if they stood motionless in the center of the dance floor. It was a waltz and he would be holding her in his arms. There were no intricate steps necessary. All she had to do was let him lead her in a circle.

She tugged back on her hand. "You know I cannot do this."

"Yes, you can. I do not care if you step on my feet. I do not care if we look ridiculous out there."

Her expression turned pained.

Agonizingly pained. "But I care," she said.

He knelt beside her chair, for she was still seated and did not want to get up. "I will not make a mockery of you, Amelia. I promise. You must trust me."

"I do trust you...but not about this. You have no idea how bad I am. Please, ask someone else."

He sighed. "No, I shall sit this one out beside you. My apologies if I was overbearing, but it is a simple waltz and I would have guided you through it."

"So you think. You have not seen me on my feet."

"It is hard to believe you are not perfect in everything you do."

She laughed. "Dear heaven, I am so far from perfect. Is this really what you think of me?"

"Is it so bad? Should I not admire you?"

She cast him a wistful smile. "I have never been put up on anyone's pedestal. It is easy to fall off when one is placed too high."

"You are not on any pedestal. I see you clearly for all your attributes and your faults. Nor do I wish to hold you up as someone perfect and untouchable. I want you right here by my side, holding your own beside me. And I do not mean merely for one dance or one night." He cleared his throat. "I...well...I think I've said more than intended."

"I did not take your words for a marriage proposal," she said, her eyes once more aglitter as she noticed his discomfort. "You can stop looking as though I have tied a noose around your neck."

He grinned, realizing this is why he liked the girl as much as he did. She was an easy flowing stream on a lovely summer's day. She did not push or pressure. "I've told you, marrying you would not be an ordeal for me."

"Dear heaven, are you always this romantic?"

"I would whisper sweet nothings in your ear right now, but I think you would turn into a fluttering hen if I ever truly complimented you as I wish to do. You do not take

compliments well. Dorothea can teach you a thing or two about that. The girl demands them from all her suitors. The more fawning, the better.”

“I could not keep a straight face if anyone compared me to a butterfly or a swan. I would laugh out loud.”

“Yet, you are those lovely things. You move gracefully, are not at all clumsy or awkward when you walk. So, the fear of dancing is all in your head and it is affecting your feet. I would love to discuss this further, but...oh, hell. I am about to be accosted again.”

“Is it so terrible? The ladies enjoy dancing, especially with you.”

“We may not have a chance to speak alone again tonight. Meet me here tomorrow morning at eight o’clock.”

“Why?”

“Because I am going to teach you to dance. By heaven, you are going to dance like an angel even if it breaks me. Promise me, Amelia. Eight o’clock.”

She nodded.

He left her side and spent the rest of the evening partnering one empty-headed beauty after another. Perhaps they were not all quite as bad as he made them out to be, but none of them came close to Amelia’s intelligence or charm.

Until this weekend, he had not realized this is what was missing in his life. A woman who could hold her own against him.

Dorothea now had him for a third dance.

Three dances.

It was unheard of.

The girl could battle her way to twenty dances with him and she was still not going to receive a marriage proposal from him.

Amelia, on the other hand...gad, was he truly ready to make the leap?

CHAPTER SIX

*A*melia could not understand why the duke would want to meet her in the music room this morning when he had spent most of last evening dancing with all the young ladies at his weekend party.

Not a one had been slighted.

But this was also the wonderful thing about him, this sense of duty he had toward his guests. Only now, he was taking his duties toward her much too far and she meant to tell him so. But she also had something else to tell him, something she found more disconcerting and perplexing than the prospect of dancing.

She hurried downstairs just as the clock in the hall chimed the eight o'clock hour. To her surprise, he was already standing by the piano in wait for her.

Her heart began to flutter.

He looked splendid standing in the morning's golden light, his arms folded across his beautifully massive chest. He was dressed casually, wearing buff breeches and a shirt of finest lawn. His cravat and vest were a slate blue silk that matched the exquisite color of his eyes. His jacket was tossed atop the piano that now sat idle. "Good morning, Your Grace."

He arched a dark eyebrow. "Callum."

"Um...yes. Callum." She approached him, almost afraid to get too close for he was far too handsome for this early hour of the morning. As sensible as she prided herself on being, she was going to behave like a peahen around him.

Little bonfires were erupting in her body...and she hadn't even had her breakfast yet.

She had never seen a man so splendidly formed.

His broad shoulders and muscled arms were even more accentuated without his jacket on.

“Amelia, you look pained. Truly, dancing is not an ordeal.”

She shook her head. “It isn't only that. Look.”

She handed him the parchment clasped in her hand. “I found another love note in my reticule this morning. This one had to be meant for me because my reticule has not been out of my bedchamber since that first day.”

He pursed his lips and frowned as he read it. “This puts a new light on the first one you received. We now know it must have been meant for you and not another lady.”

“I still cannot credit it. These notes have to be a joke. Perhaps Dorothea's scheming? But that does not make sense because she had no reason to leave me that first note. She had no idea I would be competition for her. In truth, if she had made a list of the unmarried ladies invited here, she would have scratched me off as no threat to her at all. So, what is this about?”

He examined it once more. “Seems I will have to dig a little deeper. James and I questioned our friends and no one owned up to writing the first one. I'll have my housekeeper question the maids. Perhaps they noticed someone slipping into your bedchamber or suspiciously wandering the hall.”

“Thank you. This really is confounding.”

He cast her a wry smile. “Why, Amelia? It just means someone has discerning taste. Has anyone attempted to approach you? Flirt with you?”

“Possibly, but you know how inept I am about these matters. The gentleman would have to club me over the head with his fawning gestures and insipid words. I wouldn't ever catch on to his advances if he were subtle about it.”

“Well, nothing we can do about it at the moment. But answer me this, have any of your things other than the reticule been touched?”

“No, I don’t think so. I checked my belongings, especially concerned about my jewelry. Not that I have anything of significant value, but it is unsettling to have someone enter my bedchamber and rummage through my personal items. Nothing was out of place. Not even the reticule appeared to have been touched, but obviously it was since the culprit slipped his second note inside. I find the whole affair distasteful rather than romantic.”

“I’ll put a footman on guard upstairs to watch your room in particular. I cannot imagine the fool writing a third love letter. Tonight is our formal party and the guests will begin to leave after breakfast tomorrow morning.”

She nodded. “I did not think to ask Aunt Rosie what time she intends for us to leave. I’ll ask her later. In any event, it won’t take me long to pack.”

He took her hand. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Not pack? Well, I won’t be attending to it yet.”

“I’m talking about your staying on longer. I suppose this is as good a time as any for me to ask you not to leave with the others. Would you consider it, Amelia? It is important to me. I would like time to enjoy your company without irritating interruptions.”

“So would I. Gladly, if Aunt Rosie agrees to it.” She tried not to make too much of his invitation. But even she, dense as she often was, understood the significance.

Callum, this divine duke, sincerely liked her. She had never considered he might be her ‘someone’. Until this moment, she was not certain she would ever find a ‘someone’ for herself, certainly never a duke who was handsome, clever, and kind.

He was a vision out of a young woman’s dreams.

“I will ask Rosie after breakfast,” he said, now taking her in his arms. “We will also deal with that love note later. First,

we dance. I want you to open the party with me tonight, Amelia. I'll have the orchestra start with a waltz since that is probably the easiest for you to master in the short time we have."

She sighed. "Do not be disappointed if we fail. I assure you, I am quite hopeless."

"Let's give it a try."

"Without music?"

"I'll hum a tune. But it is more about you learning to relax and follow my lead." He took her hand in his and placed his arm around her waist. "Amelia, I can already feel the tension vibrating up your spine. Just close your eyes and take a deep breath."

"Easy for you to say. You waltz divinely."

"And so shall you. Place your hand on my shoulder, and keep your eyes closed."

"But I won't be able to see the steps."

"You don't need to. What you must do is feel my movements and flow with them."

She wanted to laugh, for all she could feel at the moment was his solidly muscled form standing in front of her like a big block of magnificently sculpted stone.

Well, it was a good thing he was built sturdy, for she was likely to smack into him more often than she would glide like a swan along with him.

It did not help that she was already reeling from the excitement of being in his arms.

It was quite a heady thing to handle this early in the morning.

"You look lovely, by the way," he said in a husky murmur that had her reeling again.

"You needn't flatter me. In truth, it just flusters me more." However, she was pleased by the comment because she had gone out of her way to look her best. Not overly done up, but

appropriately casual. Her maid had helped her select this gown of ecru linen with a gossamer overlay of forest green that somehow brought out the reddish highlights of her brown hair and the gray of her eyes.

It was one of her favorite gowns and she was glad he had noticed it.

Her maid had braided her hair and then done it up in a fashionably soft twist which he also seemed to admire.

“You had better get used to my compliments, Amelia. I do not intend this one to be my last. And do not open that pretty mouth of yours to protest or I shall kiss you each time you do.”

“Is that supposed to deter me?”

He laughed. “It was all I could think of on the spur of the moment. Plus, I would get pleasure out of it, too. Are you ready? Time for us to begin this tutorial. Close your eyes.”

“And what about yours?” she muttered.

He chuckled. “Mine stay open. I need to see where I am twirling you. Wouldn’t want us slamming into the piano. Dancing is about awareness of your partner.”

“Oh, I am quite aware of you.”

“Good. I dare not tell you just how aware I am of you.” He cleared his throat. “Let’s press on before I forget about dancing and simply spend the hour kissing you. Now, dancing is about picking up cues. Notice the subtle pressure of my hand to the small of your back. It is about understanding my touch. Are you ready to give it a try?”

She nodded.

“I am going to move my right foot forward, so you must move your left foot back. Ready?”

They took one step, and she was surprised her foot hadn’t somehow landed on his. “That was easy. It’s the hundred other steps to follow that will confuse me.”

“You’ll be fine. Now I am going to bring my feet together and you are to do the same with yours.”

She followed his instruction.

“Wasn’t that easy?”

She opened her eyes and rolled them at him.

He grinned at her. “Now I’ll bring my left foot forward and you are to move your right foot back. Excellent. Next we are going to add a twirl. Close your eyes, Amelia. You cannot keep opening them to glower at me.”

She groaned.

But he led her quite capably and she managed the series of steps without stumbling. Not that she was going to leap for joy, either. It was only one twirl and she would doubtless mangle the next ones as they picked up speed in the waltz.

He ignored her gripes when she told him this. “You have little rabbit ears, Amelia.”

She opened her eyes again and glanced up at him. “What has that to do with anything?”

“Everyone knows little rabbits can dance.”

“You are quite deluded, Callum,” she said with a light, lilting laugh. “Rabbits hop and munch on vegetables in one’s garden. They do not dance. Surely, you know this.”

He paused in mid-twirl and merely stood there.

She smiled when she realized he was still grinning at her. “What is the matter?”

“You called me Callum,” he said softly.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I thought—”

“I liked the teasing way you said it. Don’t apologize. I was caught off guard, that’s all. It sounded very right. Filled with warmth. Not at all forced or fake, or as though you were gloating. I like that you don’t swoon or gush over me. I like that I have to work to earn that softness in your voice. No one will ever accuse you of being a flirt.”

“Because I am so very bad at it.”

“You don’t need any of that fakery to gain my attention. I appreciate that you see me for who I am.”

She smiled at him again. “You are hard to overlook, and you know I am not referring to those obvious attributes of wealth and rank, or your height. You stand above others because you are a fine man, fine to the depths of your soul. I swoon a little every time I am with you, but I expect you know this.”

“Only a little? I do know, and I like being with you, too. I like that you swoon over me as Callum and not the duke.”

“That is true, for the most part. However, I cannot completely ignore your title since it is also an important part of who you are, the power and confidence you wield. You will notice that I have avoided the words *ooze* and *exude*. You are not moldy cheese. You are a splendid knight in shining armor.”

“I hope you will always feel this way about me. But that is for a later conversation. Close your eyes.” He resumed their dance, showing extraordinary patience as she stepped on his foot twice and stumbled once. They had yet to make a full turn about the empty room without her making an error.

“See. It is as I said...hopeless.”

“We have only been at this for fifteen minutes, Amelia.”

She sighed. “Feels like an eternity.”

He chuckled. “You are your own worst enemy. Here, open your eyes a moment. We’re going to try this another way. Put your hands on my shoulders.”

When she did so, he place his hands on her hips. “Do not gasp and turn prudish. This is for educational purposes only.”

“I have no intention of doing so. Just what are you educating me about?” She wanted to appear stern, but his smile melted her heart and she found herself laughing instead.

“This only concerns dancing. Let’s try a full circle around the room, taking each step and twirl slowly. Keep your eyes closed. You are to feel me and trust me.”

Oh, she felt him.

Her heart was doing somersaults within her chest.

In truth, it helped to have both of his hands on her hips while he guided her.

Of course, the bonfires were going full roar inside her body.

This was not his fault, for he could not help being the handsomest man she had ever set eyes upon. His touch was exquisitely gentle and at the same time commanding.

His body was hard and his muscles toned.

Her hands slipped off his shoulders, so that she was now holding onto his upper arms for better balance as he spun her around the room.

She was so lost in her thoughts, she did not hear the crowd begin to gather in the doorway. The duke, for she could not think of him as Callum even though his name had slipped out so naturally during their conversation, must have seen everyone standing in watch since his eyes were open.

But he gave her no hint.

She had no idea they were not alone until she stumbled into him and someone laughed. She recognized Dorothea's shrill giggles that now shattered her concentration. "The girl cannot dance! I knew it. This is why she hides herself in a corner."

Amelia opened her eyes and looked up at Callum in panic.

He wrapped an arm around her in a gesture that appeared protective, but was no doubt meant to keep her from bolting. His angry gaze was on the onlookers. "And this is exactly why I am teaching her. It is my wish to have Lady Amelia open the dance with me tonight."

That took the triumphant gleam out of Dorothea's eyes.

But only for a moment.

She recovered quickly and once more cast her malicious attention on Amelia. "You are a clever thing, aren't you?"

Amelia had no idea what Dorothea was talking about. “Bluestockings generally are,” she responded dryly. “But I can assure you, my ineptitude in the art of the dance is quite real.”

“And you have played it up to your best advantage, haven’t you? Poor, dear Amelia, pretending to be so helpless in order gain the duke’s attention. But for all your schemes, you were not certain you would ever get a proposal of marriage out of him, so you decided to work your wiles on another gentleman, as well.”

“My wiles? I did not realize I had any,” she remarked, trying to hold back a bubble of laughter.

“Oh, do not play the innocent. I know your secret.”

Amelia glanced at the duke in dismay. “Well, I am stymied. I had no idea my life was exciting enough to have any secrets to tell.”

“Do not play coy,” Dorothea continued, “for it will not work with me. His Grace may think you are sweet and innocent, but I know better. I saw his own brother sneaking into your bedchamber yesterday. Will you deny it?”

The duke emitted a low, menacing growl. “My brother?”

Dorothea misunderstood the source of his anger...at least Amelia hoped he did not believe any of the malicious nonsense she was spouting. But Amelia’s mind was in a whirl, for the silly girl had inadvertently given away the identity of her anonymous suitor. Why in the name of heaven would James be writing her love notes and sticking them in her reticule?

Then she understood the reason and her heart broke.

She tried to wriggle out of the duke’s grasp, but he would not let her go. “Your Grace, you don’t understand.”

“But I do, Amelia. It is obvious James was the one who planted those notes.”

“Did you know what he was doing?”

“I promise you, I did not. But this is not something James would ever dream up on his own.” He called for his butler and

ordered him to summon James, his uncle, and her aunt to him immediately. “As for the rest of you, go on to breakfast. This is none of your concern.”

Dorothea still had a triumphant sneer on her face. “That is the last we shall see of you, you little schemer.”

“Actually, if anyone is to be accused of scheming, it is you Lady Dorothea,” Callum said, emitting another growl that even had her quaking. “I’ve had about all I can take from you, so if you wish to remain in this house another minute, then I suggest you keep your mouth shut. The next time you open it to spew your bile, I shall have you tossed from my home.”

The onlookers gasped.

Amelia saw their gazes turn avid, for they had not expected to be witness to something that would make headline news in the gossip rags. Nor were they ever expecting it to be Dorothea’s downfall. If anything, they would have placed their wagers on her — Amelia, the inept bluestocking — to take a crushing fall.

“All of you, go on about your business,” he commanded, but even Amelia knew no one was going to budge. Oh, perhaps they would slide a few steps back in response to his bark, but no one was going to leave, not even on pain of death. “Go on. Get out. Breakfast is available in the dining room. Go feast on that.”

His guests did not want eggs or kippers, they wanted to devour gossip.

Deliciously juicy gossip.

A family battle was about to unfold in the Duke of Marston’s household, and they were going to witness it, even if it meant never being invited to Marston Hall again.

Amelia cleared her throat. “I ought to leave as well.”

The duke clamped a hand on her shoulder before she had the chance to escape. He frowned at her. “Not a chance, Amelia.”

“Why must I stay? Am I not humiliated enough? Oh, not because of that ridiculous assertion about me and your brother. I hope you don’t—”

“I know there is nothing between you and James. It is utter tripe. I trust you completely.”

“Can I say the same of you?” She shook her head because her words had come out badly. “I mean, I do trust you. But why did you take me under your wing this weekend? Well, I know it was at Rosie’s urging because I have been such a failure on the Marriage Mart. But was it part of a grander plan?” She rubbed her temples, for her head was now pounding. “Were you all in on it? Rosie, Lord Danvers, James...and you.”

“There was no plan.”

“Well then, call it an act of charity. Is this what I am to you? A charity case? A hopeless bluestocking doomed to be a spinster and live out a drab, lonely life? So you all conspired to give me a weekend of magic. Is this why you went out of your way to kiss me? You were merely taking pity on me. I did not ask for your pity and I certainly did not ask for your kiss.”

“He kissed all of us,” Dorothea said, obviously having no intention of keeping quiet or leaving the music room while there was still damage to be done.

She was awfully bloodthirsty for a *ton* diamond.

More guests were now poking their heads in and blocking the doorway.

Amelia shook her head. “I was not referring to that kiss.”

“It is no one’s business,” Callum said quietly.

But not quietly enough, for gasps broke out among the ladies and chuckles among the men when they realized he had indeed kissed her another time besides the scavenger hunt victory prize.

“How many times has he kissed you?” Dorothea’s eyes were once again beady and her expression ranged from

malicious to gloating. Obviously, the *ton* diamond could not decide whether to be jealous or simply mean. “And when?”

Amelia was not going to answer the question. She was saved from fending off more questions when the crowd parted to reveal Lord Danvers, James, and her Aunt Rosie rushing in.

“What is going on?” Lord Danvers asked. “The matter sounded urgent. I thought someone was hurt.”

“Someone has been hurt,” the duke said, now staring at Amelia as tears formed in her eyes. “What in heaven’s name were you all thinking? Oh, hell. Amelia, don’t you dare cry.”

“I cannot help it. Am I supposed to stand here and pretend my heart has not been shattered in a thousand pieces? Every moment of this weekend has been a hoax, all of you either laughing at me or pitying me.” She emitted a quiet sob. “Why would any of you do such a thing? And to toss in love notes? What was I supposed to think when I received them? How do you expect me to respond now that I know they are fake?”

Rosie reached out a hand to her. “My dear, we thought you might be thrilled to know you had a secret admirer.”

“But I didn’t have one. You only made me think I did.” She turned to the duke’s brother. “Why did you go along with this ridiculous scheme? Did you plant both notes?”

Lord Danvers sighed. “No, he did not. I planted the first.”

“How you all must have been laughing at me.”

“Not at all, Amelia,” James said, looking utterly contrite. “You are a wonderful girl. How could we ever laugh at you? I promise you, this was never our intention. But Rosie was right to be concerned about you. You have beaten yourself up so badly, you did not even believe it was possible for any man to be interested in you.”

“Not *any* man,” she shot back, trying to keep her head held high, although her tears gave her feelings away. “Just no man here.”

“Still, it proved Rosie’s point. You were so sure it was some mistake and the note was placed in the wrong reticule.

But you are fine enough for any of us.” He cast her a wry smile. “Certainly smarter than most of us.”

He now turned to his brother. “I’m sorry about the deception. I should have told you from the first. But you would have told Amelia the truth and exposed our plan. We thought it was a good one and harmless. We just wanted to give her a reason to smile.”

“About a fake admirer?” The duke raked a hand through his hair.

“Aunt Rosie, was it not bad enough you had to twist His Grace’s arm to take me under his wing? Could you not have left it alone at that? And you, Your Grace...”

“What about me?” He arched an eyebrow in obvious surprise. “Amelia, I had no part in this. I would have put a stop to it immediately had I known.”

She shook her head. “But you did play along, taking on your role as my protector all too readily. All you had to do was sit with me on occasion, no more than five minutes every once in a while. But you showed me your private museum and then partnered with me in the scavenger hunt and at cards. You tried to teach me to dance. Worst of all, you gave me a kiss to dream on for the rest of my life. Did you think I would not fall in love with you after that kiss?”

“Must have been some kiss,” Lord Danvers muttered.

Amelia frowned at him. “Do not even jest about this.”

Dorothea and her circle of friends laughed. “How pathetic, did you think the kiss meant anything to him? You, a dull, little mouse?”

“No, I’m sure it did not mean a thing to him. I never supposed his heart was at risk.” She turned back to Lord Danvers, glowering through her tears. “You and my aunt goaded him to it. *Him*. You were pitting a mouse against a jungle cat. Did you never consider the obvious outcome? How am I supposed to feel about this now? Should I be smiling because the entire weekend has been a gigantic hoax?”

She turned to her aunt once again. “Aunt Rosie, do you know what hurts most?”

Her aunt reached out a hand to her. “Oh, my dear.”

“I know you love me, but you also have so little faith in me. This is what tears me apart. I know I am no society darling, but I was happy with who I am. I never once thought of myself as a hopeless laughingstock. But now...have I been deluding myself?” She turned to look at Callum as she spoke the rest. “I never wanted to be your charity case. I wish with all my heart you had simply left me alone.”

“Amelia—”

“No! I never wanted to be a sad spinster in desperate need of a duke’s kiss to get her through the empty years of her life. And the worst part of it is that I still do not know how to dance.”

She tried to push out of his arms again, for he was still holding onto her in that ridiculously protective way that only made her hurt worse.

But he refused to let her go.

Why was he being so stubborn?

And looking at her so possessively?

“Amelia,” he said with a surprising ache to his voice, “I am going to teach you to dance.”

“Seriously? Have you not done enough damage?” She pushed at his chest, but he was built of stone and would not budge. “Can you not see all your friends are laughing at me? I would laugh, too, if I could ever stop crying.”

The more she tried to push away, the more securely he wrapped his arms around her. “No one is going to laugh at you.”

“They already are.” She gave up and buried her face against his chest. She did not stop her tears as they began to flow in earnest.

She felt the knuckle of his hand caress along her cheek.

Why could her aunt and the duke's family not leave well enough alone?

Amelia knew she was never going to be a *ton* diamond. This wasn't who she was or ever wanted to be. Her parents never wanted her. Was it any surprise she also lacked suitors? She was a bluestocking and never raised to be a society belle. In time, she might have found a scholarly man who thought she was clever and wanted to marry her. But she could not marry any such man now.

Her heart did not work that way.

Once given, she could not take it back.

Callum, that well-meaning but still wretched duke, now had her heart and would hold it forever.

How did others move on so easily?

Dorothea would have done so without a qualm, set her cap for another man and landed herself an excellent catch. Perhaps a duke or a lesser nobleman of astounding wealth.

The girl was mean but also made of steel.

She really ought to take instruction on hardening her own heart from this manipulative, little schemer. Dorothea or any other young lady would have taken the duke's scorching kiss for a lark.

But, no.

She had to fall in love with him.

"Amelia, stop crying." Now he simply sounded exasperated with her.

"I cannot. You may as well order me to stop breathing, for all the good it will do." She really was too buttoned up and serious, took things too deeply. A flood of memories rushed through her, all those lonely days and broken promises from her parents. Because of them, she had grown up with a guarded heart. But this is what came of growing up neglected. It made one grasp at any wisp of affection and then shatter when even that proved false.

He sighed. "You said you fell in love with me with that kiss. Do you love me, truly?"

"What do you think?"

"I want to hear you say it."

"I'm sure I already did, and I can still hear everyone laughing about it." She was wetting his expensive silk vest with her tears.

He sighed again. "Tell me again."

"No."

"Then you leave me no choice..."

"To do what? Send me up to my room without supper? Toss me out along with Lady Dorothea? Hurt me worse than you already have? I know it was unintentional. I do not blame you for it. This is my fault. Believe me, I wish I had better control over my heart. I tried very hard not to fall in love with you. What a grand entertainment for all your friends."

He emitted an agonized groan.

"Do not berate yourself. This is an ironic jest on me. I prided myself on my logic and reason, but I haven't had a sensible thought since meeting you. I am kicking myself over it sufficiently for the both of us."

"Stop kicking yourself, Amelia. No one is laughing at you, least of all me." He tipped her chin up so that she met his gaze. "You seem to be the last person to understand what is really going on."

"Does this surprise you? I am so dense and incompetent in matters of love. Wasn't this the entire point of everyone's plotting? To give the pathetic spinster a thrill worthy of a lifetime memory?"

"You are neither pathetic nor a spinster. I can tell you for a certainty that you will receive an offer of marriage before this weekend is over."

She heard a collective gasp from the onlookers.

“From whom? My non-existent secret admirer? Forgive me, but I am through playing pretend. If you have something to say to me, then say it straight out.”

He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her with shockingly avid ardor, held that kiss beyond the count of twenty, and held *her* up against him with crushing desire, then took forever to let her go. “Does this give you a hint?”

Kiss number three, this one scorching.

“Why did you do this? And in front of everyone, no less.” As dense as she was about matters romantic, even she knew the consequences of this sort of kiss. This was nothing short of a compromising kiss, one requiring him to do the honorable thing and marry her.

It seemed a very foolish thing for him to do.

“Are you still confused about what just happened, Amelia?” he asked, his voice deliciously husky.

“Yes.” She stared at his lips as they twitched upward at the corners in the hint of a smile. “Was it meant to be a compromising kiss?”

He nodded. “Utterly and irrevocably.”

“It felt that way.” She cleared her throat. “Does this mean I have been compromised?”

He cast her a rakish grin. “Yes.”

“Do this also mean you intend to do the honorable thing and marry me?”

Dear heaven.

She dared not breathe.

He nodded. “If you will have me, Amelia. Yes, I wish to marry you. I am desperately and hopelessly in love with you.”

More gasps came from the onlookers.

Not even the king’s army could pry them away from the doorway now.

But her attention was entirely on her handsome duke.

She was afraid this was all a dream and she would wake up. “Truly? You love me? But should you not be more cautious? You’ve only known me for the length of this house party weekend.”

“I’ve known you for months, watched you since you made your debut.”

“My disastrous debut,” she muttered.

He arched an eyebrow. “You caught my attention, so it was not quite as disastrous as you imagined. I also noticed you at the Royal Society lectures. You are the prettiest thing ever to grace their stodgy halls. Your aunt has known my feelings about you almost from the first.”

Rosie now nodded. “I was afraid to say anything because I did not want to see you hurt if it came to naught.”

Lord Danvers stepped forward. “I hope you take those love notes in your reticule a little more kindly now. Your aunt thought to spur the two of you to action. My nephew is always so cautious to act, but I saw the way his eyes lit up around you. Those notes were meant to give him a kick in the pants and declare himself to you before someone else came along to claim your heart.”

Her Aunt Rosie nodded. “I also wanted you to feel desired, as you deserved to be. We never meant to hurt you, Amelia. In truth, we were all holding our breath in the hope this weekend would be the spur to finally get something started.”

James nodded. “My uncle and your aunt brought me in on their love note scheme only yesterday when they asked me to plant that second note in your reticule. I agreed because I’d seen the way my brother looked at you. He is in agony over you.”

Amelia laughed. “How can you tell? He reveals nothing in his expression.”

“He is quite closed off around others, but not around me,” James said, his grin quite broad. “I am his brother and he trusts me. I saw how he inhaled you with his eyes. It came as no surprise to me when he sought you out as his partner through

every activity this weekend. And now he is teaching you to dance. Do you think it is only because you are a challenge?"

Rosie's eyes were now tearing up. "He wanted to open tonight's party with you by his side because he meant to propose to you tonight. Seems we've forced his hand and made him rush the announcement a bit, but he was ready. Is that not so, dear boy?"

There was nothing of the boy about this gorgeously daunting man, except in the heartwarming and genuinely affectionate smile with which he now graced her. "It is quite so. I love you, Amelia. Will you do me the honor of opening the dance with me tonight?"

"Yes, for I shall gladly make a fool of myself over love."

He laughed. "I have not given up on your dancing skills yet. We shall resume our lessons after breakfast and a round of champagne to toast our betrothal. But to be clear, ours will be a love match. I enter into this betrothal with the woman who will not only be my wife, but my one true love to the end of my days."

"As you shall always be mine," she said, her heart overflowing with joy.

He invited everyone into the dining room where the breakfast salvers had been laid out across the long buffet to await them. Within moments, footmen carried in trays of glasses filled with champagne.

Callum raised his glass in a toast to her.

Amelia could not contain her happiness.

Even Dorothea and her followers raised their glasses in cheer, for they were suddenly her best friends. Not that she would ever consider them as such, but this was not a moment to hold grudges.

In truth, she sincerely hoped they all would find similar joy in their matches.

Callum leaned over and whispered in her ear once breakfast was done. "Are you ready, Amelia? Time to resume

our lessons.”

She was certain she had imbibed too much champagne, for her head was spinning and her legs were not very steady by the time she and Callum returned to the music room to continue the hopeless endeavor. But perhaps it was not so hopeless, for she now felt as light as a cloud floating across the sky.

Obviously, she was inebriated.

Perhaps this is what she needed to finally loosen herself up enough to allow Callum to guide her. “How am I doing, Callum?”

His gorgeous eyes glittered with mirth. “Spectacular, love.”

She laughed. “I am not so drunk that I do not recognize a well-intentioned lie when I hear it. Oh, I’ll never get this dance.”

“You will. We’ll have a lifetime together to figure it out.” He dipped his head to hers and kissed her as they continued to waltz.

He made her melt.

He made her heart flutter.

She could not have asked for a better choice of ‘someone’ for herself.

She gazed up at him in wonder as he ended the kiss. “I love you, Callum.”

He cast her a steamy look that set her cheeks on fire.

Oh, dear.

All of her was on fire, for that look promised of more lessons to come...and those would have nothing to do with dancing.

EPILOGUE

Cotswolds, England

September 1818

*A*melia burst into Callum's study in Marston Hall, raced behind his desk where he was seated while digging through a pile of documents, and flung herself into his arms. It was late morning and she had been about to go into the village to do a bit of shopping, but what she found in her reticule had her running downstairs to seek him out. "You are the best husband ever!"

He laughed while wrapping his arms around her. "And to what do I owe the honor?"

She held up a folded parchment. "You know very well what this is. I found it in my reticule this morning. *You are the sun that lights the dawn and the dearest treasure of my heart.*"

"Took you long enough to find it," he said with a deep chuckle that shot tingles through her. But everything about him seemed to affect her in this way. His smile. The very look of him. Dear heaven. Waking to the man each morning was a feast on the eyes, especially since he slept naked, his upper torso exposed because his body was a furnace and his skin always deliciously hot.

He was dressed now and still a feast on the eyes. No matter his state of attire, she could not drink enough of him in.

"I put that note in there three days ago."

“A love note,” she said with a nod of sublime satisfaction. “Is it really from you?”

He laughed again. “Yes, love. Short, sweet, and all by my own hand. Unless I have competition for my wife’s affection?”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I think you have chased all those hopeful scoundrels away. Not that I ever had anyone interested in me but you. Thank goodness you turned out to be the ‘someone’ meant for me.”

“I could not think of a better way to tell you how much I love you. The romantic poets will not consider me much of a challenge to their art, but my sentiments are sincere. I love you, Amelia.”

She snuggled on his lap. “I love you, too. I never believed such happiness could exist. I wish there was a way to bottle up this feeling and preserve it for always.”

“I know.” He rubbed a hand along her slightly swollen belly, his eyes widening when he felt the slight flutter of their child kicking inside her. “In my younger, rakehell days, I would hear others refer to some men as ‘happily married’ and did not think much about it. I had no concept of the depth of devotion, the trust and commitment between a husband and wife that went along with that term. Happily married also means unbreakable...inseparable...for this is what we are. No longer two separate hearts, but two pieces of one heart to encompass us both in love.”

“You shall make me cry if you continue to say such sweet things to me.”

“Then I shall just be quiet and kiss you.” He bent his head to hers and kissed her with powerful longing. His hands roamed over her body with possessive familiarity, but those big, rough hands of his were incredibly gentle as they touched her, for she was almost five months along and he treated her with more care than he did the fragile papyrus scrolls in his private museum.

“Give me five minutes, love. I’ll join you for your excursion into town. Any special reason for the outing?”

“None, other than to spend your money,” she said with an impish grin. “The merchants will be pleased. We’ll be heading to London at the end of the week and I did not want them to feel abandoned since we won’t be returning until after the baby is born.”

He sighed. “We ought to have gone sooner. I hate to be traveling with you in your delicate condition.”

“Thank you, my big, protective ape. But I’ll have you know, I am perfectly able to travel. Your child is happily kicking away inside me, and eating like a glutton. I am carrying all up front so I think it will be a boy. At least, this is what Aunt Rosie tells me and she is never wrong about such things. Our little duke-in-waiting is going to be a stubborn handful and will stay firmly ensconced until the time is right for him to make his grand entrance.”

“I’m sure you are right, Amelia. But I cannot help but worry.”

“I know.” She kissed him on the lips. “As soon as he is born, we shall resume our dance lessons. I am sure I shall be a gliding swan by the time our boy is ready to marry.”

He gave a hearty laugh. “Blessed saints, my damaged feet certainly hope so. All right, grab your reticule and let’s be on our way.”

They walked out hand in hand into the sunshine and warm breeze of a September day. Amelia’s heart was light and full.

She had stuck Callum’s love note in her reticule.

She meant to carry his words of love with her always...in her heart and in her reticule.



I hope Callum and Amelia left you smiling!

If you enjoyed this story, please leave a review for us, it is very much appreciated.

ABOUT MEARA PLATT

Meara Platt is an award winning, USA TODAY bestselling author and an Amazon UK All-Star with over fifty books published.

Her favorite place in all the world is England's Lake District, which may not come as a surprise since many of her stories are set in that idyllic landscape, including her paranormal romance Dark Gardens series.

Learn more about the Dark Gardens and Meara's lighthearted and humorous Regency romances in her Farthingale series and Book of Love series, or her warmhearted Regency romances in her Braydens series and Moonstone series by visiting her website at www.mearaplatt.com where you can also subscribe to her newsletter if you would like more information on her upcoming books.

A RETICULE FOR SCANDAL

BY CECILIA RENE

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CHAPTER ONE

London, October 1815

Ambrose Fitzwilliam, Fitz to his friends, Earl of Killingworth, sat in the lavish Crimson Drawing Room at Carlton House, taking in the elaborately decorated space. The residence of the Prince Regent himself was hung with heavy curtains, stitched with gold trim. One large chandelier illuminated the middle of the room with two smaller chandeliers on either side of it. They all glittered with crystals and gold. The ornate ceiling had gold Egyptian drawings surrounding the large rectangular space. Paintings decorated the crimson walls in gold frames. There was so much red and gold Fitz felt he would be sick.

It would be a tragedy to die in such a room.

The Crimson Drawing Room was the most lavish space he'd ever been in. Which would've been the most surprising thing to Fitz if amongst all that wealth, there wasn't a monkey.

A monkey dressed in a tailcoat, standing on a small, but expensive table, which was currently juggling four small balls while surrounded by whores and drunkards. Leopold, the monkey, threw two of the balls in the air, catching them with ease and precision. Obnoxious shouts and cheers rang out from the center of the room as the monkey's handler, Samir, held the long leash attached tightly to Leopold's neck.

"You there!" The Prince Regent, or Prinny as he was known to most, called out to one of the passing servants. He waved a chubby hand in the air absurdly, snapping his fingers

before pointing down to his drink. “I need another before this one is empty.”

Fitz closed his eyes for a moment trying to ignore the overweight, ridiculous prince sitting on the dark red sofa in front of him. For the tenth or hundredth time, he questioned why he was in the man’s company at all.

A sharp kick to his boot jolted his eyes open. Yes, it had been the idea of his oldest and closest friend, the Duke of Stonelake, for Fitz to befriend his cousin the prince. Stonelake glared at Fitz pointedly, his head tilting toward Prinny.

Stonelake, with his gray eyes, and boyish brown curls, gave his head a small shake, signaling to Fitz that he needed to school his own features.

Yes, he should remember himself; there was a reason Stonelake had insisted that they begin acquainting themselves with the often-extravagant prince. Fitz needed the prince’s assistance as he had inherited the Killingworth title and all of its debts less than a year earlier. He simply did not have the funds to restore the earldom and provide for his mother and sister.

A loud cheer erupted in the room, drawing Fitz’s attention to the monkey, which was now perched on Samir’s shoulder, juggling.

“There’s a sight!” Stonelake called out, laughing as Samir transferred Leopold from his shoulder to the naked shoulder of a whore.

Prinny stood, clapping wildly, more like a child than the Regent of an entire empire. “Excellent, Samir!” he shouted before taking his seat just as a servant delivered a full glass of champagne.

Leaning forward Stonelake cleared his throat several times before speaking to the prince. “You mentioned you had something that Fitz could perhaps assist you with,” Stonelake said gently.

Fitz sat up, ignoring the loud shouts surrounding him, focusing all his attention on the conversation between the

prince and Stonelake.

“Indeed.” Prinny picked up his new glass of champagne taking a large gulp and completely ignoring the half-empty one in front of him. “Fitz, I know you inherited the Killingworth earldom, which is in debt to the crown.” He paused to take another drink. “My dear cousin here has been lobbying on your behalf for months.”

“Of course, I have. Fitz here has been my friend since our days at Shrewsbury. Neither one of our fathers could afford Eton.” Stonelake sat back in his gold trimmed chair, eyeing his cousin.

Prinny nodded, his gaze going from Fitz to Stonelake. “Yes, that is the main reason I am trusting Fitz with this delicate matter.”

“How delicate?” Fitz asked wondering what in God’s teeth was he agreeing to.

Months ago, he had complained to Stonelake about the cursed earldom he inherited from his cousin John, the former Earl of Killingworth. A kind, gentle fellow, who became reckless in his grief and found himself on the other end of a pistol soon after the death of his wife and son in childbirth.

The three sudden deaths were precisely the reason why everyone in the *ton*, including Fitz himself, thought the earldom cursed. It was called Killingworth after all. Stonelake was the one to propose that Fitz become close with the regent, who had repeatedly invited Stonelake to his countless gatherings.

Prinny was known for his outlandish behavior and many mistresses. He was also greatly in debt due to his lavish lifestyle. A lifestyle Fitz had never seen before, growing up the only son to a second son.

His father was a vicar who had lived moderately and raised his children to do the same. Fitz couldn’t quite understand how Prinny could spend so carelessly, especially considering how the poor in England lived.

“Extremely delicate, so delicate I’m afraid that it cannot be said in such company.” Standing Prinny loudly clapped several times, gathering the attention of his guests, who now looked expectantly at him. “Everyone out! I must have a word with Fitz.”

No one called him Killingworth. He hadn’t easily accepted the cursed title. In fact, every time he made a new acquaintance, he insisted they should address him as Fitz. It was highly improper, and most members of society simply stared at him aghast.

His father had nicknamed him Fitz when he was a boy. Ambrose had always seemed too big of a name for him. It was his grandfather’s name, and it often felt like it didn’t belong to him. But he was Fitz because his father made it so, and that simple fact gave him joy.

The room cleared until there was no one left except the three of them and Prinny’s faithful servants. Fitz would’ve been shocked by such obedience if he hadn’t seen the prince clear a room before. People listened to his every command despite speaking ill of him behind his back.

The door deftly shut before the prince sat back in his chair. His right hand went up in the air, but before he could say a word a servant was rushing over with a full glass of champagne. Prinny eyed the servant with a squinted glance before taking a sip. “Better.” He waved at the three other glasses in front of him, all half empty. “You may take these.”

Fitz’s leg bounced up and down as he tried to stifle his irritation at the entire scene. Beside him, Stonelake shook with laughter, coughing into his hand when Prinny looked over to him.

“Are you all right, man?” Prinny asked his cousin with a frown on his face.

“Yes, yes, just something caught in my throat. You were saying that you had a way to assist Fitz with the earldom?” a red-faced Stonelake asked.

Fitz contained his glee at his friend being caught; it served Stonelake right. He knew Fitz hated being around the prince and his many worshippers. The entire display made him sick to his stomach, yet he had become among the many with access to the prince.

The regent turned to Fitz, sipping his champagne lazily. “You must go to Brighton at once.”

He expected a great number of outlandish requests, but going to Brighton after all these years was not one of them.

Once, Fitz had been as close to happiness as one could get. He’d had the perfect woman, a secure placement as a solicitor, and his father was still alive. Fitz hadn’t had a care in the world, except for wondering if Patience Grant would accept his proposal. However, it never came to pass.

As a result, he hadn’t returned to Brighton in five years.

Tilting his head, he asked, “Why Brighton?” He was unable to hold back the suspicion in his voice.

Fitz was aware that not too many people knew of the small connection he had in Brighton. It had been years earlier when he was just a young man. Fitz had visited who he thought was an old school friend for a few glorious months in the summer.

Although he did not wish to see Patience and his former friend again as lovers, he had no choice but to do whatever it was that Prinny asked of him. There was no way to surmise what sort of thing the prince would be involved in, but Fitz was desperate and willing to do anything so long as it wasn’t nefarious.

