



Regency
BLADES

*Rawden's
Duty*

TESSA
MURRAN

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Regency Blades Series

Rawden's Duty

Highland Wolf Series

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The Dark Wolf's Deliverance

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Won By The Highlander

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Freed By The Highlander



Chapter One

London, 1815

The rattle and squeak of the coach over London's cobbled streets did little to drown out Charles Howden's complaints. 'Dashed hot night to be out. I'm sweating like a hog, and this waistcoat is new. It will be ruined. I've a good mind to turn around and go back home.'

Ever vain was Uncle Charles, spiteful too, when the mood took him, and Grace's hopes of an enjoyable evening began to fade. When they took a corner too sharply, Grace was thrown sideways to slam against his side, and her uncle's anger swelled. He banged on the carriage roof with his cane.

'Damn you, man. Slow down before you pitch us into the streets, and I have you horse-whipped for your insolence,' he bellowed, his voice making Grace's nerves jangle.

She had to appease him somehow, for his blood was up now. 'I am sorry you are being inconvenienced on my behalf, Uncle Charles. I know that routs are a chore for you, and I am most grateful that you should attend one on my account.'

'Aye, they are a chore indeed, all mindless chatter and no dancing to be had, not that one would be minded to on such a hellishly hot evening. But I suppose it is worth suffering if it ends in matrimony, which it had better if you want to hook your own husband rather than have one of my choosing.' He narrowed his beady eyes. 'At least you look the part in all your finery, and you've a pretty countenance and a pleasing figure working in your favour. Though I doubt the more discerning gentlemen of quality will forgive your woeful lack of a dowry. Goodness knows how I am to get you wed and off my hands.'

Uncle Charles' barb hurt Grace more than she could acknowledge, and it set her temper rearing up so that she failed to bite her tongue. 'On that subject, I was told that you would be able to assist me with the provision of a dowry on final settlement of my late father's estate.'

Uncle Charles sat bolt upright and ramrod stiff, which was a struggle given the swaying of the coach, but his outrage

enabled him to manage it. 'Who told you that?'

'Father told me on his deathbed, Uncle.'

'My brother was obviously raving at his end with the fever and such. There was no agreement of any sort on that subject, child, and have I not said that any discussion of said dowry is at an end?'

'But my father intended it in the spirit of his will, surely. Is it not reasonable that as my only family, you might provide it?'

'He was not specific about any of it,' snapped Charles, cutting her off. 'And a will is supposed to leave one money, not the burden of a child. 'Make provision for Grace's future,' was all your father said, and as we had been estranged for years, I have no obligation to do so. And do not try to guile me into submission, girl. I'll not hand out a dowry for some young fool of a husband to fritter away. Your duty is to find a man who can provide for you without one. God save me, you are already straining the limits of my charity, what with your dressmaker's expenses, food and lodging, not to mention all your female fripperies and such.'

Grace looked down at her hands, clenched in despair. 'Yes, Uncle and I am grateful indeed.'

He tutted and shook his head. 'Thank God for my good christian charity. I am sainted not to have turned you out on the streets, what with all your complaining, fussing, and woeful lack of gratitude. I've a good mind to turn this damned coach about and head for home, Grace.'

How she longed to stand up to the vain, greedy man before her, but Grace could not summon the courage. In the three miserable months since she had lost her father to pneumonia, she had been thrown on the mercy of his middle-aged bachelor brother, Charles Howden, who had shown not one jot of kindness. Instead, he had made it clear at every possible opportunity that she was there on sufferance and a great burden to boot. 'Must my serene bachelor existence be imposed upon so woefully,' he was wont to declare at every opportunity.

Only the thought of society judging him dishonourable, should he dispose of her, kept a roof over Grace's head, for Uncle Charles was all about the appearance of honour whilst possessing absolutely none of it. Yet she was totally dependent on the charity of the bloat-faced man before her who now sneered out his latest cruelty.

‘I think I will turn the coach around and find more agreeable sport this evening. I am done with this dance.’

Grace leant forward. ‘Please, Uncle Charles. I am sorry to talk of such matters. I meant no disrespect, and just think on it. We are almost at Lady Blanchard's, where a refreshing rum punch is waiting for you. And you look very fine indeed in your new waistcoat. Shall you deprive the company of seeing it?’

‘Hmmpf,’ he snorted. ‘The company will not be fine enough for my waistcoat and the punch tepid, no doubt.’

‘But how will I ever find a good match so that you may unburden yourself if I do not mix in society?’ said Grace in as reasonable a tone as she could manage. ‘My friend from school, Miss Harriet Spencer, will be there, and she is a delightful young lady with excellent connections.’

Uncle Charles brightened a little. ‘Ah, yes, your well-to-do little friend is a most esteemed young lady.’

‘She often asks after you, Uncle, and is keen to know you better.’

‘As I am keen to know her. Such lofty connections and good breeding,’ he replied.

Charles Howden was ever eager to claw his way one more rung up society's ladder, being of relatively humble merchant stock just two generations back. He looked sideways at Grace. ‘An earl's daughter has every advantage, yet she has beauty too.’

‘Yes. Harriet is very fortunate in her family,’ said Grace, wary that her uncle might spot the sarcasm that strayed into her tone. But he did not.

‘Exalted indeed. And being an earl’s daughter, she will no doubt overshadow you, little fool,’ he added. ‘You should cultivate more lowly friends so they do not eclipse your virtues.’

Humiliation burrowed deep into Grace’s heart. Uncle Charles was right. Dear Harriet was the best of friends, but she was also rich, titled, well-loved and boasted excellent prospects and many friends amongst the ton. She was everything Grace was not, so with some trepidation, she braced herself to navigate a difficult evening as the coach rattled onwards to Lady Blanchard’s rout.

Chapter Two

Rawden Voss surveyed his company with barely veiled contempt and made a study of the parade of fools entering one after another. Overdressed women and chinless men. Only one person caught his jaded eye – a fine redheaded lady, young and twitchy, like a filly not yet used to the bridle, or was she more coppery than red? Oh, what did it matter? Curse his brother for dragging him out on an insufferably hot summer night to attend Lady Blanchard's rout. It was the twilight of the London season and a last, tiresome chance for the ton to indulge its ravenous appetite for gossip, scandal and spite. The event was overstuffed with the pinnacle of society, the titled and wealthy, and those striving to be, all pressed together in the pink and white confection that passed as a kind of modest ballroom at Lady Blanchard's Chalcot Square summer residence.

The evening's theme seemed to be avian, as the ladies all sported colourful feathers, bobbing comically in their hair. Scores of unfortunate songbirds from exotic parts of the world were placed in gilded cages as decorations all around the hall. But the poor creatures would not sing, nor would they be heard above the hubbub. Instead, they twitched and fluttered, struck dumb at the uproar in the ballroom of too many bodies pressed into a too-small space. Rawden could feel their pain. The urge to barge through the throng and escape the press of bodies around his own was almost insurmountable. But he had promised to behave for his brother's sake, and was a man of his word.

Potted shrubbery sprouting from all corners gave the impression of being in a jungle, and Rawden could not imagine a real one feeling any more humid. He might just as well be in the colonies in India as in a London ballroom. He fingered his high, stiff collar as sweat made it stick to the back of his neck and tried to spy out a quiet spot.

Eager, dewy-skinned society innocents were crammed in like pretty flowers, slowly wilting in bejewelled silk dresses, fans feverishly flapping to circulate the cloying air, thick with

perfume and haze from the candles. Add to this mix the noise of scores of giggling debutantes, chattering mamas and braying lords, earls and viscounts, and you had a scene from Dante's Inferno. Surely Lady Blanchard did not have this many friends, for she was an insufferable, fussy snob who was as likely to denounce you as a peasant as shake your hand? It seemed she was to judge the success of her rout on the sheer number of guests she could cram into her house rather than their quality.

At least William was enjoying the melee. Engaging and affable as ever, Rawden's brother was laughing and flirting with a group of young ladies under the eagle eye of their mothers. Being only one and twenty, his soft edges had not yet been sharpened by experience and disappointment, and he was still in awe of pretty women, though he tended to get tongue-tied in their presence. William was the perfect example of a privileged young man, eager to make his mark.

What trite small talk was he regaling the ladies with? The turn in the weather from crisp to uncomfortably sultry. No, that would bring attention to how much the ladies were sweating into their fine silk dresses, their carefully crafted curls losing their bounce in the humidity. He could hold a discourse on the progress of the grinding war recently waged on the continent against the tyrant Napoleon. No, such worldly matters were far too dramatic for these sheltered flowers. Any talk of battle and bloodshed would surely send them swooning.

Rawden stifled a yawn as William said something which sent all the ladies into a round of delicate laughter, gloved hands brought delicately to mouths as if mirth were something to be contained and never unbridled. Rawden doubted even one of them could summon a true belly laugh of pure joy. Perhaps they were too confined in tight stays to fully laugh at anything. As his frustration boiled over, he resolved to visit a certain singer of his acquaintance this evening and loosen her stays in order to loosen his mood. She would surely welcome his attentions and salve his anger.

Will caught his eye and winked at him just as some fool bumped into Rawden's shoulder, sending his punch sloshing over the top of the glass. A savage glare sent the man pushing off through the throng in great haste, and when Rawden looked back at Will, he was making his way over, winding through a press of heaving bosoms and fans.

'Are you enjoying yourself, brother?' he said, knowing full well that Rawden was not.

'Of course not,' he snapped. 'Look at all these pompous fools. How they love to shun me.'

'If you would desist from glaring at everyone, they might not.'

'I will not smile and simper to appease this lot, and it would make no difference. I am here on sufferance because of you, brother, and so I will not play the fool for a bunch of numbskulls nor suffer the attentions of the marriage-minded simpletons in this party, nor should you. By all that is holy, these matrons are like a pack of rabid dogs sniffing after eligible bachelors.'

'I would not put you into that category, though you look well enough when you clean yourself up.'

Rawden grinned. 'Thank you for massaging my vanity. Lucky for me, you are right, and I am far from eligible. But you should watch yourself. A tasty morsel like you, they will be drooling over you all night.'

'I quite enjoy the ladies drooling over me,' said Will with a smirk, lighting up his boyish face.

'Very well, do as you must, but must you scrape and bow to people who are your inferiors in every way?'

'Now, you flatter me, brother. And I am merely joining in this rout in the spirit of good manners and by being pleasant to the company, an example you should emulate. Can you not circulate and refrain from lurking in this dark corner?'

'Do not seek to educate me on manners, little brother. I am a lost cause in that respect. And I am lurking in a corner for

good reason. I have no wish to be in the vanguard of this battle.'

'Battle?'

'Aye, it is a battle - for your fortune and title, and I wish you luck with it,' said Rawden, clapping a heavy hand on his brother's shoulder.

A pretty young woman glided by and met Rawden's eye. She quickly dropped her gaze as if discomfited by his attention, though he'd paid her little heed. She did not move away. A stout lady with enormous hair swept up to her, obviously the mother, and opened her mouth to request an introduction, but Rawden casually turned his back on them both. Will sighed loudly as the ladies moved off with much tutting, the matron snarling, 'Well, I never saw such deplorable manners. That is no gentleman in my book.'

'I lay no claim to that virtue, nor will I ever, so you had best set your sights on a softer target,' Rawden shouted after her, downing his glass in one gulp. Several people turned and stared. A sharp elbow in the ribs had him turning back to his brother.

'Goodness, what is wrong with you, Rawden?' said William. 'That young lady was most pleasing to the eye.'

'You think that of all young women pleasing simply because you are a young man. Anything in skirts looks good to you. I have had quite enough of being preyed on by gushing mamas and their insipid offspring. As if I would entertain the notion of being tied forever to some pretty imbecile of a girl who has no more knowledge of how the world works beyond the stuffy drawing rooms of the ton than these poor birds trapped in their cages.'

Will sighed. 'Well, I declare you a dull dog, and I refuse to sulk here with you when I can be charming the room. So I suggest you partake of more champagne to dull your pain whilst I make myself known to the prettiest girls. I've spotted a rather striking redhead, and I mean to find out who she is before some other fellow gets to her.'

‘If you mean to make a good impression on a young lady, you would have done well to come alone. My notoriety is a constant anchor dragging you down, brother.’

‘On the contrary, it makes me appear more exciting by association. The ladies like a bit of danger to spice things up.’ Will grabbed a glass of punch from a passing servant and gulped it down before heading off with a grin.

Rawden frowned at his retreating back. Though he seemed in good enough spirits, where Will was concerned, still waters ran deep. His brother was being overly jolly, which Rawden had come to know meant he was on edge about something. Perhaps he had some special lady in this throng he was trying to impress. The thought of Will offering his heart to some young lady sent a stab of fierce affection through Rawden along with a great urge to protect him from disappointment.

Rawden shrank back a little into the shadow of the faux jungle and tried to hang onto his patience for his brother’s sake. If he drank enough champagne to fell a dray horse, it might take the edge off the bitter taste in his mouth. It was then he noticed a group of young ladies glancing his way. One of them was mouth-wateringly pretty – coppery hair, wide hazel eyes and a tip-tilted nose, giving her a playful innocence that melted his heart a little. It was the young woman whose striking hair had earned his notice earlier. Yet for all her beauty, her face held sadness, and she said little, seeming ill at ease within the lively chatter of the group. Rawden was a little intrigued. Maybe she was an outlier like him, there on sufferance, and so not really wanted.