“Not, what but whom...” Prinny paused, taking another sip as if he knew the anguish he was causing Fitz. “Maria Fitzherbert.”

Both Fitz and Stonelake sat up straighter. Fitz knew perfectly well who Maria Fitzherbert was to Prinny. Everyone in England knew that she was the regent’s first wife. A secret that Parliament tried to hide, but rumors always found a way to circulate.

Especially about a prince.

“What do you need me to do?” Fitz asked, trying to ignore the trepidation pooling in his abdomen.

He wasn’t precisely sure where the prince and Maria’s relationship stood at the moment. The last he’d heard they were feuding terribly over Prinny’s new mistress.

“I need you to attend Viscount Hightower’s ball in a sennight. There you will meet a young lady who will be in possession of a reticule—”

“I suspect most young ladies have reticules,” Fitz interrupted, not understanding how this would help him dissolve his debts.

“Indeed, but this particular reticule holds papers of a more delicate nature. Papers that cannot be published or found in the wrong person’s possession...” Prinny paused, his blue eye glaring at Fitz.

Understanding dawned on Fitz. As a solicitor he was very well acquainted with London society and the royal family’s history. “Your marriage papers?” he asked bewildered. “You want me to go to Brighton and retrieve proof of your marriage to Maria Fitzherbert?”

Fitz couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Those papers were hard evidence against everything Parliament wanted the public to assume. And he wanted to trust Fitz with them.

“Precisely. If these were to become public, it could ruin me. I need to stay in Parliament’s good graces to continue to receive my funds. Can I depend on you?” He sat back taking another sip of his champagne, looking over to the servant as he finished the glass.

Fitz looked from Stonelake to the prince. It had to be some sort of jest. Surely it couldn’t be this easy, retrieve a reticule from a chit? That sounded rather simple. “Who will deliver it?”

Prinny waved his fingers at Fitz as if the person was of no consequence. “A maid or a secretary of some sort. You are to meet in the library at eleven o’clock.”

“And once I return this reticule and its contents to you, what will I receive?” He needed to be clear. There was nothing but desperation that would take him back to Brighton. He was in debt up to his ears, having inherited his cousin’s and uncle’s debts. Fitz’s own mother was constantly complaining that his sister would never have a London season in their current state of poverty.

He needed this plan to work.

Prinny shrugged. “In return, I will see that all your debts are forgiven, and I will personally pay you fifty thousand pounds.”

Stonelake choked out a cough as Fitz sat stoically staring at the prince. He couldn’t believe it. With that sort of blunt, his children’s children would never be hungry. His leg began bouncing, his heart beating frantically in his chest. No, this could not be so easy.

“You and I both know you don’t have the funds,” Fitz challenged as it was well known that Prinny was in debt. He constantly borrowed money from Parliament to support his lavish lifestyle. How could he possibly have fifty thousand pounds?

“No, I don’t, but I am a great collector of art, and I will gift you any painting, of your choosing, within reason. You can sell it or stare at it; I don’t care. I just need those papers and I know I can depend on you.” Prinny stood, with some difficulty, his large abdomen protruding over his breeches.

Fitz stood also, hoping he knew what he was getting into. He didn’t need any more complications in his life. He would retrieve the reticule, return to London in less than a fortnight and avoid Patience Grant by any means necessary.

“You can depend on me.”

CHAPTER TWO

Miss Patience Grant stood at the top of the moderate staircase of her family home in Brighton, straining her neck, her lips pursed as she listened to the voices coming out of the parlor. Pulling her bright-blue bonnet over her massive head of hair, she took one step. Bracing her body, she waited for the loud squeak that was usually associated with that particular stair. There was none, so she took another, her heart beating rapidly in her ears. She needed to escape without being seen by any of her relations.

The next three steps were silent as her booted feet hit the plush carpet like she was a young girl again, and not a woman of eight and twenty. She would've felt ridiculous sneaking out to go to her place of employment if it wasn't for her mother and grandmother.

Patience gripped her reticule tightly, ready to take the last two steps and dart toward her freedom. The heat on her scalp was nearly unbearable due to her copious hair and the bonnet. Panting frantically, Patience fanned herself, trying to quell the up and down movement of her chest. She needed to focus on the one thing she wanted most at that moment.

To escape.

Exhaling a slow quiet breath, she rushed down the stairs, the door a hundred paces or more away. Joy swept through her. She would do it. She would leave the house without another confrontation with her grandmother.

Or so she thought.

“There you are!” her mother’s deep voice called out from the door of the parlor.

Bloody hell.

As a woman way past marrying age, she discovered that she very much liked cursing and did it as often as she could.

Patience plastered on a smile before she turned around to face her mother. Doretha Grant did not look like a woman near fifty. No, her mother still had the skin and shape of her youth and there was not a gray hair on her head. Her dark brown tresses were carefully styled in a chignon, despite her thick unmanageable hair that more favored Patience’s sister’s.

“You weren’t trying to leave without speaking with us, were you?” Her mother crossed her arms over her small breasts, her dark eyes, squinting at Patience.

“Of course not, Mother. Why ever would I do that?” she asked in an innocent voice as she walked past her mother and into the parlor.

There her grandmother and sister waited for her. Her maternal grandmother, Jane Miller, had lived with them for as long as Patience could remember, and she had been stern her entire life. Like her mother, Patience’s grandmother had flawless skin at nearly seventy years old. But she had a head full of white hair with only a small sprinkling of brown remaining.

Her grandmother had thought Patience had squandered her one chance at an advantageous connection. Patience’s own mother had failed by marrying a British soldier, who had risen through the ranks to a sergeant and recently an ensign.

Eyeing her sister, Patience raised an eyebrow in challenge, wondering why the girl did not try to warn her. At three and twenty, Mary-Anne Grant was a true beauty, and would be a diamond of the first water, if it were not for Patience’s reputation and the fact their family was on the verge of ruin.

“Sneaking off to that job again, I see.” Her grandmother spat out the word *job* like it was a contagious disease. “A better use of your time would be helping your sister find a

husband with a title and a fortune. Something you failed at.” This was an admonition that Patience could depend on hearing at least three times a day. “After all, you will surely depend on them and their good graces to provide for you in your spinsterhood.”

Ah, there her grandmother was wrong. Soon Patience would be leaving Brighton and her family. All she had to do was convince Mrs. Maria Fitzherbert, her employer, to recommend her to the Shackleford School for Girls.

Once, ages ago when Patience was a new debutante, she had been her grandmother’s crowning achievement. They were inseparable, even with Jane Miller’s known prickliness.

All of her grandmother’s hopes of an auspicious marriage or a wealthy benefactor, had fallen to Patience.

Until the incident.

The event that ruined Patience forever and irrevocably fractured her relationship with her grandmother.

Her mother walked deeper into the room, her thin arms clasped tight and mouth pursed like she had eaten something unpleasant. “Have you forgotten that we’re all destitute now that your father has gotten himself killed?”

“He’s not dead.” Patience’s body shook with anger. She was tired of the same damned conversations over and over. “He will return.”

Her father was fighting the war against Napoleon with the 49th Foot Unit. Their last correspondence from him had been directly before the battle of Waterloo, and he had not been heard from since. That was nearly four months ago, and Patience was beginning to lose all hope.

“You’re a fool if you think your father is still alive. Just like he was a fool to spend his fortune on that blasted commission. If he had taken his inheritance from his father and used it for good instead of furthering his rank, we wouldn’t be in this position in the first place.” Her grandmother tapped her annoying cane against the carpet. “If I

had any inclination of the future, I would've never allowed my daughter to marry the bastard son of a plantation owner."

Patience suppressed her anger, every conversation with her grandmother was the same, and she was tired of it.

"Fortunately for us, you're not a mind reader, grandmother," Patience said with as much calm as she could handle. Such conversations were the main reasons she avoided her family.

"No if I were, you would've never been caught with Mr. Reeves, you fool of a girl." She bore into Patience with a cold black gaze.

Patience's blood went icy in her veins, her body stiffening at the mention of the Honorable Walter Reeves. He was the heir to a barony and made it his life's mission to ruin Patience. All because she refused to be his mistress.

This was why she avoided her family at every opportunity. Every confrontation with her family was the same, and Patience was tired of arguing. Tired of how each woman allowed her grandmother to rule them. Her mother did nothing as her grandmother insulted and demeaned Patience and her father. Her sister would sit in silence, worried about her own secrets, looking like a poor helpless animal, a rabbit perhaps.

After the insults, her grandmother would go on and on about their current state of finance while her mother eagerly agreed that someone must do something.

Patience glanced over at Mary-Anne, finding her eyes cast down, and hands clasped. Yes, she definitely looked like a helpless rabbit.

"Why have I been summoned?" she asked, wanting to be anywhere but there. "I will be late for work if I do not leave immediately." It wasn't exactly true. She had at least forty-five minutes to spare, but she would never reveal the truth to her mother or grandmother.

"The viscount is having a ball in a sennight, and Lord Hightower has written that a duke will be in attendance along with some earl of no fortune. You must escort your sister and

ensure she catches the duke's attention." Her mother pointed at her, leaving no room for argument.

It was times like this that Patience longed for her father. She was nothing but a burden to both her mother and grandmother, a fact they constantly felt the need to remind her of.

Forcing herself not to show any signs of emotion, Patience held her head high, pushing away the prickle of tears that threatened to fall. She hated Brighton society; it was difficult to endure it, especially when you were the sole subject of every whisper in the room.

Her godfather, Viscount Hightower, and his wife had been longtime friends of their family. The viscount and her father were more like brothers than friends. He was the only reason that they were still accepted in Brighton society.

"I have to work that night." Her voice sounded small and weak, as it often did when she was being badgered.

"Make an excuse. This is your opportunity to make up for your foolish behavior." Her grandmother lifted the cane again, wielding it more like a sword than a walking stick.

Eyeing her sister, Patience waited for Mary-Anne to say something, anything really. But as was her usual custom, she did not. That was the one thing she disliked about her sister, her cowardice. If it were Mary-Anne constantly being demeaned, Patience would stand up for her.

She also knew now years later that if she ever found love again, she would never allow her grandmother to intervene. She had allowed the older woman to dictate life once, and it had cost her everything.

"Very well. Is that all?" she asked, wanting to flee the room before her grandmother or mother began listing her sins again.

Letting out a loud grunt of dismissal, her grandmother flung the cane toward the door, officially releasing Patience from the torture.

Not waiting another second for one of them to throw a careless insult at her, Patience rushed out of the parlor. Her booted feet made a thunderous sound as she pushed her legs to move as fast as they would go. Though her thighs ached with the speed at which she was moving, she dared not stop until the fresh air kissed her skin giving her sweet relief. Gasping, she let it soothe her as she breathed deeply. Closing her eyes, Patience allowed a few tears to fall for her father as always.

Behind her, the door to the house creaked open.

“I’m sorry,” her sister said, her voice small and filled with sadness.

She turned to look at her sister. “You’re always sorry Mary-Anne.”

They had the same brown skin and high cheekbones, but that was where their likeness ended. Mary-Anne favored their mother and grandmother while Patience was told she was the spitting image of her father’s mother.

“What would you like me to say? I’m not strong like you.” Her sister wrapped her arms around Patience placing her head on her shoulder.

“If strong is enduring constant ridicule and whispers for five years, then I am the pillar of strength,” Patience jested.

Mary-Ann leaned back, peering at her sister. “You are, you should be a bare-knuckle fighter.”

Patience stepped out of her sister’s embrace. “And you should tell both grandmother and mother that you do not want to marry a duke. That you are in love with a footman—”

“Keep your voice down!” Mary-Anne eyes went wide, her head turning to ensure that no one had overheard Patience.

Mary-Anne had no inclination of marrying anyone their mother or grandmother chose. She had long been secretly engaged to Philip Lewis, a footman of Viscount Hightower’s for a year. The two had formed a connection, and eventually fell in love.

Patience would be happy for her sister, if Mary-Anne ever really planned to defy her family and marry Philip. But it seemed that would not be the case. Besides, their mother and grandmother would be mortified to learn that Mary-Anne was engaged to a footman.

“Very well, but they will continue to pressure you and soon you will find yourself with a husband that is not Philip Lewis,” Patience reminded her sister, understanding just how precarious Mary-Anne and Philip’s situation was.

For a brief moment she recalled dark hair and deep green eyes that spoke to her very soul. Shaking her head to free herself from the painful memory, Patience tightened her bonnet, giving her sister a parting smile. “I must go before I really am late.”

She reached the safety of the carriage Viscount Hightower had gifted them after they had sold theirs. Funds had been low after her father’s disappearance. They had to sell a great number of things that both her grandmother and mother felt important in order to save the servants.

Taking a deep breath, Patience prayed that her father would return to them soon. Either way her plans for herself would not falter and the key to everything was Maria Fitzherbert.

CHAPTER THREE

Stepping into Stein House, the opulent home of Maria Fitzherbert, always made Patience aware of her own station in life. Being the daughter of a British soldier wasn't a glamorous affair, but being the daughter of one who was also the bastard child of a Jamaican slave owner and a former enslaved woman added a bit of a complication.

Walking through the large white two-story home where she had been employed for the last three months as a secretary, always felt like she had entered a different world than her own. Patience moved briskly down the marbled hallway passing painting after painting. She was accustomed to seeing the vibrant artwork from famous artists like Frances Cotes and George Stubbs.

As was her daily custom, Patience stopped in front of a George Stubbs painting. Swallowing the lump in her throat and fighting the tears that always threatened to fall from the scene depicted on canvas. A helpless horse was trying to fight the predatory, hungry lion off its back. The desperation was clear in the horse's wide eyes and the angle of his right leg up as he tried to run for his life.

It was nothing but torture that caused her to stop and stare at the picture every single day. Patience was the horse, running from her attackers, but would she truly escape?

The door to Mrs. Fitzherbert's study opened, revealing the maid Cecelia's smiling face. She and Patience were the same age but with slightly different stations in life.

“You better hurry, she’s waiting for you.” Cecelia walked past, her hands overflowing with a tea service, her abdomen slightly protruding as she balanced the tray in her hands. Kind gray eyes were wide as she stared at Patience.

Forcing a smile, Patience dabbed her eyes trying to ignore the weight at the pit of her stomach the painting always caused. Everything had a purpose and her position with Mrs. Fitzherbert would serve the greatest purpose of all.

Her independence.

“There you are, Miss Grant. Close the door. I have something of importance to discuss with you.” Maria Fitzherbert was younger than Patience’s grandmother and a great deal more pleasant.

Closing the door, she walked deeper into the study, with cream-colored curtains, white bookcases, and white furniture lined with brown wood. It was very lady-like, with a large ebony wood desk covered in neatly stacked papers. A smaller desk was against the window facing out toward the gardens. The breathtaking view had captured Patience’s attention from the very first moment she began working for Mrs. Fitzherbert.

Patience’s own desk was slightly more hectic, covered in the lady’s many correspondences, all waiting for Patience to reply swiftly. For a woman of her age, Maria Fitzherbert was extremely popular, receiving letters, invitations, and sometimes mail from strangers. Patience handled it all, even requesting funds from Mrs. Fitzherbert’s solicitor on her behalf. There weren’t many things that the woman did not ask of Patience.

The last three months in Maria Fitzherbert’s employ left Patience with no doubt that the rumors were indeed true. The lady was the first wife of the Prince Regent.

At first, Patience had not believed it. But seeing her correspondence, her luxurious lifestyle, and the way people treated Mrs. Fitzherbert like a queen solidified what most of the country had been speculating about for years. There was also the occasional correspondence from the Regent himself.

Patience clasped her shaking hands together, her feet hurriedly leading her deeper into the brightly lit study. Hope sprang free, rising through her body, and she couldn't stop the wide smile that suddenly spread across her face or the rapid beating of her heart.

There was one reason and one reason only that she worked for Maria Fitzherbert, the older woman's close friendship with Mrs. Eliza Shackelford, the head mistress of The Shackelford School for Girls. The school was known for its teaching to the daughters of the aristocracy, and for employing women as teachers. That simple fact was what attracted Patience to the school.

Through teaching, Patience would be able to instill independence and knowledge into other women. They would not find themselves without any options or hope like she did.

Mr. Fitzherbert leaned her thin body forward, the yellow day dress with brown trim shifting as she looked at Patience. Her usual calm demeanor was more excited than Patience had ever seen her. "I have decided to grant your request for a recommendation to Eliza for you to teach at her school," Mrs. Fitzherbert said as cool hazel eyes took in Patience from head to toe.

Patience couldn't help but feel as if she was on display for the other woman's approval.

Finally. The air left her body. That was the news she had been waiting on for three long months. Not only would Patience be able to escape her family, but this was one step closer to her opening her own school. A school not for daughters of the aristocracy but a school for every young woman who wished to learn and become independent.

A school for girls with no connection and no hope of a future. Patience would teach them Latin, literature, art, numbers, and science. She also would equip them with skills for a trade. Skills that would provide an income for a future... a future that did not always lead to marriage and children.

Stepping forward, Patience placed her hand on Mrs. Fitzherbert's desk, wanting to wrap her arms around the older

woman. From the moment she began working for her, Patience's only goal was for the woman to recommend her to Eliza Shackelford.

"I promise you, my lady, you will not be disappointed," Patience panted out.

"You misunderstand. I'm not doing this from the kindness of my heart. I still have my reservations about the situation you found yourself in." Patience bristled at the mention of the worst incident that had ever happened to her. "However, I am no stranger to scandal, often I welcome it even. That is why I hired you, one must rise above it. Though, having a liaison in the garden was foolish, it's not unheard of." She shook her head at Patience like she was a small child and not a grown woman. "I feel that we can help each other."

Patience had indeed gone into the garden alone five years ago, but she did not go to meet the Honorable Walter Reeves as he had gleefully told all of Brighton and anyone who had visited since. Patience had found herself in the garden alone crying, after she lost the man whom she was sure she was going to marry, her beloved Fitz.

Her grandmother insisted that a match with Fitz was undesirable, and she pushed Patience towards Walter. A younger Patience had loved her grandmother and craved her approval. Thus she allowed the older woman to interfere between her and Fitz.

A solicitor, Fitz was unlike his school friend Walter Reeves. He valued her mind and opinions whereas Walter viewed her as chattel. The night of the Hightower Ball, her grandmother had agreed to tie Patience's future to Walter. However, Walter's plan did not include marriage, a family, or a home. All the things she wanted with Fitz.

Sneaking off to be alone was her only thought when Mr. Reeves followed her. His attempt at seduction was denied, but with his bruised pride and tarnished manhood, he created his own narrative. A great tale of a seductress intent on trapping him into marriage, simply because he was to inherit a barony.

No matter how many times Patience refuted his accusations it did not matter. All of Brighton believed his word against hers. And in Patience's world the man was always right.

Patience leaned forward, eagerly wondering what exactly Mrs. Fitzherbert meant. "Help each other how?" she questioned, unable to show any propriety.

Though she was eager, she had nothing to offer a woman like Maria Fitzherbert who had married a prince in secret. Patience needed to leave Brighton and be her own person, start her life away from the rumors and whispers... away from her family, even her beloved sister and father. She could no longer protect them from her grandmother; it was time she thought of herself.

"I have a business proposition for you." Mrs. Fitzherbert waved a thin hand in the air. "Please be seated."

Hesitantly, Patience sat in the armchair directly in front of the large desk, not accustomed to being treated as an equal by her employer. Usually, the older woman was very business-like with her.

"Whatever it is, I am happy to be of assistance." Patience sat with her back straight, meeting Mrs. Fitzherbert's stony gaze. She would not cower; this was her chance to be one step closer to her ultimate dream.

Opening her own school.

"I'm glad to hear it." Mrs. Fitzherbert paused, examining Patience again, before she began speaking. "I need you to attend the Hightower's Ball."

"Attend my godfather's ball?"

"Yes. I knew you would be in attendance, that's why I chose you." Opening her desk drawer, Mrs. Fitzherbert pulled out a small black, jewel-encrusted reticule, placing it in front of her. "I need you to deliver this reticule and its contents to a gentleman who will be attending the ball on behalf of a mutual friend."

Patience gasped. Mrs. Fitzherbert's mutual friend had to be the Prince Regent!

"You want me to deliver the reticule to a gentleman I have never met? How will I know who he is?"

Brighton would not have many visitors this time of year, but often her godfather would be inundated with guests, especially during warmer weather months.

"He will meet you in the library at precisely eleven o'clock. He should be easy to notice as there are only a few people in town at the moment with whom you are not acquainted with."

Swallowing, Patience tried to quell her apprehension at being alone with a gentleman she did not know. The last time she was caught alone with someone had ruined her irrevocably. It didn't matter; the only thing that mattered was that doing this would have her leaving Brighton once and for all. For that reason, she would happily be ruined again.

She couldn't refuse.

"Once I do this, you will write to Mrs. Shackelford to grant me a position at her school?" Patience struggled to breathe around the lump in her throat. The thudding of her own heart boomed in her ears.

Closing her eyes briefly, she waited for confirmation, trying to hide her shaking hands in the skirts of her day dress.

"I will insist she hire you as a personal favor to me." Holding out her hand, Mrs. Fitzherbert waited for Patience. "Do we have an agreement?"

Without hesitation, Patience took the older woman's hand, shaking it with her gloved one. "We do."

A knock on the door interrupted their exchange. Patience released Mrs. Fitzherbert's hand as Cecelia entered the room, her eyes going to the reticule, before they quickly landed on Patience. Mrs. Fitzherbert hastily placed the reticule back in her desk drawer as Cecelia placed a pile of correspondence on the desk.

Patience retrieved the papers before she retreated to her small desk, her chest overflowing with hope. She had been ruined for nearly five years, shunned in society, laughed about in front of everyone and lost the only man she loved.

Now this was her chance to leave Brighton. Finally, she would have a future. It wouldn't be the one she had envisioned five years earlier, one with a husband, and a family, but it would be her own. All she had to do was deliver a reticule to a stranger.



A SENNIGHT LATER, Patience knocked on Mrs. Fitzherbert's chambers doors, trepidation clawing her insides for what she was about to do. Her employer had been ill most of the day, unable to keep any food down. She had yet to give Patience the reticule that would grant her the freedom she desperately needed.

Worse still, there was no news of Patience's father. She was beginning to believe her mother and grandmother were correct, that her father could be lost forever.

"Enter," a weak Mrs. Fitzherbert called out.

Patience walked into the large chambers, finding a frail Mrs. Fitzherbert lying in the large four-poster bed under a dark gold canopy.

"Miss. Grant, I'm afraid I am not feeling my best. You must retrieve the reticule from my study. It is secured in my desk." Mrs. Fitzherbert pressed a white handkerchief to her mouth. She closed her eyes, taking several moments before she continued. "No one must know the contents of the papers."

Patience nodded, her brow furrowed as the older woman grimaced in pain, a hand on her abdomen. "I understand. I will hand the papers directly to the gentleman and no one else."

Mrs. Fitzherbert sat up, clearing her throat. "Good. And once you confirm the delivery, I will write your

recommendation. You can go directly to the school. Mrs. Shackelford will not turn away anyone I recommend.”

For a moment Patience did not comprehend the words. “Do you mean I do not have to wait for a reply?” she asked, her heart feeling as if it would come out of her chest.

This could not be happening. She would be able to really leave Brighton once and for all. There was a small part of her that didn’t want to go while her father was still missing. But Patience could always visit him once he returned.

She was done choosing others over herself.

“Precisely. You may leave once the reticule is delivered.” Mrs. Fitzherbert held the handkerchief to her mouth firmly for a moment. “I shall miss you as a secretary. It is difficult to find competent assistance these days. Thank you, Patience.”

It was difficult to voice how appreciative she was of Mrs. Fitzherbert for taking a chance on her. Now she was giving Patience the one thing she wanted most in the world, freedom.

“Thank you,” Patience said sincerely. “I will inform you when the reticule is delivered.”

“Good. You shall find it in the top drawer of my desk.” Mrs. Fitzherbert laid back officially dismissing Patience.

Leaving the room, Patience rushed through the large home. Her excitement threatened to bubble out of her as she nearly ran to Mrs. Fitzherbert’s office.

Bursting through the door, Patience was shocked to find Cecelia on the other side of the desk with the reticule in her hands.

Surprise shone on the other woman’s face, before she broke out in a smile. “There you are! Mrs. Fitzherbert wanted me to give this to you. I wanted to make sure you had it before you left.” Her voice was light and airy, but Patience could not help but notice a slight tremble when she spoke.

Patience stood for a moment, not comprehending what actually was happening. “Oh, Mrs. Fitzherbert did not mention it,” Patience said slowly, doubt grazing her skin.

“She must’ve forgotten due to her illness.” Cecelia held out the reticule for Patience, who took it tentatively. “Now off you go, before you’re late for the ball.”

Patience nodded before leaving the study. Something was amiss about the entire exchange, but she didn’t know exactly what it was. Not dwelling on it, she continued out of Stein House intent on delivering the reticule and beginning her future.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fitz stared around the meager ballroom of Hilcrest Manor, shocked that he would ever return to Brighton at all. It had been five years since he had rushed out of the very same ballroom, after the cruelest woman he had ever met had broken his young heart.

Then a solicitor with a small income, no one would even look his way. He had hoped his life was enough for Patience, but her grandmother insisted she had accepted a better offer.

Now, Fitz was a titled gentleman with no income, and an estate saddled with debt, yet he was surrounded by eligible young ladies. He would never become accustomed to the amount of attention that having a title garnered.

As he stood in the center of Viscount Hightower's small ballroom there wasn't an eye that was not on him and Stonelake. He was grateful for his friend's presence if for nothing else than to capture the attention of every eager mama in Brighton.

He had hoped that no one with all their faculties would want their daughter to marry a cursed earl, but he was wrong. A title, even a cursed one, was attractive to most mamas. Hopefully, the attention he was currently attracting would transfer to his friend. A wealthy duke with family connections to the crown surely was every debutante's dream.

Stonelake often reminded Fitz that an eager mama would marry her daughter off to anyone. It seemed an earl with a cursed title was a very appealing option for matrimony.

Sighing, he smiled as Viscount Hightower introduced him to the eighth or twentieth mother-and-daughter duo. The occasional father would accompany them, but mostly it was the mothers, eager and ready.

In London, it was easy to avoid such events as a newly titled lord, but here in Brighton, where society was lacking during the slow seasons, there was no avoiding marriage minded individuals.

His eyes roamed the ballroom again. He had yet to see a young lady with a reticule matching the description Prinny had given him. Fitz also did not see Miss Patience Grant. There was a small part of him that longed to see her again, but he wasn't there for her or to rekindle any semblance of a relationship.

Fitz was there for one thing. Once he had the reticule, he would return to London and his lonely life. After he received the funds, his sole purpose was to restore Worthington Abbey, so his mother and sister would have a decent home. This wasn't about him and a failed relationship years ago. This was his only hope to free himself from the insurmountable debt that he had inherited from his cousin.

As he peered at every lady with a reticule, he only saw a handful, and none matched Prinny's description. It would've helped if the Regent had given him any detail on the woman he was meeting.

Fitz stood in front of their host, Viscount Hightower, who had always been a very amenable gentleman. He was tall with a small round belly and bald head. His friendly gray eyes surveyed Fitz.

"I'm astonished to see you back in Brighton and as an earl no less," Hightower said, his eyes full of excitement.

"Yes, it has been some years," Fitz told him, taking pleasure in the man's jovial behavior.

"The Earl of Killingworth, how extraordinary." Hightower leaned forward like he was telling a secret. "You were visiting Reeves then I believe."

“Yes. Reeves and I went to Shrewsbury together along with Stonelake here—”

“Yes! I remember the connection. You were a solicitor then,” the viscount said, suddenly rearing back. “Extraordinary. I had no recollection that you were acquainted with an earldom.”

Stonelake patted his shoulder. “Fitz never was one to brag about his familial connections. He was first cousin to the former Earl of Killingworth.”

Viscount Hightower shook his head, his eyes closing for a moment. “Tragic, tragic story. Is it true he went looking to be killed?”

Fitz froze in place; he loathed discussing his cousin’s death. John shouldn’t be defined by his grief; he should be remembered for the man he was. To Fitz, his cousin was all things good in the world. John had been blessed with the rarity of a love match, but the loss of that love destroyed him.

Hightower looked over Fitz’s shoulder. “Ladies! Allow me to introduce the Duke of Stonelake and I believe you all are familiar with the Earl of Killingworth.”

Fitz turned around, coming face to face with the woman that had ruined all his hopes and dreams of a love match.

Mrs. Jane Miller.

She hadn’t aged at all, but she still had the same pinch at the corner of her lips as if she was eating something unpleasant. Her eyebrows were still knit together, her eyes judging and assessing always.

He hadn’t liked the woman then, and he could surmise by the look she was giving him that he would not like her now.

Both Fitz and Stonelake bowed to the three women. They were all as stunning as he remembered, but none of them was the one person who had his heart beating in anticipation at seeing her again.

One look, that was all he needed, and then he would excuse himself and go in search of the reticule. The sooner he

left Brighton, the safer his heart would be.

“Your Grace, may I introduce the family of my closest friend, Ensign Phineas Grant?” Hightower held out his hand waving between Stonelake and the three women who stood beside him. “His mother-in-law, Mrs. Miller; his wife, Mrs. Grant and his youngest daughter, Mrs. Mary-Anne Grant.”

“Your Grace it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Mrs. Miller curtsied and held out a wrinkle-free hand.

It had been five years since Fitz last saw the elderly woman, but she had not aged a day. Mrs. Miller did not appear to be a woman with a married daughter and two grown granddaughters.

Taking her hand, his friend bowed over it. “Enchanted.” Stonelake rose, bowing to the other two women who had curtsied to him.

“The Earl of Killingworth?” Mrs. Grant asked, her eyes bewildered.

There was a small bit of pride that swelled in Fitz’s chest. He was not the young man who courted her daughter all those years ago. He was titled now, important in their eyes, but that did not matter. To him he was still the same man who was shunned and looked down upon by them five years earlier.

“Fitz, please, Mrs. Grant,” he said, looking at the older woman. It wasn’t that he refused to be addressed by his title; it simply was not who he was.

It had been nearly a year since his cousin’s death, yet he still could not accept the title. It didn’t feel like his. The Earl of Killingworth was John, not him.

“Forgive me. Killingworth here prefers to go by his surname, still,” Hightower informed the women. “I suppose it would be rather difficult to adjust.”

“Indeed, especially if you have been one name your entire life,” Stonelake replied beside Fitz, always on his side.

They had been friends since Fitz’s first day at Shrewsbury. Instantly connecting over their love of literature, math, and

horses. It was a relationship that he cherished, as they were more like brothers than friends.

“How very interesting to see you again,” Mrs. Miller said looking at Fitz with contempt. She turned her attention back to Stonelake who appeared bored with the entire conversation. “How long will we have the pleasure of your company, Your Grace?”

The older woman focused her attention on his friend, and Fitz could perceive that she intended him for the younger Miss Grant.

Five years earlier, Mary-Anne Grant had been a young innocent girl who idolized her older sister. She was young and vibrant then, but now, she was distant and reserved.

“Not long at all. Fitz and I should be leaving by the end of the week. We only came to enjoy the sea air,” Stonelake answered easily, a triumphant smirk on his lips.

Fitz couldn't help his own glee at his friend's expense. It served Stonelake right to have to face the stern woman after the way he acted with Fitz in the carriage. He'd spent the entire journey to Brighton questioning Fitz about Miss Patience Grant, a subject that he had rarely spoken of in years. He found that some things were better left in the past.

After his return from Brighton five years ago, Fitz informed his friend of his short courtship with Patience Grant and Reeves involvement. Stonelake had never trusted Reeves; though both men attended Shrewsbury, they had barely spoken in all the years they were there together.

“What a shame. We would've liked to have you over for dinner, wouldn't we, Mary-Anne?” Mrs. Miller said, her keen gaze boring into Mary-Anne in challenge.

The scene in front of Fitz was strange to him. This was not the same girl who ran through the sand with her sister as Fitz watched. Mrs. Miller, however, was the same stern, unpleasant woman he had met five years ago.

“Y-yes, could you not delay your return?” Mary-Anne asked Stonelake, tripping over her words, her eyes shifting

nervously to her grandmother.

Hightower bounced up and down on his heels, ecstatic over the comment. “That would be excellent! We could make it a small party. We haven’t had much to celebrate with Grant missing.”

“Missing?” Fitz asked bewildered.

He had met the amenable Mr. Grant years earlier and found him to be a doting father with his daughters’ best interest in mind, but he never could stand up to his mother-in-law. Something Fitz was sure most people struggled with.

“Yes, I’m afraid no one has heard of his whereabouts since the battle of Waterloo.” Hightower lowered his head.

Fitz remembered Mr. Grant as an honest and fair man who was surrounded by a mother-in-law much stronger willed than he was. His mother-in-law made all the decisions in the family, leaving Mr. Grant with no power in his own home.

When Fitz had asked the other man for his daughter’s hand in marriage, Mr. Grant had readily agreed. However, it was Mrs. Miller who eventually made the final decision.

Sadness for Patience Grant gripped him as he recalled how close she was to her father. It was an association that they had bonded over, since Fitz, too, was connected to his own father.

Closing his eyes briefly, Fitz fought the wave of emotion that threatened to control him at the memory of his sire.

“Your Grace, my Mary-Anne here is an excellent dancer...” Mrs. Grant trailed off suggestively, like the viscount did not mention her husband at all.

Fitz choked into his closed fist, trying to cover up his laughter at his friend’s expense. It was now his turn to be the annoying companion.

“Indeed, Miss Mary-Anne, may I have the next set?” Stonelake asked to the joy of the older women.

Miss Mary-Anne Grant, however, was not overly excited to dance with Stonelake. In fact the younger woman with smooth brown skin and light brown eyes with her thick tresses

up in an elaborate hairstyle looked around the room expectantly, positively unaffected by Fitz's friend.

Hightower looked around the room expectantly as if he was searching for someone. "Where is my goddaughter?" His voice took on a sudden light quality, as if he was speaking of someone he was fond of.

Fitz's entire body stiffened for a fraction of a second at the mention of Patience Grant.

"We left *her* to attend to our cloaks and reticules." Mrs. Miller's disdain for her eldest granddaughter shocked Fitz. Years earlier, Patience Grant had been her grandmother's rare jewel. Fitz couldn't help but notice that clearly something had changed between the two women.

"Ah, here she is now." Hightower smiled brightly.

Fitz's entire being was in an uproar at the thought of seeing Patience Grant again. His heart was pounding like a symphony orchestra, sweat forming on his brow, and around his cravat. The air in the room was suddenly so stifling he could barely breathe.

Swallowing the mountain-sized lump in his throat, he turned around to face Miss Patience Grant.

When his eyes met hers, it was like no time had passed at all. His heart stopped beating, mouth suddenly dry as he opened and closed it repeatedly. Fitz beheld the enchanting beauty with smooth rich-brown skin and round eyes. Loose curly strands of wild dark-brown hair framed an oval shaped face with high cheekbones and full lush lips. He could imagine that they had matching expressions on their faces, as she stared at him like she was seeing a ghost.

"F-fitz, Mr. Fitzwilliam," she stuttered, looking like an animal caught out in the wild. "What a surprise to see you in Brighton."

Dear God, she was beautiful. He had thought of her quite often over the years, but nothing could compare to seeing her in the flesh. Not that he particularly cared, because he was still

going to leave Brighton once he retrieved the reticule for Prinny.

But Fitz could admit that she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes upon.

“Your Grace, may I introduce my goddaughter, Miss Patience Grant.” Hightower introduced Miss Grant, who curtsied and gave Stonelake a timid smile, her gaze shifting back to Fitz.

Stonelake bowed low, taking Miss Grant’s offered hand, making a show for all to see. “Miss Grant, what an honor. I have heard so much about you.”

Miss Grant pulled back slightly, her cheeks coloring. “Oh, really?” Her gaze shifted up to Fitz. “Your Grace, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Welcome to Brighton.” Her voice washed over Fitz, waking parts of him that had been dormant since he had left five years earlier.

There had been women of course, but there was no thought of a future with anyone since her.

His gaze swept over her. Miss Grant was taller than most women, but much shorter than Fitz’s stature. Her voluptuous body was covered in a fine green gown, and he tried desperately not to stare.

“Miss Grant, dear, did you know our Mr. Fitzwilliam is now the Earl of Killingworth?” Hightower asked like it was the most interesting piece of gossip he had heard.

She shook her head, a few more curls swinging free. “No, I wasn’t aware. Forgive me, my lord.”

“No, forgiveness necessary, Miss Grant. I still prefer just Fitz. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, again.” Fitz wanted to keep their interaction formal. Bowing low, he tried to gain control over his traitorous body.

He had never reacted to other women in such a way; she was always the exception. Now, older and hopefully wiser, Fitz had a goal in life. He had to secure a future for his mother and sister, and that future did not include him becoming

enchanted by Miss Patience Grant again. Besides, he was sure Reeves would not take kindly to him stealing his paramour.

As he rose from the bow, he stopped suddenly, his mind clear as his eyes locked upon the black, diamond-encrusted reticule in her hand.

Fitz couldn't find a single word in his rather large vocabulary; years of schooling and studying did not prepare him for seeing Patience Grant with the one thing that could secure his future.

It was her; she was the reason he was there. Suddenly obtaining a reticule from a chit became much more complicated than Fitz imagined it would be.

It was just one night, he reminded himself. Once the reticule was in his possession, Fitz would return to London, all his family debts would be forgotten, and Miss Patience Grant would remain in Brighton.

“Killingworth, would you do the honor of escorting my goddaughter in the next set?” Hightower insisted, shocking Fitz.

Across from him, Patience gave a small flinch of discomfort, like the thought of dancing with him was unpleasant.

Fitz, on the other hand, was trying to pretend that she did not affect him after all these years, but he was a terrible actor. “It would be my honor,” Fitz said as Miss Grant held out her hand with her dance card and the small pencil attached.

His foot tapped loudly as he scribbled his name on her empty dance card. He was perplexed as the room increased in chatter as he interacted with the beauty in front of him. Fitz could not quite understand the amount of attention he was garnering from signing Miss Grant's dance card.

“Why do you have that blasted reticule? Give it to your mother, she will keep it for you,” Mrs. Miller spat out, her dark eyes cutting over to her eldest granddaughter.

Miss Grant shook her head, her gaze holding her grandmother's. “No, I think I'll hold on to it, thank you,

Grandmother.”

A sigh of relief left Fitz. He couldn't imagine what Mrs. Miller would do with the papers that revealed the truth about Prinny and Mrs. Fitzherbert.

The next set began and Stonelake offered his hand to Miss Mary-Anne. Turning to his own dance partner, Fitz graced her with a smile and offered his arm. “Shall we?”

Miss Grant nodded her consent before she intertwined her arm in his. As they walked away, arm in arm, her body visibly relaxed the further they were from her grandmother.

He tried to ignore the rightness of it all. How she felt beside him, the sweet smell of her teasing his senses. He thought he was over her, that being told by her grandmother that she had a better offer was the worst thing that happened to him.

Suddenly, he no longer knew anything at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

Patience stared straight ahead as the whispers began to circle around her. She couldn't think of them at that moment, as she was on the arm of the very man who had consumed her every thought the past five years. Of course, it was him, Fitz, the man she had loved. After all this time.

As they positioned themselves on the dance floor, the whispers increased like a swarm of buzzing insects on a hot summer day. Couldn't Patience have one night where she wasn't gossiped about like a prize stallion at the races?

She ignored them all, deciding that if she had one night with Fitz, again, Patience would not waste a single moment caring about what others thought.

Staring over at him, her gaze traced the familiar shape of his face. He was older, to be sure, but it did not detract in any way from how devastatingly handsome he was.

Living in Brighton she had seen gentlemen of all shapes, sizes, and countenances. No other man had been as appealing as Fitz had been when they first met, or now in the present.

He was a lord now, but she could tell that it was still him behind the title and the finer clothes. Fitz who ran with her in the sea, who had nearly kissed her once, but they had been interrupted by the Honorable Walter Reeves.

Fitz was even more intriguing to her now than he was the first time they met. Which was very bad indeed as he was only in town for a short period. Not enough time for her to indulge girlish fantasies. Besides, she had given those up years earlier.

It didn't matter; Patience had plans for her life now. She would ensure that not another young lady under her tutelage would ever be in the position that she found herself in years ago.

She understood that either Fitz or his friend, the duke, was the gentleman whom the prince sent to retrieve the reticule. But which one could it be?

Patience took in a shaky breath, praying she would survive a single dance. The beginning chords of a waltz began, and his hand circled around her waist, pulling her body closer to his. She couldn't breathe; her pulse beating wildly and her eyes trained on his hard face. He had perfect bone structure, a crooked nose, full lips, and a strong chin. Everything about him called to her even after all this time.

"Thank you for agreeing to dance with me, though I fear you had no choice in the matter." His smooth voice enveloped her in a cloak of comfort as the musicians began to play.

Allowing him to guide her body across the dance floor, she looked up into green eyes the color of fallen leaves, a teasing smile on her lips. "Are you not aware that a lady always has a choice?" she retorted, aware that the world didn't see it that way.

When she was younger, she thought she had no choice, but being treated like nothing had opened her eyes to her choices. And she was choosing to live her life for herself, starting that night, after she delivered the reticule. Patience would begin a new life in Yorkshire, and there would be nothing anyone could do to stop her.

Fitz laughed at her comment, his grip tightening. "I thought you always had a choice," he whispered as he leaned in closer, and if she was paying any sort of attention to her usual admirers, she would've distinctly heard what they were whispering. But she did not; she only heard the hushed quiet voices and assumed they were discussing her and Fitz.

For the first time in nearly five years, Patience did not care.

When he had first arrived in Brighton years earlier, no one cared about a struggling solicitor, but now he was the Earl of Killingworth.

“You’re the earl now, but you still prefer to be addressed as Fitz?” she asked, wondering how it came to be that he was now a part of the aristocracy.