So intrigued was Rawden by the sad beauty that it took him a while to realise that the party of young ladies was laughing at him.

Chapter Three

Grace's arm ached from fluttering her fan to cool herself. There were far too many guests crammed into Lady Blanchard's mansion, and she was miserable despite the opulent surroundings, elevated company and extravagant delicacies laid out for guests. Uncle Charles had gleefully given her up to her friend Harriet almost immediately upon their arrival and headed off to the buffet of sweet treats on offer. There had been no time for anything other than the briefest of greetings before they had been descended upon by a hoard of young ladies of Harriet's acquaintance. They had given Grace a cursory glance and the barest of courtesy, then edged her out of the conversation. It was clear she was beneath their notice, and such had been the case all season. She was only tolerated amongst them because of her friendship with Harriet.

Grace wished she was somewhere far away, back in the soft, rolling hills of Oxforshire, barefoot in a cool grassy field of buttercups and daisies, instead of hovering at Harriet's side, neither wanted nor remarked upon.

'Must you single out the most fearsome man in the room, Harriet?' crowed one of Harriet's friends, whose name Grace could not recall. Oh, what was it, Lady Lydia, something or other? Oh, yes, Lady Lydia Granston - a baron's daughter who sported a loud voice and teeth that her mouth struggled to contain. She and her haughty companions were desperate for scandal and drama, always finding fault in others, and it seemed they had found a new victim for their spite.

'Oh, stop looking. He is staring this way. Do you think he heard you?' cried another, grabbing Lydia's arm, her enormous feather bobbing in her hair in mock mortification.

'Well, I don't care if he did,' said Lydia. 'What a sullen creature. A troll, if you like, a misshapen thing. See how he lurks just beyond the candlelight.'

'I think him shaped rather well and fearfully handsome to boot. Look at the breadth of those shoulders,' offered Harriet,

casting a coy glance into the edge of the room.

‘How shocking of you, Harriet,’ said Lydia, trying to ingratiate herself with Grace’s friend as she had done all season.

Grace followed Harriet’s gaze and met a black-eyed glower from the object of their derision. She stared back at the tall, imposing man who had obviously heard their nonsense, for Lydia’s voice had a braying quality. The two of them locked eyes, his, black in the darkness, boring into her like a sword to the chest. The man’s face had a patrician look to it – fine-boned, with a broad nose and a haughty snarl of a mouth pressed tight in displeasure. Yet despite his evident good breeding, he boasted a jagged pink scar down the side of his face, rendering him thuggish, dangerous, even. His eyes held her attention – there was a haunting darkness to them as if the devil swirled in those black depths. Whoever the man was, he seemed altogether unpleasant.

A nudge to the ribs broke her gaze. ‘Look away, Grace. Do not encourage him,’ said Harriet. Grace was about to reply that she was not.

‘What are you all twittering about?’ said a portly older lady with frizzy hair and a red face, bursting into their group. It was Lydia’s dreadful mother, Alice. ‘If there is gossip, I shall have it,’ she cried.

‘The scowling man in the corner, Mama,’ replied Lydia. ‘He was staring at us and glowering.’

‘He seems rather discomforted by our attention. It would be prudent to look away,’ offered Grace.

The older lady gave Grace a dismissive glance and then cast her gaze towards the man. ‘Ah, that is Rawden Voss,’ she sighed. ‘Does he not have a whiff of Hades about him? A handsome man, to be sure, but most ill-favoured, in any way that counts. He is half man, half monster, if the ton is to be believed, and there is no way of knowing which will hold sway tonight.’

‘Whatever can you mean, Mama?’ squeaked Lydia. ‘Are we in peril?’

‘Peril. Who is in peril?’ said another matron, pushing her ample bosom before her into their conversation.

‘I am telling the young ladies about that scoundrel, Rawden Voss, Lady Prudence.’

‘Oh, a scoundrel indeed,’ nodded the lady, eyes widening in outraged excitement.

Lady Alice leant into the group and hissed, ‘Let us just say that Rawden Voss is best avoided by honourable young ladies. That fine visage does not compensate for a wild character and shocking reputation. He is a rake of the first order who will not end well, mark my words. It is just as well he is easy on the eye, or else he would not be received. But Lady Blanchard does like to adorn her festivities with the beautiful and the outrageous. Adds a bit of spice, I suppose.’

‘Which is he?’ said Lydia

‘Both, I should imagine,’ offered Harriet, and all the young ladies squealed like little piglets and stared again.

The man squared his shoulders and seared them with a glance. Instead of being chastened, they all giggled, even Lydia’s mother. Grace had to choke down a sigh of irritation at their lack of manners.

‘Do you think he looks well, Mama? I think that scar down his face is horrid,’ continued Lydia, casting an arrogant glance back.

‘I heard it was from the slash of a rapier and earned in a duel,’ said Lady Prudence, pressing a palm to her bosom for dramatic effect.

‘Is that not illegal, Mama?’ cried Lydia.

‘Yes, and a most shocking scandal ensued. A married lady was involved, though I would hardly use the term ‘lady’ to describe her if she was involved with Rawden Voss. He tends to favour a baser kind of woman.’

‘But I heard that...’ offered Lady Prudence.

‘Shush, my dear, I have the telling of it,’ interrupted Lady Alice rudely.

‘And his opponent? Who was he?’ said Lydia.

‘Oh, his name escapes me.’

‘And what happened to him, Lady Alice?’ asked Grace, as horribly fascinated as all the other young ladies, despite her better judgement.

Lydia’s mama leant in and hissed. ‘I heard the poor man was run through and died of his wounds.’

The group shrieked in horror and turned as one towards Rawden Voss, but where he had lurked, there was now just shadow and emptiness, a little like the man himself.

‘Oh, he has gone, thank goodness,’ cried Lydia as if she had been in mortal danger. ‘The man had the most appalling glower on him, enough to curdle milk, don’t you think? And that scar. Goodness.’

‘I heard it was from a French blade, my dears,’ said Lady Prudence. ‘At the battle of Leipzig, Rawden Voss fought in the Austrian ranks.’

‘Well, maybe. We might never know the truth of his murky parentage, for I am told his family hail from Saxony several generations back. So he is not only a rogue but a foreigner too,’ spat Lady Alice, as if this was some irredeemable defect, far greater than killing a man at sword point.

Lady Prudence was not about to let Lady Alice gain the upper hand. ‘I believe Rawden Voss earned his scars defending you all from that scourge, Napoleon. He is a hero of the Life Guards.’ With this last volley, she moved off into the crowd.

Lady Alice was not about to concede defeat. ‘Yes, but even if that is the case, such scarred and broken men should hide themselves from decent company, not come amongst us to frighten us with their wounds,’ she spat.

‘But should we not applaud them for their sacrifice?’ said Grace.

Lady Alice sneered down her nose at Grace. ‘Yes, of course,’ she snapped. ‘But they should not be making a show of themselves in polite company.’ Alice Granston lowered her voice. ‘My friend, Lady Prudence, may declare him a hero of the battlefield and the scourge of Napoleon’s armies. But we must give him a wide berth as he is seldom received in polite circles.’ She leant in conspiratorially, and all the young ladies did the same. ‘I also heard that, at Leipzig, Rawden Voss slaughtered a hundred men. Shot them or ran them through with his rapier, the savage,’ she hissed, to gasps of horror from all.

Grace groaned inwardly at their gossiping, but thankfully, Lady Granston was easily distracted. ‘Ah, there is my friend, Mrs. Ellis. Excuse me, ladies,’ she said, brightening and rushing away.

Lydia brought a gloved hand to her lips in horror. ‘To kill all those men. Is that not horrible?’ said Harriet.

‘Is that not the point of a battlefield?’ offered Grace to the group, and all eyes turned to her.

‘My, what a vengeful nature you have, Miss Howden,’ said Lydia with barely contained malice.

Grace’s face burned at her scrutiny. ‘What I mean to say is, Napoleon is no friend to England, and if he insists on invading half of Europe, surely his armies deserve violence?’

‘Well, they will most certainly get it from that blackguard, Rawden Voss. My word, Miss Howden, you are very forward with your opinions.’

‘I have read widely on the subject, and it is the truth. Since Napoleon’s escape from Elba, Europe is holding its breath for news of a fresh war.’

Lydia smirked and looked around at her friends. ‘Carry on in that vein, and the ton will consider you a bluestocking, and that will surely dash your hopes of a husband, my dear.’

‘I assure you that should I seek a husband, I would never hide my mind from him.’

Lydia sighed as if she was talking to a vexing child. ‘As one who moves in these circles often, let me advise you. There is nothing wrong with elevating one’s mind. But let me share a morsel of advice. No man wants a wife more accomplished or well-read than he is.’

The other young ladies all nodded in agreement, even Harriet. Grace burned at their disapproval, though she did not care for most of them. They soon resumed their trite conversation, and so she took her leave. ‘I think some refreshment is in order,’ she said, heading for the punch bowl.

As she walked away, Lydia’s bark carried over the melee. ‘Grace Howden is a little coarse for this company. Provincial manners can be forgiven, but prideful opinions cannot. You should be more discerning of the company you keep, Harriet.’

Another voice chipped in. ‘Yes, pity is one thing, but putting yourself at a social disadvantage by dragging its object in your wake is quite another.’

Grace choked back tears of rage and did not wait for Harriet’s reply. She headed to the punch bowl, though it was tricky getting through the throng, and several guests tutted at her as she elbowed her way through.

Within minutes, Harriet appeared by her side. ‘Escaping into the evils of drink, dear friend?’ she said.

‘Forgive me. I am out of my depth with your friends and their finely-honed manners and conversation.’

‘Do not be sarcastic. It does not suit you. And you always tended to dwell on rather serious subjects, even at school.’ Her gloved hand rested on Grace’s arm. ‘I do not judge you for it.’

‘Life was much simpler then, was it not?’

‘Yes. We were too silly friends together getting into scrapes.’

‘And I value your friendship,’ said Grace. ‘You were the only good thing about Miss Lawson’s Academy for Young Ladies. But now you have new friends, and I am sorry you have had to drag me in your wake all season.’

Harriet grimaced. ‘Hush now. I enjoy your company tremendously, and I know my London friends seem intimidating at first. Indeed, I am not always fully at ease in their company, for they are so quick-witted, but they have been with me throughout the season, and I am sure you will warm to them.’

‘You are kind and good, Harriet, but I am nought but a country bumpkin to them.’

‘You are nothing of the sort to me, dear friend,’ said Harriet, taking her arm. ‘Let us enjoy this excellent buffet and the punch. Perhaps a glass will cheer us both.’

Grace surveyed a plate of little cakes studded with currants, sweating off a fragrance of orange flower in the heat, and felt her stomach turn. Harriet brought a glass of punch to her perfect rosebud mouth and sipped like a kitten lapping at a bowl of milk. Grace took in Harriet’s angelic looks - primrose hair, a heart-shaped face and pale blue eyes. Though not possessed of any great intelligence – she had struggled in vain to master French and Latin at school, and as to making her additions and subtractions, it was a lost cause – Grace envied her friend, for Harriet did not need to excel. Harriet’s doll-like beauty alone would have been enough to recommend her to the ton, but her family were also titled and wealthy, which meant that Harriet possessed every advantage.

‘Where has your uncle gone?’ her friend asked.

Now, that was a distinct disadvantage right there. ‘He abandoned me for the rum punch as soon as possible and has not returned. I am not sorry for it, Harriet.’

‘And did you talk to him about your father’s will?’

Grace signed. ‘Yes, for the umpteenth time, with no success. I am doomed to destitution unless I can find a husband this season to ‘take me on,’ as he indelicately puts it.’

‘But this season is almost at an end.’

‘Indeed. I will have no eager suitors vying for my hand, unlike you. With no dowry to speak of, I must reconcile myself to life as a companion to an invalid, or a governess. It

is not that I particularly want a suitor or to get married, but there is no other way for women to make their way in this world, is there?’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t know about that and...’ Harriet trailed off, her attention taken by a handsome young man who gave her a curt nod from across the room. ‘I am sure something will come along soon,’ she said distractedly.

A guarded expression crossed Harriet’s face, and suddenly, Grace knew precisely what Harriet would say next, and it would involve the eager suitor making his way through the throng. Grace suddenly felt overcome with the exhaustion of her life - smiling, being polite, cheerful and obedient, bearing her uncle’s cruelty. Already, his largesse was wearing thin and a withering, loveless spinsterhood of solitude and drudgery stretched before her. And Lady Blanchard’s rout was an insufferable furnace of an affair.

She had eagerly anticipated seeing Harriet again after weeks of being apart, while Harriet had indulged in a whirl of invitations, spinning out of the mundane little twosome they had been at school. Now, her friend, who had everything she did not, just seemed to highlight the hopelessness of her own situation. Grace simply did not have it in her to gush at her friend’s happiness amid her own misery. It might be selfish, but she had to escape.

‘I need some air, Harriet. You should return to your friends, for I am poor company tonight. Is there a cool spot I can find somewhere?’

‘I recall a quaint little conservatory at the back of the house. Ask one of the servants the way. Are you sure you are not unwell?’

‘I am well. I will get just a little air and return, and then I will insist on hearing all your news.’

Grace rushed off just in time to see the horrid Lydia and her friends bearing down on Harriet and surrounding her in a maelstrom of fans. The young man veered off with Harriet’s gaze following him.

With a sigh of relief, Grace followed the faint breeze from the back of the room. Escape must lie that way.