She couldn’t imagine the same man she met five years earlier as an earl. Then he was carefree and charismatic, an easy smile on his face.

His eyes filled with a hint of sadness that did not look as if it should grace such a handsome countenance. “I am the earl now because my cousin John was killed last year in a duel. Three months after his wife and babe perished in childbirth.” She watched him swallow, his eyes glazing over with unshed tears. “I don’t feel like the earl, I’ve always been just Fitz.”

A warmth settled in the pit of her stomach and the small butterflies that always took up space there when she was around him, flapped their wings repeatedly. “I’m sorry about your cousin.”

His hand tightened slightly around her waist, making her acutely aware of his strong muscled body.

She remembered him speaking fondly of his cousin and how he had assisted Fitz with becoming a solicitor.

He blinked for a moment, before he replied. “Thank you for saying that. Most people act as if I should be happy to inherit, but truly it feels selfish to celebrate when an entire family has been lost.”

Patience silently followed his lead on the dance floor, shocked by how easy it was to speak to him again. He was right: it would be cruel to celebrate the loss of his cousin and his family.

“Feel however you like, Just Fitz. If it pleases you, I’ll never call you the Earl of Killingworth,” she teased, enjoying the wide grin on his face.

Her hand was scorching hot in the confines of her gloves. Patience tried to ignore the tingle in her hand where they were

connected, but there was no denying how he affected her.

He chuckled again as he swirled her around the ballroom floor. “I think that would please me very much, Miss Grant. I can only depend on Stonelake to address me as Fitz consistently, and I’m sure that is because he’s known me longer than anyone.”

“Of course, one can always depend on friends.” She smiled a true smile. Something she had not done in ages.

She quite missed it. A rare genuine smile that she did not force upon herself out of obligation. This one came freely because of a man she once knew.

“Have you been well?” he asked as they passed a scowling Mr. Reeves and his band of followers.

Her eyes shifted to Mr. Reeves, who was openly glaring. She chose to ignore him. Patience would no longer give him power over her. “Yes, I have been quite well. Thank you for asking.”

Fitz’s gaze shifted to Walter Reeves who was whispering in the corner like an old matron. “Is Mr. Reeves treating you well? He looks displeased.”

Patience tripped over her skirts. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand. Why would I care about Mr. Reeves and if he looks displeased?” She didn’t understand why Fitz of all people thought her and Mr. Reeves had a connection?

“When your grandmother informed me that there was no chance you would marry me—”

Patience stopped dancing, her mouth suddenly dry as it fell open in disbelief. “She... what?” Her voice carried over the hushed whispers and music.

Her grandmother was a lot of things—ambitious, deceitful, and downright unpleasant at times—but to tell Fitz such an inappropriate thing was simply disgusting.

“Perhaps we should not discuss this here,” Fitz told her, his voice gentle as his gaze peered around the ballroom.

“When would you like to discuss it?” she asked, her temper rising.

She was aware of how easily she allowed her grandmother to manipulate her then, but Patience had no clue what her grandmother was capable of.

“Later.” He squeezed her waist, leading her around the dance floor.

They danced in silence for several moments before he finally spoke. “The night of the ball here, I had intended to propose. However, your grandmother pulled me aside and informed me that you had agreed to enter an arrangement with Reeves—”

“No, I did not,” she blurted, unable to contain herself. “Are you... certain my grandmother told you this?” The question left her slowly as bile rose up in her throat.

It couldn’t be possible; her grandmother could not have known Reeves’ true designs before the garden incident.

The Honorable Walter Reeves’ true intention was to make Patience his mistress.

It was all arranged: a house had been purchased for Patience. Funds would have been set aside for an allowance. Any children from their nefarious union would have received the best of educations. Or so that is what Mr. Reeves told her in the garden.

It was simply disgusting, for a lack of a better term.

Not only was she not a whore, but she did not feel any romantic inclination toward Mr. Reeves at all.

The most hurtful and demeaning part of it was that her grandmother encouraged her to accept him. It was unfathomable and she would never forgive her.

She had lost Fitz, her reputation, and her grandmother in one single night.

“What?” Fitz asked, stumbling slightly.

She didn't answer him. The truth was that she had wanted to marry Fitz. He had only been in town three short months, but in that time, he had become important to her.

The chatter and whispers around them continued to grow, but they ignored it all.

"You've become popular," he said, his head tilting to the small group gathering by Mr. Reeves.

"I don't believe *popular* is the correct term for it." It was liberating to ignore the displeased faces and the whispers.

"Perhaps you'll have to tell me about it." He leaned in closer, the heat of his body warming her in places she had thought long dead.

"I don't think I will. I prefer you to believe that I am this mysterious older woman now." Patience met his gaze, her own traveling from his eyes to his lips. The top one was slightly thinner, but the bottom was plump and made to be kissed.

When they were young, Patience and Fitz had not found the opportunity nor the courage to be improper with one another. Now it was all she could think of. Being in his arms and watching his sensual lips smirk at her in a roguish manner, all had her wanting Fitz to be her first kiss.

Patience had not been kissed in her entire life, no matter what rumors Mr. Reeves told all of Brighton. She was as pure as freshly fallen snow.

"You are a mysterious woman now, if only slightly older," he teased, his gaze traveling from her eyes and back to her lips.

Leaning in, Patience giggled, *giggled*, like she was a girl of eight and ten and not a woman well on the shelf. According to her grandmother, at least. "*Slightly older*; is a nice way of saying spinster."

"You are still the most beautiful, entertaining person I've ever beheld." He captured her with his gaze that had her longing for more than a solitary life as a spinster teacher.

The small part of Patience that still longed for attention perked up at his pretty words. “I must warn you, my lord, that flattery does not affect me. I am no young debutant who would swoon.”

“No, you never were.” He led her around the ballroom floor ignoring every other occupant. “What would make you swoon?”

They weren’t the only two people in the room, but it felt like he was the only one who understood her. It had always been like that with Fitz. Being with him again, a person who did not judge her, was liberating. She had lived the last years of her life being judged by everyone, even those who were supposed to love her most.

Is that what it would be like away from Brighton? Free from her family and the whispers? Liberating?

She looked up into questioning green eyes, wondering who he really was now. From her observation Fitz was still kind and considerate.

No, even though he was now a lord, he still spoke to her like she was an equal. This man, the one who had always treated Patience better than most of the people she’d known her entire life.

She thought about his teasing question for a moment. “Pheasant, perhaps.” Patience tilted her head to the side. “I’m actually known for swooning over a good biscuit.”

His loud buoyant laughter pierced her, making her feel all warm and tingly inside. She couldn’t stop the permanent smile on her face or the constant flutter of her eyelashes.

Bloody hell, she was actually flirting with him like no time had passed between them. Usually, Patience ran away at the first sign of interest from a person of the opposite sex.

He leaned in closer, his breath on her lips. A tremor skipped up her spine at having him so near. Little specks of brown gleamed in his green eyes that added an extra layer of mystery to him.

“Who wouldn’t swoon over a biscuit?” he asked as they passed by a silent Mary-Anne and the duke. “My mother makes the best biscuits in England.” He smiled, dimples forming in his cheeks.

Alas, she had missed those deep indentations in his chiseled jaw.

“Your mother still makes her own biscuits?” She’d never heard of a member of the *ton* actually cooking, not even a new one.

Patience’s own mother never stepped foot in the kitchens, and they had only ever had a small staff. Even now with her father lost at war her mother insisted on keeping the cook, and the scullery maid, one footman, and the two ladies’ maids that had always been employed with the family.

“She does. Even after I inherited the earldom, she still insists on doing most of the cooking herself.” The corners of his eyes crinkled at the mention of his mother. Patience longed to have a better relationship with her own mother.

“I have never cooked anything in my entire life,” she admitted, realizing that perhaps she was slightly lucky.

“I’ve cooked once,” he said as they swirled and twirled to the crescendo of the waltz.

“How was it?” she asked, captivated by him once more.

He was still Just Fitz even with a title. A man who happened to inherit an earldom.

“Burnt,” he said, his lips holding in his laughter as the waltzed ended.

Patience herself could not contain the bubble of glee that escaped her as she looked up into the kind eyes of the man who had once captured her young heart.

CHAPTER SIX

As Fitz escorted Patience off the dance floor, his hands shook, and his stomach felt like a bottomless pit. Empty and dark.

He could admit to himself that he did not want the dance or the evening to end. She was still beautiful, funny, and absolutely captivating. All the things he once required in a wife.

He wanted to be in her company even though he had spent the last five years trying to forget her.

There had been an abundance of other women; he could admit that he was a libertine in trying to forget her.

Before he inherited, most women of the *ton* only wanted one thing from him, and he was happy to oblige them. He never longed for a wife after Patience. Fitz had only longed for stability to help provide for his family so that his father did not have to worry.

Now his father was gone. He died a year before Fitz's cousin perished.

His father, Joseph, was the second son to an earl, and believed he was never going to inherit. The church was his father's first love, a decision that Fitz's grandfather did not agree with.

Fitz's life without his grandfather's support wasn't hard. Saying that he had a difficult life would not be true at all. He had a loving family, a doting mother and faithful father with an annoying little sister, Dinah. It wasn't until his grandfather

died that they reconnected with Fitz's uncle and cousin. A familial connection that became everything to him.

"Thank you for the dance, my lord," Patience said, dipping into a curtsy after he had returned her to her scowling grandmother.

He bowed, his eyes never leaving hers. There was a strange feeling in his chest, a heavy ache he couldn't quite understand.

"The honor was all mine, Miss Grant." As he stood, his gaze went to the reticule still hanging delicately from her wrist.

Soon it would be in his possession, then what? There was no future for him and her again.

Providing for his mother and sister was his future, and to ensure that he must deliver the reticule to Prinny. There was no time for beautiful brown skinned ladies of his past with hypnotizing eyes and high cheekbones.

"If you would excuse me." He nodded curtly before walking away.

The sooner he had the reticule, the sooner he would return to London, far away from Miss Patience Grant.

Reaching the refreshments table, he quickly procured a glass of chilled champagne, needing a moment alone to clear his mind before he was due in the library to meet Patience.

"No greeting for your old friend?" Fitz turned to the Honorable Walter Reeves. He was a tall, thin man with oily blond hair and conniving eyes.

Fitz tried to hide his irritation for the man he had once called friend. But he remembered the night Reeves informed him of his intentions for Patience.

Then a younger Fitz had wanted to fight for her, for them, but he had learned that aristocrats really did not abide by the rules they so adamantly dictated.

"No, I don't believe you deserve a greeting, Reeves," he said, trying not to be overly obtuse. Gazes turned their way

and Fitz refused to give more fuel to the gossip mongers.

“Lord Killingworth, is it? I had word that your cousin perished.” He stood taller, as if Fitz’s cousin being killed in a duel meant nothing. “Now you’re one of us.”

“I’ll never be like you,” he sneered, not believing that he had ever been friends with the scoundrel. “You’re spoiled, conceited and a liar. You told me that Miss Grant and you had an understanding.”

“And we would have if she had listened to her grandmother.” Reeves shrugged his shoulder. “It matters not. With her father declared dead soon, the family will be destitute, and I will be her savior—”

Fitz took a sip of his champagne, needing to do something to prevent him from pummeling his former friend. “You’re delusional. She refused you once, and she will again.”

“Why are you and Stonelake really here?” Fitz ignored the question. Anonymity was key in procuring the reticule and the Honorable Walter Reeves was not to be trusted.

Though most of England knew of the secret marriage between Prinny and Maria Fitzherbert years ago, the entire ordeal was frowned upon and considered illegal. The papers in Miss Grant’s possession in the wrong hands could be used most atrociously. It wouldn’t only ruin the Regent. It would ruin England.

“Our business in Brighton does not concern you,” Fitz said, placing his empty glass down.

“If you came to reconcile with Miss Patience Grant, I’m afraid her grandmother would never allow it. You see she has made me promises,” Reeves said, his gaze wandering over to where Patience stood speaking with Stonelake and her sister.

“Whatever my plans for Miss Grant, they are no concern of yours.” Fitz folded his arms over his chest. Closing his eyes briefly, he tried to hold his tongue, but Reeves was even more pompous now than he was when they were young.

He wanted to tell the Honorable Walter Reeves to go to hell, but maybe using colorful language in a crowded ballroom

was not Fitz's best idea.

Catching Stonelake's eye, the other man raised an eyebrow at Fitz. Shaking his head, he tried to reassure his friend with the slight movement that he was not going to kill Reeves.

"You should be warned against a woman like that. I tried to warn you before. You didn't see that five years ago, and you don't see it now." Reeves chuckled, shaking his head.

Fitz opened and closed his hand, his neck hot under his cravat. He couldn't stop the fury and rage that filled him at the other man's words. He wouldn't stand there and listen to another foul thing out of the Honorable Walter Reeves mouth a moment longer. "Thank you for the warning, Reeves, but I'm no concern of yours and neither is Miss Grant."

"That is where you are wrong, old friend. Soon she will very much be my concern." Reeves released a small rather fake chuckle, shaking his head, not noticing Fitz's rigid posture. "A woman like that is only good for one thing—"

Fitz took a step forward, crowding Reeves' into a corner. "If you say one more ill word against the lady in my presence, sir, I will be forced to lay you out in front of all of these people," Fitz said, jabbing two fingers into Reeves' shoulder. The other man stumbled back, his eyes wide.

"Fitz, a word for a moment," Stonelake called to him before Fitz could make an arse out of himself.

Stepping beside Fitz, Stonelake took him by the arm discreetly, leading him away. "He's not worth the scandal. He never was."

"I know, but he's so damned infuriating," Fitz told his friend, trying to take hold of his anger.

"I did warn you about him at Shrewsbury, but you never did listen. Even as a boy he was a scoundrel," Stonelake said, turning back to where Reeves stood straightening his tailcoat, his cheeks red with embarrassment.

Fitz walked away with his friend, smiling as he heard the whispers increase around him. Finally, they had something to really gossip about.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Patience had spent a great deal of her childhood in the library at Hillcrest Manor. It was filled with wall-to-wall books, high windows, and dark reading corners where she would hide from her family any time they would visit.

Now she was there for an entirely different reason. To gain her independence once and for all.

Seeing Mr. Reeves speak with Fitz was evidence that no matter what, he would continue to spread lies about her.

For a few blissful moments she had ignored everything—the whispers, Mr. Reeves, the fact that her father was still missing, and most of all, her grandmother's penetrating stare.

Her grandmother who had informed Fitz of Mr. Reeves' nefarious plan. Patience still could not fathom that she had actually told him such a thing. Jane Miller was the sole reason why he left her five years ago.

That night, after her family had left the ball, her grandmother had visited her room, insisting on all the details. A mortified Patience had informed her of Reeves' offer as a benefactor, and to her horror, her grandmother had encouraged her to accept.

Encouraged her.

That was when Patience discovered who her grandmother really was. After that night their relationship had changed irreversibly.

Patience had thought the worst thing her grandmother had done was to insist for her to accept Mr. Reeves' offer. She now knew she was wrong. Her grandmother, not only knew, but she'd wanted Patience to become Mr. Reeves' whore. Mrs. Jane Miller separated Patience and Fitz intentionally to ensure it would happen.

Opening the silky reticule that dangled from her wrist, Patience peered in, noticing the neatly folded papers. She hadn't opened the documents, but there was a small part of her that wanted to know what Mrs. Fitzherbert and the prince felt so protective over.

However, Patience respected Mrs. Fitzherbert and her secrets with the prince. Closing the small, jeweled reticule, she exhaled, waiting for either Fitz or the duke to appear. She did not know which gentleman she would be meeting, only that they were the only two people at the ball who did not live in Brighton.

During the cooler months Brighton did not receive an influx of tourists, for it was too cold for sea bathing to be fashionable in October. So fortunately for Patience there weren't many new people to listen to Mr. Reeves' lies about her.

Patience loved the sea and would often spend her time on the rocky shores of Brighton with her father, letting the water wash over her feet. When she was older, she had learned to swim. Sea dipping with Mary-Anne had been the highlight of her summers in Brighton. She hadn't felt that exhilarated in ages.

However, being in Fitz's arms again was an exhilaration that she had missed. It had awakened parts of her body that she had forgotten existed. In his embrace Patience remembered what it was like to be his. There, she did not care about the whispers or the rumors. She had been lied on and accused of being free with her favors when all she did was deny Mr. Reeves.

Now Fitz had returned to her after years of being apart, and she wanted to feel the same exhilaration again. Just one

last time.

Once the reticule was delivered, she would leave Brighton for good and make her own future. Patience was a grown woman, and she no longer would hide who she was to make others feel important.

Turning toward the bookshelf, she scanned the volumes, her fingers trailing over the old worn spines as she waited. Her abdomen felt hollow, her heart pounding wildly. She would soon be alone with a gentleman, and she wanted it to be Fitz. Wanted it more than anything in the world.

Tired of running from her ruin, Patience decided that if Fitz walked through the library door instead of the duke, she would surely do something improper, because she wanted to.

Mrs. Fitzherbert was right: one must rise above their scandal. And she would. She would no longer allow it to dictate who she was. Patience was a woman grown and Fitz was the man she wanted, if only for one night.

A loud creaking sound reverberated through the library, making Patience aware that she was no longer alone. Closing her eyes, she waited to see who the new occupant in the library was. The torture of the last five years would be inconsequential if Fitz had just walked through that door.

Patience rubbed her fingertips over her clavicle, trying to ward off the sudden wave of heat that ran through her body. Her gown was too heavy, too constricting, though her corset wasn't tight at all.

She struggled to breathe, not daring to turn around.

“Miss Grant,” the smooth voice of Fitz, the Earl of Killingworth, warmed her from the inside out.

It was him.

The door closing let out a loud thump throughout the quiet library. A delicious chill ran up her spine as goosebumps formed on her skin. She turned away from the well-loved books on the shelf, facing the only man she had ever wanted. He had reawakened her from the five-year slumber that she had been forced to endure by others.

Fitz stood in front of the large dark wood door, his black hair hanging low on his brow, green eyes traveling up her body. Licking her lips, she watched him stalk toward her like a lion hunting his prey.

Retreating on instinct, her back pressed up against the bookshelf as he stood in front of her. His hard body shadowed over hers, the heat enveloping her limbs like a warm duvet.

A warm green gaze captured hers. He was captivatingly handsome, and it did not matter that she had just shared a waltz with him. After five years, Patience had thought that perhaps she had overestimated his good looks and charm but seeing him again solidified her thoughts.

“Hello, Just Fitz,” she whispered gazing at those lips that were beckoning her. The plump bottom one captured her attention again as it had on the dance floor.

“Hello, Patience.” He said her name and a small portion of her wanted to always hear her name on his lips. It sounded like it belonged to him, and she felt like she did too.

Biting her bottom lip, she inhaled taking in the fresh scent of pine and cedar. A pulsating need swirled through her womanly depths, causing her to gasp in shock. She had never had such a reaction before, and she wanted to experience it. With him. It made her feel like a woman in control of her destiny and not a shunned, disgraced girl. A woman with needs that only one man would be able to meet.

Dipping his head, Fitz eyed the reticule. “I believe you have something for me.” His voice was a deep resonating purr that took up space in the empty crevices of her soul. Her toes curled as she leaned in closer, her mouth watering at the overall maleness of him. Patience wanted to relish in his presence; for one night she wanted to forget everyone and everything and just feel.

Holding up her wrist, she let the reticule dangle, the weight lighter than her usual reticules, which would be loaded with all the necessities a lady needed for the night. “This? What will you give me in return?” she asked, peering up into his hypnotizing eyes, which had captured her from the start.

She had worried that his conversation with his old friend had changed things between them, but it had not.

“I’ll give you whatever it is you require,” he said, caging her in with his arms on either side of her.

Power surged through her body. She shivered at how her confidence crescendoed. Patience placed her left hand against his hard chest, her fingers playing with his lapel. She could feel his heart beating, and it thrilled her to know that she affected him as much as he affected her. “I will give you the reticule... for a kiss.”

Patience inched closer, raising her head slightly. Her gaze darted from his eyes to his lips, her heart pounding wildly in her chest, her mind gloriously blank for once. She didn’t care about anything or anyone else at that moment.

Stretching her neck, Patience stood stagnant as Fitz closed the space between them. His lips hovered over hers, so close yet far away. All she needed was one more inch and she would feel the weight of them.

She would have her first kiss on her terms, with the man of her choosing.

And Patience Grant chose Fitz.

It had always been him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*B*loody hell. He couldn't stop himself even if he tried, and he really wanted to try. He had responsibilities now, people who depended on him. But she was still so damn appealing, with lush brown skin, wide eyes, and a mouth so delicious that he knew he had to taste her. Just one little taste, then he would retrieve the reticule, and his life would go back to some semblance of normal.

One kiss, then they both would forget their past and move on with their futures separately.

Without another thought, he leaned in and slanted his mouth against hers.

Exactly two seconds after his mouth touched hers in a firm but dominating kiss, Fitz knew he had made a monumental mistake. Because there was no way possible, he would be able to venture away from Patience Grant after just one kiss.

Swooping her into his arms, he pressed her smaller body against the mahogany bookshelf. Her sweet lips opened to him, her taste reviving him.

Fitz had been dead inside after his father's death two years earlier, then his cousin's entire family perished, and his cousin not long after. Nothing motivated him anymore except providing for his mother and sister. He was barely living until Patience entered his life once more.

Dainty arms wrapped around his neck, hands pulling at his hair. Fitz groaned. His cock strained in his breeches and his hands fisted the skirts of her gown. Never had he been that

hungry for a woman in his life. Not only was she the single most alluring person he had ever met, but she was funny, intelligent, and kind.

Deepening the kiss, he swirled his tongue against hers, eliciting a moan from Patience. Peppering kisses from her lips down her cheek, to the long column of her smooth neck, Fitz licked and nibbled at her soft skin.

“Blazes. Kiss me again, Fitz,” she cursed, pulling him to her by his hair and crashing their lips together.

This kiss was hungrier, as he let her ravish his mouth like a starving woman. Fitz let out a deep groan as he pressed his hard cock against her lower half. If he wasn't careful, he would take her right in the damned library, and that would not be a smart decision.

Breaking the kiss, he pressed his head against hers, closing his eyes. He needed to control himself. This was not the reason he was in Brighton. The reason was still hanging from her wrist.

Slowly he removed the reticule from her arm as she threw her head back, her breath coming out in short spurts.

“Thank you, Just Fitz,” she said, looking at him as she ran her fingers through her thick mane of hair.

A pang of longing gripped his heart, as he tilted his head to the side. “For what?”

“For my first kiss. I am glad I chose you.” She smiled at him, and in that exact moment he knew.

He had lost all control of his faculties and his purpose to this beautiful woman. Patience Grant with her almond-shaped eyes and hypnotic lips. Lips that had him leaning in for one more kiss. One more and she'd be out of his mind. One more and he could return to London alone.

The creak of the old door, loud gasps and a bark of outrage all interrupted the complete bliss that Fitz was in mere moments ago.

“What is going on in here, Killingworth?” Viscount Hightower’s voice seeped through the haze of Fitz’s mind.

Stilling, Fitz pulled himself away, turning to find Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Grant, and the viscount all staring at him and Patience with varying looks of horror.

His heart plummeted to his abdomen, his senses suddenly returning now that he was free of the spell he was under.

“Dammit,” Patience cursed beside him, capturing his attention.

The curse from her delicate lips shocked him. He had never heard abrasive language from such delicate lips. He struggled to contain the inappropriate chuckle that left him.

Hang it all, this was a disaster, and it was all his fucking fault. Fitz knew what was coming next, and to be honest it did not horrify him like he expected.

This was Patience, after all, the woman who’d stolen every single piece of his heart five years earlier. He first saw her promenading with her family outside of the Royal Pavilion. Construction was nearly complete by then, and all would gather to view the fantastical structure.

After their first introduction, he couldn’t stop thinking of her beauty, wit, and conversation. She was refreshing; everything he had wanted in a wife.

Everything he still wanted in a wife. His heart had decided his fate from the moment he saw her again. It just took his mind longer to agree.

In front of him, Mrs. Miller forcefully tapped her cane against the upholstered floor. The sound was louder than one could imagine on carpet. “You fool of a girl, behaving like some common doxy!” Mrs. Miller shouted at her granddaughter, shocking the viscount who gasped beside her.

Fitz took two steps toward the older woman, but Patience stopped him. Her delicate hand rested on his arm. “How dare you speak to your own granddaughter in such a way?” he asked, trying to control his temper.

He understood Mrs. Miller was a vile, deceitful woman, but he had hoped her granddaughter would be spared her wrath.

He was wrong.



HER GRANDMOTHER HELD up her hand, pointing it at Patience. “She’s made a fool out of this family for the last time. Are we supposed to rejoice that she is now connected to an earl without a farthing to his name?”

Patience closed her eyes, trying to contain her indignation, but really she was beyond angry. She had done everything the older woman had ever asked, but still it was not enough.

It never would be enough for her grandmother. She knew that now, more than ever. Unwanted tears pooled in Patience eyes. She wanted to wipe them away, but she wouldn’t give her grandmother the satisfaction.

Patience startled as Fitz’s hand slipped into hers, giving her strength to continue.

“I don’t care what you do, Grandmother.” Patience took a deep inhale of breath, drawing strength from the man beside her. “I will no longer be used as a pawn in your games. Now if you all will excuse me, I suddenly feel ill.”

“Are we to ignore what we saw with our very own eyes? I demand that you marry her at once!” her mother shouted in outrage. “This will surely ruin our family and any semblance of a decent match for your sister.”

Her sister.

Not Patience.

Her mother did not care what happened to her eldest, ruined daughter. It was fine because for the first time in her life, Patience would choose herself over her family.

Her godfather cleared his throat several times, his cheeks speckled red with embarrassment, as he shuffled from foot to

foot.

“You do plan to make this right, don’t you, Killingworth?” the viscount asked Fitz, like it was his decision and not Patience’s.

Was she not to have an opinion on whom she was to marry?

It wasn’t that Patience did not want to marry Fitz. Even after five years, she could not deny she still had feelings for him. She just would not take away his choices in the matter, or her own.

Finally, this was her chance to teach and eventually open her own school. Patience would be her own woman and provide for herself. After years of doing what her family expected of her, Patience was finally going to be her own person.

“I will marry her if she will accept me. On my honor.” Patience turned to Fitz, shocked by his statement.

There was a small part of her that wanted his words to be honest, but she had believed him once before. Then he had left without speaking to her, believing the lies of her grandmother and Mr. Reeves.

Her godfather nodded repeatedly, dabbing at his bald head with a handkerchief. “Good. Then I think we all should return to the ball—”

“The word of a scandalized lord means nothing. Are we to gloat that she’s to marry someone like him, whose family scandal and debts are known to all?” her grandmother huffed out, sneering from Patience to Fitz.

Patience stepped in front of her grandmother; her head held high. “I have to take your abuse because I’m your granddaughter, but don’t you dare speak to Fitz in such a manner.”

“You fool of a girl!” her grandmother snapped. “You ruined everything five years ago by refusing Mr. Reeves, but I’m sure he will accept you now. All you have to do is agree to his previous offer,” she spat at Patience.

Patience laughed, not believing the other woman had the audacity to champion Mr. Reeves after all these years.

“What offer? Mother, what are you talking about?” her mother asked, looking from Patience to her grandmother.

Both her mother and Hightower had equal expressions of shock on their faces at her grandmother’s admission.

Patience stared at her mother, searching for the truth, and finding it in brown eyes that matched her own. “Mr. Reeves wanted me to be his mistress,” she said, her voice shaking slightly. “He made it clear that night we were discovered in the garden, but I refused him.”

Beside her, Fitz gave her hand a light squeeze, and it was everything she needed in that moment.

“Why did you not tell me?” her mother asked, hurt and betrayal lacing her voice.

“You all believed his lies over my word. What else could I have said? I informed Grandmother of his plans, and she encouraged me to accept his offer.” Patience turned to her grandmother, anger and hurt weighing on her shoulders. “What did he offer you?”

Her grandmother clearly had something to gain; that was the only explanation of her behavior then and now.

“I was to be your companion, see to your home. Care for your children so that he and you could live freely, but you had to ruin it all.” Her grandmother gazed at her with hatred in her eyes. “You went and fell in love with a poor solicitor.” She flung her cane in the air toward Fitz like a weapon.

“I’m no man’s whore! How dare you?” Patience asked, looking at her grandmother in horror.

“How dare I?” Her grandmother pointed to herself. “Was I to continue living this mediocre life because my daughter married a poor soldier? No you were to change it all. But then *he* came, and I knew I had to do something.”

“You wanted me out of the way, so that Miss Grant would accept Reeves’ offer.” Fitz’s arm went around Patience’s waist,

securing her to him. “But her strength and morals surpassed both you and Reeves’. You should be ashamed of yourself, madam.”

Her grandmother held her head high, ignoring Fitz’s comment. “I am not, and I have another granddaughter—”

“You do not!” her mother shouted, stepping in front of Patience and her grandmother. “I want you gone. I want you out of my house and away from my family.”

Patience stared at her mother, wondering where the sudden burst of strength had come from.

“Doreatha be serious. I’m your mother.” Her grandmother spat the words, but the tremble in her voice revealed her fear.

“No, I’m a mother. You are nothing but a manipulator, and I could not see it... until n-now.” Her mother’s voice broke as she looked at Patience. “I’m sorry.”

For a moment, Patience could not find her voice. It was everything she wanted—for her family to believe that what happened five years earlier was not her fault.

“Doreatha! Be reasonable, I needed funds! I’m not meant for this life! You married a bastard son of a plantation owner who barely inherited a farthing,” her grandmother screeched, becoming hysterical.

Patience had heard enough of her vile nonsense. “If you want Reeves’ funds so badly, you be his whore!” Patience released Fitz’s hand, rushing past her grandmother and out of the library.

“Patience!” her mother called after her.

“I need air, Mother. I can no longer stay in the same room with her.” She looked over at her grandmother, seeing the small, weak woman she really was.

Patience would never be like her. Alone and desperate.

As Patience walked out of the library, Fitz caught her, taking her by the hand, and suddenly she knew that her grandmother’s fate would not be hers.

Perhaps she did not have to be alone after all.

CHAPTER NINE

Fitz followed Patience out of the library, taking her hand in his. He couldn't comprehend the level of deceitfulness Mrs. Miller had used against her own granddaughter. The nerve of that woman behaving in such a way.

He was disgusted and angered that she would willingly assist Reeves in making Patience his whore. Fitz could not believe she preferred that future for her granddaughter over the one that Fitz had willingly offered five years earlier.

Patience stopped right outside a small alcove away from the ballroom. "Fitz," she said, "the thought of staying in the same home as Grandmother, makes me ill."

Hope filled his chest as he pulled her body to his. Fitz didn't care who saw them together. It didn't matter anymore if being seen with him in an intimate position would ruin her. She was his now and forever, and could never be ruined in his esteem.

"Come with me tonight," he said, trying to hide the desperation in his voice. "We'll return to London in the morning."

"I won't marry you because you think it's your duty to save me from ruin." She chuckled, the moonlight casting a glow on her smooth skin. "I was already ruined, so you're free Fitz." She removed her hand from his, leaving him suddenly feeling cold and alone.

“No.” He wrapped his free hand around her waist, pulling her closer to him. They needed to be strong together if they were to survive this time. “I don’t want to be free. Not from you, not now or ever again.” The words burned through him. He needed her to know exactly how he’d always felt.

Nothing had changed for him. Fitz had known it as a young solicitor of twenty-seven years, and he knew it now as a man well into his thirties. Patience Grant was meant to be his wife.

His lips descended on hers, her pliable body molding to his. This is what he had imagined all those years ago, and he would have it. If he had to beg her every day for the rest of his life to be his, he would.

She placed a small hand on his chest, her breathing coming out in pants. “I can’t think when you kiss me.”

“Good.” He kissed her again, slow and steady, his entire body alive. Her lips were soft and pliant; the taste of champagne still lingered on her tongue. Giving her one last gentle peck, Fitz leaned back, staring into her eyes. “I’ll see you home. We leave tomorrow for London.”

“We both know this is what you really came for, Fitz.” She took the reticule out of his hand, opening it and pulling out the neatly folded papers.

Holding them out, Patience waited for him to take them.

He didn’t. Fitz would give up everything for another opportunity for her to be his wife. To hell with the earldom and the debts, none of it mattered anymore.

“Yes. I admit that at first I came for the papers. It was the only way that Prinny would assist with my family’s debt to the Crown.” Stepping up to her, Fitz cradled her face as he stared into the most beautiful brown eyes he had ever seen. “Then I saw you again, and it was as if no time had passed between us.”

“Don’t. Please don’t. “We’re different people now, Fitz. I don’t know this version of you, and you don’t know me anymore,” she said, sadness on her face.

He slipped his hand around her waist, pulling her to him. “Then allow me to spend the rest of my life getting to know this version of you.”

He was aware that they could be discovered at any moment, but she needed to know how he felt.

“Be reasonable. I’m no longer that doe-eyed girl who believed she would truly find a love match.” She leaned forward, resting her head against his shoulder.

His arms tightened around her, needing her closer. Fitz wouldn’t allow her to go another moment without knowing how he felt then, and now. “You did find a love match,” he said honestly.

Her eyes widened slightly as she shook her head side to side. “Fitz,” she whispered his name like a secret.

He basked in being with Patience again, wanting that moment in time to last for the rest of his life. Tilting her head back so that he could capture her mouth, his lips found hers insistent and demanding. His tongue explored and dominated, needing to convey the gravity of the situation to her.

Fitz couldn’t live five more years without her... not again. His hand traveled over her bare arms. His fingers shook slightly, hope swelling in his chest and spreading throughout his body.

His kisses became frantic, one of his hands tightening around the back of her neck, stilling her movements. Claiming her mouth so forcefully he was sure her lips would be swollen from his kisses.

Tearing her mouth from his, her head fell forward and he kissed the top of her wild hair. “I can’t go to London with you. I—”

“Marry me,” he said, squeezing her to him.

It was the one thing he had wanted for himself since the day he first met her five years earlier. Seeing her again had reawakened the love he had always had for her.

Patience shook her head, taking several steps back, releasing herself from Fitz's hold. The papers fell out of her hand, falling open to the floor to reveal blank pages.

Fitz stared, vaguely aware of the loud gasp that Patience released. Bending slowly, he picked up the blank parchments, turning them over in his hands.

Dear God. This could not be happening to him.

He raised his head to stare at Patience. Five years ago she broke his heart. Did she do it again?

“Did you know?” he asked, wanting to hear the truth from her own lips.

Patience shook her head, taking the papers from his hand. “No, no, this cannot be,” she cried out in distress, her bottom lip trembling, her eyes watering. “What am I going to do? This was my only chance to leave Brighton.”

Fitz ignored her comment. Once they had the papers, he would marry her.

“Patience.” He bent down, taking her by the hands. They needed to figure out what happened to the originals. “Are you positive you had the papers in your possession?” he asked, looking in her eyes.

“No, I never opened them fully. When Cecelia handed me the reticule. I simply checked that the papers were inside, but I did not read them—”

“Who the bloody hell is Cecelia?” he demanded. It was unfathomable to think that she hadn't looked inside, but he could admit that he too had been too busy with other things.

“Mrs. Fitzherbert's lady's maid. Oh God,” Patience said, holding her hand to her mouth.

Fitz felt sick, his head light. Retrieving those papers had been his sole purpose, but now, he had a new purpose.

“What is it?” he asked, leading her away from their hiding place.

He couldn't think. Fitz needed to do something, anything. Those papers were the key to absolving his cousin's debts. Debts he could not pay, especially with a mother, a sister, and a wife to care for.

"Mrs. Fitzherbert wasn't feeling well and asked me to go retrieve the reticule, but Cecelia was in her study when I arrived. I didn't think anything was untoward, but something did not feel right." Patience rushed away, leaving him standing alone.

Hastily he followed her, catching her in a few short steps. "Patience, wait. We need to go find this maid and demand she gives us the papers. Those papers contain proof that Prinny and Maria Fitzherbert were really married. Anyone would pay an astronomical amount for that information."

He couldn't think. Moments ago all he wanted was to marry Patience, and now he had to go gallivanting around Brighton in search of a maid. She could be anywhere.

"We must go to Mrs. Fitzherbert's now." Patience continued down the long hall, reaching Hightower's butler, Banks, who looked at them in alarm.

"I'm sorry, Lord Killingworth," Banks said, bobbing up and down nervously. "There has been an issue with the carriages—"

Not quite understanding what he was possibly speaking of, Fitz couldn't help but to inquire. "What issue?" he asked, holding back his irritation.

"Mr. Reeves' coachman has created a bit of a commotion trying to get it out of the queue. I'm afraid several of the carriages have been unable to move, horses are entangled..." The man huffed out like it was the Battle of Waterloo outside, and not a queue of carriages waiting on a ball to end. "Let me check on the status and see if you are able to depart."

"Thank you, Banks," Fitz said to the much shorter, older man with thinning white hair.

Banks nodded before leaving them alone.

“Once we have the papers, we’ll return them to Prinny, and then we can marry.” Fitz watched her reaction to his words, holding his breath.

This delay would not hinder his plans. They were meant to be together again. No matter what obstacles stood in their way, they could face them.

“I will help you find the papers, tonight,” she whispered, avoiding his gaze.

Help him find the papers and nothing else. The single remark took away any hope he had that she would become his wife after they found the maid. Then again, he had not properly asked her. Fitz would do so as soon as they were alone and did not have to worry about the papers in the wrong hands.

He no longer cared about the funds Prinny had promised him. They could survive as long as they did not have his cousin’s suffocating debt lingering over them. His only wish was that Patience would agree to be his wife.

But perhaps five years was too great a distance for them to reconcile, no matter how wronged they had been by others.

A door opened, and a sudden girlish giggle caught their attention. Down the hall, Patience’s sister Mary-Anne was leaving a room with one of Hightower’s footmen of all people.

“Mary-Anne!” Patience called to her sister before rushing toward her and the footman who both were slightly disheveled.

“P-patience, what are you doing out here?” her sister asked, tucking a wayward piece of hair back in place.

“Dash it!” Patience yelled, looking from her sister to the footman. “The both of you need to settle your situation out. If you want to marry each other then for God’s sake, get married, but do not sneak around for anyone to catch you.”

Fitz’s head swiveled between the footman and Miss Mary-Anne. To say he was shocked would be an understatement. “Do you love her?” Fitz asked the tall lanky man with dark skin and thick hair cut short.

“More than anything in the world.” The words were announced with a deep longing conviction.

“Oh, Philip! I love you too.” Mary-Anne looked up at the man with love and devotion in her eyes and for a moment Fitz felt a brief stab of jealousy.

Beside him, Patience’s anger depleted as she looked at the young couple. “Then stop sneaking around before you’re caught. Tell my mother you want to be married, tomorrow.”

“Philip, what are you doing?” Viscount Hightower’s butler called out as he entered the foyer.

“I have to go. I’ll come to your house and speak to your mother tomorrow,” Philip said, squeezing Miss Mary-Anne’s hand, ignoring the old butler who was glaring openly at the young man.

“What about Grandmother?” Mary-Anne looked at her sister, her eyes filled with fear. “She is determined to see me marry well.”

Fitz understood now that Mrs. Miller had been pressuring her younger granddaughter as well. Did the woman’s ambition ever end?

“After tonight, Grandmother will no longer be a problem for any of us,” Patience told her confidently as she reached out to squeeze her sister’s shoulder. “Live your life, Mary-Anne. Be happy and don’t ever let anyone stop you.”

Fitz swallowed the lump in his throat, her words taking up space in the empty places of his heart. He wanted to be happy with Patience. It was something he had envisioned long ago—a home, children, and years of happiness—and it had all been ruined by her grandmother and Reeves.

“Will you do the same?” Mary-Anne asked Patience.

Patience did not answer as the two sisters stared at each other.

It was a question Fitz wanted the answer to more than he wanted air. He could tell she was still holding something back from him, but he did not have any idea what it could be.

“Goodnight, Mary-Anne.” Patience turned to Fitz. “Shall we go?” Her eyes were filled with a sadness he couldn’t understand.

“Of course.” He offered her his arm.

It felt right having her by his side. Her warmth was a constant comfort to him. They reached the butler who still stared curiously at Philip and Mary-Anne.

“The duke’s carriage is ready, but Mr. Reeves’ carriage is still unable to move. His coachman foolishly tried to maneuver around the other carriages and has completely entwined Mr. Reeves’ horses with another carriage.” Banks shook his head repeatedly, the gravity of the situation upsetting him.

“How horrid, Banks,” Patience said with a small quirk to her lips.

“Yes, I do hope they are able to free his carriage soon.” Fitz tried to hold back his laugh, happy that the Honorable Walter Reeves would not get his way.

Banks opened the door for them. Fitz escorted Patience out into the cool night air where Stonelake’s carriage was waiting for them. The queue of carriages was in utter disarray, the horses all agitated, jumping up and down. Coachmen tried to pull them apart and calm them, but there was no end to the chaos in front of them. Reeves’ carriage was in the center of it all, completely turned around in the wrong direction.

“Fortunately, the duke’s carriage has been spared since you all arrived earlier.” Banks stood beside Fitz, pointing to where Stonelake’s carriage sat out of the entanglement of horses and carriages.

Beside Fitz, Patience shivered in the cool night air, and he suddenly realized that she did not have a shawl or a cape. Making quick work of removing his tailcoat, he placed it around her thin shoulders.

She turned to him in shock, eyes round in surprise. “Thank you, Fitz,” she whispered, as he placed his hand on her lower back, escorting her to Stonelake’s carriage that sat slightly away from the others.

They walked past the long queue of carriages. Coachmen were shouting out orders to one another, as footmen tried to hold the horses. Reeves stood in the center of it all, cursing at his coachman.

“Dear God, man! Do something. I have to leave here this instant!” Reeves shouted, his head slashing toward where Fitz and Patience were walking.