Harriet was right, and the house boasted a small conservatory of intricate wrought iron. The honeysuckle clinging to its side yielded a cloying scent to the heat. It was almost overwhelming, so Grace stepped through the open French doors and into the garden.

No one had ventured outside yet, though surely they would as the evening wore on. Who could not, for it was a balm, like drinking cool water after a long walk on a summer's day?

Grace looked back at the house. Blazing torches lit along the veranda sent pools of light out into the cloudy dark, and a chorus of insects called to the night. Grace was suddenly a little giddy from the punch and giggled into her hand at the absurdity of the evening. She walked out onto the lawn, hitched up her skirt and took off her shoes and stockings, wiggling her toes in the deliciously cool grass. She walked to the limit of the light, wishing to leave behind all the self-important, spiteful company and just be free under the stars. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, tilting her head to the sky. Ah, peace at last.

Out of the darkness came a deep, mocking voice.

‘What pretty little feet you have.’

Chapter Four

Grace leapt back. ‘Who goes there?’

A man emerged from the shadow of some bushes - tall, dark, and in the flicker of the torches, she could just make out the shine of a scar marring his face. Her heart leapt to her throat. It was none other than the man they had been mocking - the terrifying Rawden Voss.

‘You seemed to have stumbled into some bad company, Miss. The eligible men are back there,’ he drawled, pointing back to where candlelight gushed amber through the open doors. His face bore the same expression as earlier – anger married to boredom.

‘You startled me. What are you doing out here?’ Her words burst out in a rush before she realised that she was being terribly rude.

He looked down at her bare feet and smirked. ‘I could ask you the same, Miss, or is it Mrs? I sincerely hope it is not the latter, or my poor heart will break.’

His smirk annoyed her, for Rawden Voss seemed to be laughing at her. ‘I am unmarried, not that it is any business of yours,’ she said, feeling ridiculous.

‘And?’ he said, coming closer.

‘And what?’

‘I would beg your name.’

‘And you shall not know it, Sir,’ she said, swallowing hard.

‘Why? Is it secret?’

‘No.’ Grace glanced towards the safety of the house and back to her interrogator. ‘I...I do not converse with strangers.’

‘Which we shall remain if you withhold your name. Oh, come on. Show some courage and own to it.’

Grace shook her head and tried to edge backwards towards the house. For every small step back, her tormentor took several forward. His nearness alarmed her, and Rawden Voss

was taller and broader out in the wilds of the garden than he had been in the elegance confines of the ballroom, as if he had grown to fill the space around him.

‘I would have a name for this juicy little chicken that stands before me, plump of breast and shiny of feather,’ said the insufferable Rawden as he reached out a hand and stroked the feather bobbing with outrage in her hair.

All Grace’s good sense and bluestocking studies went out of her head. No scathing retort came to mind, nor would it work on this rogue. ‘Sir, you should not approach me, for we have not been formally introduced,’ she said.

‘And you are alone with no husband to protect you.’ He smiled again. ‘Thank God, you are not wed to that fat toad you came in with, for it would be a sad waste of youth and beauty. Though if you were, perhaps he would not have let you wander off alone in the dark and end up with me.’

‘I need no permission to do anything, Sir.’

‘An independent spirit. How refreshing.’ He narrowed his eyes, looking her up and down, and Grace’s skin prickled with goosebumps. ‘Were you not enjoying the company of your friends?’ he said, his dark eyes demanding honesty.

‘I...they were not really...’

‘You should run along, back to those twittering simpletons. There is safety in numbers.’

Grace bridled. Was he calling her a twittering simpleton? How dare he insult her. As she groped for an insult to hurl back, he came right up to her, invading her space.

‘You must know that the lions pick off the stragglers in the herd? Or are you hoping to be preyed upon?’

‘Whatever can you mean?’

He sighed. ‘Do you really have no idea, or are you playing with me?’ He gave a bitter laugh. ‘God help me, but it seems I have found the only innocent heart in this little hell of Lady Blanchard’s. You should not be here, Miss.’ He pointed to her

bare feet. 'I will keep your little indiscretion to myself if you tell me why you are out here all alone?'

'I just wanted to get some air, for it is insufferably hot in there.'

'Likewise. I, too, sought solitude and a respite from the young ladies.'

'I am not avoiding the young ladies.'

'Aren't you? I certainly am. And I advise you to do the same.'

His voice was so deep and dark that it made a shiver run up Grace's spine. 'Excuse my intrusion, Sir. I should re-join my party.'

'You are an intrusion indeed, but it is not to say the intrusion is unwelcome.'

'It was not my intention to speak to anyone, Sir. I must go if you will not. I cannot stay here with you.'

'Come now. You do not strike me as the timid type.' He glanced at her feet again. 'Such pretty little toes. Come, have you no rebellion in your soul? Do you not enjoy flirting with danger? If you seek respite from the hot company of fools and parasites, I fear we must share the darkness and the cool night air, for I will not give way to you.' He smiled.

'Then I must leave. You can afford to be casually reckless with my honour, but I cannot,' she hissed.

He smirked. 'Why not? Is your honour not yours, to do with as you please?'

'I am a woman, Sir. I can never do as I please.'

Rawden Voss stepped closer just as loud voices sounded at the doorway. In a flash, he grabbed hold of Grace and dragged her into the bushes.

'What are you doing?' she cried.

'Saving you from scandal. A man touches a lady's hand out of wedlock, and it is a terrible liberty, enough to send a shudder through the heart of the ton,' he hissed. 'I declare it a

ridiculous notion, for men and women should touch each other, and often. It amazes me that men lie butchered on muddy battlefields all over Europe, and the ton concerns itself with convention. The crows feast while these dandies do likewise. Have you any idea what a body looks like when it is turned inside out by cannon fire?’

‘No...I....’

‘It is not a pretty picture. I doubt you could render it faithfully in your embroidery.’ He sneered with so much bitterness her breath caught.

‘I know that there is much suffering in war, Sir,’ she offered, ears straining for the sound of the voices fading so that she could escape this angry man.

‘Oh, there is much suffering everywhere, and it seethes out in the darkness just where the candlelight fades beyond these opulent halls. It is the stuff of nightmares – thieves, whores, hunger, famine and debauch. If only your pretty little head could begin to comprehend it. But how could an ornament comprehend anything?’

Rawden Voss seemed to have forgotten he held her tightly, for his fingers dug into her flesh.

‘You are hurting me. You must unhand me now,’ whispered Grace. ‘Please.’

Voices carried across the grass. ‘No,’ he snarled. ‘If they spot you, you are doomed, for these old matrons are desperate for gossip. We cannot be seen. Stay and take the air. No one knows we are here, so you are quite safe from those who would surely name you a harlot for speaking to a man in a dark corner alone.’