They hadn’t stopped to view the chaos; Fitz didn’t want to have Patience linger in the cool night air for long.

Beside him, Patience let out a giggle. He turned to her knowing exactly what she found amusing. “I must say that is a little satisfying to see,” she said, tilting her head toward Reeves.

“Finally got your whore, I see,” Reeves called out to Fitz, the words slapping against his face like the cold wind.

He didn’t stop or care to think when he sprinted over to where his former friend stood in the center of horses and men. His fist connected to the Honorable Walter Reeves’ jaw. Fitz didn’t give a damn if he was making a scene or that he was now a member of the peerage. All he cared about was that this vile blackguard had offended the woman he loved.

Fitz loved her, five years ago and now, and he knew no matter what their future held, he would always love her.

His fist made contact with Reeves’ smug face, not once, not twice, but three times. Voices screamed around him as two men pulled and shouted at Fitz to stop.

“Sir! Sir!”

“Unhand him, man!”

“Fitz! Fitz, stop! Stop!” Through his rage filled haze he heard Patience’s sweet mellifluous voice, beckoning him back from madness.

He released his hold on his former friend, sneering down at the wastrel that he was. “If you ever call her that again, I will end your life. Do you understand me?” he asked, pointing at Reeves.

“No, please! Please don’t hurt him!” a shrill frantic voice called out, rushing over to stand between Fitz and Reeves.

“Cecelia, what the bloody hell are you doing here?” Patience asked, marching up to the small round woman in front of him.

Fitz stared from her to Reeves, suddenly suspecting that he had everything to do with the missing papers.

CHAPTER TEN

Cecelia stood with wide eyes filled with terror, as she looked from Fitz to Mr. Reeves, who was rising off the ground with a bloody nose.

For Patience, there was something satisfying in seeing the man who had tormented her for years, hurt and bleeding in front of the man she loved.

Love.

She loved Fitz, of that she was absolutely certain. Could Patience give up her hopes and dreams for him?

“What are you doing, Cecelia!” Mr. Reeves railed at the maid who was frozen in place. “I told you to wait for me at Fitzherbert’s.” He took a step toward Cecelia but was stopped by Fitz.

“I can’t do it. Mrs. Fitzherbert was so ill, after I gave her the Antimony.” Cecelia began crying, her body quaking. “She has been kind to me and so have you, Miss. Grant,” she said, shaking her head.

“You, poisoned Mrs. Fitzherbert? Patience asked in shock.

“I-I didn’t know. Walter said that it would only make her ill,” Cecelia stuttered, as she continued to cry.

“Be quiet!” Mr. Reeves shouted, trying to walk past Fitz but was stopped.

“Don’t you dare move, or I’ll knock you down again,” Fitz threatened, his hand flat on the other man’s chest.

Patience couldn't believe that Mr. Reeves was connected to Cecelia, and suddenly she knew why. "What can't you do, Cecelia?" Patience asked gently. She didn't want to frighten the woman, but she needed those papers.

She had no idea what she was going to do once she had them back in her possession. There was a part of her that would always want Fitz, but she also wanted to educate other women like her.

Could she have both, a husband and a school of her own?

"Walter promised that he'd marry me once the papers were sold," Cecelia said tears suddenly falling down her face, a hand on her abdomen.

Patience gasped in horror, wanting to punch Mr. Reeves herself. He had attempted to do the same thing with her five years earlier, but unlike Cecelia, Patience had refused him. So he preyed on Cecelia and used her to get the papers.

"Reeves is a liar and a thief. Hand over the papers and you have my word we will not mention this to either Mrs. Fitzherbert or the Regent," Fitz assured her. "But you must leave her employ. She could've been gravely ill from the poison."

Patience stepped forward, putting her hand on Cecelia's shoulder. A small crowd was gathering, whispering around them. She ignored them all, looking into the watery eyes of the woman she thought was a friend. "Give me the papers, and I promise no harm will come to you or your child."

Cecelia removed the papers from inside her cape, passing them to Patience. Once they were in her hands, Patience sighed in relief.

She could leave Brighton and Fitz could pay off his debts. Her body deflated as he safely tucked the papers into the reticule around her wrist.

"No, those papers belong to me!" Mr. Reeves hit his chest trying to push past Fitz. "I've done nothing but endured this simpleton for months. I was never going to marry you," he spat at Cecelia causing the woman to cry.

“What about our child?” Cecelia asked her tears now falling freely.

Mr. Reeves laughed at the woman’s question as if she had made a jest. “As if I would care about a bastard with a ma—”

Patience let out a loud yelp of surprise as Fitz hit Mr. Reeves again. He fell to the ground unceremoniously. His coachman tried to help him up.

Fitz approached Patience and Cecelia, walking them past the growing crowd. “We will escort you to Mrs. Fitzherbert’s. I suggest you do not inform her of the poison.”

Cecelia clung to Patience, crying hysterically. Patience’s heart went out to the other woman, and she could only imagine how alone she felt in that moment. It could’ve been her, it *would* have been her if she had listened to her grandmother.

“We will not inform Mrs. Fitzherbert of the poisoning, but you must agree to leave Cecelia.” Patience did not want the other woman to be punished for believing Mr. Reeves’ lies.

Cecelia had endured enough, and she should be spared, so that she could raise her child without the cloud of Mr. Reeves surrounding her.

A chill ran down her spine as they approached the duke’s carriage, ignoring everyone. Once they were safely ensconced inside, Patience sagged in relief. They had the papers, she could leave tomorrow and go to Yorkshire, never to see Fitz again.

She knew quite well what her life was without Fitz. But now she wanted to know what it would be like with him by her side.



ONCE CECELIA WAS SAFELY ENSCONCED in Mrs. Fitzherbert’s butler’s care, Fitz and Patience finally relaxed from the ordeals of the evening. As the carriage pulled away from Stein House, suddenly Fitz did not know what to do with himself. His leg bounced up and down, as he sat staring at the woman he loved.

She was breathtaking, with the moonlight casting its glow on her through the small carriage window.

He should have rejoiced in his freedom and in having the papers safely in his possession at last, but he could not find it in himself to celebrate.

“I’m glad it’s finally over,” she said, running her hands through her hair.

Fitz moved to sit beside her, wanting her close if this was to be the last time they were together. “How are you doing? I know learning about your grandmother’s involvement wasn’t easy, but to see how Reeves treated Cecelia and her unborn child. I can’t imagine how you must be feeling.”

Taking her gloved hand in his, Fitz squeezed, pulling her closer so that she was cradled in his arms.

“I am sad for Cecelia and I want to help her and her child, but I never was in fear of being in her position,” she said looking at him with deep brown eyes. “I never felt an inkling of attraction toward Mr. Reeves. My grandmother convinced me that you felt nothing for me. I went into the garden that night, missing you more than I ever imagined missing anyone.”

Fitz listened, wanting to know everything that happened five years earlier. He wished that he had stayed and fought for them. But he had been young and insecure.

“When Mr. Reeves found me in the gardens, I believed he was offering marriage, and I declined him. It was then he informed me that he would never marry a girl like me.” She swallowed; her eyes boring into Fitz’s.

“Like you?” he asked, not understanding. To him she was perfect and any man would want her for a bride.

“A woman of African descent.” She shook her head, closing her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, fire gleamed. “He followed me into the garden and made it perfectly clear that he wanted me to be his mistress. I refused him.”

Fury took over Fitz and he wanted nothing more than to go and punch Reeves once more. “If I ever see him again, I’ll kill him.”

“No, you will not. He’s no longer in our lives.” She pressed her forehead against his, looking into his eyes. “I was leaving Brighton, Fitz. Mrs. Fitzherbert had arranged a position for me at a girl’s school in Yorkshire.”

The little hope that he had sank. He couldn’t lose her again, not after tonight. Fitz would go wherever she wanted him. There was no possible way he could walk away from her, from them.

From this all-encompassing love he felt five years ago... the love he still felt.

“Was?” He couldn’t help but notice the past tense of her sentence.

Years ago, when he left Brighton in the middle of night with nothing but a broken heart, he had thought a future with Patience impossible, but now with her in his arms, it felt inevitable.

He wanted to fall to his knees and beg her to stay with him this time. Being back with her again had been the best hours of his life, and in truth he did not want it to end.

Patience pressed her hand against his chest. “I still want to teach and open my own school for girls. That will never change. Can you accept a working wife?” she asked him, leaning in, her sweet breath cascading over his face.

Dear God, was he dreaming?

“It will be my honor to have a wife who works.” He leaned in kissing the tip of her nose. “You are most fortunate as I have an entire estate with acres of land just waiting for a school to be built.”

“What?” She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body closer to his. “Truly, Fitz? You would allow me to build my school on your estate?”

“I will allow you anything as long as I can have you forever,” he said, unable to contain the complete joy coursing through his veins. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my countess?”

She raised her head in thought, before she looked at him, a breathtaking smile on her face.

“Yes,” she answered simply before she pressed her lips to his.

Ravishing her mouth, he pulled her onto his lap, his happiness overflowing. After everything they had been through, she was finally going to be his wife.

The carriage came to a stop in front of the residence where he was staying with Stonelake, a crème-colored town house.

She was going to be his wife. Fitz wouldn't walk away this time. He couldn't, not now, not ever again.

“Let me prove to you that I still love you.” He deepened the kiss, swirling, tasting, savoring every moment of it. As he broke away, his hand moved to her chin, stroking gently as he peered into deep brown eyes, that reminded him of home. “Prove that I've never stopped loving you.”

“I never stopped loving you either. I thought I had but seeing you again, and being with you awakened parts of me I thought died five years ago.” She tightened her arms around his neck, taking his mouth in a searing kiss, again.

His cock jerked in his breeches, and he wanted nothing more but to take her right then and there.

“Are you sure?” he whispered, waiting with bated breath.

He would wait for her to be his wife for another five years if that was what she wanted.

She opened her eyes, capturing him in her lust-filled gaze. Brown eyes so dark they were nearly black met his, and it was then that Fitz knew time meant nothing, that she would always be the one for him.

A small delicate glove-covered hand rested on the unfashionable growth of whiskers on his cheek. “Yes, I'm

sure, Fitz. I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

Triumph soared through his body, and suddenly he felt that he could do anything, like run back to London, shouting that she was his again.

"Good." He kissed her, greedily wanting to take her up to his rooms so that he could ravish her properly.

He wanted her to know that from the moment they met five years ago she had swept him away completely, stealing his heart and soul. Ruining him forever.

Removing her from his lap, he gave her a moment to repair herself before he draped his tailcoat around her shoulders.

Holding out his hand, he waited, with ragged breath, and then she placed her hand in his sealing their fates forever.

Opening the door, Fitz led her out of the carriage and up the small walkway. The butler, Reynolds, opened the door, looking momentarily stunned.

"G-good evening, sir, Madam." Wide eyes like an owl traveled from Fitz to Patience and back again.

"Good evening, Reynolds," Fitz replied not allowing the butler to say another word. "Please see we're not disturbed."

Leading Patience up the stairs, he fought with himself not to pick her up and carry her the remainder of the way. He was too eager, and it was becoming increasingly hard to quell his excitement.

"I believe we have shocked the butler," Patience said as they walked down the dark corridor of the old home, the mounted candelabras lighting their way.

He stopped in front of the chamber that he had claimed for himself, pulling her inside hastily. His lips claimed hers, his body pressing hers firmly against the door. Dammit, he'd never tire of kissing her.

Fitz's body vibrated with the weight of his emotions. Love soared through him. He had never stopped loving Patience. He had tried to get her out of his mind, but he never did. It didn't

matter what her grandmother or Reeves told him; he had always felt incomplete.

Trailing his lips to her soft cheekbones, then to the slope of her neck. Fitz teased and tasted her skin with his tongue. “Turn around,” he whispered the command, taking a step back.

Patience looked up into his eyes, her breath coming out in heavy pants, her own eyes wide. Slowly, she turned around, presenting her back to him.

His fingers shook as he began unlacing her gown. Fitz could hear the loud thumping of his heart in his chest. Each pull of the thin green ribbon loosened her gown, urging Fitz to move faster. His greedy eyes wanted to see her. His desperate hands wanted to touch every inch of her.

When she was free of the offending garment, Patience slowly turned around to face Fitz. Her hands clutched her chest as she held the gown in place.

They stood staring at each other for a few moments, no sound in the room but their labored breathing.

She released her hold on the gown, allowing it to fall to her feet just as Fitz wanted to do every day for the rest of his life.

This was everything he had ever dreamed, and now it was happening. He would never be able to part from her ever again, not now, after finally finding her again.

Her breasts were plump, overflowing out of her stays. Fitz couldn't take his hungry eyes off the lush globes, his lips falling open. He wanted nothing more than to taste her, to spend the entire night ravishing and worshiping her body.

Undoing her stays, he released each button, freeing her. Once she was free of her undergarments, Patience stood waiting for him, wearing nothing but her chemise and stockings.

Fitz began unbuttoning his waistcoat, freeing himself of society's constraints. Excitement swept through him, his hands shaking as he pulled his shirt over his head, throwing it to the floor.

Her fingers teased the thick hairs on his chest, his wrapping around her thin waist.

Unlacing her chemise, he pulled the thin material down her body, revealing smooth brown skin. Bending, his lips trailed down her long neck to the swell of her breast as the chemise fell to her feet with the remainder of her clothing.

Fitz peered at the woman who would soon be his wife, taking in her toned abdomen, full breasts, and round hips. His mouth captured a dark nipple in his mouth, sucking and swirling.

“Oh Fitz,” she cried out, her body arching as he clung to her, ensuring she didn’t fall.

Releasing her, Fitz stood, taking her in his arms. He lifted her off the ground, his mouth capturing hers hungrily. Carrying her to the bed, he laid her down gently, careful not to place his full weight on her smaller body.

Her hands trailed down his back, cupping his buttocks.

“You minx,” he groaned, forcing himself away from her.

He could no longer wait; he had to be inside of her.

Standing at the side of the bed, Fitz removed his boots and breeches. His member was hard, straining against his abdomen.

Her eyes roamed his body greedily, and he couldn’t help the smug quirk of his lips.

“Are you going to stand there all bloody night, or are you going to make me yours?” she asked him, arranging herself against the pillows.

Joining her on the bed, he pulled her toward him, his mouth hovering over hers. “I love you, Patience Grant. I never stopped loving you, and I never will. Please do me the honor of becoming my wife,” he asked, overcome with emotion.

“Yes. I love you too, now and always, Just Fitz. Even if your timing is a little strange,” she teased him, pressing her lips to his.

He kissed her so happy in that moment. Lining his hard cock against her wet sex, his body quivering in need, he thrust gently. Fitz nudged at her sex, feeling the hot, wet sheath, grip him.

A groan left his body as he moved in and out, her hands roaming over his body. Fitz lifted one of her legs, needing to go deeper.

“Fitz! Dammit!” she cursed, as he increased his speed.

“The things your mouth does to me. Every time you curse, it drives me insane.” He kissed her, hands roaming her body, tweaking a pert nipple with his fingers.

His body began vibrating, the precipice of euphoria out of his reach. Sitting up, Fitz increased his speed. His hand went to the dark curls of her sex, playing with her nub of pleasure.

“Yes!” she cried out.

Fitz could feel his own orgasm building, but he wouldn't reach completion before her. She reached for him, pulling him down on top of her.

“I'll crush you.” He tried to protest, but she pulled him down to her.

“I don't bloody care.” She took his lips in a controlling kiss, her hands pulling at his head.

Good Lord, did he love this woman.

“Fitz!” she cried out his name, as her body shook, her hips thrusting to meet his.

He followed her, as he would always do. Hope of a different kind filled him, and he couldn't help but wish one day she would be round with his child.

There would be plenty of time for that. First, Fitz needed to build his wife a school.

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her slowly, enjoying the feel of her naked body against his.

“You're mine now. I will never allow anything or anyone to ever come between us again,” he whispered against her lips.

Her hand trailed down his abdomen, awakening his hunger again. “Good, because I’m yours forever.”

“Forever.”

EPILOGUE

Three Years later

Patience stood at the head of the small classroom, looking at the ten young women who were astutely concentrating on the ten questions on the chalkboard. They were in one of two newly constructed buildings at Worthington Abbey, Fitz's ancestral home.

When her husband said he would build her a school, Patience had believed him, but she was not expecting for him to do so with the funds he received from the Prince Regent. After the reticule was safely in the prince's hands, he had gifted Fitz a rare Rembrandt, which her husband then sold for the sum of sixty thousand pounds. A great deal more than what the Regent promised.

She smiled as she looked down at the pocket watch attached to her modest day dress. "Time, ladies," she called out, being met with a chorus of groans and gripes.

After teaching for over two years, she was accustomed to the young ladies' complaints about anything really.

The Fitzwilliam's School for Girls had twenty students, fifteen of whom lived in a dormitory next to the school on the northern part of the estate.

They had decided to build the school and dormitory away from Worthington Abbey. It wasn't a great distance, but it was important for Patience to separate her work and home life. Although she enjoyed teaching, she also enjoyed time with her family.

“Lady Killingworth, will you and the earl go to London for the season?” one of the girls, Agatha, asked excitedly.

“I believe we are,” Patience replied, still not believing she was an actual countess and a member of the *ton*.

“You must tell us everything when you return!” another girl, Tabetha, added.

“I will indeed. Now come. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis have made you all a small feast for the end of term.” Patience smiled at them, watching as they placed their parchment papers on her desk.

Once every paper was turned in, Patience packed them up in her satchel, wanting to make it to the dining hall for the end-of-term lunch.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for my wife. Have you seen her?” the deep voice of her husband called out.

Turning around, Patience was met with the captivating sight of her husband holding their four-month-old son in his arms.

“I believe I saw her running away somewhere,” Patience said, closing the gap between them.

She slid her arms around his waist, kissing her son Joseph’s, chubby cheeks.

“Never or if she did, I would just find her, no matter how long it took.” He bent down, kissing her lips.

“I missed the both of you. I’m finding it dreadfully hard to be away from you.” Patience took the babe in her arms, pressing her lips to his downy dark hair.

“You can always hire another teacher, or have Mary-Anne teach more.” Wrapping his arms around them, Fitz led her out of the classroom and down the hall.

They entered the dining hall where the students were having lunch. The students sat at two long tables. Her sister, Mary-Anne, her husband, Philip along with their daughter, Poppy, sat at a table with Patience’s parents.

Her father had been injured greatly at Waterloo and was unable to send word for months. He had returned to them six months after the battle, with only one arm. It did not matter; all that mattered was that he was alive and well.

“There you are,” her father called out, waving at her with his one good arm. “I was telling Fitz that we should repair the greenhouse before your mother and I return to Brighton.”

Patience took a deep breath, trying not to show her irritation with her father. Ever since he had returned, he had been determined not to be an invalid.

“Father you really should not overdo it—”

“Nonsense. I have one good arm, and I shall use it. Now let me see my grandson. We’re only here two more days.” He held out his arm for her son.

Patience gently placed the babe in his arm, making sure he was secure.

“I really think we should consider moving here. I dislike being away from the girls and the children,” her mother said, kissing the top of Joseph’s head. “Besides we have no other family in Brighton anymore.”

Her mother’s countenance had changed dramatically without her grandmother’s influence. There had been no word from her grandmother since the night of Patience’s godfather’s ball. It didn’t matter to her if she never saw Jane Miller again.

“Walk with me,” Fitz whispered in her ear, leading her away from the crowded dining hall.

The sun was bright in the sky as Patience walked arm in arm with her husband. “What did you want to talk about?” she asked, pressing her body against his as he leaned against a tree.

He pulled her closer, pressing his lips to hers in a searing kiss. She melted against him, wishing that they were alone. “I wanted to kiss you again,” he confessed against her lips.

“I will never tire of kissing you,” she leaned, pressing her body against his.

“I have news from Stonelake. It appears that he is ready for a wife.” Fitz pulled closer as he leaned his long body more securely against the tree.

“Surely you jest. I thought Stonelake would never marry,” Patience giggled, shocked by the news.

She thought the duke was the ultimate bachelor but perhaps she was wrong.

“He’s throwing a grand ball for all the eligible ladies in London. He is demanding we be in attendance.” Fitz stood, pressing his lips to her forehead. “I hope he finds someone. I want everyone to be as happy as we are.”

“It took us five years to get here,” she reminded him, remembering how alone she had been without him.

“I don’t care,” he said, bending down to ghost his lips over hers. “I’d do it all over again, as long as the end result was me being with you.”

He kissed her again, and Patience knew there would never be a day where she would not be grateful to Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Prince Regent.

It was because of them that they had a future and all it took was a reticule for scandal.

The End.

ABOUT CECILIA RENE

Cecilia Rene is a Detroit native who attended Grambling State University and then ventured to the Big Apple with nothing but a hundred and twenty dollars to her name, and somehow she survived. After working nearly fifteen years as a Post Producer in the NY Advertising world, Cecilia continued her love for writing with Screenplays, until finally, she met a group of like-minded individuals online before she ventured into publishing herself. Always an avid reader of romance and all things spicy, Cecilia fell in love with historical romance and craved to tell her own stories. When she's not writing in her office with her very loud snoring companion, Sadie the pitbull, she can be found hiking the trails of Austin where she now resides with her giant teenager and grumpy husband. Cecilia Rene loves romance, humor, and all things spicy. For this reason, she will always give you a Happily Ever After. Follow her below for more.

☆ Website: <https://bit.ly/3kreHUG>

☆ Instagram: <https://bit.ly/30DWh1S>

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☆ FB Group: <https://bit.ly/2SlhGuF>

BANKING ON A
BLUESTOCKING

BY RACHEL ANN SMITH

BANKING ON A BLUESTOCKING

What is a lady to do when she falls in love with a rake?

Confess.

Absolutely not - yet that is exactly what Lady Hazel Arbor does and to no surprise to anyone but Hazel, the rake in question, the dashing Samuel Mowbry, the new Viscount Thornsbee, rejects her interest in favor of friendship. Except Hazel doesn't want a friend, she needs to wed and grant her brother the freedom he so deserves.

Is banking on a Bluestocking wise?

Not when your heart and title is on the line.

Samuel Mowbry never thought he'd marry and he knows he's not quite up to the standards a lady like Hazel needs. Yet the spirited bluestocking whose interests includes star gazing makes him want to reform his rakish ways and be a man worthy of her love—even if her brother doesn't approve.

Discover how a life long rake reforms and wins Lady Hazel's heart.

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PROLOGUE

Embarking upon her debut Season, Lady Hazel Arbor descended from the coach on the heels of her brother, Richard Arbor the Earl of Bixley, filled with delight and anticipation. Hazel ran her gloved hands down her silk pastel-pink gown and began to worry yet again that her staid fashion choices would be mocked by the other debutantes despite the multitude of reassurances given by her modiste that there were other ladies who would be donned in gowns designed with simplicity and comfort in mind.

Richard winged out his arm and smiled down at her. “Ready?”

She wanted to shake her head no, jump back into the coach, and return to Bixley Manor in the country. Instead she calmly placed her hand on her brother’s forearm and nodded. “Ready.”

As they made their way to the entrance of the Duke of Fairmont’s residence, Richard said, “Remember—”

Before he could recite the ten things she must never do during the Season, which he had repeated ad nauseam during their journey into London and every day since arriving, Hazel interjected, “Brother, I’m not a feather brain, nor am I a child. You will have to simply trust that I shall not place myself nor the Bixley name in jeopardy.” What she had done to warrant such reminders from Richard was beyond her since she never complained nor challenged him on any matter.

“My apologies. It’s not you that I do not trust, it’s those damn rakes and fortune hunters who call themselves gentlemen.”

Hazel stumbled on the stairs at her brother’s apology. Richard never admitted to being in the wrong. Regaining her balance she glanced up at Richard and said, “Then mayhap rather than reciting superfluous rules, you could provide me with a list of gentlemen I should steer clear of.”

Richard’s brow creased. “Hmm...well to start you should steer clear of the Duke of Whistlestop and his mate the Earl of Hurlington, and you most definitely should stay away from Samuel Mowbry, who recently inherited the title of Viscount Thornsbee.”

“Done. I shall avoid Whistlestop, Hurlington and Thornsbee at all times. Happy?”

Rather than alleviating the crease between her brother’s brow, Richard’s frown deepened as they crossed the threshold and entered the main foyer. Gaggles of men and women were littered about the room, which was brimming with candlelight and chatter.

Hazel’s fingers tightened about her brother’s arm. She’d expected a crowd but was ill prepared to meet the curious gazes directed her way. A wave of whispers weaved about her. Thanks to her excellent hearing, Hazel’s cheeks began to burn as comments on her plain appearance floated about her.

Richard leaned down and whispered, “Don’t be fooled. Women know little of what gentlemen prefer...or the reverse.”

Chin tucked to her chest, Hazel focused on the hem of the pale blue gown in front of her. She carefully trod forward, following the lady in front of her, all the while praying she wouldn’t make a fool of herself at her debut ball. No longer willing to remain a burden to her brother, she hoped to find a gentleman willing to marry her and her bookish ways by the end of the Season. Then Richard would be free to travel as he had always dreamed of doing.

Her brother patted her hand and she looked up at his grim features. His gaze darted over her shoulder and the muscles in his jaw clenched tight. Returning his attention to her, he said, "I must go rescue Ambrose. Wait for me here."

Left without Richard to shield her, she was forced to step backward and then to the left and the left once more.

"Ow!"

Hazel whirled around to apologize to the stunning blonde lady in a pale blue gown hopping on one foot. "I beg your pardon, I'm ever so sorry."

"You." Lady Lorna Kemp, who was a year older than Hazel and who had been a boon companion prior to Lorna's debut, glared down at her. "Stay away from me."

Still perplexed as to what she had done to anger her friend, Hazel reached for Lorna's hands to plead for a private audience so that they could discuss what had occurred that caused Lorna to ignore all of Hazel's correspondence.

"Get away from me!" Lorna swiped Hazel's hands to the side and strode off through the crowd without the slightest hitch in her step until she neared a group of rather dashing looking gentlemen engrossed in their own discussions.

Warm air tickled the back of Hazel's neck and she turned to see who dared to stand so close to her. She jumped backward, heart thumping, as the Viscount of Thornsbee's sea-blue eyes and striking features came into focus.

The rake caught her by the shoulders and hauled her to the side. "Careful."

"I'm sorry," Hazel murmured.

Viscount Thornsbee bent at the waist and looked directly at her. With a smile that was fashioned to charm and disarm a lady, he asked, "Did you say something?"

Something about the man's arrogant smile raised her ire. She wanted to wink at the man and set him back on his heels, but it was only a brazen thought. She'd *never* act out her whims. From the corner of her eye she spied her brother

returning. She had promised Richard to stay away from the man and she wasn't about to break her word. Hazel backed up a half step and dipped into a deep curtsy, hoping to sink low enough that she might slip away unnoticed.

The Viscount of Thornsbee's fingers slipped from her shoulders. "Friends don't abandon one another in the face of danger."

Eyes wide, Hazel repeated, "Danger?"

"The fierce frown upon your brother's features has me considering my future. Should I flee the country or shall I be meeting him at dawn?"

Hazel studied her brother's fierce expression. It was clear Richard was displeased. She glanced at the viscount who, contrary to his words, appeared unaffected by her brother's narrowed gaze and thinned lips. Rake or not, she was certain that the Viscount of Thornsbee had only acted to protect his fellow peers from her clumsiness. He appeared totally unaffected by her presence, unlike her, whose cheeks burned and heart fluttered every time he glanced at her. He had referred to her as a friend. She needed more allies amongst her peers. Better a rake for a friend than a foe, or even more terrifying, a beau. Hazel straightened to her full height, all of five feet three inches, and prepared herself to defend her newfound friend.

Standing slightly in front and to the right of the Viscount of Thornsbee, she smiled up at her brother. "You've returned." She locked her trembling knees beneath her skirts and pasted the sweetest smile she could muster.

"Thornsbee." Richard had ignored her and greeted the man standing behind her. She could no longer feel his breath on the back of her neck, which meant he had distanced himself—hopefully the socially acceptable arm's length away.

"Bixley." The Viscount of Thornsbee shifted and stepped forward.

To Hazel's utter dismay, the rake and Richard engaged in a silent exchange of glares that she didn't understand. After a

moment, her brother nodded, grabbed her hand, and led her directly to the ballroom, where he promptly deposited her in the care of Ambrose Kirkman, the Baron of Harlowe. Hazel scanned the crowded room, half hoping to find Viscount Thornsbee occupied on the dance floor. She paused and clutched her chest as her mind formed an image of the viscount's strong hands wrapped about another woman. What was the matter with her? It was best if she simply forgot about the rake and focused on her search for the perfect husband. But was there a gentleman amongst her peers who shared her love of star gazing? Mayhap if she ventured out to the gardens she might find him.



THE COOL NIGHT air did nothing to alleviate the heat roaring through Samuel's veins. His goal had been to gain the favor of his fellow peers, erase his past, and convince the ton he was worthy of inheriting the Thornsbee title, not provide more fodder for gossip. He squeezed the back of his neck as he paced in front of the stone bench he'd lured a lady to on more than a few occasions. Argh. The life of a rake was his past, not his future.

"Thornsbee."

Samuel whirled around to face the Earl of Bixley, whose hard gaze had him considering an extended stay on the Continent until the earl's ire cooled. It wouldn't be the first time he had to leave the country on account of a misunderstanding, but now that he was expected to carry out his duties and attend to matters of import in the House of Lords, running away was no longer a possibility.

Jaw clenched, Bixley growled, "Stay away from my sister."

"Lady Hazel is way too innocent and trusting to survive the treacherous waters of a Season without friends."

"My sister doesn't need the likes of *you* as a friend."

Samuel couldn't argue since Bixley had an unfortunate yet valid point. "True. However, Lady Hazel could benefit from having a friend who has mastered the art of navigating difficult situations. The envious stares *your* sister garnered from the other marriage-seeking ladies this eve immediately upon her entrance should not be taken lightly."

Bixley's frown deepened. "What in the blazes are you referring to?"

"Gaining the queen's favor places any debutante in a precarious position, but one as kind and shy as your sister, well..." Samuel tapped his chin with his forefinger and added, "it can be a curse rather than an advantage." Samuel stood at attention as the shimmer of pink silk behind Bixley caught his attention. "Lady Hazel!"

Arms crossed, the lady stepped out of the dark and turned her back to him. "Brother, I've been searching for you. I wish to return home."

Bixley's disapproving frown shifted to one of concern. "Are you feeling unwell? Did something happen?"

"Rather than subjecting me to another inquisition, let's be off." Without waiting for a response, the woman marched along the path back toward the ballroom.

Samuel stood rooted to the spot amazed at the brazen chit. Lady Hazel was no damsel in distress for him to protect; in fact, it might be in his favor rather than hers to become fast friends. Yes—he was going to become Lady Hazel's boon companion this Season.

CHAPTER ONE

Hazel's Debut Season - 1813

In the corner of Bixley's music room sat Samuel's favorite instrument, an intricately carved pianoforte. It had been a stroke of genius on his part to feign ignorance of how to run his fingers over the ivory keys, thus gaining Lady Hazel as his own private tutor. Over the years he'd perfected the art of pretending to be unskilled in all matters and to not care—it was his way of ensuring he didn't disappoint his family. With a deep breath, he crossed the threshold and entered the room prepared to bolster the woman's confidence that was woefully lacking except in the company of her brother.

Lady Hazel, dressed in a bright yellow day dress, sat on the bench with her back to him. "You're late."

He strode forward mouth slightly agape as if he was about to utter the words that usually rolled off his tongue without hesitation in order to appease those about. However, apologies were spoken when one had no intention of doing better. And for some odd reason, Lady Hazel made him want to try... to try to be a better man. There was no good reason for him to be tardy to their lessons. In fact, he should refrain from making the lady wait, especially since over the course of the last three months he'd come to realize time spent with Lady Hazel was always memorable and precious.

Hands behind his back, he made quick work of bridging the space between them. Rather than sitting next to her on the bench as he normally would, he stood next to the pianoforte

and admired Lady Hazel's profile. Her high cheekbones were flushed pink and her blue-green eyes were more green than blue in the waning sunlight. Lady Hazel's hands were clasped tightly in her lap instead of lying at the ready on the keys of the musical instrument that he'd discovered could produce the most soothing sounds to the soul.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Shall we begin?" Her hands shook as she aligned her fingers on the keys.

Instinctively he reached out and took her right hand in his. "Not until you tell me what is bothering you."

She withdrew her hand and turned to face him. "We are friends, are we not?"

"Of course we are friends." Samuel's brow knitted into a frown while Lady Hazel crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him through narrowed eyes. He was afraid to hazard a guess as to what the woman was about to share next.

Lips pursed, she said, "And was it not you who was the one who suggested to be each other's champion...to assist one another. You were to provide support in my quest to find a husband, and I was to guide you in mastering gentlemanly behavior in order to shed the persona of a rake."

He nodded, not knowing how best to reply.

"Then...then pray explain how it came about that Lady Archbroke overheard you last eve at the Harrington affair sharing to all and sundry a long list my faults. That is not an act of a boon companion. Who in their right mind would agree to share the rest of their days with me when my own friend believes I'm a stubborn minx with a sharp mind and tongue?"

His head throbbed, partially due to having over indulged the night before, but also from guilt as he recalled the monologue Lady Hazel was referring to. While he had used those exact words, they were taken out of context. "Let me explain." He reached to take her hand in his once more, but she scooted back and he ended up wrapping his arm about her to prevent her from falling off the edge of the bench. Lady

Hazel rose and he let his arm fall to his side. He didn't want her to leave his side. He grabbed her hand. "I was wrong. It was not my intention to disparage your character."

She released a sigh filled with defeat. "We are midway through the Season, and while you have managed to regain the favor of the ton, *I* have not gained the interest of any gentleman. You claim that your attention will induce others to take notice of me, yet I find that the other eligible bachelors steer clear of me when you are present. I think it's time we..."

"I agree. We...we should devise a different stratagem to find you a husband." A lump in his throat formed as the words slipped through his lips. He swallowed hard and continued, "As your friend—"

Lady Hazel squeezed his hand that remained desperately clasped in hers. "That is the crux of the issue, Samuel. We can't remain friends." She pulled free and began to pace in a circle.

He rose and shifted to stand next to the pianoforte. "You enjoy my company and I enjoy yours. Thus there is no reason for us *not* to remain friends."

Lady Hazel stopped mid step and froze. "But there is a reason." She inhaled deeply and stared directly up at him. "I've grown far too accustomed to your presence. When you are not near, I begin to feel anxious. I think of you constantly. And when you are near, my heart races. These...these are not the feelings a friend should have. I can't remain your friend. I fear I'm—" Lady Hazel covered her face with her hands.

He slowly approached her and gently removed her hands from her face. "Lady Hazel." He waited for her to open her eyes but they remained shut. "I'm in no position to take a wife. I've but only begun to come to accept the fact I'm Lord Thornsbee and to rectify my rakish ways."

Head bent Lady Hazel muttered, "I understand."

The trickle of moisture that escaped the corner of Lady Hazel's eyes had Samuel's heart aching with regret. "I should take my leave now."

Lady Hazel nodded and rather than remaining behind, it was she who retreated from the music room first.

He wanted to run after her and beg for forgiveness for causing her tears but he remained rooted to the spot, unable to move forward to leave. A war as to what was the best course of action raged within him. To leave and let Lady Hazel be—or to convince her to remain friends, to hell with finding a husband this Season?

CHAPTER TWO

Hazel's second Season - 1814

The man who had devilishly captured her heart weaved through the crowd toward her. Hazel wanted to whirl around and run. Run into the dark gardens, but Samuel would only follow her and track her down without a care for what it might mean to her reputation. Hands fisted at her side, she counted to ten, hoping Samuel would be waylaid by one of the many widows that were more than eager for his company. Her blood boiled recalling how she had recklessly wasted her debut Season secretly hoping Samuel's feelings would mirror her own.

What had innocently begun as fondness for a friend and had ultimately bloomed into love. No longer was she willing to wait for a glimpse of the man's winning smile or while the hours away reliving the enthralling scientific discussions on the formations in the sky, especially those conversations that focused upon the stars that glittered in the night. No other gentleman of her acquaintance humored her interest in such subjects; instead, they found her bookish ways a bore and escaped from her company. Prepared to do whatever necessary to find a husband this Season, Hazel emptied her mind and plastered a smile upon her face as Samuel came to a stop in front of her.

"A good evening to you, Lord Thornsbee."

"Lady Hazel." Samuel folded into a bow but his gaze never left her face. "How was your summer, my friend?"

Friend! Blast the man and his “friendship.” She wasn’t in need of a friend; she needed a husband. Unwilling to repeat the same mistake as last Season, misinterpreting the time and attention he devoted to her as interest, Hazel swore she would keep her distance and remain as far away as possible from Samuel. No, not Samuel. Lord Thornsbee. The sooner she refrained from referring to the man so informally and rebuilt the wall of propriety the better.

Hazel stared at the man who had rejected her admission of love and crushed her heart. The fine laughter lines of a carefree rake that had appeared at the corners of his eyes last Season were gone. She slowly unfurled her fisted hands and purposefully clasped them behind her back prepared to verbally spar with the man who still had the ability to make her knees weak. “My summer was...” She wanted to confess she had missed his company, but the sting of rejection stiffened her spine. “I always enjoy sun-filled days in the country. Thank you for inquiring, friend.”

Lord Thornsbee chuckled. “So...you missed me.”

How arrogant of the rake! She had to admit his ability to read her thoughts accurately had not dissipated one bit despite not having contact for over three months. He’d seen straight through her vague reply. Hazel planted her hands on her hips. “Not for a moment did I think of you.”

He bent at the waist and stared directly at her. “You’re lying.”

Terrible at uttering falsehoods, but unwilling to look away, she replied, “I’m not.”

“Lady Hazel, your eyes don’t lie—you missed me.” Lord Thornsbee straightened and adjusted his cravat. “Now that the summer’s over and you have returned to London, I expect we shall be able to enjoy each other’s company once more.” He winged out his arm for her. “Shall we take a stroll?”

The audacity of the man. Didn’t he realize that if she continued to accept his invitations to accompany him, she would once again face a Season with no prospects of marriage? She brought her chin up from her chest and infused

as much conviction as she could muster into her answer. “Not with you, *my friend*.” She blinked as the sharp edge to her tone sliced through the air between them.

Brows knitted, Lord Thornsbee tilted his head and asked, “Are you angry with me? Is there something I should apologize for?”

“I don’t know, is there, my friend?” What possessed her to reply with the tone she normally only reserved for her brother, Hazel didn’t know. The ire that had been simmering within her all summer had bubbled to the surface. She needed escape before Lord Thornsbee extracted the truth from her: that she was still in love with him and had no desire to remain his friend.

He cupped his hands about her shoulders, and the warmth of his palms through the thin muslin of her gown played havoc with her heartbeat.

Gazes locked, he said, “If I’ve offended you, simply state what it is I’ve done so I can atone for my mistake.”

The man was no dullard, yet he appeared entirely unaffected by her continuous referral to him as a mere friend. Of course he was fine. *He* wasn’t the one who spent three months pining away the sun-filled days. Hazel closed her eyes as she recalled how he had candidly admitted it was her company that he sought out at every social event but also in the same breath explained that he wished to only remain friends.

Even after an entire summer, the sting of rejection caused her cheeks to burn. Misty eyed, Hazel slowly raised her gaze to meet his. Blinking away the tears that threatened to escape, Hazel acknowledged she could no more make his heart skip for her than she could prevent her own heart from melting at the twinkle of panic in his blue eyes.

Well aware of his philosophy that apologies were not for those you love, she looked directly at Lord Thornsbee and replied, “You’ve done nothing that requires an apology.” Her voice quivered and her ire bubbled to the surface. She was no meekish miss.

Hazel twisted and shrugged to dislodge his hands from her. “A good eve to you, Lord Thornsbee, I’m off to find my...” She wanted to say future husband, but the words refused to roll off her tongue.

With one eyebrow raised, Lord Thornsbee finished her sentence for her. “Your brother?”

“No, not my brother.”

The cocky smile that Lord Thornsbee gave her nearly swayed her conviction to avoid the man. Struggling to combat the fluttering in her belly, she glanced about the ball room and caught sight of her best friend. “I’m off to find Lady Daphne.”

“Ah... as always, my competitor for your company. I heard she recently married and is now Baroness Harlowe. How is she adjusting to married life?”

If she stayed and conversed with the man any longer, she doubted her willpower to resist his charms. She would end up remaining by his side all evening, the exact opposite of what she needed to do.

Hazel shook her head at him and said, “Never again shall I fall into your trap.” With the snap of the wrist she unfurled her fan. From behind the black lace, she added, “A good eve to you, Lord Thornsbee, and don’t...don’t even consider following me.” She turned on her heel and fled.



THE LUMP LODGED in Samuel’s throat had him gasping for air and rooted to the spot. He wanted to ignore Hazel’s request and chase after her. Should he swallow his pride and beg for forgiveness?

Raised up on his tiptoes, he scanned the room, avoiding the inviting gazes from his prior lovers. He wasn’t interested in a tryst or the company of another woman. No, he wanted Hazel by his side. To hell with his vow to never apologize to the woman. He marched forward, weaving his way toward the terrace. Having spent an entire Season accompanying Hazel

about, he would wager his entire estate that the chit had escaped into the gardens to hide. She was most likely engaged in her favorite pastime—star gazing.

Fearful that another might find her alone in the gardens, Samuel hastened his strides and exited through the terrace doors, leaving the stuffy ballroom and its occupants behind. If it weren't for Hazel's presence, he'd be happily ensconced in his study sipping on a brandy and reading the latest scientific journal. Guilt had turned his stomach sour and he'd reluctantly donned his evening attire all in the hopes of an opportunity to explain to Hazel that he'd remained in town during the summer months to avoid attending the plethora of house parties which were famous for scandals and impromptu weddings. She of all people should understand that he would never jeopardize all the effort he'd made to shed his rakish ways and restore his reputation as befitted the Thornsbee title. His only regret was the distance he'd placed between himself and the woman he could not seem to banish from his thoughts.

For months he'd replayed Hazel's brave confession over and over in his mind. Preoccupied with the demands of his estate and the intricacies of the matters being discussed in the House of Lords, he'd had no time to focus on the matters of the heart, which is why he had responded to Hazel's declaration of love candidly. He had not considered her anything more than a friend. When she suddenly left London without bidding him farewell, the emotions that rioted within him left him at a loss as to what to do. From past experience, he'd learned it was best not to take action when conflicted. He had remained in town and focused on setting his affairs straight. As the days became weeks, he'd contemplated his relationship with Hazel. Never had a woman retained his attention for longer than a fortnight, let alone an entire Season. It had to be due to the fact that he had remained friends with Lady Hazel rather than complicating their relationship by acting on his baser desires to take the woman into his arms and kiss her senseless.

The shimmer of pale green silk between the hedges caught his eye and brought his thoughts back to the present. He

slowed his footsteps and silently approached.

“Hmmm...where is the plough this eve?” Hazel’s mumblings soothed Samuel’s racing heart.

He peered around the hedge prepared to do whatever it took to gain her favor once more. Moonlight twinkled off the jewels sprinkled in her hair. The queen’s keen eye for beauty was indisputable, and Hazel was no exception. While most sought out the title of the Season’s incomparable, Hazel had deemed it a curse, claiming it had only garnered her ill will from the ladies of the ton. He’d appointed himself as her protector from the harsh whispers uttered behind fans and the not so subtle glares of jealousy despite knowing he wasn’t worthy of Hazel’s company. It was hardly a plausible excuse except he couldn’t help but want to be near her. He hated the idea of her being harmed by others. His hands clenched at his side as he acknowledged that he had been the one to bring tears to her eyes last Season.

Samuel released a sigh and stepped up behind Hazel, mouth opened to utter the apology he owed her. Except when Hazel looked over her shoulder at him, the words *I’m sorry* refused to tumble forth. She deserved better from him.

“Why are you here? I asked you not to follow me.”

“It’s unwise to be out in the gardens alone.” His mind raced. What to say next? Unable to find the words that might make things right between them, he shifted his weight from side to side. How was he to make amends for ignoring her all summer if she refused his company?

She turned around and faced him. “Being anywhere in the vicinity of you is a mistake.”

Her words stabbed in the chest and he placed a hand over his heart. “You wound me.”

Hazel scowled at him and said, “Don’t act as if my words mean a thing to you.”

She stepped to the side to walk around him but he couldn’t let her leave, not on these terms. Samuel caught her by the elbow and spun her around until they were once again face to

face. Her cheeks were bright pink and her brows were raised in surprise. The sudden urge to lean forward and kiss her shouldn't have been a surprise. After all, he was a rake. No—he was a reformed rake, and it was all because of Hazel. He no longer sought refuge in the warm embrace of a woman to banish his loneliness. Now all it took was a smile from the woman who remained stock still next to him. And he wasn't referring to the strained upturn of the corners of her mouth she adopted when surrounded by their peers.

Wanting to once again experience the lightness that came with seeing Hazel smile, he cocked his head to the right and pleaded, "Don't go. Stay...please." His hand fell to his side.

Hazel crossed her arms over her chest and released a deep sigh.

Grateful that she hadn't marched off, Samuel looked up at the night sky to search for the seven stars he knew would bring a smile to her lips. Finally, all the evenings spent studying the twinkling lights in the London night sky would prove useful. With his white gloved forefinger outstretched, he outlined Hazel's favorite constellation.

Face tilted up to the sky, eyes trained to the spot he'd pointed to, Hazel smiled. "How did you identify the plough so quickly?"

"Seeing as I've searched for the blasted thing every night since your departure, I've become an expert of sorts."

Hands planted on her hips, she turned and asked, "Why would you do such a thing?"

"To be close to you." Hazel's jaw fell and he couldn't stop himself from reaching out and cupping her adorable face and adding, "I missed you. I missed my best friend."

Hazel took a quick step back out of his reach. "If you care for me as a friend, you will maintain your distance from me this Season. Don't ruin my chances for happiness like you did before." She held his gaze and then added, "Promise. Promise you will stay away."

"I can't."

“Why not?”

It was a valid question, a question he had no sensible answer to. He fully understood she wished to marry, and if he were in a position to marry, if he were good enough for her to marry, he would take her hand and propose.

But he wasn't.

Head bowed, Samuel relented, “I promise...I promise not to interfere with your search for a husband this Season.”

The swoosh of silk followed by a rapid click-clack of her heels on the stone path was the only response he received. Hazel had left him and he crumpled to one knee. Samuel had failed to convince Hazel's brother last Season that he was indeed a reformed rake and gain Richard's favor. He'd worked long and hard over the summer to learn all the nuances of the issues that were to be presented in the House of Lords that Hazel's brother claimed he took lightly. With his estate affairs all settled, he was prepared to win Richard's favor and obtain the blessing he had mistakenly believed would be gladly given to him last Season. Failure wasn't an option. He was going to make Hazel his wife come the end of Season no matter what.

CHAPTER THREE

*W*ith her silk skirts balled tightly in her fists, Hazel ran to the Fairmont conservatory. She wasn't ready to face the daunting task of feigning interest and making frivolous conversation with this Season's eligible bachelors. Peering into the glass enclosure to ensure her privacy before entering, Hazel jumped at the touch upon her shoulder.

"It must be you desire to end my existence early," Richard teased, the worry lines upon his forehead deepened. "Why are your cheeks flushed?"

She covered her face with her gloved hands. "I'm sorry to have worried you, brother."

"I'm actually surprised to find you alone." Richard held the door open for her and waited for her to enter. He followed her into the aroma-filled enclosure and stopped in front of one of the Duchess of Fairmont's famous orange trees. "When I noted Thornsbee's absence I was certain I'd find the pair of you together."

"I'm surprised you would presume such a thing, especially since I gave you my word not to remain in the man's company this Season."

"I don't doubt your intentions; it is his that I worry about."

"You have nothing to fear, he once again made it quite clear we are to remain merely friends."

"Is that so?"

Her brother's smug smile piqued her curiosity. "Why do you find that amusing?"

"Men, rakes in particular, are incapable of maintaining a platonic relationship with the opposite sex. And for my highly intelligent sister to believe such nonsense is...well, it is simply comical."

She sank down and seated herself upon the stone bench. If her brother's theory was true, and Richard was rarely wrong, then Samuel had lied to her—but why?

Hazel turned to face her brother as he occupied the space next to her. "Please share why it is that you don't care for Lord Thornsbee."

Arms and legs crossed, Richard let out a deep sigh and answered, "He's nothing like his cousin, Patrick, who worked tirelessly to restore the good standing of the Thornsbee title within the House and to replenish the family coffers."

Her heart ached at the sight of her brother still mourning the death of one of his closest friends, but Richard was unjustly comparing the two men. Hands tightly clasped in her lap she replied, "The Thornsbee line has been riddled with rakes over the years; however, you must admit Samuel has done nothing but honor Patrick's wishes and hard work."

Eyes focused upon her hands that she refused to twist in anticipation, Hazel waited for her brother to respond. The dense silence was broken by the sound of booted footsteps.

Richard clasped her elbow and stood. With no choice but to mirror his movements, she let her brother escort her through the greenery and to the door that would thrust them back into the Fairmont affair. Unlike last Season when she was unprepared for all the gossip and ill will directed her way behind fluttering fans, Hazel stiffened her spine and prepared herself for the onslaught of criticism that would reach her sensitive ears as she walked through the crowded ballroom.

The quick pace Richard set meant she caught only snippets of the harsh whispers. No different from last Season, the claims she was overconfident of her looks, too proud, lacking

in charm, and a bluestocking at heart whirled about her. While she was unashamed of her intellectual pursuits, her counterparts had on more than one occasion shared with her that being a bluestocking harmed her chances at being wooed.

Richard squeezed her elbow. "Ignore them."

"That is easy for you to say. *You* are not their target. You are a young, hale, eligible titled gentleman who they would marry regardless of all your faults if you gave them the opportunity."

"I'd never invite one of those harpies to join our family."

For some peculiar reason, Richard's informal reference had a giggle bubbling up and escaping her. Her brother had a way of making her laugh even in the most dire of situations, much like another man she cared for. An image of Samuel's rakish smile appeared in her mind's eye and had her tripping over her own feet. How many times had the blasted man made her forget her plight of being the target of hateful comments and made her laugh until her stomach ached last Season? Countless. Before she could stop herself, Hazel clutched her brother's arm and rolled up onto her tiptoes to scan the crowd.

"If you are looking for Thornsbee, he's tracking our progress from the far right corner." Richard's height gave him an unfair advantage. "I thought we agreed upon our return to London you were to steer clear of the man."

It wasn't so much as she'd agreed as she had relented to protect her heart, but she wasn't about to admit to such a thing to Richard. "We did."

They came to a stop in front of the refreshments table. "Lemonade?"

Hazel took the pale yellow beverage from her brother and lifted it to her lips. The notion struck her that the taste of her drink, whether it be sweet or sour, would predict the rest of her eve and even the Season. She took a sip and with pinched lips she mumbled, "It's going to be a long Season...a long Season indeed." The tart zing of lemons remained on her tongue as she placed her empty glass on a tray of a passing footman.

Richard surveyed the crowded room. “Let’s go find Ambrose and the others.”

She shook her head. “I’ll wait here.”

“If I leave you alone, Thornsbee will no doubt approach.”

“Never fear, Lord Bixley.” Daphne, her closest friend, came to the rescue. “I shall keep Hazel company.”

Richard hesitated before nodding. “Then I shall leave Hazel in your care, Lady Daphne.”

Urgh. She wasn’t a child anymore.

Hazel buckled to the side as Daphne poked her in the ribs with her elbow. “The festivities have barely begun, and you are already scowling.”

While she had corresponded with her best friend frequently over the summer, Richard’s overprotective ways had prevented Hazel from seeing Daphne, who had fallen ill for some weeks.

With a bright wide smile, Daphne commented, “Thornsbee has been craning his neck all evening looking for you. He appears lost without you at his side.”

“I doubt the man has had a shortage of interest in my absence.” Hazel turned, placing her back to the man they were discussing. She would not falter. She was in need of a husband, not a friend.

Daphne’s gaze darted over Hazel’s shoulder for a moment before she said, “Mayhap, but I’m fairly certain you are the only person who is on Lord Thornsbee’s mind.”

“As a friend. And as you know, I’m determined to find myself a husband this Season so I’ll no longer remain a burden to Richard. I want him to fulfill his dreams of exploring the world.” The half-truth rolled off her tongue with ease. The other half of the truth was that she longed for her own independence, to be free from her overbearing brother who meant well but didn’t understand her growing interest in what their peers considered unladylike pursuits like studying the stars and fossils.

“You’re not a burden to anyone, least of all your brother.” Daphne’s gaze flickered to the man who owned her heart, Ambrose Kirkman, Baron Harlowe.

Similar to her own predicament, Ambrose and Daphne were friends, but Daphne had been in love with Ambrose for more than a decade. Hazel didn’t have a decade to wait for Samuel to return her regard. Blast. The mere thought of the man flooded her cheeks with heat. With a flick of her wrist she unfurled her fan and created a slight breeze that did nothing to alleviate the warmth that settled upon her face.

Daphne chuckled. “You shall have to do better to mask your feelings if you wish Richard to believe you have given up hope of marrying the one man who he has deemed unworthy of your hand.”

“I still don’t completely understand Richard’s objections aside from the fact that the man was once a rake.”

Her best friend rolled her eyes and said, “The reason Richard abhors the idea of you marrying Thornsbee is the same reason why you fell in love with the man—Samuel is the complete opposite of your brother.”

Hazel’s hand stilled. It was true, the two couldn’t be more different from one another.

CHAPTER FOUR

As if his boots were laden with rocks, Samuel remained on the fringes of the ballroom, flanked by wallflowers. Amongst the shy misses who avoided eye contact and conversation with him at all costs, he was free to observe Hazel without interruption. From a distance, one would never guess that Hazel's true charm wasn't her beauty, but her sharp mind. The queen had declared her a diamond of the first water, but it wasn't merely her heart shaped face or her mysterious hazel-colored eyes that made Hazel stand out from the others. There was an aura about her that ladies envied and gentlemen admired from a distance. Thankful that his peers had caved to the fear of rejection and left Hazel alone, he'd taken the opportunity to befriend the belle of every ball and had been granted a glimpse of her that others would never see. Hazel was mindful of her speech except in the company of trusted friends and her brother. She wasn't the least bit interested in the latest fashion plates or painting with watercolors; however, she did have a fondness for purchasing multiple reticules. When he'd questioned her why she loved the little silk sacks that he thought of as a nuisance, Hazel had replied, "Unlike gowns, they need not be tailored to or deemed appropriate for the lady who purchases it. A reticule simply has to appeal to its owner." At the time he accepted her response with little thought, but over the summer her words had volleyed in his head, leaving him to question if Hazel was hinting that she didn't need a husband that suited her according to society, but one that appealed to her.

He clenched his hands together tightly behind his back and returned his gaze to Hazel across the room. Richard had finally left his sister's side, only to be replaced by Hazel's close friend Lady Daphne, who was more tenacious and protective of Hazel than Richard.

"I'm assuming you fell out of Lady Hazel's favor, since you are here and not standing by her side like last Season."

He turned to face Lady Sarah, the woman who he hadn't dared speak to in over a year. Lady Sarah had been his late cousin's love, the woman Patrick had been rushing toward when he perished.

Lady Sarah added, "I see you are no longer hiding behind Lady Hazel's skirts."

He couldn't help but return the teasing smile he'd so often received from Lady Sarah, who had always treated him like a younger brother. "I was in plain sight all last Season."

"You were avoiding me." Lady Sarah looped her arm around his and continued, "Let's take a stroll about the room and chat, shall we?"

He shouldn't have ignored the woman his cousin had intended to wed, he should have protected her in Patrick's stead. But Samuel knew Lady Sarah all too well and his familiar image, so similar to Patrick's, would have caused her more pain than he would wish upon his darkest enemy.

He emerged from his thoughts at the light tap of Lady Sarah's fan against his arm. "Pray explain your peculiar behavior this eve."

Simultaneously Samuel said, "I was formulating an appropriate apology."

Lady Sarah arched her left brow at him. "An apology?" She raised onto her tiptoes in Hazel's direction. "Hmmm... yes, it does appear you have fallen from Lady Hazel's good graces. Although based on the bond the two of you formed last Season, I suspect she'd happily forget any of your trespasses if you simply utter three words every woman longs to hear from the man they wish to marry."

“I wasn’t preparing to apologize to Hazel, even though I probably should. Actually, I was attempting to piece together the words necessary to convey to *you* my regrets for not...”

“Hush.” Lady Sarah shook her head. “I have no wish to marry you in Patrick’s stead. However, I’ve been watching you from the shadows, and I wanted you to know how proud I am of you and share that Patrick would have been too.”

Lady Sarah’s words of praise released the two-ton burden he’d been carrying about with him. He wanted to hug the woman who he had always considered like an older sister, but now was neither the time nor the place. “Are you certain?”

“I’m resolute in not desiring to become Viscountess Thornsbee now that you hold the title...but I am banking on *that* bluestocking to fill the role.” Lady Sarah stared in Hazel’s direction.

“I am too. But I’ve a suspicion it will take more than a bundle of flowers and a string of pretty words from me in order for Hazel to forgive me and love me once more.”

“Then I shall assist you.” Lady Sarah steered him in the direction of the foyer.

“But I’m not ready to retire for the eve.”

“We need to devise a plan, and your study is more conducive for such an activity.” Lady Sarah frowned as she looked over her shoulder back through the open ballroom doors. “Do you think Lady Hazel is the jealous type?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Because normally when a woman sees the man she’s in love with leave with another woman, they get jealous, but Lady Hazel’s expression didn’t falter, not even a little bit. I found that rather peculiar.”

“She has a rather aloof exterior, but once you get to know her, you’ll find that Lady Hazel is the exact opposite. She’s caring, empathetic, understanding, best of all, extremely passionate.”

“Says the man whose head over heels in love with the woman. But if that is truly the case, we need a plan or you might lose her to another.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Fire roared through Hazel as Samuel left the ball with the elegant and beautiful Lady Sarah, who had also been declared a diamond of the first water in her debut Season. Hazel admired Lady Sarah. Unlike herself, Lady Sarah had garnered the support and kindness of the other ladies, and for good reason. Lady Sarah was a generous woman who exuded confidence that Hazel could only dream of possessing. As if she weren't already jealous of the woman, Hazel found herself even more so, wishing she was the one being escorted home by Samuel.

Her view of the two most interesting people on the room was obstructed by none other than the Duke of Whistlestop who bowed before her and said, "A good evening to you, Lady Hazel."

"And to you, Your Grace." Hazel sank into a deep curtsy and silently cursed Daphne as she spied her friend's skirts flutter as Daphne sank back into the crowd, making a hasty retreat. Blast, left alone to deal with the dashing rake, Hazel quickly scanned the room to make sure Richard had not yet returned. With her brother nowhere in sight, she exhaled slowly before rolling her shoulders back, ready to take advantage of the chance to practice engaging in idle conversation that she no doubt would be required to maintain this Season if she really intended to find herself a husband.

If Samuel had taught her anything last Season, it was the importance of making eye contact when speaking. The eyes were the windows to one's soul. She slowly raised her chin

and when her gaze met the duke's, her breath caught in her chest. Stunning green eyes bore down on her, banishing all thoughts from her mind. Blast. She had been overconfident. The Duke of Whistlestop was an entirely different breed of rake from Samuel. With a quick shake of the head, Hazel refocused on the task at hand and met the man's intense stare that was nothing short of beguiling. It was no wonder Richard had been so adamant that the duke was on the list of ineligible bachelors. Her senses returned and with them came the realization that while she'd been momentarily blinded by the dashing duke, there was a distinct lack of fluttering in her belly. Those reactions were reserved for one man and one man only, who had left with another woman on his arm.

With a twinkle of mischief in his eyes, the Duke of Whistlestop said, "I'm looking for Thornsbee. Do you happen to know where I might find him?"

"Why would you presume I have knowledge of your friend's whereabouts?"

"Since the pair of you were rarely seen in any other's company last Season..."

Before the man could say more Hazel interjected, "I'd caution you not to make such assumptions." The surprise on the duke's face was laughable and defused some of the tension in the air. Feeling more relaxed, Hazel grinned and took pity on the man whose mouth was still agape. "Lord Thornsbee left with Lady Sarah upon his arm."

The Duke of Whistledown scanned the room and then frowned down at her. "Are you sure it was Lady Sarah?"

Did all men doubt women?

She released a sigh and turned to leave but the duke's hand at her elbow stopped her. Over her shoulder she said, "Your Grace."

"Don't go." His hand dropped back to his side.

Hazel spun back around to face the duke, whose ever-present warm, inviting smile was slowly disappearing from sight. "Is something wrong?" She followed his gaze across the

dance floor toward a row of chairs which were currently all occupied by ladies considered past their prime. All ladies, including herself, feared being banished to spinster seating. If she continued to listen to her heart, holding out hope that one day Samuel's feelings for her would transform into love rather than friendship, she could easily imagine being seated next to the lovely Lady Helen. Why no man had yet claimed Lady Helen's hand was a mystery to Hazel. Lady Helen, an heiress, was from one of the most respected families of the ton and possessed a pristine reputation.

"Can you keep a secret?" The Duke of Whistlestop's gaze flickered between Hazel and Lady Helen. His charming lopsided grin briefly returned but quickly disappeared as his gaze fell back upon the quiet and reserved Lady Helen.

"I believe I can."

"Lady Helen and I are engaged, and have been for years."

Hazel couldn't recall ever seeing the two in each other's company. "Years?"

"Our parents arranged the betrothal well before either of us could talk, or walk for that matter." He forced his lips to curve into a smile and added, "If I'm successful tonight, we shall wed as soon as the banns have been read."

"Then I shall wish you all the best in your endeavors this eve, and please accept my sincere congratulations for your upcoming nuptials." She turned to sneak a peek at Lady Helen but the woman was no longer in sight. Her heart began to ache for Lady Helen. To have been secretly engaged to a rake must have been trying.

As if he could read her mind, His Grace said, "You're probably wondering why we have kept our betrothal a secret and why have I never publicly claimed Helen's hand." The Duke of Whistlestop winged his arm for her and added, "If you assist me in tracking down my clever and ever evasive fiancée, I shall share with you why and how I've come to find myself in what any man would call a no-win situation."

Curious to know more, Hazel hooked her arm through his. “It shouldn’t be that difficult to locate Lady Helen.”

His Grace chuckled and said, “Then you don’t know my intended very well. Lady Helen is a master magician. She can make herself disappear and reappear on a whim. The truth of the matter is, I’ve been chasing Lady Helen for nearly half a decade, but this Season I shall prevail.” As the duke led her around the perimeter of the dance floor, Hazel attempted to deduce a logical reason as to why Lady Helen would lead her intended on a merry chase for five years. But in matters of the heart, she was quickly realizing logic doesn’t apply.

After combing through the crowded ballroom and three very brief but discreet trips out into the gardens, Hazel turned to His Grace and said, “You weren’t bluffing earlier. Lady Helen is truly a master at evasion.”

“My thanks for assisting me this eve. I’m indebted to you.” The man released a deep sigh and added, “To be honest, most ladies retract their offers of help after a short spell.”

Hmm. Hazel snuck a quick peek up at the man next to her and said, “Mayhap you aren’t really the rake most believe you to be.”

“I pay no mind to what others think. I’m content knowing the truth of my actions and motivations.” He took a step back and bowed. “Thank you again for your time and help this evening. If you are ever in need of assistance...”

Before he could finish his thought, Hazel blurted, “I’m in need of a husband.”

“Beg pardon?” All the color in the Duke of Whistlestop’s cheeks faded until he was as white as a sheet.

“Not you, you are already betrothed. I’m seeking help in finding a suitable husband.”

“What of Thornsbee?”

She dipped her chin to her chest. “He views our relationship as purely platonic.”

“Very well. Leave it to me, and I shall repay your kindness.”

She raised her gaze to ascertain if the duke was being serious, but His Grace’s attention was already directed elsewhere. The man she had presumed held only fleeting feelings for the opposite sex was once more scanning the room in search of his fiancée. Without another word, but with a determined expression set on his features, the Duke of Whistlestop strode directly toward the terrace doors.

Left to ponder the Duke of Whistlestop’s situation, Hazel found herself sinking down into the chair Lady Helen had vacated earlier. Would an arranged marriage be easier than hunting for a husband? She shook her head. Definitely not. She shuddered at the thought of Richard selecting a husband on her behalf. Suddenly thankful for the opportunity, Hazel rose to her feet and rolled her shoulder back. She would not let this Season go to waste. She was going to give Richard back the freedom that had been taken from him at an early age when both their parents were lost at sea. Resolute on success, Hazel made her way back into the throng of guests, determined to find an eligible bachelor to wed.

CHAPTER SIX

An unrelenting ache settled in Samuel's chest. After spending an hour attempting to devise a plan to win over Hazel, Samuel realized his monumental mistake in not being completely honest with Hazel about his feelings for her.

Sarah huffed and flopped onto the settee. "Why are men so obtuse when it comes to love?"

Samuel continued to pace in front of the fire in silence. Dimwitted he might be in matters of the heart, but he was at least wise enough to know that Sarah's question was a rhetorical one. Another extra loud sigh came from the settee and Samuel stopped to peer over at Sarah.

With her arm draped over her eyes, she mumbled, "Who am I to criticize? Had I been honest with your cousin, Patrick might very well be with us today instead of..." Sarah's voice broke off with a heartbreaking sob.

While it may not have been obvious to others, including Sarah herself, Samuel knew how deeply in love the late Lord Thornsbee had been with the woman who lay crying on his settee. "I've been a terrible friend to you, Sarah. Knowing how much Patrick loved you, I should have..."

"I know you all too well, Samuel, and while others may well assume you would take responsibility for me in Patrick's stead since you and I are close and you share many of Patrick's finer qualities, we both know we are ill suited. A union between us would only result in misery." Sarah pushed herself up and rolled to her feet to face him. "It's getting late,

and seeing as it is apparent we shall not come to an agreement upon how you can best obtain Lady Hazel's favor, I shall retire for the eve. But if you should need my assistance at all this Season, please do not hesitate to call upon me."

Samuel ushered Sarah to the ducal coach awaiting her and said, "My thanks for your efforts and care. I'm honored to have your support."

She stopped before entering the coach and raised the back of her gloved hand to her eyes. "You probably have no inkling of how proud Patrick would be of you, but I can assure you, there is no other more deserving to be the Viscount Thornsbee."

Sarah's words of confidence demolished Samuel's defenses and a wave of anxiety that he had been suppressing since his cousin's death crashed down upon him. "I appreciate your kind words, and I have to beg to disagree, or the Earl of Bixley would have given me his blessing to marry his sister."

Sarah reached out and took his hand in both of hers. "Bixley is a fool, and you will be one too if you let Lady Hazel marry another. Make haste and ask her directly to marry you."

"A proposal would be rather sudden, appear rash and insincere."

"Not if you are completely honest with her." Sarah gave his hand a tight squeeze and then entered the coach.

He watched the coach roll away until it was out of sight. Sarah was right, he needed to be honest with Hazel. He'd call upon her tomorrow and explain everything.



HAVING WRESTLED with how to woo Hazel all night, Samuel rose early and ventured to the flower market early to select a bundle of blue hydrangeas, her favorite, in the hopes it would put her in a favorable mood to listen to his confession. As his coach rolled to a stop in front of Bixley's townhome, Samuel grabbed the blooms resting on the seat and hopped out, only to

discover he wasn't the only gentleman intending to call upon Hazel this morn. The Marquess of Middleton, the Earl of Hurlington, and even the Duke of Whistlestop were all making their way up the path to Bixley's front door. What in the blazes had happened at the ball last night?

Last Season he had been the only brave soul to call upon Hazel. Word that Richard would financially ruin anyone who dared to offend or hurt his sister had spread like wildfire amongst his peers. The rumor had effectively eliminated any fortune hunters but it also had discouraged many that didn't question Richard's ability to see to it that they landed in dun territory.

He fell into line behind the Earl of Hurlington and approached the entrance.

Over his shoulder, Lord Hurlington nodded and said, "A good morn to you, Thornsbee."

"Hurlington." Samuel lengthened his stride so he would be shoulder-to-shoulder with the man that most considered a veritable rogue. How long had Richard left Hazel unaccompanied last night?

"I couldn't help but notice you were missing from Lady Hazel's side, unlike last Season." Hurlington's lopsided grin, which most ladies found irresistible, had the opposite effect upon Samuel, inciting anger. He focused on relaxing his fingers that were wound tightly around the stems of the flowers that he had so carefully selected. Unwilling to allow Hurlington to divert his attention from his purpose this morning, he quickened his stride and waltzed past the Bixley butler who held the door open for the line of gentlemen queued to enter.

He entered the morning room that was already filled with gentlemen and positioned himself next to the window. If Hazel had garnered this much attention after one night of his absence, there was no way he'd be leaving her side again for the rest of the Season. He'd stick to her like a burr if necessary.

A collective groan echoed through the room at Richard's appearance.

"I'm here to apologize on my sister's behalf. She will not be receiving this morn." Hazel's brother scanned the occupants of the room and then settled his gaze upon Samuel. "No need for concern, Hazel is simply overtired." Richard stepped to the side, waving his hand in a manner that clearly communicated that he wished for his guests to head back toward the foyer.

One by one, the gentlemen filed out of the room.

Samuel joined the long line but paused to stop in front of Richard and said, "It appears you will have more than me to deal with this Season. Any regrets?"

"None." Richard's features remained emotionless, but the twitch of the man's jaw muscle told Samuel that Hazel's brother was far more anxious than he wanted others to know.

Samuel shoved the bouquet of flowers into Richard's chest. "Please inform Hazel that I shall see her at Radcliff's soiree, later this eve."

"I thought the Radcliff gathering was to be a rather private affair."

"It is." Nose to nose, Samuel stared directly at Richard and added, "While you may continue to question my sincerity, others do not." He was done trying to placate Richard.

After spending a summer apart from Hazel, Samuel knew for a fact that he was a better man when he was in her company than not. He simply needed to speak with the woman to set matters straight. Tonight would be his best opportunity before the other wolves in the pack attempted to steal her away from him.

Arms crossed over his chest, Richard replied, "I shall pass along your message...along with Hurlington's request for a drive in the park, the duke's invitation to dinner, and—"

Hazel's brother ceased speaking as Samuel raised a hand and motioned for the man to stop. He didn't want to hear of his rivals' plans to woo Hazel. Without a backward glance, Samuel left Richard and stomped back out to his coach. He

was going to have to strike before the others could, and tonight was his chance—he was going to convince Hazel to become the Viscountess of Thornsbee or die trying.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fingers gripped tightly about the panel of material she hid behind, Hazel peered out the window as the gentlemen walked out to their awaiting vehicles. After attempting and miserably failing to strike up conversations with the gentlemen present at the ball last eve, Hazel was surprised when a string of callers appeared this morn, until she remembered that the Duke of Whistlestop had agreed to assist her. What had she inadvertently got herself involved in?

Richard barged into her room and came to stand next to her. He didn't even spare her a glance. Instead, he too stared down at the street where the men were departing. "Dear sister," he said. "I'm certain you have a reasonable explanation as to why every eligible bachelor in town with a questionable background decided to appear on our doorstep today; however, I'm not in the mood to hear it."

"I... Well, actually..."

Her brother raised a hand and stalled her from continuing. With eyes that were filled with regret, her brother turned to face her and asked, "Are you not happy living here with me?"

"Whatever gave you the impression I was unhappy?"

"It would appear you are rather determined to wed and leave me. So eager in fact that you are willing to accept the suit of every reprobate in town."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say I was *that* interested in all the gentlemen who were kind enough to call upon me today. However, it was rather nice..."

Once again her brother interrupted her. "It pains me to say this, but I miss the days when I had only to deal with Thornsbee." Richard pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let's plan on getting some fresh air this afternoon. Rakes are rarely seen taking a stroll in the park. If you are indeed intent on finding a husband this Season, I shall endeavor to assist you in finding one."

An image of the Duke of Whistlestop came to mind, and along with it his predicament of an arranged marriage. Hazel smiled up at her brother and replied, "I don't want to bother you. I know you already have a full schedule."

Richard gripped her by the shoulders. "You are never a burden to me."

He sounded sincere, but the fact was, Richard had been forced to become her guardian at the tender age of fifteen. Her brother never once complained and continually indulged her wish to remain close, allowing her to sit in on his lessons, which fostered her love for knowledge. But she was of age to marry now, it was time for her to cut ties and become the lady over a household of her own.

She smiled up at her brother, who was still waiting for a response. "Then I shall agree to accompany you to the park later this afternoon. Mayhap you might even consider asking some lovely lady to promenade with you."

"I've no intentions of marrying anytime soon. But if it is truly your wish to marry, then as your brother, I have an obligation to see to it that your wish comes true."

All Hazel heard was the word *obligation* which sent an arrow straight through her heart. The sooner she found a potential suitor the better.

Amid sunshine defused by the clouds, Hazel walked alongside her brother, hands free of an umbrella, and inhaled the fresh air. "It's been a while since we've ventured outside for a stroll."

Richard nodded to a group of ladies passing them on the left before releasing a deep sigh. "I've been remiss of late, and

I apologize.”

Guilt was the last emotion Hazel wished for her brother to experience. They both had experienced too much of it over the years. “Please don’t apologize. You have done your best to manage all the demands placed upon you.”

“My best hasn’t been good enough.” Richard may be exacting, but he was hardest upon himself.

Hazel fiddled with the corner of the ridicule that hung from her wrist. A comfort habit to soothe her anxiety. “Is it that you failed or simply that I’ve become a disappointment?”

He stopped dead in his tracks and said, “Hazel Camilia Arbor, don’t you ever spout such nonsense again.”

Lucky for Hazel, the Duke of Whistlestop, Lord Hurlington, and Samuel appeared before Richard could launch into a lecture.

“Ahhh...how fortunate, it’s the lovely Lady Hazel.” Lord Hurlington’s beaming smile would have melted any other lady’s heart, but it was Samuel’s smirk that set Hazel’s heart thumping against her ribs.

Hazel placed her fingers in Lord Hurlington’s outreached palm, dipped into a curtsy and said, “A pleasure to see you again, my lord.”

The dark scowls Lord Hurlington received from both Richard and Samuel might have sent a lesser man running with fear. However, rather than retreating, the rake seemed to be struck by curiosity, his lips curved into a grin he darted his gaze between the two men. Lord Hurlington was no fool. He retracted his hand and firmly clasped both hands behind his back.

Richard nodded to the Duke of Whistlestop and greeted, “Your Grace.”

“Bixley.” The duke returned her brother’s cool greeting and then added, “It’s a lovely day for a stroll.”

Stiff lipped, Richard replied, “It is. Please do not stop on our account.”

She shouldn't have hoped Samuel had somehow altered Richard's bias against rakes, but Samuel was proof that rakes could reform.

"I was wondering if you would grant me the honor to promenade with Lady Hazel for a spell."

Wanting to clarify matters with the duke, Hazel swiveled to face her brother and pleaded with her eyes to allow her to speak with His Grace in private.

With a nod, Richard said, "Go on. I'll follow behind."

"I'll join you," Samuel volunteered, while Hurlington said, "If no one objects, I shall venture eastward. If my eyes don't deceive me, I believe I spied Lady Violet headed that way."

Hazel linked her arm through the Duke of Whistlestop's winged arm, and once they were out of hearing distance, she commented, "I hadn't realized Lady Violet was out of mourning."

"She isn't, but the woman has never followed social convention." His Grace scanned the park.

"Are you searching for Lady Helen?"

The duke shook his head. "No. She's not here."

"How can you be certain?" Hazel glanced about at the crowded pathways.

"It's more an inkling rather than a certainty."

The twinkle in the duke's eyes had Hazel staring up at the man. Could he sense when Lady Helen was nearby like the way she felt the tug of Samuel walking behind her?

His Grace winked down at her and she had her answer.

"I'm sorry my scheme failed this morning."

Unwittingly Hazel's lips curved into a smile. "I'm not certain I'd call it a failure."

"Is that so?"

"I don't believe Samuel ever considered me more than a friend until this morn."

The duke's relaxed smile turned into a frown. "Well, I know for a fact you are wrong. Thornsbee's transformation last Season was all your doing."

It wasn't she who was mistaken, it was the duke. "I couldn't possibly take credit for reforming a rake. Samuel... umm...what I meant to say is that it was all of Lord Thornsbee's own accord."

"I can't say if Thornsbee has reformed or not but I can assure you, the man's deeply in love with you and has been since he rescued you at the Fairmont ball at the beginning of last Season."

She studied His Grace's serious features. He wasn't teasing her. He was being sincere making her feel safe to share, "If that was the case then he wouldn't have rejected my confession."

The frown line separating the man's dark eyebrows deepened. "You really don't know." He glanced over his shoulder. "Interesting. And here I thought you and your brother were extremely close. So close in fact that I hadn't considered the possibility of him keeping it a secret that Thornsbee has been hounding your brother for his permission to marry you for several months now."

Hazel stumbled.

The Duke of Whistledown helped stabilize her with ease. "Easy."

"Are you telling me that it is Richard's blessing that has prevented Sam...I mean Lord Thornsbee from proposing?"

"Yes." His Grace blinked and his arm tensed. "Lady Helen has arrived."

She searched the path in front of them, but as far as she could see there was no sight of Lady Helen. Seizing the opportunity to sort through the whirl of emotions and thoughts at discovering Samuel's love for her and the actions of her overprotective brother, she said, "Allow me to assist you in tracking Lady Helen down. And today I promise, I won't leave

you until we do, even if we have to traverse every path in the park.”

“You are a good friend, Lady Hazel, but it will be faster if I venture on my own.” He stopped to let Richard and Samuel catch up to them.

“Bixley, I shall leave your sister in your care.” The duke turned and gave her a wink before he broke into a light jog in the direction they were headed. The wink that others might consider as flirtatious was actually the vote of confidence Hazel needed to deal with her well-meaning but interfering brother and the man who still set her heart racing by merely being within arm’s length. Shoulders rolled back, she was about to suggest to continuing on when Richard turned to Samuel and said, “I’ll be escorting Hazel home now...alone.”

Never had she openly contradicted her brother’s will in public. Hazel lowered her head and stole a brief look at Samuel who respectfully nodded and retreated without a word. Disappointment weighed her shoulders down.

Richard ushered her to a nearby bench. Glad for the opportunity to be off her feet, Hazel sat and placed her reticule next to her as she adjusted her skirts.

Bent over, Richard rested his elbows on his knees and wove his fingers together. After several long seconds, he glanced over at Hazel and asked, “What did Whistlestop have to say?”

It was obvious her brother was troubled as to what her answer might be.

She could either confront her brother or continue to pretend to not know that it was in fact Richard’s fault that she remained unwed and not married to the man she loved. “Nothing of import. He merely wished to impart his opinions on the gentlemen who called upon me this morn.”

“None of them, with maybe the exception of Thornsbee, is ready to give up the life of a rake.”

Hazel’s gaze narrowed on Richard’s jawline. If it was clenched, he would be in no mood to debate the issue.

Fortunately, her brother's features remained fairly relaxed after mentioning Samuel.

Feeling courageous, Hazel tapped her chin with a forefinger and said, "Hmm. Would it be a fair presumption then that out of all the gentlemen, you would consider granting Lord Thornsbee your blessing to court me...even maybe marry me?"

Richard pinched the bridge of his nose and answered, "Maybe."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seated on the stone bench that Hazel had occupied earlier, Samuel cupped the forgotten reticule cradled in his palm. Something was amiss for Hazel to forget her favorite accessory. He stared at the white silk bag and traced the blue hydrangea embroidered on the material with his gloved finger. He should give chase and return the reticule to its owner post haste; however, he was reluctant to leave the park. Reluctant to let go of the item that he had secretly commissioned just for Hazel.

Ever since Samuel discovered Hazel's fondness for the blasted things, he'd come to appreciate how the little pouches came in various shapes and designs that often mirrored its owner's personality or mood. Now when he spied a unique swath of material at the haberdashery, he often wondered what reaction Hazel would have. Would she smile, or would her cute little button nose scrunch up? Picturing the lady and her adorable reactions had Samuel grinning. As soon as the image of Hazel faded, melancholy settled in his chest as he compared Hazel's cool demeanor toward him earlier to her enthusiastic greetings of last Season. His fingers tightened about the reticule that couldn't have weighed much more than a pound to prevent it from slipping away from him like its owner had.

A shadow fell across the ground.

"Ahh...I see you have found my reticule before I could."

Hazel's exasperated tone didn't fall upon deaf ears. He didn't have a clue as to how best to respond to the woman. He desperately wished for Hazel to transform back into the lady

who dared to surprise him from behind the hedges in the garden or tap him on the shoulder from behind a potted plant, making his heart leap. The ache in his chest deepened and a defeated sigh escaped him.

He stood with the silky reticule balanced upon his hand and held it out for her. "I'm glad I was able to keep it safe."

His palms began to sweat when she avoided meeting his gaze. Hazel stared at his outstretched hand for a moment. "Did you know that out of all the reticules I own, this one holds a very special place in my heart?"

"Why is that?" The question slipped out before he could stop himself.

"Because it was gifted to me from a man who knows me better than anyone else, even my own brother." She picked up the silk bag by the blue ribbons and slipped into place upon her wrist.

Baffled, Samuel asked, "How did you...wait...who do you think gifted it to you?"

"You, of course." Hazel admired the embroidered flower and then said, "You are the only person who knows of my fondness for blue hydrangeas. Like I mentioned, even Richard doesn't know this about me." With pinkened cheeks, Hazel finally glanced up at him and then back at the bench. "May I join you?"

The mention of the man Samuel considered responsible for his misery left him feeling a little less amicable. "Isn't Bixley anxiously awaiting your return?" The bitterness he tasted upon his tongue at having to mention Hazel's brother rang clear in his tone. Knowing how much Hazel cared for her brother, he cleared his throat and said, "What I meant to say was—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Hazel sat on the bench and tugged at his sleeve to join her.

Seated face-to-face, she said, "Let's not mention Richard right now. He is not my favorite person at present." Her gaze dropped to her hands that were clasped tightly in her lap.

“Although to be frank, you are the reason why my brother has fallen out of my good graces.”

Flummoxed, he blurted, “Me?”

“Yes you.” Hazel straightened, rolled her shoulders back and demanded, “Why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

Speaking to a woman was sometimes like doing a puzzle, except he normally didn’t experience the sentiment when conversing with Hazel. He squinted at the woman seated next to him and willed his brain to function. When he remained confused, he asked, “What are you referring to?”

“Us.” She waved her hand in the space between them. Hazel continued to stare at him, and when he remained silent she frowned at him. “Why didn’t you inform me that you had asked Richard for permission to court me? Why did you insist we remain friends?”

“Because your brother made it abundantly clear that he didn’t believe I was worthy to even stand next to you, let alone marry you. Still, I wasn’t prepared to give up on gaining the man’s blessing. You can’t simply ask a man to trust you—you have to build it over time. So until Richard was prepared to wish us well, we couldn’t be anything but friends.” His response had tumbled out of him without considering the consequences. Gentlemen don’t act rashly nor irresponsibly, yet he’d reverted to his rakish ways in a blink of an eye. Mayhap Richard was right, he was still a rogue at heart. He inhaled a deep breath and held his breath as he waited for Hazel’s reaction to his long-winded answer.