The way he said ‘we’ suggested they were almost intimate acquaintances, which felt wrong. She was in danger of being discovered alone with a man. The ton would jump to the worst conclusion – that she was engaged in some tryst.

Rawden Voss softened his grip but did not let go. His face was all shadow and moonlight, giving it a ferocious, predatory look. ‘I would not wound you, Miss,’ he whispered, but his

words belied his actions as he glanced around and suddenly dragged her further into the shrubbery. ‘Come. Let us hide here where we cannot scandalise society.’

‘I cannot, and you must release me.’

‘I must do nothing of the sort, and those fools will be a while with their cigars, so you must stay hidden. You know I am right,’ he added, with utter male authority.

Grace turned from his penetrating gaze and tried to still the gallop of her heart. He had eyes so brown they were almost black, and striking, arched with a sweep of black brows. His mouth was full and wickedly sensual, curved into a teasing grin. Grace had to look away from his intense gaze.

Silence fell between them, broken only by the faint waft of buoyant male conversation from the terrace.

‘I watched you tonight, you know,’ he said.

‘Why ever would you do such a thing?’

‘Because I was bored, and you seemed out of place in your company. Such a pretty face you have on you, a Helen of Troy if ever I saw one, a shy beauty. Yet on this smooth countenance, I saw only disdain for your company and hopelessness too.’ He slid the side of his hand slowly down her cheek as he spoke, and Grace jerked away, so startling was his touch. ‘I saw it cross your face when you realised no gentleman present would deign to show interest in you.’

Humiliation sparked anger. ‘You are right. I was snubbed, but I am accustomed to it, being of a lowly station in life.’

‘Fools, the lot of them, for you were the most splendid woman in that room, all smothered fire waiting to break out.’

‘You cannot speak to me in that manner. It is too....’ Grace swallowed hard. ‘It is too familiar.’

He bowed his dark head. ‘My apologies for complimenting you. Tell me, Helen of Troy, have you ever been to war?’

‘No.’

‘Yet you talked of battle as if you understood it.’

So he had heard Lydia and her friends insulting him. How could he not when she brayed like a donkey? ‘You were eavesdropping on a private conversation,’ said Grace.

‘Nothing is private in a packed room, and as I just said, I was bored. Do pay attention, Helen, else I will think you as vacuous as all the other young ladies who think I should not be in company having fought for king and country. Their foolishness piqued my anger, so I managed an outflanking manoeuvre and lurked behind a company of rather ample matrons. Answer my question. What do you know of war?’

‘I make it my business to read the papers, Sir. Anyone with half a brain can see that Napoleon is still a great threat.’

‘Indeed he is - the most ruthless and talented military man of his generation.’

‘I regret any offence from our comments, Sir.’

‘It was not really your offence, but theirs, and one of ignorance, but they will never be otherwise,’ he said steadily.

The voices from the terrace faded away, and Grace looked longingly at the house. ‘Very well. So it is settled, and there is no bad blood between us. Now let me go back.’

‘I have a mind to detain you. It is rare to find a beauty who understands what men suffer in war.’

She struggled to free herself, but the awful man would not relent, and he had a mad look in his eye. ‘If you will insist on pawing me, then perhaps war has made a savage of you. Sir,’ she said.

‘It makes a savage of the best men, the purest of souls. It is nothing but butchery.’ For a moment, he seemed far away, his gimlet eyes turned to the darkness. ‘I will paw you no more. Go then, leave the savage to his darkness and follow in the wake of the eligible young men.’ He leaned in, his mouth close to hers. ‘If you wish to catch one, I would advise smiling more.’

‘I am not searching for men, eligible or otherwise, and I will smile when I have something to smile about.’

‘Stay here and face ruination then, or do you not have the courage to bend the rules?’

‘I sought solitude and respite from the heat, and I certainly did not come out here to trade barbs with you nor to ruin myself.’

‘Ah, some spirit at last. I am gratified to see this defiance, though it does get my blood up.’

His face was inches from hers. The look of ferocious regard in his dark eyes made Grace’s heart race without her knowing why. How overwhelming this man was up close – his breath in her face, the smell of cologne undercut by something earthy, almost carnal, and his lips almost touching hers, their breath mingling in the humid air. The sound of voices from the house faded to nothing as Grace’s face burned, and the night became silent. There was no one nearby to save her from this man’s clutches.

The man’s jaw worked, and then he ran his fingers through a stray curl brushing the side of her face and said, ‘You are right, Miss. Too long out here with me, and you flirt with ruin.’ He smirked suddenly, making his face less harsh, more boyish. ‘However, your friends did injure my pride most grievously, so perhaps I should punish you in their place.’

‘How so, Sir? I am not to blame.’

‘Because you are here, and you are lovely, and they are neither. Come closer,’ he commanded, narrowing his eyes and reaching for her when she did not move. Grace found her bosoms against his broad chest, belly to belly with a monster.

‘No. Please, unhand me.’ She squirmed, but his grip was firm. ‘Are you not a gentleman, Sir?’

‘Oh, the last thing I am is a gentleman. Quite the opposite – nought but a war-torn savage, or at least that is what the ton thinks of me. Lady Granston was at great pains to point out all my shortcomings, wasn’t she? And you? What do you think of me?’

Grace smelled liquor on Rawden Voss’s breath now that he was so close. ‘I think you are drunk?’

He gave a bitter laugh and grinned. 'I most certainly hope so, for I can barely stand upright.'

That smile again, making her belly clench, low down, sending a thud of sin between her legs. 'All the more reason to leave you to your lurking, Sir.'

'No,' he said emphatically. 'I need a diversion from my dark thoughts. You will stay and amuse me. I command it,' he breathed, his lips brushing hers. Thunder rumbled overhead as if the sky was pressing down on them, and the night was suddenly twice as hot.

'This storm is about to break,' he said. 'It will release the heat, and we shall have relief at last. Tell me, have you ever been kissed?'

'No...I...'

'Well, you are about to be, and thoroughly.'

A howl of protest somehow died in Grace's throat as his mouth brushed hers, tickling, gentle, banishing all rational thought. His hand slid about her waist, locking her to his body, and then it came - a gentle assault on her mouth that left Grace breathless with confusion. Rawden's kiss was shocking and yet sublime - warm, slippery, invasive and forceful, yet tempered by tenderness such as Grace had never felt in her life.

'You taste like heaven itself,' he breathed against her lips before claiming them again and sinking his fingers into her hair. It was as if he was worshipping her with his mouth, as if the man had gone inside her soul, and they had become one. It was so profoundly moving, so thrilling to her soul, that Grace let it continue. How could she be here, tasting a man's mouth and not want it to stop?'

A lump formed in her throat, the ache that comes before tears, and only the thought of Rawden Voss judging her weak made Grace push him away. They stood silently, his face raging with some emotion she did not understand.