“If we hadn’t spent an entire Season getting to know one another, I might have shared my brother’s opinion of you. However, the Samuel I know is not the rumored rake. The Lord Thornsbee I know is hard working, diligent, intelligent, extremely observant, and generous.” She gave him a wide smile that tilted slightly to the left and continued, “Granted you might have behaved differently in the past, but that is all in the past. You can’t change what occurred.” Hazel cupped his face and said, “If I’m not mistaken, you haven’t even glanced twice at another lady since the day we met.”

He merely nodded, for her touch had rendered him speechless.

“What would you say if I told you that we don’t need my brother’s blessing to wed?”

He grabbed her wrists and placed her hands back in her lap. “Richard is the only immediate family you have remaining. I’ll not forge a wedge in your relationship with him.” Unable to stay seated so close to her, he stood and began to pace in a circle. “Plus I respect Bixley far too much to ignore his opinion.”

Hazel rose and planted her hands on her hips. “Does that mean my brother’s opinion matters more than mine?”

“Of course not.” Why was he having such a difficult time finding the right words?

“Then...perhaps I am to blame for the situation we find ourselves in.” She removed her hands from her hips and placed them behind her, rolling her weight from heel to toe and then back onto her heels. She was deep in thought.

“How do you figure this is somehow your fault and not entirely mine?” he asked.

With her brow knitted she explained, “If I had not made my feelings for you so apparent, maybe you would have been more focused on gauging *my* interest in marrying you than worrying about gaining my brother’s permission.”

He wanted to reach out and run the edge of his thumb over her brow to release the tension. Instead, he kept his hands to himself and asked, “Would you marry me without your brother’s consent?”

“You’re a fool to think I wouldn’t.”

“Then should we set off for Gretna Green?”

She stared up at him with the brightest smile he’d ever witnessed. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.” He ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms bringing her hands to the front for him to hold. “Lady Hazel, will you marry me?”



HAZEL BLINKED RAPIDLY TWICE. The man was being serious. For a moment she was tempted to say yes and throw all propriety to the wind, but then reality hit her. There were still three words she wished to hear Samuel say to her. Although she had already confessed her love for him and was certain that her feelings for him would not change, it's be unwise for her to agree to wed Samuel without first hearing a confession of love. Wouldn't it?

She squeezed his hands and said, "Running away to Scotland is not the answer, my lord."

He tried to pull away but she held on tight to him and continued, "Do you really wish to spend the rest of your days with me?"

"Do you not?" He arched just his right brow at her.

To date, Hazel hadn't dared to verbally spar with Samuel on such topics that had the potential to reveal her insecurities. "I asked first."

Samuel withdrew his hands from hers and placed them upon her waist to draw her closer. Staring directly down at her he answered, "Yes. It would be an honor to be by your side, to be your husband and to be the father of your children."

An image of a miniature version of Samuel appeared in her mind and Hazel's heart skipped a beat. There was no doubt in her mind that Samuel cared for her, but did he love her? A marriage founded in unrequited love was not what she dreamed of.

She rested her forehead against his chest and said, "I feel the same. It would be my honor to become your wife."

He pushed her back away by the shoulders and his gaze searched her face. "Does that mean you agree, you are saying yes, you will marry me?" The uncertainty in Samuel's tone was foreign to Hazel's ears.

She shook her head. "Not exactly."

Samuel's hands immediately dropped to his side and he took a step back.

Not caring for the extra space between them she step forward and grabbed him by the lapels. "Don't retreat. Let me explain." She waited for him to nod and then she proceeded to say, "I wish for us to court, to explore and confirm these feelings we have for one another. And if we are still in agreement by the end of the Season, but Richard continues to have objections, then we can take a trip up north."

When Samuel shook his head, she released him and it was her turn to take a step back. She didn't get far, as he reached for her and caught her right elbow.

He shook his head slowly from side-to-side and said, "I don't need to court you. I already know with all my heart that you are the only woman for me. But if you are still uncertain, I'm willing to do whatever is needed to prove to you that I love you and only you."

Hearing the three words she'd given up hope on ever receiving from Samuel instantly squashed her fears of marrying the man. "You love me?"

This time, when he answered he nodded and gave her his winsome smile. "I do, and will for the rest of my days."

"You won't regret it?"

"Never." He slipped his hand down her arm and held onto her hand. "Ready to embark upon an adventure?"

Enjoying the banter that so reminded her of their conversations last Season, she grinned and asked, "Are you sure you want to bank on a bluestocking?"

"I'm certain." Samuel dropped down onto one knee. "Lady Hazel, will you be my wife?"

She gazed upon the man she loved wholeheartedly and replied, "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

He rose and picked her up by the waist and twirled her about until they were both dizzy. When Samuel set her back down on the ground he cupped her face and kissed her—

soundly. Whether it was from spinning about or from his kiss, Hazel found herself weak at the knees. As if sensing her dilemma, Samuel scooped her up into his arms and carried her toward his awaiting coach.

“Are you taking me home?” she asked.

“Not unless that is your preferred destination. I was rather hoping you’d agree to journey up north to Gretna Green so you can become the Viscountess of Thornsbee post haste. I hate to admit it, but at present I’m not on the best of terms with the Archbishop, so obtaining a special license is simply not feasible, and I certainly don’t want to delay wedding you until all the banns have been read.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “I hear Gretna Green is beautiful this time of year.”

Samuel chuckled and said, “It is indeed.”

The Thornsbee footman held open the coach door for them and rather than setting her down, Samuel stepped up into the coach and settled her upon his lap on the forward facing bench seat. She’d never felt more safe and secure. Slightly overwhelmed, she buried her face into his shoulder and took in a deep breath.

“Are you all right?” He gently stroked her back as if it was the most natural thing to do.

How could she not love this man? He was kind, intelligent and patient. She murmured into his coat, “Hmm. I’m fine... I’m exactly where I want to be.”

Exhausted, she closed her eyes and let the gentle sway of the coach as they made their way through the streets of London lull her to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

Samuel paced in front of the blacksmith's anvil, worried he'd made a mistake by not sending word to Richard as soon as they had set off for Gretna Green. He'd waited until they had left the outskirts of London before ordering a footman back to town to inform Bixley of Hazel's whereabouts and destination. Her brother should have caught up with them. Samuel had set a leisurely pace, but the blasted man had yet to appear. What if the news of Hazel dashing off to get married gave the young and hale earl an apoplexy?

Marrying Hazel without Bixley's blessing still remained a point of contention for Samuel. He would have preferred to have at the very least a conversation with Bixley man-to-man before he and Hazel tied the knot.

Pocket watch in hand, Samuel glanced down to check on the time once more. Hazel would be down any moment. Still unaccustomed to the fluttering in his stomach that occurred every time he thought of Hazel, he pressed a hand over his waistband and inhaled slowly. The terror of failing the woman you love could very well be one of the reasons gentlemen of the ton didn't marry for powerful emotion, instead choosing a wife for either political or financial reasons. Despite his fears, Samuel couldn't envision marrying anyone but Hazel.

Another shallow breath, another heartbeat passed before the sound of booted footsteps on the stone path behind him had Samuel swiveling around. On the arm of her brother, Hazel stalled Samuel's heart with her beauty.

As brother and sister approached, Hazel spoke first. “Sorry to have kept you waiting, my lord.”

He didn’t miss Bixley’s scowl, but Samuel couldn’t help but return Hazel’s unrestrained smile. “No need to apologize. I’m glad to see you—the both of you.”

Bixley stepped in front of Hazel, cutting her off. “A word, Thornsbee, before the smithy arrives.”

Samuel nodded and followed Bixley.

They hadn’t taken but two steps before Bixley looked back over his shoulder and peered around Samuel to address Hazel. “Dear sister mine... you promised me two minutes and I intend to use all one hundred and twenty seconds, so stay put until we return.” Bixley continued forward until they were no longer within hearing if they whispered.

As Samuel expected, Bixley lowered his voice and said softly, “Hazel informed me she was under no duress or coercion when she agreed to traverse across England to marry you, which I can share with you was a huge relief. However, I also know she set her sights on marrying you last Season, and knowing how stubborn she can be, I’ll ask you the same questions I asked her. Were you by any chance blackmailed? Did she kidnap you? Do you really wish to wed Hazel?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle but when Bixley’s scowl darkened, he quickly shed all levity and replied, “Yes, your sister is rather tenacious; however, I can confirm that I’m marrying Hazel of my own accord.”

“You promise to care and love her, and only her?”

He took a moment to mull over Bixley’s question and then answered, “I solemnly swear, although in reality I can’t promise she won’t shed a tear or two over the years. Life is full of challenges.”

Bixley’s shoulders relaxed and the man’s fierce scowl disappeared. “I’m glad to hear you are mature enough to know this and not to make promises you can’t keep.” Bixley extended his hand and said, “I grant you and Hazel my blessing.”

Samuel shook Bixley's hand. "My thanks for coming and for your blessing."

Bixley's cheeks pinkened and then he said, "To be honest, I've been tailing you both ever since you left the park. Hazel's safety and well being has always been a priority for me, but after observing your actions over the past five days and the pains you took to see to Hazel's care, I'm confident I'll be leaving her in good hands."

All Samuel could do was smile and shake his head. He could only hope if he had a son and daughter that they would share a bond similar to the one Hazel possessed with Bixley. Samuel threw his arm over Bixley's shoulders and said, "I'm ready to wed."

Bixley finally smiled and replied, "Better you than me."



HANDS BOUND, Hazel walked back inside the inn with her husband to partake in a light meal with Richard before her brother set off to return to London. Handfasting and the signing of the wedding certificate was a simple affair and, as far as Hazel was concerned, absolutely perfect. She peeked up at Samuel who was deep in a conversation with her brother about the latest bill to be discussed in the House of Lords this season.

"I shall give you my proxy," Samuel said.

Richard nodded. "Since we are in agreement upon the matter, I shall use it wisely."

Seeing the two men she loved conversing in such an amicable manner had Hazel smiling from ear-to-ear. Not wanting to be left out, she leaned slightly forward and asked, "Brother, are you certain you can't stay longer?"

While Samuel and Richard shared a side glance and smirks that the pair of them appeared to understand, Hazel was at a complete loss as to what they found so amusing about her question.

Her brother cleared his throat and replied, "Since our departure was rather hasty, there are a number of matters that are awaiting my attention. You need not worry though, I shall make the appropriate apologies on your behalf to your friends for not including them on this momentous day."

She wanted to plant her hands on her hips, but with one hand bound to her husband all she could do to express her displeasure was to scowl at Richard. "There is no need to apologize to Daphne, I'm certain she will not mind in the least."

"Well you do know her best." Her brother held out a chair for her and then pulled out the one next to hers for Samuel and said, "Brother."

Richard's acknowledgement of Samuel as family altered her entire mood from annoyance back to fondness. Blast her brother for knowing how to manage her so well. She turned away to hide her burning cheeks from her brother's sight only to find Samuel paying close attention to her exchange with Richard. Head cocked to one side, she said, "Shall we dine?"

As if he was attempting not to grin, Samuel's lips twitched ever so slightly, resulting in a brief yet charming lopsided smile. "If you wish."

What she really wanted was to be rid of her brother before he exposed any more secrets as to how best to deal with her.

Hmm... repeating Samuel's response over once more in her mind she took advantage of the fact her husband always did his best to make her wishes come true. "It seems I've lost my appetite."

Oddly, Samuel and Richard exchanged a glance similar to the one they shared earlier. Her brother didn't mask his smirk and said, "If that is the case I shall leave you two be. I'd like to reach the next coaching inn before sunset." Richard placed a chaste kiss upon her cheek and added, "No need to see me off."

For the first time, Hazel wasn't scared of Richard leaving her. She painted a bright smile and replied, "Safe travels."

Moments later when Richard was no longer in sight, she found herself once again being held close by her husband. And once again he provided comfort without question or request. Samuel would always and forever be there for her. She tilted her head back and professed, "I love you."

Without hesitation Samuel kissed her forehead and returned the sentiment, "And I love you."

The End.

ABOUT RACHEL ANN SMITH

Rachel Ann Smith writes steamy historical romances with a twist. Her debut series, Agents of the Home Office, features female protagonists that defy convention.

When Rachel isn't writing she loves to read and spend time with the family. You will often find her with her eReader, by the pool during the summer, or on the sidelines of the soccer field in the spring and fall or curled up on the couch during the winter months. She currently lives in Texas with her extremely understanding husband and their two very supportive children.

Rachel Ann also writes contemporary romance under Rachel A. Smith. You can sign-up for her newsletters here: www.rachelannsmith.com

PADS, PURSES, AND PLUM
PUDDING

BY USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR - AUBREY WYNNE

FOREWORD

The Story of Paddy's Peelers

Patrick O'Brien, previously of the Dublin Police Force, left Dublin with his wife Margaret and arrived in London in 1798. Paddy was frustrated with the lack of government involvement in crime and the poor, unreliable pay received by officers. He wanted to belong to an organized body of policing.

Margaret's stepbrother worked as a Bow Street Runner, and this new policing force greatly interested O'Brien. It was directly attached to the magistrates and court housed at 4 Bow Street and received some funds from the central government through grants. The Runners were to become the model of the future, proving to the government and the public that a professional police force could reduce crime.

O'Brien soon gained a reputation at the Bow Street court for his clever and expedient investigations. While his professional life provided him great satisfaction, his personal life was lacking. He and his wife lamented the absence of children in their household.

When Paddy stumbled across a sick waif in an alley in Whitehall, he brought the lad home. Over the years, their "family" grew to a brood of seven. The couple developed the unique talents of their six boys and one girl, eventually creating a detective agency as the children grew into adulthood. The men would spend an allotted time as a constable for Bow Street while working in the "family business."

Nicknamed Paddy's Peelers (*peeler* slang for an Irish policeman), O'Brien's crew became an efficient team that included detectives, a physician that doubled as a coroner for autopsies, a solicitor who specialized in criminal law, a female master of disguise able to infiltrate any level of society, and a barrister who later joined their ranks to present certain cases pro bono in a High Court.

PADS, PURSES, AND PLUM PUDDING

Dr. Sampson Brooks is on a case that has nothing to do with medicine. He vows to help bring down the man who ruined his father and sent his mother to an early grave. When the villain's top henchmen are apprehended, Sam attends the hanging. While closing one chapter of his story, he unexpectedly opens another.

Dottie Brown, young and naïve, is duped by a charming swindler. A year after the wedding, she learns he's not what he pretends to be. Watching him on the gallows, she vows never to be taken in by romantic notions again. Yet fate tosses two obstacles in her path that day—a handsome physician and an abandoned child.

A chance encounter reveals one woman's secret, another man's revenge, and a love that will change their lives forever.

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Thank you

PROLOGUE

Christmas Eve 1802

East London

The icy rain misted around Sam, coating his thin jacket, seeping into his cracked shoes. He was so cold. His stomach hurt. He had nowhere to go. Approaching footsteps—at least two sets—echoed eerily behind him, so he turned a corner and hurried into a dark alley. With his back to the slimy wall, he watched three dark forms pass him.

Sam had no money for them to steal, but they'd take his coat and shoes. He slid to the ground, leaning against a cluster of barrels, and closed his eyes. Just for a moment. Just until he could figure out where to go. His trembling hands pulled the coat tightly around his neck, and he huddled with his head against his knees, feeling his warm breath go through the ragged wool of his breeches.

“Sam, would you light the plum pudding?” His mother’s soft voice matched the gentle touch on his shoulder. She was so beautiful in the deep-blue silk gown that matched her shining eyes.

He looked to his father, excitement rising in his chest.

“Sir?”

“You’re a young man of ten—almost eleven now, Sampson.” There was an odd catch to his father’s voice that Sam had rarely heard. Smoothing his thick

black hair, his father tugged on his brocade waistcoat before continuing, "It's time you took on more responsibility and learned your place in the world. Don't you agree, Mrs. Brooks?"

His mother blinked rapidly and nodded. "Yes, dear."

To Sam's surprise, she pulled him into a tight hug. Pressing her lips to his forehead, she whispered, "Remember, we love you very much."

"Mama, don't overset yourself." He gave her a peck on the cheek as she poured brandy into a cup. He gave his father a side glance with his eyebrow raised, wondering why they were both so out of character tonight. "It must be the holiday making you both sentimental."

A thought struck him. "It isn't because I'll be going off to Winton next fall? I'll always be home for Christmastide."

"Of course you shall!" His father slapped Sam on the back and handed his wife the sprig of holly to place on top of the dessert. "But this will be the last Christmas... well... as we have known them. You're becoming a man, and someday, God willing, you'll have your own house with your own family. Life can change in the blink of an eye or the stroke of a pen..." Mr. Brooks blinked and turned toward the window.

Mrs. Brooks smiled brightly. "No dour thoughts tonight, my love. Let us enjoy the festivities."

His father retrieved the tinder box from the mantel and handed it to his son. Sampson poured the brandy over the dessert, a smile turning up his mouth as the liquor pooled around the bottom of the plate. It was a fine brandy—his father had taught him the difference between the smooth and cheap blends.

"Papa?" Given a nod of approval, Sam pulled a slender pine stick from the box and held it to the hearth fire. The brimstone at the end flared yellow and

orange. He slowly turned and touched the burning end to the pool of brandy surrounding the dessert.

With a loud poof! the plum pudding was surrounded in flame. He held his breath as the dessert flickered, the pungent scent of brandy mixed with the sweetmeats. The Brooks family laughed and clapped, Mr. and Mrs. Brooks kissed, then hugged their son, and wished one another a happy Christmas. As his mother cut each of them a slice, his father poured the wine.

It was the best day of the year for Sam. He had received his own writing set, with a bottle of ink and a journal to write in. "For your memories, ponderances, and the most valuable lessons you shall learn in life," his father had said when he'd opened the gift.

After they finished eating, they gathered around the harpsichord. His mother's slender fingers touched the wooden keys lovingly, then impatiently brushed at a tear rolling down her pink cheek. With a deep breath, her fingers hit the keys with gusto, playing "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks" as they all sang. Afterwards, his parents took their chairs before the fire, waiting for Sampson to read to them.

He settled on the plush rug, leaning against his mother's legs, and opened the bible to a marked section in the Book of Matthew. The story of Nazareth and the babe born in a stable was always the crown on the evening. The fire crackled cheerily before them, faces of family now gone watching over them from the mantel.

Sampson cleared his throat as he always did before reading aloud, then paused. He looked up at his father, pride beating in his chest for the man who had begun life as a coal boy and now was a prosperous merchant. His mother was known as the Beautiful Mrs. Brooks. Sampson would continue to improve the family name by attending Winton, moving on to university, then studying at the Inns of Court. There, he would study law and become a solicitor. Make his father proud. Oh,

how he wanted to be as respected and successful as his father.

“Papa, tell me again what my days will be like at Winton?” He would begin the Michaelmas term in October. It seemed more like years rather than months away.

“Well, first of all, you’ll become accustomed to a new routine. Your studies will be difficult, but you have a quick mind. I am confident you will—”

A swift kick to the backside woke Sampson from his dream.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” sneered a voice from the shadows of the alley. “Anything worth my time?”

Sam swiped at his face and squinted at the dark figures hovering over him. The chill damp stone had soaked through his bones. He tried to sit up, one palm landing in something slick, *what* he didn’t want to think about. He wiped his hand against the wooden barrel he’d been leaning on before he fell asleep.

The man wore a filthy wool coat with the collar turned up against the cold. His hair was hung down from under his cap, but greasy strands had come loose and stuck to the side of his face. Puffs of white floated from his nose when he snorted, still peering down at Sam.

“Leave the lad alone, will ye?” pleaded a woman. She was dressed in a tight gown that exposed her generous bosom. A thin shawl covered her shoulders. “I’m givin’ ye what yer lookin’ fer. It’s Christmas Eve—let the boy be.” She whispered something in the man’s ear, and he grinned, displaying brownish-gray teeth.

“C’mon then, my little bat. Let’s see if yer worth the price.”

They moved on, stopping in the blackness at the end of the alley. Their laughter and moans faded as Sam scurried back onto the street.

Only a year ago, he'd been surrounded by loving parents, a fine home, a warm bed, and a promising future. Tonight, he'd be grateful for a chunk of bread and a coat not threadbare, sleeves that covered his arms, and shoes that fit without holes. His stomach growled painfully after the cruel recurring nightmare. The memory of that last dinner of roasted fowl and plum pudding made his mouth water. He chewed on his chapped bottom lip, and it started to bleed. The salty, metallic taste made him gag.

It had been a nightmare when the constable came to arrest his father. February second, Candlemas Day. In hindsight, he understood the disappearing furniture "out for repair," his mother insisting she enjoyed performing household duties for her "men" as the cook, then the maid quit. The poorer quality of their meals had been explained away by the change in butcher or baker. Yet, Mr. Brooks had refused to sell the harpsichord—his wife's only possession she'd brought into their marriage.

After several months, what little blunt his father had been able to take with him had been sorely depleted. They'd had to move to more crowded quarters. His mother's cough worsened inside the damp stone walls, shoved together with so many people that there was no room for cots. So, Sam had left the prison and looked for work. At King's Bench, he was one more mouth for his father to feed.

This afternoon, Sam's last coin had gone to his parents, now residing in King's Bench. It had taken half the day to make it to the Southwark prison and cost a farthing of his precious stolen hoard to see them. But his fragile mother would die in the debtor's prison without a dry place to sleep and sustenance. He'd been horrified to learn that one must pay for everything in gaol. It made no sense. His father was in debt, yet he might never leave the prison walls because all their blunt went to the wardens. Without the payments, his parents would suffer worse conditions in an overcrowded cell, layers of filthy straw for a mattress, fending off even hungrier, more desperate inmates.

He learned to survive. Therefore, his parents would survive. But it was a daily struggle to find a position when one had no manual labor skills, only book learning. Grown men with families claimed any position Sam might have been qualified for.

He tried street sweeping, but he didn't have the gumption for it. The successful boys jumped in front of people, swept a path for them, then demanded or finagled money from the unlucky passersby. He was too big for a chimney sweep. A barkeep gave him a corner in the kitchen in exchange for running errands and tending the fire. With a place to sleep, Sam had held horses for the genteel and sold newspapers on the street during the day. A modiste gave him soup and bread whenever she needed a chore done around her shop. But it was barely enough to keep himself fed and warm, let alone support his parents.

And then the final blow. Last week, a new barkeep had taken over the tavern. He had his own sons to help him, and Sam found himself out on his ear without a place to sleep.

So, much to his horror, he found himself snatching food from stands and running like the thief he'd vowed never to become. At low tide, he joined the other mudlarkers, combing the Thames muddy bottom for anything he could sell. His clothes reeked of the foul river, the cuffs of his shirt and hems of his breeches in tatters. His hands and feet blistered from the constant exposure to the frigid water and muck. There, a boy of five had befriended him, offering "trade secrets" on pickpocketing for a share of Sampson's stolen food.

Sampson J. Brooks, once a future solicitor with the world before him, was now a thief and a pickpocket—still an apprentice-in-training for the latter. He hadn't actually picked any pockets or stolen any purses yet. But it had to be better than mudlarking. Except his hands shook every time he thought about it.

"Where're ye goin' so early, my friend?" A drunken portly woman called out from the tavern door across the street.

A large man stumbled out, his hand up in a friendly goodnight wave, the echo of music and laughter following his huge dark form. “Home. I’ve a wife waiting.”

The murky yellow light spilling from the grimy window framed the customer’s silhouette into a giant menacing shadow. Sampson couldn’t see his face, but he could feel the strength of the man. The glint of gold flashed as the man twirled his walking cane.

Sam leaned back, blending into the shadows of the stone steps and hoping the man would head his way. He did, weaving ever so slightly across the street toward Sam. Collecting his courage, Sam hid in the dark corner of the stoop, willing the feeling back into his calloused hands. As the gentleman passed by—for he must have been a gentleman from his fine coat, hat, and gleaming boots—Sam prayed to any god listening that the man was foxed.

Slipping from the darkness, Sampson quickly moved behind the tall form, mimicking his victim’s walk as the river lad had taught him. When the man leaned to the right, then to the left, so did Sampson. He eyed the walking cane with the gleaming handle and intricately carved stick, knowing it would bring a month’s keep at the pawn shop.

He sucked in a deep breath, lunged forward, his hand grasping the stick, and—

“Mother Mary and Joseph, boy-o. What ye doin’?”

A great paw pulled Sampson up by the back of his collar. It began to rip, and he struggled, praying the cheap wool that had never kept him warm would at least aid in his escape. His feet hit the ground again, and Sam took off once more, only to have the hook of the cane pull him back by his neck.

“Oh-ho. Ye tink to get away so easy?” boomed the deep voice.

Sampson raised his head and looked at the barrel-chested Irishman. His brogue was as thick as his red hair and beefy hands. *I’m doomed.* He squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the sturdy fist to find its target.

He stared at Sam for a while, then gave him another shake.

“Open those eyes, boyo,” the stranger demanded. “Ye want ta die in a rat-infested prison or be transported ta Australia?”

Sam shook his head, terrified of this monstrosity of a man.

“Tis no answer, boyo.”

Sam shook his head again, blinking back the hot tears stinging his eyes.

“No tongue? A mute, are ye?”

“No, my lord.”

That seemed to amuse the man for he let out a hearty guffaw. “I’m a hardworkin’ Irishman. Not a drop of blue blood in me.”

“Yes sir,” Sam croaked.

“The workhouse would give ye a meal and a cot ta sleep on.”

“I need coin, sir.”

He barked a laugh. “Don’t we all. There’re better ways ta get it.”

“I’ve tried, sir,” Sam managed, seeing his mother’s tearstained face when he never showed up at King’s Bench again.

The man’s blue eyes narrowed, studying Sam for a long while. Sam held his gaze, waiting to be dragged to the nearest constable. *Why had he tried for that walking stick?*

“So ye have manners, I see. Where’d ye learn ‘em?”

“My parents, sir.”

“And where might they be?”

“At King’s Bench, sir.”

Another long stare as Sam fought the urge to squirm.

“How long ye been on the streets?”

“April last, sir.”

“What’d ye do before the family was put away?”

“My father owned a bookshop, and I was to start Winton last month.” Something in the stranger’s tone had changed, sparking a tiny flicker of hope in Sam’s chest.

“How long ye been stealin’ from honest folks?”

“Except for food from the costermongers—and only the finer dressed ones—you are my first. And I wish to God I could undo it!” he blurted out to his captor. “I swear I’ll never do it again.”

“The fat is in the fire, lad.” The stranger eased up a bit on the cane around Sam’s neck, then snorted. “Do ye want a hot meal and a cot ta sleep on?”

Sam nodded his head vigorously, his chin bumping the gold crook of the stick.

“Are ye willin’ ta work for it?”

Another energetic nod.

“D’ye have a dram of loyalty in yer blood?” asked the burly man.

“At least a barrel, sir, if you don’t hand me over to the constable.”

“I’ll want every drop. I can put ye ta work but no tongue waggin’.” He squinted at the Sam. “I see sumtin’ in those sad eyes, boyo. If I be a bettin’ man, I’d say ye learnt some life lessons and will come out the better for it.”

Sam hung his head, blinking back pesky tears.

“Tink about it, boyo—”

“It’s Sampson J. Brooks.” He looked the Irishman in the eye. “My name is Samspon J. Brooks. I can read, write, and keep a ledger. I’ve read a dozen books about plants and healing. My brain is quick, but my hands...” He held up his hands, palm up, implying that pickpocketing wasn’t his best skill.

“Oh, ho! Well, Sampson, I don’t need a thief in my employ.” He removed the cane from the boy’s neck. “Tis yer

lucky day, for I'm goin' to release ye. If ye run, I'll not chase ye. That action will tell me ye ain't worth the effort." He nodded and grinned. "If ye come wit' me, ye get a cot, a warm meal, and Christmas wit' the most generous and kind woman God's ever seen fit ta put on dis earth."

A tear slid down Sam's cheek, and he brushed at it with an angry jerk. He tried to take a deep breath, but a pain shot up his ribs. Could he trust this man? He didn't appear to be an angel. But then, Sam had never seen one except in religious books. He felt the giant paw on his thin shoulder and looked up. It couldn't be worse than gaol.

You have manners, he'd said. Sam did have manners, and he'd make his mother proud.

"I would be honored to accompany you home, sir."

"There's the spirit, boyo. I'm Paddy O'Brien. *Mister* O'Brien ta the likes of ye." He chuckled, a warm rumbling sound that made Sam smile too—his first in months. "I think my Kate will take ta ye, once she's cleaned ye up."

CHAPTER ONE

July 1820

Cheapside, London

The front door opened, bringing with it the clatter of horse hoofs, the stench of the city, and a handsome dark-haired man with a roguish smile. “Luvvy, I’m home.”

Mrs. Robert Dunn met him with a grin and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Did you miss me?”

“Always.” He gave her a sound kiss, pulling her close and swinging her in a circle before setting her down with a smack on her arse. “I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

Dorothea shook her head. “Not tonight. We are celebrating, and I won’t tolerate anything dour.” She pulled him to the wingback chair in front of the coal stove. “I’ll pour you some brandy.”

Robert eased his stocky frame into the chair with a heavy sigh. “I suppose it can wait.” His nostrils twitched and he nodded toward the “kitchen” at the other end of the room. “What magic are you working in there, luvvy?”

A rabbit sizzled over the small hearth fire, and a loaf of bread waited on the table with freshly churned butter. Shortbread—her husband’s favorite—was hidden away in a basket. A perfect dinner for their first anniversary.

Dorothea untied her apron and eased it over her head, careful not to muss her hair. Arranged in a loose chignon, she

took a quick peek at the dulled mirror and pulled down some of her auburn curls to nestle against her cheeks.

“You’re wearing my favorite gown,” Robert said with a wink. “I thought of your eyes when I bought it.” He had given her the deep-blue muslin dress last Christmas. A white satin ribbon emphasized the high waist and delicate lace bordered the modest neckline and cap sleeves.

“You say that every time I wear it.” She had begun sewing tiny delicate birds of peace along the hem. It would be perfect to wear again during next Christmastide. The white wings seemed to take flight as she moved across the small parlor to rejoin her husband.

She handed him a cup, and he took it, pulling her onto his lap along with the drink. “I swear you get prettier every day. How did I get so lucky?”

With a laugh, she pushed off his lap. “You charmed me before I knew any better.”

“You stole my heart at first glance.” He nuzzled her neck, making her giggle. “Remember?”

“How could I forget?”

She had taken some of her students from the Darlington School for Girls into the nearby village. Dorothea, then Miss Brown, had been employed there as an instructor of French, household accounts (knowledge mandatory for every good wife), and the pianoforte. With their proximity to London, many wealthy merchants sent their daughters there for “polish.”

“Here I was, minding my own business—”

“Whistling at ladies is not minding your own business,” she interrupted with a giggle, stroking her hand through his thick black hair.

“Who’s telling this story?” Robert’s dark eyes twinkled as he tugged on one of her curls. “Here comes this gaggle of girls”—he held up a finger when she opened her mouth—“tittering and pretending not to look at me. Their chaperone is gaping so hard that she trips and falls right into my arms.”

She kissed his cheek. “And they lived happily ever after.”

“It did take six months of wooing to get you to say yes, luvvy.”

“Do you regret it?” Why did she always ask him this? Because she’d never expected to find a husband and have a family. A spinster helping other young ladies find happiness had been her future. And she’d been more than satisfied with her lot until Mr. Robert Dunn had burst into her life.

“Never. And you? Are you happy?”

His sudden serious demeanor sent a shiver up her spine. Something was wrong. *Tomorrow. Ask tomorrow.* “Only one thing could make it better,” she whispered in his ear.

“That will come, luvvy. In fact, the more we try—”

“The sooner I’ll be with child.” She grinned as he threw back the whiskey and stood, cradling her in his arms.

“Enough said.”



A week later

DOROTHEA SAT IN THE ROCKER, mending some socks, humming an old tune her mother used to sing to her as a child. A knock on the door interrupted her musings. When she answered, Mr. Cotter, one of the local constables stood before her, hat in hand.

“Beg your pardon, Mrs. Dunn. May I come in?” His stern look made her stomach clench.

“What’s wrong? Is it Robert? Is he hurt?” Panic skittered up her spine as the older man walked past him. His short gray hair was tousled by the strong winds of the day, and he stood rigid by the door.

“No, ma’am. I need... to speak with him.” She shut the door as two men passed by, giving her a side-glance. The taller man, older with red hair, caught her gaze and held it for a brief

moment. She slammed the door against the overwhelming sense of danger.

“I’m afraid Mr. Dunn isn’t home yet. I expect him soon, though. Would you like to wait?”

Mr. Cotter bobbed his head. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

“I’ll fix us some tea while we—”

“No need, Mrs. Dunn.” He averted her gaze when she gave him a questioning look.

The heavy silence set off more warning bells. Did this have something to do with the “bad news” Robert had wanted to tell her last week? Was he in some kind of trouble? She knew little of his position with the man she knew only as “The Vicar.” It paid well, but he kept irregular hours. Robert said his employer was very private, and he often had to go out in the middle of the night to assist distraught parishioners.

The door burst open, and Robert rushed through it, an unfamiliar air of urgency sweeping in with him. “We have to pack, luvvy. I don’t have time to explain, but we need—”

He froze, taking in the constable standing near the stove. “Ah, Mr. Cotter,” he said, his tone smoothing out, the familiar Robert returning. “How’s the missus? That boy of yours sure is growing.”

“None o’ that will be necessary. I’m afraid you know why I’m here.” The constable moved forward. “Let’s make this easier on your wife and come along quietly.”

“No! There must be some mistake.” She looked wildly from her husband to Mr. Cotter, their friend. “He’s done nothing wrong.”

When she locked her gaze on Robert, her stomach roiled. His dark eyes were black and cold as a moonless winter night. She didn’t know this man who stood before her. Her Robert was warm and kind and charming. This man...

“Robert?” she asked in a quivering voice, her hand finding the back of a chair to hold her up. “What have you done?”

“Don’t look at me like that,” he sneered. “You’ve enjoyed all the finery I’ve given you, the life you’ve had with me. Do you think it comes without a price?”

“But you work for a man of God...” Dorothea shook her head. None of this made any sense.

“The Vicar is no man of God, ma’am,” said Mr. Cotter. “He’s the head of a criminal ring, and your husband is one of his best henchmen.”

Robert made a dash for the door, Dorothea screamed, and the constable cursed. A scuffle in the alley, more cursing, followed by “Where ye off ta in such a hurry, boyo?”

She ran outside to see the redheaded man and his partner dragging her husband away. Her breaths came in rapid spurts as she cried out, then all went black.



End of July 1820

Newgate Prison

“WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU NOW?” Dorothea asked, though she already knew the answer.

The nightmares came every night—the rope swinging, Robert’s feet dangling. The fear that after all this time, she might be pregnant—and alone.

She still couldn’t reconcile this man before her with the charismatic gentleman she’d married. The dazzling smile that had melted her heart, soft kisses that promised a happy future. What a fool she’d been. What a monster he was.

“We both know my fate, luvvy,” he said softly.

“Don’t call me that. Don’t ever call me that again.” But she had to ask, had to know for sure. “Is it true? You’ve kidnapped children and killed men? For some mysterious employer who goes by the ridiculous moniker of The Vicar?”

“Careful, now. He’s a dangerous man with a network of criminals to do his bidding and spies all over London. Keep your mouth shut or they’ll find you floating in the Thames.” Robert scowled, then answered her with a heavy sigh. “I killed my first man when I was ten. It was him or me. The Vicar kept me from hanging, so I was told, and I’ve been working for him ever since. Worked my way up.”

“To kidnapping little boys and girls?”

“That was a side job. We took the boys from one flash house and sold them to another. They were already in hell. We just swapped them to another for a price. I do as I’m told.” His eyes pleaded with her to forgive or at least understand, the softness returning to his gaze. “It means a lot that you came to see me one last time.”

“I came for answers, to try to make sense of this before...” She turned her head, blinking back the tears.

“Did you get the money?” he asked, as if that would make it all better.

She nodded, feeling the heat in her cheeks. One of Robert’s “associates” had brought her his last wages. Dorothea had wanted to throw the bank notes back in the man’s face, but common sense won out. She had to eat. “I have to be out by the end of the week.”

“Will you go back to the school? You seemed happy there,” he said, trying to smile.

“Ha! She can’t take me back now. I’ll soon be the widow of a murderer and a thief.” She closed her eyes, praying for the strength to get through this visit, this week, this year. “In fact, no one seems to want me to hire me or be associated with ‘trouble.’ I’m-I’m scared a-and I’ll *never* forgive you.”

That hard glint was back, his eyes as shiny as a watching crow. Dorothea shivered. She’d been happy at the Darlington School for Girls. Content and useful. He’d burned that bridge for her.

“Did you ever love me?” Why did it matter? She wouldn’t believe a syllable he uttered.

“I believe you are the only person on this earth I’ve ever loved. When I was with you, I *was* the man I pretended—dreamed—of being.” He stood, took a deep breath, and walked away.

“And now I dream of the gallows.” A tear slipped down her cheek. Not for the loss of this man, this stranger, but for the loss of her innocence and the fairy tale that had ended. The realization that the world wasn’t a wonderful place. It was its own kind of purgatory, and she’d have to bide her time and become a fighter. Or she’d never survive.

CHAPTER TWO

August 1820

Newgate Prison gallows

Samson didn't usually attend public hangings, but this one was an exception. He stared at the fifteen men lined up on the gallows, understood the fear in their eyes. It was frightening to meet your maker before you could atone for your sins. Those men would never have the opportunity.

He had helped put three of them on that platform, a small part of The Vicar's vast network. Sam had worked for Patrick O'Brien's agency, nicknamed Paddy's Peelers, to nab the criminals. The Peelers assisted local magistrates in tracking down criminals. O'Brien had come from Ireland to join the Bow Street runners and had slowly begun his own agency. He had acquired a reputation for thorough investigations. When the magistrate couldn't track a criminal, they called in Paddy and his Peelers. Many private citizens often went straight to O'Brien and saved time.

"Lookin' for some entertainment after the 'angin'?"

He looked down at the doxie, gave her a half smile, and shook his head. "This is enough excitement for me."

Turning away from her and pushing into the crowd, he tried to tune out the festive chatter, shouts of vendors, and a fiddle playing somewhere behind him. He was concentrating on the men standing on the far right of the gallows. They

weren't responsible for selling the fake certificate of insurance to Sam's father, but they were three of that vile criminal's most industrious employees, overseeing half his operations in Town. It would cause a large hole in The Vicar's network.

"Good riddance," Sampson mumbled as the trap doors opened, and the crowd roared their approval. He turned abruptly and pushed his way back through the cheering throng. Another battle won, but the war raged on.



DOROTHEA STOOD ALONE in a multitude of people, clutching her shawl at her neck against the strong gust. The crowd watched the gallows in excitement, waiting for the men to swing in the wind. She, on the other hand, just wanted this chapter of her life to end. She had moved to another part of Cheapside, remained a widow, but took back her surname. She had been fairly isolated when she was married, preferring to play the wife. To her surprise, few people recognized her when she introduced herself as Mrs. Dottie Brown. They turned their back on Mrs. Richard Dunn.

She'd changed in the past few weeks, no longer humming as she worked, no longer eager to see what was around the next corner. She had a plan. Earn enough money and move to America. No one would know her, no one would care about her past, and no one would ever break her heart again.

A disturbance ahead caught her attention. A man pushed through the mass of people, shouting and cursing. At the same time, Dottie felt a small hand slip into hers. She looked down to see a girl, perhaps six or seven, gazing up at her with huge doe eyes. Her dress was tattered and dirty, her hair uncombed and greasy. The round face was streaked with dirt and... tears?

As the irate man shoved past them, she hid her face in Dottie's skirts.

"Are you alright?" she asked the girl.

The waif shook her head, then peeked over her shoulder to watch the man disappear in the sea of spectators. She studied

Dottie a moment before pointing to the men on the scaffold.

Dottie's heart cracked a little more. "Your father is up there?"

The girl shook her head.

"Your brother?"

She nodded and gripped Dottie's hand more tightly, her eyes pinned on the young man next to Robert on the platform.

A loud *slam* and the men dropped. Dottie closed her eyes against the sight and pulled the girl into her skirts. It was over. Time to start again.

A tall, handsome gentleman with brown hair and hazel eyes paused in front of them. Their eyes met as he passed, and she had the feeling she knew him. Where they would have met, she had no idea. But Dottie was drawn to him in the oddest way. He studied her for a moment as if he, too, found her familiar. With a murmured, "Ma'am," and a tip of his hat, he melted into the crowd.

Dottie looked down at the girl, who nodded, and in silent agreement, the two lonely females left the gallows behind them.



Cheapside

THEY WALKED toward her new home—a cozy room attached to the kitchen of a public house. The owner's wife gave her a place to stay in exchange for baking bread and helping with the cooking. Dottie had a warm bed and a kitchen at her disposal to make her various pastries, which she sold on Gracechurch Street to the busy shoppers. On Sundays, she went to St. James Park where the promenade was crowded with people.

Dottie enjoyed baking, finding it therapeutic as she kneaded the dough and pounded out her frustrations and emotions. She was already making a small profit. Though she

hadn't wanted to take her husband's money made by illegal gains, there would have been no way to buy the ingredients needed to get started.

She looked down at the small girl beside her. "We haven't even introduced ourselves. How remiss of me." Dottie forced a smile. "I'm Mrs. Brown. What is your name?"

The child gazed around, spotted a flower vendor, and pointed.

"A guessing game, is it?" She pondered the array of flowers. "Daisy?"

The girl shook her head.

"Violet?" This time, the child managed a weak smile and nodded.

"That's a fine name. Violet. I like the sound of it. It may suit you once you're cleaned up." She studied her new young friend. "Do you speak?"

Violet shook her head, giving Dottie a woeful look, then gripped her forearm with both hands.

Dottie sighed. "I won't send you off. No reason for both of us to be alone. But it all depends on the landlady. We'll have to think of something to tell her, other than we met at a hanging."