A cool breeze hissed through the tops of the trees, and Grace shuddered. Strands of her hair had come down where he

had grabbed her and they floated across her face. Her feet were bare, and she must look a fright. She was alone in the dark with a stranger, and he had put his hands and mouth all over her. Every nerve in her body screamed that she must find a way to flee and slip back into the house before she was spotted and her whole life ruined. Confusion raged like a tempest in her chest.

Thunder cracked overhead, breaking the spell. Rawden Voss took a step towards her. 'Forgive me,' he said gently.

Grace shoved at the man with all her might, and he gave a little step back.

'How dare you!' she exclaimed, wiping her mouth with a gloved hand.

'How dare I? You didn't seem to mind, and if that was your first kiss, then I declare you a quick study, Miss.'

The dam of slights and humiliation she had endured all season suddenly broke. Grace lashed out at the man, catching him with a ringing punch across his jaw, though she had to stretch to do it, for he towered over her.

He put his hand to his cheek. 'Christ in heaven, that hurt.' He gazed back at her with surprise, then said, 'But it was worth it,' and burst out laughing.

Mortified, Grace tried to run, but her feet seemed to have taken root, and she could not look away from the awful Rawden, whose fiery gaze made her feel as if all her clothes had just fallen off. And he was not backing off. Instead, he stepped forward, the air between them bristling with tension.

'You are a blackguard and a lecher and a...oh...I can't think of a nasty enough word for you,' howled Grace.

Just when she thought he might grab and kiss her again, a young man burst through the bushes beside them. He took in the scene, and his mouth fell open. 'Good God, Rawden, what on earth are you doing?' he declared.

'Tasting forbidden fruit, which happens to have an excellent right hook,' drawled her tormentor, not taking his eyes from Grace as he rubbed his jaw.

The young man looked from Rawden and back to her in horror and Grace could think of only one thing to do. She picked up her skirts like a common strumpet and ran for all she was worth back to the safety of the house.

William took hold of Rawden by his jacket. 'Are you run mad? I must apologise to the young lady before our family name is dragged through the mud.'

Rawden could almost taste his honour. 'That name has long since been tarnished, but do as you must.' He shook himself free. 'I doubt she will say anything about our encounter, but please, do not let me stop you. Go and do battle on our behalf.'

'I will, and on the subject of battle, I have news to impart, and you may as well hear it before you get insensible with drink.' Will squared his shoulders and set his jaw. 'I have joined the regiment.'

'No, you have not,' snarled Rawden, his temper sliding away as self-loathing took hold of him.

'If Napoleon attempts to invade, I will fight shoulder to shoulder with you, brother.'

'So this is what you have been working up to all evening, and now you spit it out as punishment for my lack of morality. Will, you are a green fool who knows nothing of army life.'

'I know better than to molest a woman.'

'She was not molested. The lady needed to be kissed and soundly. And what do you know of seduction, Will? My God, you've never even had a woman, have you?'

'What of it?'

'You are risking your life before you have had a chance to live it.'

'I am a man who believes in honour and defending king and country. Perhaps I live by a higher standard than a man who despises his birthright and is presently trying to whore and drink and gamble himself into an early grave.'

His words hit like gut punches. Rawden raked his hand through his hair and paced. 'I may be a lost cause and a hell-bound fool, but you are a lamb to the slaughter. And as for your king, he is a witless ruin and his son a bloated, indolent wretch. Why shed your blood for them?'

'You have.'

'I have no better prospect than a soldier's lot, and who would care if I throw my worthless life away in some foreign field. You can aim higher, and yet you rush to your doom. Tell me, Will, is this folly a means of seeking our father's approval?'

'I have told our father, and he takes pride in my joining the regiment.'

'Then let him take pride in the medals of valour they pin on your corpse,' said Rawden, jamming his finger into Will's chest to drive his point home. 'Father can fondle them and console himself when you are gone.'

'Aye, Rawden, and if I was gone, would that not benefit you?' said Will bitterly.

'How can you say that to me? You know full well it would not, brother.'

'Then do not be angry.'

'I cannot be anything else. What a wretched evening this is turning out to be. I cannot look at you. Go back to the softer company of the ladies.'

'I will, for I must make amends for your shocking lack of propriety. That girl is not one of your opera mistresses, Rawden. You cannot manhandle women like that.'

'She liked it.'

'Rawden!' William's gentle face twisted in anger.

'Forgive me. You are right, Will. I acted badly. I will go and apologise myself.'

'You cannot return to that house and frighten that poor girl.'

‘Alright. I am sorry if I spoiled your evening and hers. Go and make amends for your wretched brother.’ Rawden stalked away, riven by guilt, anger and a surprising sting of lust, for the redhead’s kiss had been the sweetest, headiest he had experienced for some time – a balm to his jaded soul.

‘Where are you going?’ shouted Will.

‘Somewhere far from here. And if you know what’s good for you, do not follow me. And as to you joining the regiment, Will, this is not the end of the matter.’

‘I will not yield to you on this, Rawden,’ shouted Will, but he went unheard. Such was the rush of blood through Rawden’s ears, the anger and frustration pounding in his breast. He had to work it off somehow or on someone.

Chapter Five

Rawden's jaw was starting to throb, as were other parts after his encounter with the delectable redhead. He was sure she had been in search of an adventure, strolling about the gardens unaccompanied. But her punch had proved him wrong, and there had been a good deal of indignation in it. Damn, but that redhead had tasted delicious, and her squirming surrender had improved his mood no end. What a fiery little thing she was, too. He had derived a cruel satisfaction from glowering at her companions, and it had cowed them but not her. No, that redhead had continued to stare back to the point of insolence until one of them had elbowed her in the ribs. Only then did she cast her eyes down and find her feet fascinating.

There was a glow about her - that innocent lushness that blessed young and pretty women. But that was not why she had stood out. She had not twittered inanely like the others. Instead, she had hung back, listened, and observed the room. It had not been a predatory gaze, hunting for a husband, more a desperate one. And she had not been well-clad. Her silk dress had been worn many times before, so Rawden had concluded that the young woman had scant wealth and connections and was a little beneath Lady Blanchard's rout. Just like him, she did not belong there. For that reason, she had piqued his interest more than any other.

He should not have preyed on the young lady. Was that why he chose her? Was he so far removed from civilisation that he had to prey on low-hanging fruit like her? He should hunt the lady down and apologise in person instead of sending poor William to do his dirty work. Rawden almost stopped his carriage. Hunt her down, that is what he would do, whereas Will would be all smiles and politeness, and by now, Will's charm would have soothed the lady's ruffled feathers, and so no harm done?

The carriage rattled on through empty cobbled streets until the grander houses began to rub up against the more tawdry end of town. Covent Garden rose up - a sprawling maze of sin and excess, housing theatres and gin houses, barracks and

docks and establishments of ill-repute. The rank smell of rot wafting off the Thames was strangely welcome, for it sucked the tension from Rawden's shoulders. He had long been more at home amongst the slithering, night-crawling creatures of this world than the bright, empty vessels of the ton.