Violet nodded, a big grin transforming her round face. She threw her arms around Dottie, almost toppling them both over. "Goodness, child. Don't send us both to the infirmary with your gratitude."

But Violet had made her heart lighter, and she felt a genuine smile curve her lips for the first time in a month. It felt good. Right. She'd think of something to tell Mrs. Clatterly.

The tavern was busy, and Dottie ushered Violet into her room. "Strip off those filthy clothes, and I'll fetch water for a bath."

Violet shook her head. Disgust curled her lip.

“This is not a choice. If you wish to remain a grubby waif, then off you go. I’ll not share my bed unless you’re clean, and I’ve combed your hair for lice.”

Violet sighed, her small shoulders drooping.

“Well, that wasn’t much of a fight. Good.” Dottie went out to the pump for water and to find a tub.

When she returned, the girl was inspecting the room, drawing a finger over the wood chair, walking to the bed, and pushing on the mattress, a surprised smile lighting her face.

“Do you approve?”

Violet nodded, undressed with no modesty, and stepped into the small tub. She gasped as water was unceremoniously dumped on her head.

“Gracious me. Your hair is blonde!”

An hour later, Violet sat on a stool in front of Dottie, wearing an old shift that had been cut at the bottom. The girl would need clothes. Dottie had refused to wear mourning for a man she had never really known and went with the story that she’d been widowed over a year. Instead, she’d sold her more impractical dresses except for one her father had given her. With the money, she’d bought sturdier material of brown, dark blue, and gray for clothes that would last longer through the summer and winter months.

“I have some material tucked away. You’ll have a new dress by the end of the week. We can take in this old shift and perhaps make a cap from the half I cut off.”

Violet nodded, yawned, and leaned back against Dottie’s legs while she brushed out her hair. Within minutes, she snored quietly. What kind of life had the girl had before today? Fate had sent her, and Dottie would heed the call. She was lonely, and if Violet wanted to stay, they’d find a way. Perhaps Violet could help her atone for Robert’s past.

That night, after a supper of bread, cold meat, and cheese—which Violet stuffed into her mouth like a squirrel storing nuts—they curled up together in the small bed. She had a good start on a dress, and the girl’s tattered clothes had been washed

and hung to dry. She'd cut the old sleeves and hem shorter, removing the ragged edges so the gown didn't look quite so bad. There was nothing to do for the stains, but at least the child would smell better.

It was the first night she did not dream of the gallows. Instead, she was running in a field of violets, laughing and swinging a little blonde girl in a circle. They fell onto the soft grass—

“Mrs. Brown!” Thump, thump, thump. “Mrs. Brown, I hate to bother you.”

Dottie woke with a start. “Coming, Mrs. Clatterly. Just a moment.” Had she overslept?

Violet stirred and made a snuffling sound, her eyelids fluttering, then rolled over as Dottie rose from the bed. She opened the door to find a frazzled landlady.

“I'm sorry to bother ye, but Mr. Clatterly's leg is acting up again. When it gets this bad, he's got to stay off it until the swelling goes down.” She pushed a gray curl under her mobcap and shook her head. “I'm in a pickle. Is there any way you could take over the kitchen this morning while I stay out with the patrons? I can find some extra help later today, so I won't trouble you tomorrow.”

“Of course, ma'am. You've been so kind. I'd be happy to help out.”

“Oh, you're an angel, you are. Once you're dressed, I'll show you what I've got started. Then I'll ready the public room for the early customers. I have several who come to take breakfast.” She scurried away, then returned. “And please help yourself too. Thank you, again.”

Though a bum leg wasn't ideal for Mr. Clatterly, it was the perfect opportunity to install Violet as a scullery maid. Once she had a stool so she could reach the sink, the girl washed dishes with gusto. There was a constant smile on her face, making her brown eyes twinkle.

Mrs. Clatterly took to her instantly. “Where'd you find this pretty little thing?”

Dottie was ready with her story. “My late husband’s sister had some... debts. I’ve written to relations, but if you don’t mind her staying with me until we hear from someone? She doesn’t mind helping out.” Though she hated to lie, she couldn’t say she’d found the waif when she said goodbye to her husband at the gallows.

“No trouble at all. In debtor’s prison, is she? Poor thing. Horrible places, I’ve heard.”

Dottie said a quick prayer of thanks for finding the Clatterlys and began chopping carrots for the day’s soup. By the time she’d finished with the landlady’s work, she was running late and hurriedly packed her cart with her berry tarts and pasties.

“I’ll be back soon,” she told Violet, who nodded with a smile.

She wondered about her new companion and whether she’d ever spoken. Had something happened or was she born that way? Dottie would ask her tonight. Perhaps she was just extremely shy. She’d known a girl at the school who rarely spoke, and when she did, it was in a whisper.

The weather was cooler today, so there were more people strolling the graveled paths of St. James Park. She had sold half the tarts and most of her shortbread when she spied a familiar gentleman approaching on horseback.

The handsome man from... The thought of Newgate made her stomach clench, and she turned her head to avoid meeting his eyes should he look her way. But as the *clip clop* of horses’ hooves grew nearer, she took a deep breath.

CHAPTER THREE

Early September 1820

St. James Park, London

Sam had promised to meet Walters that afternoon. Sir Harry Walters, the first ragamuffin O'Brien had taken in, was bringing his fiancée for a promenade. Walters wasn't comfortable mingling with the *ton* at Hyde Park, so he agreed to St. James. He told Sam they could enjoy a break from the heat, keep his promise to escort Lady Matilda Bancroft for a Sunday stroll, and pass on some information for another case. Sam, however, expected to find not only the couple, but a "friend" who'd just happened by. Lady Matilda seemed intent on finding him a wife since he'd mentioned it may be time to think of the future.

He leaned down and patted his gelding's neck. "Well, Jack, let's see what tortures await us along The Mall, shall we?" As he urged the bay horse forward, a costermonger caught his attention. The woman selling cake seemed familiar... The moment he recognized her, his heart began to pound. The beautiful woman from Newgate! She'd taken his breath away in the instant he'd passed her, even with her red-rimmed eyes. A girl, perhaps her daughter, had held her hand. What had she been doing there? Had a family member or friend been on the gallows? He doubted it had been for entertainment since she'd obviously been crying.

That same odd feeling engulfed Sam again—as if he should know her. Or did know her. Or *would* know her.

“Well, let’s take a closer look.” Before he reached her cart, he dismounted and spotted the tarts and shortbread. Tarts were his favorite. It seemed fate meant for them to meet.

“Good day, ma’am,” he said, eyeing the sweets. “What kind of—” Cornflower blue eyes met his, and his lungs seized for a moment—“eyes do you have?”

“The last time I looked they were blue,” she quipped, arching an auburn brow.

“Tarts. I mean, tarts.” *Beefwit! Stop acting a green boy.*

She smiled, lighting her up her already perfect heart-shaped face. “The last of the berry and some fine shortbread. What’s your preference?”

You.

“A tart, please. I’ve been partial to those and plum pudding since I was a wee lad.” He took the tart, the sugar sprinkled on top glistening in the afternoon sun, and handed her coin as he took a bite.

“That’s too much, my lord,” he heard her say. But his eyes were closed as the berries and sweet pastry hit his tongue.

He shook his head. “I’d pay twice that for one of these.” Licking his lips, he grinned at her.

“I’d be happy to give you another to take with you for that price. Or would you like some shortbread?” Her head tilted as she asked, and he spied her slender neck. Imagined placing kisses along its graceful arch. *Blast! She’s most likely married.*

“I’d wager your husband is one happy man.” Her expression almost made him curse out loud. *Nodcock!*

“I’m a widow.” Her tone was subdued, and her gaze flickered to him and then to the ground. With a forced smile, she lifted the shortbread. “Why don’t you try it?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine. You meant no harm, my lord.” Her lovely cheeks turned pink.

“I’m no lord. Dr. Sampson Brooks at your service.” He extended his hand, putting on the charming smile that always worked for his patients.

“Mrs. Brown,” she said, taking his hand.

At the touch of her palm, a jolt of pleasure shot up his arm. A sensation he’d never experienced. It was exciting and terrifying. His mother’s words came back to him from long ago.

I knew your father was the one the moment he kissed my hand. A woman just knows.

What about men? Did a man *just know*? Sam realized she was waiting for him to release her hand, but he was still gripping her fingers. His cheeks burned until she laughed. A sound so sweet that it put him at ease, and he found himself chuckling along with her.

“I believe I will try that shortbread. You seem to have a magic touch.” He rolled his eyes, still feeling the warmth of her skin on his. “With tarts, er, baking.”

“Thank you, Dr. Brooks. I’ll accept the compliment.” She handed him the bread. “Enjoy your ride.”

“Yes, ma’am—Mrs. Brown,” he returned, tipping his hat. “I hope we meet again.”

“I’m here every Sunday. Bring your friends.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “The more the merrier as they say.”

Sam walked away, leading Jack with one hand and eating the shortbread with the other. Once inside the park, he spotted Walters and waved. The lovely blonde next to him also lifted her arm in greeting, but it was the unfamiliar raven-haired woman who had Sam’s jaw clenched. He knew this had been a ruse.

“Brooks! Good to see you, mon,” the Welshman said a little too enthusiastically. His stiff smile told Sam that his

friend had been duped as well. “We just happened to meet up with—” He looked questioningly at Lady Matilda.

“Dr. Brooks, may I present Miss Halden? Her father is—”

“A banker. I believe I met Mr. Halden at a meeting of the Magdalen Hospital.” He bowed to the pretty lady. “It’s a pleasure.” He would cut this off as soon as politely possible. He preferred lighter hair and more petite, curvy women to the willowy dark type before him.

“Oh yes, the home for wayward women. How generous of you to help such a charity.”

“We must all do our part,” Sam agreed, stepping back beside his brother.

“Did ye finish the autopsy?” Walters asked quietly as they all proceeded to move forward, the ladies in front.

“Yes, and it was as we thought. The man didn’t drown—unless someone followed him into the Thames and then stabbed him repeatedly underwater.” He paused, remembering the gruesome sight under the dead man’s clothes. “He was wearing a wool coat in August, which I would assume was to soak up the blood while they transported him to the river. The bruises all over his body, and the differences between them, indicate he may have been tortured for some time before being dumped.”

Walters snorted. “That’s what I needed to know. I’ll start with who he was seen with last. I wonder if they got the information they wanted—or didn’t want him talking. Mayhap an interrogation gone wrong.”

“If anyone can find the truth, it’s you, Brother.”

Walters nodded. “And I didn’t mean to ambush ye.”

Walters, a stocky barrel-chested master of disguise, was the lead detective for Paddy’s Peelers. His work to uncover a plot to murder the Prime Minister and all the British cabinet members, now dubbed the Cato Street Conspiracy, had earned him a knighthood. That had given him the courage to finally court an earl’s sister. Though the willing earl, Lord Darby, was also a friend and a previous client.

“Ladies,” Sam said with a bow, “I’m afraid I must leave you. It was a pleasure to see you again, my lady, and to meet you, Miss Halden.”

“Do not be a stranger,” Miss Halden said in a husky voice, her lips in a plump pout. Those dark eyes danced with experience an unmarried woman should not yet have.

Lady Matilda’s eyes widened, as if surprised by her friend’s flirtatious manner, before turning to Sam. “We shall see you for dinner next week, Dr. Brooks?”

If you don’t invite any ladies searching for husbands. “Of course, unless some emergency claims my attention.” He walked his horse to the path and mounted, eager to be away. If the woman had been a widow, a dalliance may have been possible. But he wouldn’t entertain a young woman intent on marriage. Not yet. He was still building his practice, donating time to hospitals, and keeping ridiculous hours.

He made his way back to Cheapside, passing St. Mary’s Le Bow. It was said anyone born within hearing of its bells was considered a true Cockney. The thought brought to mind Mrs. Brown’s cultured speech. How had she ended up as a vendor? The woman was a conundrum.

Sam ambled along the busy thoroughfare in the bustling heart of London’s commerce and trade. One could buy anything from hats, cottons, silks, and timepieces to perfumes, stationery, and pianofortes. It was a convenient location for a residence too. The shops stood next to houses and apartments, and many affluent merchants made their homes here. From his bedroom window, he could see the Tower of London on a clear day.

When he reached the fork at Cornhill, he veered left toward Threadneedle Street and the Stock Exchange Coffee House. He often stopped there, for it was near his home, and the food was good at a reasonable price. He tossed his rein to a small boy and gave him a coin.

“A penny now, and another when I return to collect the horse. Understood?” he asked the open-mouthed boy, staring at the penny but nodding his head. “Good.” Another memory

from his youth, of holding horses for men dressed to the nines and standing for hours for a ha'penny.

"Afternoon, Doc," the proprietor said in a loud voice over the din of patrons. "Wanted to thank ye. The missus is doing much better."

"Glad to hear it, George. Could you have Sally bring me a coffee, meat pie, and white soup if you still have it? If not, oyster is fine." He perused the crowded house but didn't find a familiar enough face, so he sat at the end of a long trestle. He grabbed the Sunday edition of *The Recorder* from the center of the table to occupy him while he waited for his meal.

"Well, if it ain't the 'andsome Dr. Brooks," said a cheerful female from above. He tilted his head and smiled at Sally as she set down his coffee. "I saved ye the last bit 'o white soup. It's beef and kidney pie if that's to yer likin'."

"I would be forever grateful," he answered with a wink.

"Aw, go on with ye," she gushed. "I'll be back in two jiffs."

He returned to the newspaper, letting the din of the coffee house fade into a dull clamor. When the food arrived, he continued to read as he ate. Until a huge paw slapped him on the back.

"Spare a poor man a wee bit 'o bread?" Patrick O'Brien loomed over him, his huge frame still as intimidating as it had been when Sam was ten. But now he knew better.

"Ho! Tis a beggar, is he now?" Sam rolled his eyes, hearing his own poor attempt at an Irish brogue.

"Only when needed, boyo," Paddy said as he sat down with a *thump*. "Figured I'd find ye here. Tis Margaret's birthday Sunday next, and she wants all her boys ta be wit' her. Since I can't tell her no, I'm roundin' all of ye up in advance."

The "boys" were the misfits the Irishman had collected over the years. The O'Briens took them in, spending the time to find and develop each boy's strength. As they grew, Paddy turned them into a unique team, creating a detective agency

that had a reputation for never failing to solve a case or find their man. Sam had gone to medical school, and besides making a nice living as a physician, he also performed autopsies for the Peelers and London constabularies. In court, he was often an expert witness, testifying with medical opinions and the results of the autopsies he performed. On occasion, he went along with the detectives as an extra man and to treat injuries that may occur.

The agency included several detectives who had all put in time as Bow Street runners. The O'Briens had also raised a solicitor, whose law expertise helped prepare cases for court, and a woman who'd played so many different parts in Paddy's investigations, she had become an actress. The only member of the team who hadn't lived under the same roof was the barrister. He presented their cases pro bono once the evidence for a client had been collected and verified.

"I couldn't think of a better way to spend the day." He lowered his voice. "Have we heard any more of The Vicar?"

Paddy shook his head and combed his thick fingers through his still vibrant red hair. His blue eyes narrowed in disgust. "The man's like fog. He just dissipates 'fore ye can catch him. Word has it he's left Town for a while. But his time is comin'. I feel it in my bones."

"Even the slipperiest of eels eventually make their way to the trap." Sampson silently vowed it would be the next public hanging he attended.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dottie packed up her cart and headed home. It had been a long week, but having Violet waiting for her lightened her heart. She wasn't talking yet, but Dottie had a hunch she would. The child had nodded when asked if she'd ever talked. So, something had happened? The girl's brown eyes had shone with tears as she nodded again. They'd left the subject alone after that.

When she entered the kitchen, Violet looked up from the dishes she was scrubbing. She set down the pot and wiped her hands on the oversized apron that Mrs. Clatterly had given her, then ran to Dottie, and threw her arms around her.

"I missed you too, sweeting," she said, kissing the top of the girl's head. "Keeping busy?"

The girl nodded and pointed to the sink, going back to finish the pans.

Mrs. Clatterly bustled in. "She's a little angel, she is. The darling snuck into the public room and began clearing dishes from the table. Didn't ask her to do a thing, just wanted to help." The older woman blew at a strand of brown hair streaked with gray, then tucked it under her mobcap. Her usual pink cheeks were red, and she dabbed at the sweat on her brow with her apron. "I'll hate to see her leave. We've never been blessed with one of our own, and I enjoy having a young one under foot."

That was a relief since Dottie wasn't letting the girl go anywhere. Unless they actually found a family member, of

course. “It’s a brutal heat today. I’ll unpack my cart and help you. I’ve got six pasties left.”

They had begun selling anything remaining on her cart to the patrons at the tavern, splitting the profit. The customers were happy with the occasional dessert, Dottie didn’t lose any money, and the Clatterlys had another reason to be satisfied with their arrangement.

“Mr. Wells will be happy to hear that. He’s disappointed when you sell out.” Mrs. Clatterly bustled out, calling over her shoulder, “If you can heat up more stew, I’d be thankful. Mr. Clatterly is doing better but still moving slow. It took him almost quarter of an hour to hobble down the stairs this morning. I can’t spend as much time in the kitchen as I’d like.”

Later that evening, Dottie and Violet sat in front of the small coal stove. Dottie rocked as she sewed, and Violet sprawled out on her stomach on the faded thick carpet. She turned the pages of *Tom Thumb’s Pretty Song Book*, Dottie’s cherished children’s book, giggling occasionally at the illustrations or pointing at something in a silent question to Dottie.

“Are you happy here, sweeting?” she asked the child.

Violet nodded, her smile slipping as fear crept into her brown eyes.

“No, I haven’t any intention of sending you away. You are welcome as long as you’re happy.” She put her mending on her lap. “Do you know if you have any other family?”

The girl shook her head.

“You had a brother. And a father. Did you know your mother?”

Another shake of her head.

“Well if you do want to stay, you’ll have to begin lessons.”

Violet gave her a questioning look.

“There are printed words on those pages that you could read. They will tell you the story better than the illustrations

and add to the meaning of the pictures. Some of them are songs we could sing together.”

Understanding lit up Violet’s eyes, and she nodded.

“Without speech, it will be more difficult, but we’ll manage. I was a teacher before I married.” She sighed and smiled down on her daughter—

She’s not your child.

Dottie watched Violet, her flaxen locks trailing the pages, her eyes searching between the illustrations and the words with renewed interest.

But she could be.

Dottie had become attached to the child in such a short time. Fate had crossed their paths for a reason. She believed that with all her heart. Perhaps even the horror of Robert had led her to this purpose. Dottie spoke her mind, said her thoughts out loud now because someone was there to listen. She also began singing again while she worked and had been silently thrilled when Violet had hummed along this morning.

The pair had quickly fallen into an evening routine. First, they would finish chores with Mrs. Clatterly in the kitchen, then retire to their room. There, they would count the money she’d made that day—Violet separated the coins into piles by size while Dottie counted, then added the total to her ledger. When there was a large enough pile, Mrs. Clatterly gave them a banknote for the silver and copper. Finally, they ate a light supper together before sitting in front of the small stove. Dottie had always ended her evenings before a hearth. The stove was not lit, of course, since they had no need of heat this time of year. But the habit gave her a feeling of security, going through the motions of a schedule she’d followed for so many years. She hoped it would do the same for Violet.

“We’ll start with your name. Everyone should be able to sign their own name,” she told Violet.

The next day was Sunday. Mrs. Clatterly came into the kitchen as Dottie wrapped the pastries for St. James. “Oh, ma’am, I wanted to thank you for Violet’s shoes. I hoped to

get her a new pair next week. I'll settle up with you when I return this evening."

The landlady waved a hand at her. "Absolutely not. The lass has been working hard, and we ain't no workhouse here. She's earning those shoes, she is."

Dottie's eyes burned with emotion. "You are too kind, ma'am. I appreciate it. We both do!"

"Now be gone or you won't get a good spot. The heat's finally let up, so them highborn folks won't all be flockin' to Gunter's or Farrance's for ices today." Mrs. Clatterly smiled at Violet. "Well, my girl, let's get Mr. Clatterly something to eat. He's grumpy as a bear when his stomach is empty."

Humming a bawdy tune she'd heard the other night in the tavern, Dottie made her way along Friday Street, wrinkling her nose at the briny scent of fish, and turned left onto Cheap Street. It was a beautiful sunny day with a slight breeze, and she made the walk in less than an hour. It was early for anyone to be on the promenade yet, but she'd wanted to be close to the main entrance. She settled on her stool and began to read the book she'd brought along, but her mind kept wandering to the gentleman she'd met last week.

Dr. Sampson Brooks. A physician.

"Good day, Mrs. Brown," a deep male voice said, interrupting her daydreaming.

She looked up to see the man of her thoughts smiling at her and inspecting her pastries. "Good day to you, Dr. Brooks," she replied with a warm smile.

"You remember my name? I'm impressed."

"As you remembered mine. I, too, am impressed." Her cheeks heated, and she silently scolded herself. She was too old to be acting like a young miss. Love and romance were in the past for her.

"I've a party to go to this evening and thought to bring some of your delicious goods with me. What have we today?" He looked very handsome in his beaver hat, deep blue riding coat, and shining Hoby boots. As he moved his head to look at

the pastries, the sun brought out golden streaks in his brown hair.

“No tarts today, I’m sorry to say. But I have Shrewsbury biscuits and rout cakes,” she said, pointing and realizing she still had the book in her hand.

At Dr. Brooks’s look of surprise, she quickly set it on her stool. “The currants in the rout cakes are fresh and plump.”

He shook his head. “What are you reading?”

“The Romance of the Forest by—”

“Ann Radcliffe. Yes, I’ve read about the mysterious de la Motte family.” There was a question in his gaze, and she knew he wondered how a costermonger would happen to have a novel. “Do you enjoy reading?”

“I do. I was an instructor at the Darlington School for Girls before I married.” His hazel eyes, brimming with curiosity, had more gold flecks than she remembered. “I’m surprised you would have chosen such a novel.”

“Gothic? As a boy, I read anything. I still would if I had the time. What subjects did you teach?” He crossed his arms, giving her his full attention. The sleeves of his riding coat stretched across muscled arms.

She directed her gaze back to his face. His very handsome face. “French—”

“French?”

His astonished tone irked her just a bit. “Yes, French and the pianoforte, and skills for running a household. Budgets and meal planning.” She sniffed. “You’re surprised.”

“Stunned as a matter of fact.” He grinned, showing his dimples. “Beautiful and intelligent. A rare combination.”

“Especially pushing a pastry cart?” She grinned back. His jocular mood was infectious. Who was she to take umbrage? The widow of a criminal, no less.

“Exactly! Pardon my shock, although now you’ll have to put up with a discussion of the novel when you finish it.” He

rubbed his chin. “Do you enjoy poetry?”

She shrugged. “Some. And you?”

“Despise it,” he said in mock horror. “I remember trying to write a poem for a girl that I was arsey varsey over. The rhyming was absolutely horrid.”

Dottie laughed. “How old were you?”

“Fourteen and very, very awkward.”

“I can’t imagine you as awkward, sir.” She bit her lip as she realized he was flirting with her—and she was reciprocating. While flattered, she didn’t have the time or inclination for coquetry. Dottie was determined never to succumb again to a man’s sweet-talk. A hard lesson learned in her short life.

“My fourteen-year-old self thanks you.” He chuckled and returned his attention to her cart. “Let’s see, there will be...” His fingers flicked as he mentally counted. “I suppose there might be as many as a dozen. Since I’m not sure what everyone would prefer, why don’t I take a dozen of each?”

Dottie gasped. That would be over half her inventory for the day. She could be home early, perhaps take Violet out for tea. “My goodness. Are you sure?”

“Yes, I don’t want to be responsible for someone not getting their favorite. It’s a birthday party, after all.” He fished in his pocket for coin.

“Someone special, I assume?” She wanted to know if he was married—no, she didn’t. Yes, she did. Dottie told herself it was only so she would know if he was being kind or hoping for something in return for such generosity.

“I’d say very special. The couple saved me from freezing to death in the street and put me through school. It’s her celebration.” He watched her for a reaction.

“You’re an orphan?” This was a surprise.

“No, well, yes.” He shook his head. “Both my parents are dead, yes, but they were alive when I was a child. Still, the O’Briens helped raise me into the man I am today.” The

softness in his hazel eyes told her how much he cared for this couple. “They saved me from a life I was ill-suited for.”

“It sounds like an interesting tale.” He had piqued her curiosity.

“And one for another day when I have more time.” He handed her several coins, waved away her protestations, and collected his treats wrapped in newspaper and tied with a string. “Enjoy this lovely day, Mrs. Brown.”

“Enjoy your party, Dr. Brooks.” She watched him walk away and collect his horse from the boy holding his reins. The lad’s eyes opened wide at the coin given him. It seemed the physician was a charitable man, along with having good looks and a fine profession.

But the worst of men could appear to be the best of men.

CHAPTER FIVE

*A*s Sam rode back to Cheapside, crossing over to the north side and the wealthier homes, a plan began to take shape. He liked Mrs. Brown. Yes, he was also attracted to her. She was a beauty. But he *liked* her. There was kindness mixed with the pain in her deep blue eyes. Perhaps next week, he'd find out about the girl who had been with her. Daughter? Sister? A waif she'd found?

So, the pastry lady had worked at a girls' school. Sampson was on the board for the Magdalen House, a hospital established in 1758 to take in "penitent prostitutes and young women" who had been seduced or shunned and might be forced into prostitution. It was a worthy charity, and he was proud to be a part of it. The staff worked to reunite the upper-class women with their families, and those who couldn't return home were taught working skills. No woman was forced out until she found a good position and could support herself.

But the charity did not take in pregnant women. Sam had seen girls as young as thirteen turned away, swollen with child. He hated the terrified look in their eyes, knowing what they faced. For the past few months, he'd been thinking about opening a hospital for these unfortunates. And now, he wondered if Mrs. Brown could be part of his scheme. He still had to organize wealthy benefactors, find a suitable building, and create a budget. For now, the lovely costermonger was another pearl forming in the back of his mind.

Leaving Jack at a nearby mews, Sam walked down the block to the O'Briens' townhome. The door opened, raucous

laughter spilling out the door.

“Sampson! C’mere, boyo,” boomed a voice from behind the housekeeper. “We’ve been waitin’ for ye.”

The parlor was crowded with the “family” all in one room. There were his brothers-by-choice, including Walters. The six men were of various heights and builds, men he’d known since he or they had been lost boys on the streets. Sitting next to Mrs. O’Brien was Honora, the last waif to enter the Irishman’s fold, coming to them as a foundling. With so many “brothers,” the lass had been spoiled rotten.

Honora was now going on twenty, a young woman with bright red hair and green eyes who could truly pass as one of the O’Briens’ natural offspring. She was tough as old leather but lovely to look at, could mimic any brogue, and was proficient at disguise. The female counterpart to Walters. She was also making a name for herself on stage as Nora Diamond. The girl was fearless and had been vital in tracking down key figures in the last several cases.

All of them were talking at once, asking how the others had been, when a shrill whistle froze every tongue. “Wind yer necks in and let me speak!” yelled Margaret O’Brien. “Now c’mere ta me.”

A mumbled chorus of “Sure now” and “Sorry” echoed against the paneled walls of the parlor.

They all obeyed as they had since they were children and gathered around her rocker near the hearth. Margaret’s auburn hair shone with bits of silver, her dark eyes glittering as she gazed at each of them. “My boys,” she said with a weepy smile. “I love ye all. And *we’ve* an announcement ta make.” She stared pointedly at Honora.

“Uh, yes,” agreed Honora hesitantly. “I have decided to give up my stealthy ways and focus my energy on stage.”

Silence.

“Sure, look,” said Paddy to fill the awkward moment. “We knew she’d marry some day and leave us. Consider dis as marryin’ the theater.”

“Congratulations.” Clayton came forward first. With his reddish-brown hair and green eyes, he was the only one who might have passed as Honora’s brother. He’d been found by Mrs. O’Brien at the age of nine, his mother dying a penniless maid and his father an unknown marquess at the time. “I’ll rent a box for the season.”

Honora laughed. “You don’t even know where I’ll be performing yet.”

“But we’ll be there,” added Eli, the youngest detective of the group.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” agreed Benjamin, their solicitor, light-brown eyes merry beneath a mass of blond curls.

Gus, a massive man with straight dark hair always pulled back at the neck and fastened with a leather tie, grinned down at her. “If ye need a bodyguard, I’m happy to slap a few heads together. They’ll be fightin’ fer ye, a pretty thing like you. All those oglin’ men and jealous wives.” It was a badly kept secret that Gus had a tendre for Honora.

“Thank you, August,” Honora said with a sweet smile, rising to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I know you’ll always be here for me.”

Marshall, the barrister, cleared his throat. “I may not have been raised under this roof as all of you have, but I feel as though you are all kin.” He raised his glass of brandy. “To Nora Diamond, may she have a bright and promising future.”

“Aye” and “Here, here” and “To be sure” mixed together at once to wish one of their own a happy life.

“Now.” Paddy raised his glass again. “Ta the finest of women, the flower of the flock! My Margaret, my luv.”

They all raised their voices and toasted the woman who meant so much to them. She’d fed them, bathed them, doctored their fevers and broken bones, and loved them.

Sir Harry Walters raised his glass. “To the dear woman who chased the meanness out of each of us. Ye showed us kindness when the world was cruel and taught us that compassion can still be found in those around us.”

“Sounds like being affianced has put silver on his tongue,” Gus said with a chuckle. “Where is the soon-to-be Lady Walters?”

“Unfortunately, she had a previous engagement and begs me to send her warmest regards.” Walters grimaced. “A musicale I was able to escape, rescued by Margaret. Again.”

After a splendid dinner of clear broth, oysters that were back in season and fresh pork, late peas and sliced cucumbers, they enjoyed a plate of nuts, cheeses, and the Shrewsbury biscuits and roud cakes with fruit preserves. The conversation was lively, with someone always talking over someone else, stopping, apologizing, and then starting all over again.

This was where Sampson felt at home, needed and loved, a part of this pieced-together brood who would give their lives for one another. He wondered where he might have ended up without the O’Briens. Without the advice of Walters or his best friend Benjamin or the loyalty of them all. While he longed for his parents, especially during Christmastide, he was the luckiest of men to be part of this loving household.

Besides the camaraderie, they all had a bond, a shared purpose working for Paddy. Finding criminals, helping victims, and bringing justice to those who had been wronged. It was a heavy responsibility when they took on a case, whether it was for an individual or the Crown, and one they each took seriously. Pride was a funny thing: It could pull a man up from the gutter one day and strike him down the next.

Margaret sat next to him as everyone moved from the dining room back to the parlor, her plump hands smoothing out her skirts. There would be singing and dancing, more spirits, more laughter. “Before we go, tell me where ye bought those fine cakes and biscuits. I expected yer usual bottle of Irish whiskey.”

“Ah, but it’s your day not Paddy’s. I don’t think the whiskey would have been to your liking.” He kissed her cheek. “Has it been a fine afternoon?”

“Tis been a grand day. How can it not wit’ my family about me?”

Paddy and Margaret had never been blessed with children of their own. They threw themselves wholeheartedly into the one they had created. Sam couldn't have been more cherished by his own parents.

“There's a pretty little costermonger near St. James Park on Sundays. Last week, she had the tastiest berry tarts.”

“Yer favorite,” Margaret added with a smile. “A pretty little thing, is she? Sounds like yer takin' dis new idea of a wife to heart. Unmarried or widowed?”

He gave her a side look and shook his head. “A widow but don't get any ideas. While I have decided on the need to marry, there is no one in particular that has caught my interest yet.”

“Me, ideas?” she asked, a twinkle in her dark eyes. “I only want ye happy.”

“Your mission has been accomplished.” Sam knew this was true for all of them. The O'Briens had saved their lives. “She had a book with her, which is very unusual. She intrigued me. That's all. I barely know her.”

“Ah, sorry, but yer eyes tell a different story. The heart has no calendar or clock.” She patted his hand. “A mother always knows. Won't ye unburden yer mind?”

With a sigh, Sam realized he wanted to. The woman always knew when he had something worrying him. So, he told her about the last admission day at Magdalen House and the poor girl who had been turned away. How he hoped to open something similar but for those who found themselves alone and with child.

“Tis more than a dream, ain't it, Sampson? Ye already have some bits of a plan in place.” She beamed at him, her cheeks round as her smile grew. “And how does the pretty little costermonger fit in?”

“She taught at a girls' school—” How did this woman always read his thoughts? Was it intuition? Would he have the same kind of intuition with his own offspring? He doubted it.

“Go on.”

With a resigned sigh, he explained the rest of his scheme to procure a building with his own funds, then look for benefactors to help run the home. “And Mrs. Brown might be the perfect instructor to teach these girls skills that will help them become independent, give them the ability to raise their children without...”

“Becomin’ doxies,” Margaret finished.

“Precisely,” he agreed, a bit embarrassed.

“’Tis a fine goal, Sampson. If anyone can accomplish it, ‘tis you.”

“As Paddy says, all your geese are swans.”

“Nothin’ wrong with swans.” She patted his hand and rose to join the others. “When ye decide to court this pastry woman, remember to bring her home for us ta meet.”

She walked away before he could respond, leaving him astonished at her insight as he followed her to the parlor. The woman had a gift. If he could bottle and sell her insight, the Hospital of Hope would be up and running in no time.

CHAPTER SIX

End of October

It was Sunday. Dottie packed her cart, looked at the dreary day, and debated going to St. James. If it didn't clear up, there would be no one to sell her goods to. But Dr. Brooks might appear, as he had each week since their first meeting. He never stayed overly long, but bought half her pastries, saying he was now expected to bring something for his Sunday dinners. Whether that was true, she didn't know. But selling out so quickly gave her extra time with Violet.

"Close the O on your name, Violet, or it will look like a U. Then we'll have to pronounce your name *Vioolet*."

The girl giggled at that and shook her head. But she wiped the offending O from the writing slate and made another. She looked up at Dottie for approval.

"Very nice," she said and kissed the child on top of her head. Humming and giggling had become such a sweet sound. But would she ever hear actual words coming from the girl's mouth? "Now, let's try your numbers 1-5. I'll write them first, and you will copy them."

Violet nodded, her tongue peeking out as she concentrated on forming the numbers. She was a curious student and learned quickly. It filled a void in Dottie to be teaching again. She hadn't realized how much she had missed it.

She peered out the window again. "I hope it stops raining."

Violet spread out her hands and put her thumbs together, moving back and forth like a ship, then pointed to the bible they read from each night.

“Oh my,” Dottie said with a chuckle, “I hope we don’t need to build an ark.”

Violet nodded enthusiastically.

She went behind the stove, careful of the hot metal from the glowing coal, and retrieved the tin that held her savings. Taking out all the ha’pennies, she pushed them toward Violet. “Remember how to count along with the numbers?”

The little girl nodded, placing one penny below her newly scratched numeral 1, then two pennies under her scrawled 2, and continued until there were five coins lined up beneath the 5.

“Very good!” Dottie pointed at the board, explaining the pattern of “one more” in each row. Then she lined ten of the pennies in front of the girl and began to count. Violet followed along with her, touching each coin as Dottie said the number.

When the lesson was over, Dottie put the coins back in the tin and shook it, scowling at the contents. “I’ll be old and gray by the time I make enough money to take us to America.”

Violet gasped and pointed to herself, questioning if Dottie meant to take her.

“Of course, dear girl, as long as you want to go.”

Violet nodded, a huge grin on her face.

“We can start over. I’ll be a widow, you’re my daughter, and we’re searching for relations. I don’t have any that I know of, but it’s a good tale as to why we left England.” If she’d had references, Dottie could have tried for a position of cook if governess or instructor hadn’t worked out. Across the ocean lay a world full of possibilities. There was a myriad of excuses as to how she had “lost” her references on the voyage over. She could earn a decent wage and be a proper mother to her “daughter.”

Violet jumped up, rounded the table, and threw her arms around Dottie. The hug was so powerful, it almost knocked Dottie off the chair. She wrapped her arms around the child, burying her face in the soft blonde waves. This could be enough for her. They could be happy, the two of them together.

Just as suddenly, Violet placed a kiss on Dottie's cheek and ran into the kitchen.

With a sigh, she rose and replaced the tin. A weak ray of sunshine peeked through the curtains. It looked like she'd be going to St. James Park after all. Her stomach did a slight flip.

She had given up trying to curb the attraction she felt toward Dr. Brooks. What was the harm? He was a handsome man who treated her nicely, proving to be her best customer in fact. A little flirting made her feel young again and helped pass the time. He never acted untoward, and she didn't dream of such a man wanting anything more serious than a light flirtation every Sunday.

The temperatures had dropped, a definite chill seeping through the city. Winter was making itself known, and Dottie was grateful for the brown wool redingote. By the time she was settled outside the park, her cheeks were cold. As long as her nose didn't run...

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Brown. I wasn't sure if the weather was going to cooperate today.”

There he was, dressed in a forest riding coat that brought out the green in his hazel eyes. Fawn-colored breeches hugged hard thighs that disappeared into shining black boots. When he removed his hat, his hair had lost the sun-touched streaks and was more umber with slight curls brushing his collar. It made him seem older, more serious. Until the creases in his cheeks deepened, and he grinned at her with a bow. My, but he was handsome.

“Good day to you, sir.” She stood, setting her book on the stool. “Have you been well?”

“Excellent, and you?”

“Happy to have another fine day to sell you some pastries.” With a smile, she pulled back a cloth. “Apple tarts for a certain physician who has a preference for them.”

A hand went to his chest. “Oh, you’ve stolen my heart through my stomach.” He went to pick one up, and Dottie slapped his hand.

“Oh,” she cried, mortified at her action. She was accustomed to fending off Violet and Mr. Clatterly while she baked. “I forget myself. My apologies.” Heat rose up her neck and flooded her cheeks. What would he think?

Laughter erupted from him, his eyes twinkling as he shook his hand. “You wound me, Mrs. Brown. There’s a vixen hiding beneath your gentle exterior.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking... why I would...” Her words faded as she realized he was staring at her mouth. It made her do the same. That was a mistake. Wondering what those full lips would feel like against hers sent her stomach tumbling.

“Mrs. Brown, may I speak plainly?”

Had she put him off with her behavior? Lost her best customer? She could only answer with a nod.

“We’ve been meeting for the past eight weeks, exchanging pleasantries and pastries. Very enjoyable, I admit, but I’d like to see you without the cart between us.” He paused, his gaze direct and penetrating, warm and knowing, as if he could see her quivering inside.

“I-I don’t know... I-this is unexpected.” She chewed her bottom lip. “You and I are from different worlds, I believe. I’m not—”

“You are a lovely, educated woman who has a talent for baking. I am the son of a bookshop owner who ended up in debtor’s prison for years. We are not so far apart that we cannot socialize.” He paused as if making a decision. “A carriage ride or a cup of tea? We can share our stories, then you may decide if we are not suited to continue a friendship.”

How did she respond to that? He was right, of course. Her own father had been a steward for an earl. His position had come with certain privileges. No one would comment on a steward's daughter stepping out with a physician. Except she was a costermonger now. Not someone's daughter or an instructor.

"Is it propriety? I assumed from your attire that you were no longer in mourning. If you are not yet ready for an outing, I understand and apologize." Yet his eyes pleaded with her, his smile tempting her to say yes. "Our brief conversations have been delightful. I hope to have lengthier discussions at our leisure and get to know you better. I have a feeling you may have quite a story behind those sparkling blue eyes."

Dottie heard herself say, "I would be honored to have tea with you, Dr. Brooks. There's no need for flummery."

"A sincere compliment."

She nodded, watching a lopsided smile curve his mouth. "Excellent. Now, about those tarts. I believe I'll take the lot."

"All of them?" She chuckled. "You can't possibly eat everything you purchase."

"No, no. I am on the board of Magdalen House and bring whatever is left to our weekly meetings." He winked at her. "You've made me quite popular."

How could she say *no* to this man? Kind, intelligent, generous, and good-looking. Well, she could enjoy his company without unlocking her heart. Details of her past could be kept vague. Besides, with winter on their heels, it was good to know a doctor.

"I've heard of the hospital. Do you provide medical services for the women there?"

"I do. I was impressed with the mission of Magdalen and the work they've done for females who have been taken advantage of or cast out. No one should be alone. I understand what desperation feels like and wish it on no one."

"As do I. You are a good man." And he was. Too good for her.

“I endeavor to make my parents proud every day. And I hope they look down on me and approve.”

“I’m sure they do, Dr. Brooks.” She handed him the tarts. This time, both his hands cradled hers as he took the bundle. Warmth spread through her like a cheery hearth fire.

“Shall we set a date?” he asked, his thick brows wiggling. “Is there a time that is better for you? Perhaps when you have finished your day?”

Dottie told him the direction on Watling Street, and they arranged to have tea in the Clatterly public room the next Wednesday afternoon. Though a widow, she wasn’t comfortable meeting a man alone. With her landlord’s hawk-like gaze on them, Dottie could relax.

“You have given me something to look forward to, Mrs. Brown. Until Wednesday.”

She watched him walk away, wondering at his motive. Surely, there was no lack of ladies vying for his attention. Would the kind physician still be interested when he learned her husband had died on the gallows? Yet, he had been there that day. She did not see him as a man who went to public executions for entertainment. Why *had* he attended?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wednesday

Samson shook his head to clear it. *Ridiculous*. How could he be nervous? Yet his palms were sweaty, and he kept clearing his throat. The balding barkeep, with one foot propped up on a stool and a scowl on his ruddy face, continued to silently stare at him with menacing dark eyes after serving up an ale. Sam had quickly retreated to a table after asking for Mrs. Brown.

Mr. Clatterly, he presumed, was extremely protective for a landlord.

A plump woman with soft brown eyes bustled in with a tea tray. She set it down on Sam's table with a wide smile, then put her hands on her hips.

Mrs. Clatterly, he assumed again, was much friendlier than her husband. How had they known who he was? There were more than a dozen men in the place.

"I'm Mrs. Clatterly, and that beast of a man over there is my husband."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm Dr. Brooks," he said, standing for a proper introduction.

She eyed the ale he was sipping. "A bit of courage before she comes, eh? Well, best hurry. Dottie will be here in a blink."

Her given name was Dottie? Or Dorothea? Dottie Brown. It had a warm sound to it.

Then she was standing before him, no heavy coat or hat on her head.

“Mrs. Brown,” he said simply, his discomfort evaporating at the sight of her.

He could drown in those ocean-blue eyes. Her thick auburn hair was pulled up in the back, long curls tickling her slender neck. A modest dress of dove gray clung to her full figure, taking his imagination for a jaunt. She looked every bit the lady who might instruct the daughters of wealthy merchants.

“Dr. Brooks,” she replied with a nod of her head. She murmured her thanks as he held out her chair. “Did you find the place without much trouble?”

He nodded. “I grew up in Cheapside. And you?”

“My father was steward for the Earl of Langhorn’s country estate in Kent. I lived there until I was fourteen.” She held up the teapot, an eyebrow up in question. He nodded, pushed the bumper of ale away, and she poured them each a cup. “My mother died when I was four—a fever of some sort is all I remember. Papa didn’t talk about it much. He loved her so.”

“My parents were also dedicated to each other. I hope to have the same someday.” Sam saw the panic in her eyes. “Not that I’m ready to wear the leg shackles quite yet.”

He was rewarded with a brilliant smile as she visibly relaxed. “Your father was obviously an educated man. Did he insist you were too?”

Mrs. Brown nodded. “Both my parents believed in the power of learning. Papa convinced his lordship to allow me to study with his daughter. There was no one else nearby that was close to her age. So, I received lessons and provided companionship in return.”

“He sounds like an astute man. Living above a bookshop, I had knowledge at my fingertips.” Sam remembered the place with fondness, despite the sad ending.

“You are your only limitation, my father always said. I believed him when I was younger.”

“You don’t believe him now?” He wondered at the sorrow that darkened her eyes, the lines that creased the corners, telling him she’d known pain.

“There are so many conditions and obstacles in this life that are out of one’s control. We can strive to become better, but we can only rise as far as the world, or society, will allow us.” She shrugged. “Life has a way of reminding us that we are not always in control of our destiny.”

So true. “Why did you leave the blissful fields of southern England at fourteen? School?”

“My father fell from his horse and broke his neck. My mother’s family disowned her when she married Papa, and he was a foundling. I was alone, as far as relations, and in a peculiar position. Not a domestic, yet not one of the family.” She hesitated, her gaze scanning the room, smiling at a customer, then studying her teacup. “So yes, I left to continue my education, though not according to the original plan. The earl had been close to my father, took pity on me, and sent me to a boarding school with a small allowance until I was of age.”

“A generous lord.”

“Very. I was befriended by an instructor at the school, who planned to open her own school for girls, and she personally trained me. When I turned eighteen, she offered me a position at the Darlington School for Girls.” A bittersweet smile curled her plump lips. “Mrs. Darlington is a fine, caring woman. I don’t know what I might have done without the earl’s generosity and her guidance.”

“In my opinion, humble as it is, fate puts who we need in our path. We can accept the gift or turn away from it. Fortunately, it sounds like both of us accepted those who offered a lending hand.” He studied her for a moment as she sipped her tea. “The puzzle begins to come together. You intrigued me from that first day at St. James. A costermonger

who spoke without a cockney accent, refined in her movements, and a smile that pulled me to your cart.”

She blushed. “You made a fine figure yourself, sitting on your horse.”

He wanted to ask her why she had been at the hanging. *That* had been the first time he’d noticed her. But something told him to wait, to learn more about her before bringing it up.

“Enough about me for now. How did you come to be a physician? What happened to your parents?” She fiddled with one of the curls at her pink cheek. “I’m sorry. If you don’t care to talk about it, I understand.”

“It’s fine. I was a boy of ten, almost eleven, when my world turned upside down. My father, while a learned man, didn’t have much common sense. Too much faith in his fellow man.” He nodded as she offered him more tea. “A swindler of the worst kind sold him insurance for the bookshop. It cost a tidy sum but came with a certificate of guarantee. Father never suspected a thing until there was a fire in the shop, and he went to collect.”

“There was no such insurance company?”

Sam shook his head with a derisive chuckle. “The man had rented an office space for the scheme and left after he collected a tidy sum. We were ruined. I stayed with them at King’s Bench until my father’s funds ran low. I realized I was another mouth to feed.”

“What did you do?”

“Found work wherever I could, stole food when my stomach demanded I fill it, and gave anything I earned to my parents so they could eat. It still goes on, you know. Charging people for their stay in prison. How does one pay off a debt if they have to pay to survive in gaol?” He shrugged. “A wrong I shall never be able to right.”

Mrs. Brown reached out, her hand covering his. “You were a brave boy.” Her compassion was sincere, and without thinking, he covered her hand with his other. It seemed such a natural reaction to her concern.

“I was a desperate boy. I had no skills, but I was well-read and clever. It was then I realized there were two kinds of intelligence—academia and life lessons. I learned the latter quickly.”

Mrs. Clatterly was serving a table next to them, and she looked over her shoulder, her eyes resting on their joined hands. “Do you need a fresh pot?”

Sam understood. Though Mrs. Brown was a widow, the landlady was determined to maintain propriety. He slid his hand back with a grin, and Mrs. Brown did the same, her cheeks adorably pink. How old was she? Early twenties, perhaps?

“No, thank you, ma’am. But it was delicious.” He smiled when she beamed at the compliment. “I don’t want to overstay my welcome on the first visit.”

“You plan to come see us again, do you?” Mrs. Clatterly’s hip bumped Mrs. Brown’s shoulder. The widow drew in a breath and shook her head ever so slightly at the older woman.

“If Mrs. Brown allows it, I would be honored to continue our conversation. May I?” Sam gave her his most persuasive smile, knowing his dimples were on full display. Women seemed to like the dents in his cheeks. He’d use them to his advantage if it got him more time with this captivating woman.

“I’ll see you on Sunday, of course,” she murmured. “Yes?”

“Unless the weather says otherwise.”

She stood and he did the same. “I suppose, if you’re still interested on Sunday, we could arrange another time.”

“If I must wait, I will. Until then, Mrs. Brown,” Sam murmured, taking her hand and kissing the top of it. He had the strangest urge to trail kisses all the way up her arm. He dropped a coin on the table for the tea and ale and made his way to the door.

Despite all he’d learned about this woman—one he now admitted stirred his blood—his curiosity had only been piqued rather than satisfied. How had she ended up in Cheapside? What happened to her husband? Did she have a child? Sam

was confident he'd discover her past and its secrets if he was patient. He was one of Paddy's Peelers, after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

True to his word, Dr. Brooks met her on Sunday and bought his usual bounty of pastries. They had agreed to repeat their tea on Wednesday. Dottie knew she shouldn't encourage him, but the man was so persuasive and such good company. On Tuesday, Mrs. Clatterly teased her about her "beau."

"He's a fine-looking gentleman, though Mr. Clatterly is reserving his opinion."

"As am I. In fact, I wonder why he's interested at all. I'm sure he would have no trouble courting a young miss from a good family." Why a widow with no social standing?

"You're still a lovely young woman. Why *wouldn't* he be interested?" Mrs. Clatterly poked Violet's belly. "What do you think of him?"

Violet frowned and shook her head, then ran to the sink and put on her apron. Dottie watched her thin shoulders shake as she scrubbed furiously at a pot. Was she jealous? They would discuss it later. The poor dear had enough sorrow in her life.

The following day, Dottie dressed carefully, telling herself it wasn't for Dr. Brooks. She wore a Devonshire brown walking dress, with the heart-shaped pendant her father had given her nestled above the square neckline. "Violet, how do I look?"

Violet grinned and nodded. Dottie had explained to her the previous night that, if it were in her power, nothing would ever

part them. Knowing how life could change in a heartbeat, she couldn't promise the girl that it would *never* happen. No one could make any guarantees in this world. Dottie would never lie to the girl.

As she entered the public room, Mr. Wells waved to her from a table near the fireplace. She smiled and waved back. Several other patrons greeted her as she walked toward Dr. Brooks. He stood, smiling and handsome in pale trousers, a light-blue coat, and a white-and-blue striped waistcoat.

"Mrs. Brown, you look lovely." He bowed and took her hand before pulling back a chair. "I've ordered tea, and Mr. Clatterly is not scowling so harshly at me this week."

She laughed, her nervousness disappearing at his touch. "His bark is worse than his bite."

They discussed a variety of subjects, laughed, teased, and drank too much tea.

"May we meet again? Please don't make me wait until Sunday to say yes." He leaned forward as if about to share a secret. "I am not too proud to beg."

She chewed her bottom lip, watching pedestrians pass by the window and deliberating the wisdom of beginning such a friendship. "I suppose we could do this again."

"Would you consider an outing to Farrance's for tea? I will only keep you a respectable amount of time. Perhaps we could take a stroll in St. James Park afterwards if the weather permits."

"That does sound tempting."

"We could enjoy a treat you didn't have to bake yourself."

"That might be nice. Yes, I accept. When?"

"Next Wednesday? And of course, I must see you on Sunday or the hospital board will be very disappointed." He rose when she did and took her hand. "Thank you for a wonderful afternoon."



SAMPSON SNAPPED the reins and the pair of gleaming chestnuts lunged forward into the traffic. He deftly handled the O'Briens' black-lacquered curricule, thinking he'd eventually need one of his own. The top was down—for now. It was a sunny day, and he was eager to be with Mrs. Brown without the Clatterlys or other patrons listening. He wanted to ask about the girl, about her late husband, and how long she'd been widowed.

Most of all, he wanted her close beside him, elbows touching, smelling her scent as the breeze drifted his way. She smelled of citrus and cinnamon and cloves. He wanted to blow on those dangling auburn curls, jealous as they caressed her neck. Sink back into the velvet squab and study her profile, the delicate ears, the straight nose, the perfect chin, and the long lashes. For the third time in a week, he had dreamt of her—walking along the canal at St. James, strolling along a beach in Brighton, dancing at a ball. Each time it ended with a kiss. Would he be disappointed? For he fully intended to kiss her today. If had to put the top up and throw his greatcoat over them, their lips would meet.

He grinned as he turned onto Watling Street and slowed the pair in front of the Clatterlys. A lad ran up to take the harness, remembering Brooks from the past two weeks. “Ye can count on me, my lord,” the boy said with a nod, a cocky slant to his shoulders. “I’m yer man.”

With difficulty, Sam hid his smile and tossed the boy a coin. Entering the tavern, he peered around the room until his eyes adjusted from the bright sunlight. The hearth to the right crackled, several men sat in a back corner arguing good-naturedly over something, and the ever-so-congenial Mr. Clatterly sat with his arms crossed, only a slight scowl today.

A small girl with wild blonde curls escaping a too-big mobcap came from the kitchen, walked behind the bar, and tugged on Clatterly's waistcoat. To Sam's surprise, a delighted

smile transformed the man's face. It was amazing—or the child was, for the barkeep looked like a different person.

The lass caught Sam staring at her. The brown eyes widened, and she turned and dashed back to the kitchen. As soon as she disappeared, Mrs. Brown came out. She wore the same gray dress from their first tea with a small hat perched on her head. He wondered if he'd be able to breathe if he saw her in a ball gown. Mrs. Clatterly helped her on with her brown redingote.

“Dr. Brooks, how good to see you again.” She smiled, then waved to the men at the table, who paused in their argument to wave in return.

Sam bowed and she took his arm, a beaming Mrs. Clatterly behind them, the little blonde hiding behind the older woman's skirts. He swore the girl frowned at him with the exact scowl the barkeep always wore.

After helping Mrs. Brown up and into the curricule, he maneuvered the chestnut geldings around other carriages, hackneys, carts, and pedestrians. Cheapside Street was hectic, even in midafternoon, with businesses crammed along the busy thoroughfare. Sam would never understand the lure of the overpriced and limited shopping on Bond Street compared to this industrious area.

“So, tell me more about Dr. Brooks the urchin and how he pulled himself from the streets as a child.” There was a smirk on her plump lips, and he wanted to kiss it off.

“Ah, the urchin, Sam.”

“Sam?”

“My given name is Sampson. Sampson J. Brooks.” He clicked to the horses after pausing for an elderly pedestrian. “I tried to steal a cane from the wrong man—or the right one, depending on how you look at it—on Christmas Eve. I had only stolen food before, but I was so cold and hungry. All I'd earned went to my parents. My mother was doing poorly.”

“Oh, my. It must have been terrible.” Her hand went to his forearm, and he didn't want her to remove it.

“It was. But Paddy saw something in me. Instead of calling the constable, he took me home. There was one other boy they had taken in—Harry Walters—and we became fast friends.” He sighed, remembering that long ago night. “Because of the O’Briens, I was able to continue the path my father would have wanted.”

“They sound like special people.”

“Few could surpass them.” He told her of the Peelers and the part he played to help his “second” family. “I was determined to be a solicitor but found the books I pored through on plants and healing held my attention much more than dry legal cases. Margaret, Mrs. O’Brien, urged me to think about medicine. And here I am.”

“I’m glad. You’re a good man, and London needs them.” She returned her hand to her lap and watched the passersby as they made their way to the confectioner’s shop.

“Have you had a prosperous week so far, Mrs. Brown?” he asked, anxious to fill the silence.

“Yes, I’ve begun filling orders for Christmas pudding. Mr. Clatterly has been spreading the word to the patrons. He’s such a dear.”

Sam snorted. “Not to me. However, I did see a genuine smile on his face when a young girl pulled on his waistcoat.” He gave her a side look, hoping she’d indulge his curiosity.

“That’s Violet. I do believe she’s charmed him without a word.”

“That’s hard to believe. Does she get her charm from her mother?” he asked, probing again.

Mrs. Brown shook her head. “I have no idea. Violet doesn’t remember her, and her father and brother are dead. We crossed paths, two females alone in London, and joined forces so to speak.”

Of course, the girl wasn’t her daughter. The woman he’d come to know would have spoken of the lass more. “It seems you have something common with the O’Briens.”

Sam pulled up on the reins and slowed the horses as they came up to the corner of Spring Gardens and Cockspur Street. He jumped down from the curricle and came around to help Mrs. Brown. As she put her foot on the step and reached out for his shoulders, her half boot slipped. He caught her waist with both hands, lifting her and safely bringing her to the ground. Their bodies touched as he lowered her to her feet, and heat rushed from his chest to his groin.

Stifling a moan, he asked, “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head but looked flushed. “N-no. Only my pride. I’m afraid I’ve never had an abundance of grace.”

“I’m happy to catch you in my arms any time.” Her smile made his pulse race. He held out his arm, and she took it as they entered Farrance’s.

“Oh my, it smells divine in here,” she gasped, closing her eyes and drawing in a deep breath. “Thank you for suggesting this.”

They sat at a small table. A man came up and took their order of tea and a plate of various comfits and pastries.

“This tea is superb,” she exclaimed. “And these cakes... I’m trying to determine what is in them. I must try to replicate them.” Her face was flushed from the steaming tea, her eyes sparkling as she tried another candied fruit. “Are you not enjoying the sweets?”

“Indeed, I am,” said Sam, placing his chin on his fist and smiling at her.

“Flummery, Dr. Brooks, but I enjoy it all the same,” she said around a mouthful, then giggled.

“Please, call me Sampson.” He poured them more tea. “Unless you don’t wish to continue our friendship, which would devastate me.”

“Well, Sampson, we can’t have that.” She paused, her gaze holding his, and something changed between them at that moment.

It happened in a breath, but he knew she was finally giving in. Would give him a chance. His heart soared.

“Then you must call me Dorothea, or Dottie,” she said at length. The tip of her tongue peeked out to swipe up a crumb at the corner of her mouth. His breath caught.

When they finished their tea and sweets, she wrapped up the last remaining candied fruit, and tucked it in her reticule, murmuring, “For Violet.” Then they made their way to St. James Park.

It wasn't busy, being Wednesday, which Sam preferred. They strolled, her arm in his, and he thought they looked the perfect couple. Others passed them, smiled, and nodded as the pair spoke of books and music. They walked along the canal, and he told her the pelicans had resided there since Charles II. They talked of their favorite colors and smells and animals. The sun was setting when they made their way back to the curricule, and he hated for their time together to end.

Sam was happy with the day, felt he'd made progress with... Dottie. He liked the feel of her name on his tongue. That thought sent him in another direction, soft lips and...

He maneuvered her behind a cluster of trees, placing his hands on her arms. There were few people about, and they were in shadow. “Forgive me if this offends you, but I've wanted to kiss you for weeks. May I?” He waited, thinking he'd gone too far, when her blue eyes darkened with desire. She felt the same.

“Yes, but—”

He couldn't wait, and stepped closer, breathing in her sweet scent. Orange? Cloves? She moved back, leaning against a tree trunk. Her eyes raked across his face, down his chest, and then she locked her gaze with his. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing coming in rapid bursts.

“Did I frighten you?” he whispered.

She shook her head, and his patience fled. Bending his head, he brushed her lips with his. A jolt shot through his body, desire flaring hotter than he'd ever known. He flattened

against her, trailing kisses across her jaw, down her neck. He heard the gasp and smiled before claiming her mouth in a searing kiss. Her hands came around his collar, fingers scraping his scalp, signaling she was as hungry as he was.

Sam's blood pounded in his ears as his tongue traced the seam of her mouth. She opened for him, and he entered that heavenly space, tongues clashing, dueling, leaving them both breathless. When he ended the kiss, he kept his forehead against hers, breathing heavily. "I knew it would be like this." It had been better than his dreams. A blessing or a curse?

"I apologize for my... for..." His desire? His passion? But he wasn't sorry.

She shook her head. "Don't. We'll spoil it."

He nodded, and with a deep breath, he stepped away, tucking her arm in his once again as they made their way back to the path. Sam had a ridiculous smile on his face. He could feel it, and he didn't care. That kiss. That kiss had been—

"So, do you have plans for the future, Dr—Sampson?" she asked breathily.

He reluctantly came back to earth and scrambled to gather his thoughts. "I have an office for my practice, but as I gain experience, I'd like to mentor young doctors at one of the hospitals. There are so many in need of medical care and so few good physicians. The medical field is changing, growing, and I want to be a part of it." Did he sound pompous or passionate? He hoped the latter. "And you?"

"America. I'm saving my money and starting a new life in America."

Sam's stomach plummeted to his knees.

CHAPTER NINE

*W*hy had she blurted that out? After *such* a kiss?
She'd panicked.

Never had a kiss affected her like that. As a married woman, the marital bed had been pleasant, her husband's attentions ardent, enthusiastic. But this... this was a brand-new, breathtaking experience.

Was this passion?

Dottie wondered how her legs held her up as they walked back to the curricule. She was sure if she let go of Sampson's arm, she would crumple to the ground. When his lips touched hers, nothing had existed except his mouth on hers, his breath against her skin. It was frightening and deliriously wonderful.

Sampson helped her into the curricule and paid the boy. She heard him thank the lad for putting the top up, and the boy's gasp when given a coin. Climbing in, Sampson clucked to the horses, his beaver hat back in place, his face a polite mask to any passerby. No one would ever know they had just shared an earth-shattering moment. For Dottie was no longer sure what love was. Her limited experience had not prepared her for the touch of this man, the genuine goodness she saw him in.

"So tell me, why America?" His soft voice had a new pitch to it. Hurt, perhaps?

"Why not?" She shrugged. "I thought the farther away I went, the easier it would be to start again."

"Running from memories?"

The clack of the horses' hooves echoed in a taunting rhythm against the cobblestone.

Tell him. Tell him. Tell him.

But the words wouldn't come. Her feelings were too new, and she wasn't sure how she felt about... anything. Him, that kiss, leaving England. She was so confused.

Sam bumped her shoulder with his, and there was a lighter tone to his words. "We can make new memories here, together."

Dottie blinked back tears. Why couldn't she have met him first? She was damaged goods now, and he deserved so much more. He pulled up on the reins, and she realized they were back at the tavern.

"Have I done something? Should I have waited longer to kiss you?" he asked, tipping her chin with a knuckle and turning her face toward him. "I think about you all the time. You are in my dreams when I close my eyes, in my thoughts as I drink my morning coffee or take my supper. And when we kissed, I knew you had found your way *here*." He took her hand and held it against his chest. Even through his greatcoat, she could feel the steady *thump* of his heart.

"We hardly know one another," she managed weakly, her resolution failing.

He shook his head. "We've been meeting for over two months. Many couples marry after a courtship of that length."

She opened her mouth, but he put a finger against her lips.

"No, you aren't ready for a proposal, but I don't think it's too soon to tell you how I feel. I was not alone under that tree. It was a mutual passion." He leaned forward and brushed her lips, once, twice. "Can you deny there is something between us?"

Dottie shook her head. "There is so much you don't know about me." Her words were a ragged whisper.

"We have nothing but time, Dottie. I don't know what you've been through. There is a haunted expression I see in

your beautiful eyes when you think I'm not looking. I want to know everything about your past." He kissed her forehead. "There are bits of my past you will learn, and I hope we will not judge each other."

"I have no right to judge anyone." She shook her head, laid her hand on his cheek. "You are a good, caring man. One who will make a difference in people's lives."

"Let us make a difference together. I have an idea for a hospital for unmarried mothers. You could be an important part of that. I need someone by my side with intelligence, a partner, who can help me with my plans. One who would understand the girls—women—and educate them to be independent, self-sufficient." His eyes were almost brown in the dim light, but his excitement shone brightly. "Who better to help those in need, than those who have been in their shoes?"

With a deep breath, she nodded. There was a ring of truth to that statement. The downtrodden knew how disingenuous the upper class could be, doling out aid which always included stipulations. What Sampson offered was sincere, assistance on their terms, giving them ways to help themselves long after they left the hospital.

"Will you think about it?" he asked. His voice was husky as his thumb stroked her jaw, and she leaned her cheek into his palm.

Dottie closed her eyes when his lips touched hers. At that moment, she could deny him nothing. She would have to find the right time to tell him about Robert. And pray he would understand.



Sunday

St. James Park

"HURRY, sweeting, or we won't get a prime spot." It was another warm day for November, so she'd decided to take

Violet with her. It would be good for the girl to get some fresh air. And meet Dr. Brooks.

Dottie had made a decision. She would find the words to explain how she'd become a widow, and let fate decide if she should stay or go to America. Her heart told her that Sampson meant what he said about a future together. If he would have her, she would be a part of his life, his plans.

Besides, the voyage had lost its appeal. The Clatterlys had helped her establish a living. She was able to support herself, and soon, she wouldn't need a reference. Her landlords and their patrons already sang her praises. Violet had settled in and seemed happy with their lot.

"I don't mind if you walk around and enjoy the day but don't wander too far. I want to properly introduce you to Samps—Dr. Brooks. He may become someone important to me, so the two of you need to become acquainted." Dottie ignored the pouty look and patted the girl's cheek. "You look very pretty in your new gown. The deep green makes your hair look golden."

Violet grinned and ran off toward the canal. "Don't muss your clothes and keep your pelisse on. It's not that warm!" Dottie called after her.

By the time Sampson arrived, she had calmed her nerves. "Good day, fine sir. May I interest you in a treat? I'm told I make the very best tarts in London."

"Funny thing. I was told the same." He leaned over her cart, squinting at the pastries. "They don't look so extraordinary to me."

She gasped in mock offense, then grinned when he winked at her. "I'm glad you've come."

"Are you? I wasn't quite sure how we'd left things on Wednesday." Relief shone on his face. "Shall we continue our Wednesdays, then?"

She nodded. "However, there are some things about my past I must share with you before—"

“Before I lose my heart? Too late, Dottie.” He took off his hat and ran a hand through his brown waves. “There are some questions I’ve been wanting to ask, but I’ll save them for another Wednesday.”

“I brought Violet along today. It’s time the two of you meet.”

“The magical child who tames the beastly barkeep?”

Dottie chuckled and scanned the expanse of lawn on either side of them. “One and the same.”

“Is she hiding in the cart?” he asked with a straight face, poking at the cakes and pasties.

“She disappears each time I have a customer, then gets bored, I suppose, and returns. The last time I saw her, she was following a couple toward the canal.”

“Is that her?”

Dottie saw Violet approaching them at a run. “Yes, and she managed to stay clean. Miracles on a Sunday.”

The girl stopped just behind Dottie, clinging to her pelisse and peeking around at Sampson. In the distance a constable’s whistle blew, and the sound of pedestrians laughing floated on the slight breeze.

“Violet, this is Dr. Brooks.”

“Miss Violet, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Violet stared at him solemnly, and Dottie wondered what was going on in that little brain of hers.

“And yes, I *am* enjoying this fine November day. Thank you for inquiring,” Sampson said with a grin, his dimples deepening as he tried to charm Violet. His questioning eyes looked to Dottie.

“I’m afraid she doesn’t speak. I’ve heard her laugh or hum along when I sing but never words.” Her arm went around the slim frame protectively. “I understand she’s capable, but something must have happened...”

“Fascinating—and tragic, of course.” He cocked his head, studying Violet. “I’ve heard of the phenomena with soldiers in battle. A traumatic incident that keeps them from speaking, some blocked memory too painful to remember.”

“Is there a cure?” Dottie realized she should have shared this information sooner. Sampson might be able to treat Violet.

“Time, usually.” He squatted down to Violet’s level. “You’re a lucky girl to have found Mrs. Brown.”

Violet nodded and clutched Dottie’s skirt more tightly.

Sampson stood and tousled the girl’s hair. “I’d like a dozen of everything you’ve brought.”

She chuckled and decided not to argue this time. When she handed him the package, he reached inside his greatcoat and pulled out his purse, dropping some coins into her hand. “Until Wednesday, Mrs. Brown.”

He tipped his hat and walked away, whistling some jaunty tune.

Violet stepped to the front of the cart and watched him leave. A small group approached from the opposite direction, catching Dottie’s attention while they considered what to buy, and when she looked around, the girl was gone again.

A few minutes later, another whistle blew, closer this time. A man’s shout, then a terrifying scream that sent a chill down Dottie’s back.

CHAPTER TEN

Dottie picked up her skirts and ran toward the commotion. Somehow, she knew it was Violet. Had she fallen into the canal? In the distance, she saw Sampson carrying the child, kicking and screaming. As he drew closer, a constable close behind, she could see Violet's tear-streaked face.

“Maaaamaaaa!”

The breath left Dottie's lungs. Sampson struggled to hold on to the girl, who was striking out at some invisible obstacle, fingers clawing at the air, her brown eyes glazed and unseeing.

Sampson stopped at the cart, leaning against a tree as he lowered himself and the hysterical girl to the ground. Dottie was on her knees in an instant, stroking her hair, murmuring soothing words. Violet's flailings subsided. She leaned against Dottie's chest, whimpering and clutching at her shoulders.

The constable stood over them, a stern look on his face. “What's going on here?”

Sampson gently laid the child in Dottie's lap and stood. “My name is Dr. Brooks. I'm afraid this child has had some kind of fit. I believe it's over for now.”

The man's bushy eyebrows came together as he stared at Dottie and the trembling girl. “Well, I s'pose you would know more about it than me. Do you need any help with the lass?”

“No, but I thank you.”

“Been a busy day. Four pockets picked today and now this.” The constable nodded. “Well, if you don’t need my help, I’ll be off. Good luck with the little one. Poor thing.”

Dottie rocked Violet, holding her close and trying not to cry. “What happened?”

“We’ll discuss it later. She may have remembered something.” He squatted down and brushed wet hair from the girl’s face. “I’ll get a hackney to take you both home, then find someone to bring your cart to the Clatterlys. Perhaps the boy who is holding Jack.”

Dottie nodded, so thankful that Sampson had been there. “Will you come and check on her?”

“Of course. Once she’s home, get her into bed and use a cool compress to ease the pain in her head. I’d imagine she has a megrim after all this.” He straightened. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine.”



SAM WONDERED how he would tell Dottie what the girl had done. At the time, his main concern was for the health of the child. She was a little thief and had probably been at it all afternoon. He imagined she’d been taught by the age of four how to pick pockets. But why today? Habit? After arranging for Dottie’s cart to be returned, he’d stopped by his office for his satchel and a tincture in case Violet was restless.

He knocked on the back door of the tavern, and Mrs. Clatterly answered it, spying his bag. “Oh, Dr. Brooks. You’re a saint. The poor little mite is asleep now, but Mrs. Brown is...” The landlady sighed and showed him to the room, leaving the door open as she backed away. “I’ll get you some tea.”

Dottie sat at a wooden table, staring at four small purses in front of her. When he entered, she looked up at him, her eyes brimming with tears.

It seemed his explanation might not be as lengthy as he'd thought. "You found them in her pelisse?" He removed his greatcoat and hung it on a hook next to the door. Setting his satchel on the table, he took out the tincture and handed it to her.

"If she becomes restless during the night, give her two drops of this, no more. It will make her drowsy, so she can relax and go back to sleep."

She nodded, then pointed to the stolen pouches. "Why?"

"I was wondering the same thing." He sank into a chair next to her and took her hand. "When I caught her reaching into my greatcoat and snatched her up, she went berserk. I thought bringing her to you might calm her. And it did, eventually."

"She s-stole from you?" Her voice cracked with pain. "I'm so sorry."

"Why don't we start at the beginning. Tell me how the two of you met."

At this, the tears streamed down her face, a sob escaping. "I was going to tell you on Wednesday, explain everything."

Apprehension skittered down his spine. "Explain what?"

"We met at a hanging." She gazed at him with pleading eyes.

"The same day I first saw you?" he asked, releasing her hand. "We've never discussed that."

Dottie closed her eyes and nodded.

"In hindsight, I realize she was being chased. But I asked her if she was there with someone, and she pointed to the gallows." She swallowed and opened her eyes. "Her brother was the young man standing next to Robert."

He blinked. "Robert Dunn?" His heart pounded as he waited for a trap door to open beneath *him*. "And how would you know Robert Dunn?"

"He was my husband. Brown is my family name."

Sam shook his head in disbelief. “You couldn’t have been married to that man. He was... he was—”

“A murderer. Yes, I know.” She reached for his hand, and he pulled it back. “I had no idea who he was. I thought he worked for a vicar of a wealthy parish.”

“The Vicar, a criminal with no conscience who we’ve been after for years. How could you not know?” He was shouting now and stood, sucking in a deep breath to calm himself.

“I was naïve and believed his façade of a gentleman. There was no one to guide me except a spinster who ran a girls’ school. She was fooled as well. I didn’t know until the constable knocked on our door and arrested him.”

“*Your husband* worked for the man who was responsible for my mother’s death.” He ran his hand through his hair, pacing the room. “He sold the insurance certificate to my father. When I was finally able to pay off the debt, it was too late. My mother’s health was so poor, she only lived another six months. My father died within the year. Most likely of a broken heart.”

“Why were you at Newgate that day?” she asked, her voice growing cold.

“To watch The Vicar’s men hang.”

“And the man responsible for their arrest?”

“Paddy O’Brien.”

They stared at one another, at an impossible impasse.

Mr. Clatterly burst into the room, Mrs. Clatterly right behind him with a tea tray. He took one look at the Dottie, then at Sam. “I think you should leave now.”



ONCE HER LANDLORDS were assured she was fine, they returned to their apartment above the tavern. Dottie added more coal to the stove, then undressed and climbed into bed

with Violet. The girl had slept through their entire confession. Dottie wrapped her arms around her, holding her close.

The Clatterlys assumed Sampson had been furious about Violet stealing the money.

She didn't have the strength tonight to explain. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow would be soon enough.

Tonight, her heart was broken.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sampson spent a sleepless night filled with nightmares. He was chasing Dottie, but each time he caught her, he saw Robert Dunn's face. Then his mother's. He needed a voice of reason and knew where to go.

Margaret answered the door herself. "Why, 'tis our Sam. Paddy," she called over her shoulder, "Sam's come."

He followed her into the dining room, where the redheaded giant was filling his plate from the sideboard. "Grab a plate, boyo."

Sam shook his head. "I'm not hungry. I came for advice."

Paddy's blue eyes narrowed. "Ye look like death. What happened?"

After pouring a cup of coffee, he sank into a chair. "It's a long story."

Margaret kissed him on the cheek. "We've nowhere ta go. Tell us all."

Sampson told them the whole sordid story. When he finished, his coffee was cold.

"So, she ain't Mrs. Brown?" asked Paddy.

"No, she was Miss Dorothea Brown before she married." He gulped down the cold black liquid and stood to pour himself another. "No idea who the girl belongs to."

"Easy enough ta find out if her brother swung next ta Dunn." Paddy smeared some jam on his bread and said around

a mouthful, “We’ll put Harry on it. He’ll have sumtin’ before the end of the week.”

“What about Dottie?” Both men turned to look at Margaret. “I can’t imagine what she’s goin’ through.”

“What she’s going through? She lied to me—about her name, who she was.” Sam stood abruptly, almost sending his chair crashing to the floor. He began to pace. “All this time I thought she was a widow—”

“She *is* a widow,” Margaret said quietly, “who was duped by a man. Just like those women ye help at Magdalen. Only she didn’t end up at a hospital, begging for help. She made her own way the best she could.”

Sam opened his mouth, then closed it, letting Margaret’s words sink in.

“I doubt she could get any *decent* work using the name Dunn. So, she took back Brown and found a way to survive. A way other than prostitution. Tell me, Sampson J. Brooks, what ye would’ve done in her position.” Margaret’s chin stuck out as she held his gaze. “In my opinion, she’s a brave young woman, and yer lucky ta know her.”

Paddy whistled. “Well, ain’t it just like my lovely wife to cut right ta the thick of it.”

“That’s why she wanted to start over in America.” Sam hung his head. “No one would know her.”

“I imagine she couldn’t find a position without a reference. The poor dear,” Margaret said. “And my Sam shouts at her. Shame on ye.”

“But—”

“Ye love her, boyo?” asked Paddy.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Answer him, Sam.”

With a snort, he nodded.

“Then ‘tis settled.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Margaret snorted this time. “Aye, it is. Yer mother followed yer father into King’s Bench out of love. Ye took ta the streets out of love. Yer woman told a lie, ‘tis all. How can love not conquer that?”

Sam stared at the wise woman before him. Yes indeed. If he could bottle her insight, they’d all be as rich as Croesus.



Friday

VIOLET HAD NOT SPOKEN AGAIN. She had been terrified Dottie would send her away. It had taken the entire next day before she and Mrs. Clatterly had pieced together that Violet thought Dottie would marry Dr. Brooks, leaving her alone. She had stolen the money, hoping to leave for America before that happened.

The rest of the week was a blur. She had no idea what to do with the stolen purses, so she’d given them to the Clatterlys. They had passed them on to a constable, saying a fleeing pickpocket had dropped them outside the tavern.

“You can’t mope around forever, my dear,” said Mrs. Clatterly as she helped Dottie load her cart. “Will you try to speak with Dr. Brooks?”

She shook her head. Her landlady had been much more understanding when told about Dottie’s past than Sampson had been. Not that she could blame him. It had all come to light in the worst possible way. And it was upsetting to know he was somehow connected to the worst time in her life.

“He was surprised and hurt. Who wouldn’t be?” Mrs. Clatterly smiled at Violet. “But look how he worried over our little girl, even knowing what she’d done. He’s still a good man, I say.”

That was the hardest part. Sampson *was* a good man. If only she could turn back time.

“Violet!” called Mr. Clatterly from the public room.
“Violet!”

The girl wiped her hands on her apron and ran out of the room. A few minutes later, she returned with a grin on her face. She took Dottie’s hand and began pulling her toward the tavern.

“I don’t have time, sweeting. It’s time for me to leave.”

Violet shook her head and pulled harder. Mrs. Clatterly went to the doorway and peeked out. “Saints and sinners!” she said. “Dottie, you’re needed in the front.”

Irritated, she took off her redingote and walked into the tavern. “Mr. Clatterly—”

He pointed at the entrance.

Sampson stood there, his greatcoat dusted with snow, a lopsided smile on his face. He cleared his throat. “I was wondering if I might have a word with you?”

“Why?” Her heart couldn’t take one more crumb of disappointment.

“I have information concerning Violet.” His hazel eyes pinned hers, daring her to say no.

“About Sunday?”

“About her family.”

All the fight went out of her. She nodded and moved to a table next to the kitchen. There were only a few customers at the moment, and they were seated at the other end of the room.

Sampson took a chair next to her. “The Clatterlys are welcome to hear this if you’d like.”

“Yes, I would.” They would give her strength.

Mrs. Clatterly made tea, and they all sat at the table, listening to Sampson’s tale.

“So, her name is Violet Ferguson?” asked Mrs. Clatterly again. “There’s no way she could have told us that with hand motions.”

“No,” agreed Sampson. “The father and son both worked for Robert Dunn. Before that, they were pickpockets and taught Violet the trade. That, however, has nothing to do with why she doesn’t speak.

“She and her mother were set upon one night by two men. Her mother put up a fight, and according to a witness, Violet tried to kick and bite the attackers. One of them caught her, holding her back as the other pushed her mother and grabbed her bag. She fell and hit her head. The men fled, leaving Violet crying over her mother’s lifeless body.”

He paused, letting them think about the news. “She never spoke after that.”

“Oh, my heavens.” Mrs. Clatterly shook her head and dabbed her eyes with her apron.

Mr. Clatterly scowled.

Dottie reached for Sampson’s hand without thought. Oh, how her chest hurt, but it was for Violet. When he squeezed her fingers in return, reached across the table, and wiped a tear from her cheek, the river flowed. He pulled a handkerchief from his waistcoat and handed it to her.

“Will she ever speak again?” she asked.

Sampson shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s possible. But I believe when I grabbed her last Sunday, that memory—or parts of it—came flooding back.”

“Thank you for coming to tell us.” Dottie blew her nose, then chewed her bottom lip, wondering if she should give the handkerchief back.

“I’m sorry for Violet. And I’m sorry for losing my temper.”

“No, you have nothing to apologize for,” she said. “I—”

“Had to survive, as my second mother pointed out.” He put his other hand over hers. “I will say this in front of the Clatterlys. In front of all London if I must. I love you, Dottie Brown or Dunn or whatever name you decide to take. You

have an inner strength to match my own, and I can't imagine a better woman by my side."

She sniffed and blew her nose again. Definitely not giving it back until she washed it. *I can't imagine a better woman by my side.* Her gaze snapped to his face. That crooked smile again.

"Paddy always says a person should try to follow bad news with good news. I hope you consider this good news." He cleared his throat. "Dottie, would you be my wife?"

She swallowed. This week had been miserable, thinking she'd never see him again. "What about Violet?"

"Of course, she'd be welcome—"

"She's staying with us."

Three pairs of eyes turned to look at Mr. Clatterly. "You can spend all the time with her that you want, but we've an extra room upstairs. The lass considers this as her home now. Ain't no one gonna upset her again."

"Could we leave it up to Violet?" asked Dottie. She had never heard the man put so many words together at one time. She turned to Sampson. "Are you sure... *I am what you want?*"

"Never been more certain of anything."

"Then, yes."

"Heaven help us!" cried Mrs. Clatterly. "There's going to be a wedding!"

EPILOGUE

Christmas Eve 1821

Dottie carried the plum pudding to the dining room and set it in the center of the table. Mr. and Mrs. Clatterly sat across from her and Violet, with Sampson at the head of the table.

“Sam, would you light the plum pudding?” she asked him.

His heart was full. He had a beautiful wife, a babe on the way, a thriving practice, and his dream of a hospital for unmarried mothers was coming to fruition. He was truly blessed. He only wished his parents were here to see the “family” he had surrounding him.

Sam smiled as Dottie poured the brandy around the pudding. He went to the mantel and retrieved the tinder box. After lighting the stick, he handed it to Violet.

“I believe Violet should do the honors this year.”

The lass had come so far. She was thriving with the Clatterlys, spent afternoons with Dottie for her lessons, and even spoke occasionally.

Violet grinned and jumped from her chair. Carefully, she took the burning stick from Sam and held it to the pudding. They all clapped as the flame caught and lit up the dessert. Dottie and Mrs. Clatterly blinked back tears. Mr. Clatterly rubbed at his eyes.

“Happy Christmas,” she whispered, and they all cheered.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Paddy's Peelers is a new Regency detective series by Aubrey Wynne, launching in 2024. Pads, Purses, and Plum Pudding includes Dr. Sampson J. Brooks, one of the Peelers. The Vicar is a recurring villain that will appear in each mystery—until he's caught in the final book.

I chose to write a series that included a cast outside the *ton* and set in Cheapside. It is a fascinating district that is not given enough credit for its bustling trade and variety of goods and services at reasonable prices. Here the wealthy merchants mixed with middle and lower classes, enjoying much the same lifestyle as our usual Regency heroes and heroines but in a less lavish background.

Reviews are the lifeblood of authors. If you've enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a few words at your favorite retailer.

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ABOUT AUBREY WYNNE

USA Today Bestselling author Aubrey Wynne resides in the Midwest with her husband, dogs, horses, mule, and barn cats. Obsessions include wine, history, travel, trail riding, and all things Christmas. Her Chicago Christmas series has received multiple awards and was twice nominated as a Rone finalist by InD'tale Magazine.

Aubrey's first love is medieval romance but after dipping her toe in the Regency period in 2018 with the *Wicked Earls' Club*, she was smitten. This inspired her spin-off series *Once Upon a Widow* and the Scottish Regency series *A MacNaughton Castle Romance* with Dragonblade Novels. In 2024, Aubrey will launch Paddy's Peelers, a Regency detective series.

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Penford Publishing and the authors of Rakes & Reticules hope you enjoyed Book 3 of the Lords and Ladies of St James anthology set.

Up next Book 3 **Dukes & Diamonds**



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