In the heart of Covent Garden, the Theatre Royal had just disgorged its audience for the night. The cream of London society was slowly dispersing in fine carriages after a night of culture and sophistication. Rawden pushed through the crowds and made his way down a side alley, too narrow for any carriage to navigate. He found himself at the familiar red door feathered with peeling red paint, and he pounded on it as rain began to fall, turning the cobbles shiny and slimy. It was the hour just before the decent part of the city settled into slumber and when the creatures of the night blinked and emerged from their lairs deep within the sinful shadows of London's underbelly.

He was let inside and shown into a hellish bedroom located in the maze of narrow corridors and rooms that lurked like an anthill at the back of the theatre. The room was dominated by a huge, canopied bed clad in red silk linens and given a warm sheen by the many candles set about the room and a fire blazing in the hearth. At its centre stood Romola Bianchi - temptress, ruthless social climber and heartless bitch, hands on hips, a blonde vision of outrage in a dress that was a violent shade of pink that no lady would ever wear. She always took Rawden's breath away after an absence.

Her hair was loose, as loose as her morals, and it tumbled fetchingly about her face. And what a face it was - innocence married to carnality. Romola had a way of quickening a man's loins. Her blue eyes were fierce, her nose small and pert, and her mouth turned down at the corners. Sometimes, when Romola was cross, she reminded him of a snappy little pug. Indeed, she held her rare smiles like little jewels, to be dished out grudgingly to her many admirers only when they had done something to please her.

No one would have called Romola a raving beauty in any sense the ton would understand, but she was pretty, clever,

quick-witted, and had a voice like a nightingale. All these gifts combined to ensure that she always got her way. Romola also had a thirst for expensive presents, which her current occupation did not satisfy. Hence, she swelled her funds through teasing coin from the pockets of rich benefactors. At present, she was an up-and-coming chorus girl at the opera, but Rawden had no doubt she would soon claw her way to the prima donna position where she would no longer suffer the pinching and fondling of prop men, musicians and stagehands, to whom any lowly woman was fair game.

He rushed forward, tearing off his jacket and loosening his shirt and grabbing her, planting a hefty kiss on her rosebud of a mouth. He eased his tongue inside, the way she liked it and pressed his manhood against her belly.

‘Get off, Rawden,’ she hissed.

‘What is wrong, Romola?’

‘Do not barge in here after weeks without a word and then maul me. Can we not have some conversation before we fall into bed?’

They often played this game – her feigning outrage and him feigning contrition. ‘A thousand pardons, my Lady. How was your performance?’ he said, too weary for pretence.

‘Tiring, and the audience tiresome, as are you.’

‘I hope you are not too tired for me. Come to bed, and I will give you something more pleasing than applause.’

‘You presume too much, Rawden. Are you drunk?’

‘Not nearly enough for your safety, Madam.’ He bit her neck, and she squealed as he pressed against her. ‘You are wearing far too many clothes for a hot night, Romola.’

‘I will not have you, Rawden. I have another engagement.’

‘No, you do not. You are engaged right here,’ he said, sliding his hand into her low bodice and stroking an eager nipple. ‘I need you, Romola,’ he murmured against her neck, fragrant with some exotic scent.

‘You go off for a month without a word and leave me hanging,’ she spat.

‘But I am back now, with a vengeance and with such a passion for you, my love. Let me make it all up to you.’

‘It will not do, Rawden. You will not treat me with contempt.’ Her voice was firm but breathless with desire.

For some reason, her pretend outrage sparked Rawden’s irritation. ‘Come now. Don’t play the fool, Romola. I never made any promises,’ he said coldly. ‘We enjoy each other. That is all we have or will ever have. Have I not been honest with you from the start?’

‘Brutally so, yes.’

‘Generous too.’

‘Yes, but all the same, I am fearfully angry with you.’

‘Then let me be kind, not brutal. I will be your slave, Romola. Let me worship your beauty.’

She squirmed in his arms as he stifled her protests with kisses. He hesitated for a moment, bitterness curdling his loins. Romola had other lovers. Many gentlemen of pleasure roamed the streets around Covent Garden and hung around the theatre doors, waiting for her favour. He had no illusions that his money brought either loyalty or affection, just this urgent carnality, an itch occasionally scratched for both.

‘I hate you, Rawden Voss. You smell like a gin shop wed to a barracks,’ she breathed against his mouth, even as she grabbed him closer.

Rawden smiled into her fragrant neck and released her from his embrace. ‘Alright, then. If I offend you, I will go and find comfort elsewhere.’

He turned and grabbed his jacket off the bed, and even before he got to the door, she cried, ‘Stop, Rawden.’

He turned with a smirk. ‘I knew you couldn’t resist my charms. Come here and do my bidding,’ he snarled.

‘You do not have any charms. You are an unfeeling lout, and I will not come to you,’ she replied, darting around the side of the huge bed with a glower. He caught her easily enough because deep down, Romola wanted to be caught, and they fell in a flurry of breathless kisses onto the bed. Her hand went to the buttons on his breeches and opened them to release his manhood, raging with lust. She wrapped her cool fingers around it, arousing him further.

‘Oh my!’ she exclaimed as Rawden pulled down her bodice. He filled his hands with her smooth, ripe flesh, and in a frenzy of hitched-up skirts and moaning, he plunged inside her welcoming body. Her fingers clutched at his hair and back, nails digging in painfully, and she wrapped her legs around him, pinning him to her and writhing provocatively.

Soon, Romola’s little gasps of pleasure filled the room, growing louder the harder he thrust inside her. ‘Don’t stop, Rawden. Go harder,’ she squealed.

‘If it pleases you, Madam,’ he snarled, withdrawing and tossing her onto her belly. He hoisted her hips off the bed, growling with desire at her pale, rounded buttocks. Rawden entered her quickly and fisted his hand into her hair. Romola flung her head back and moaned, meeting his thrusts with her own. Rawden’s fingers wandered between her legs, and they met their mutual release quickly - her screaming her pleasure into the night, and he stifling his with gritted teeth.

He eased himself from her body and fell back on the bed, staring at a dark patch of damp shadowing one corner of the ceiling. The room was stuffy and stale, with no order to it. Various pots and ointments were strewn across a dressing table, and a collection of scarves and dresses were thrown over a screen, its lurid pattern long since faded. Romola’s lair was a mean little place, and he felt a flash of pity for her situation.

‘You were different tonight,’ she said, laying on his shoulder and trailing her fingers down the hair on his chest.

‘How so?’ he said as his eyelids grew heavy.

‘More ferocious than tender, hurrying to the end, rather than savouring the moment.’

‘Did I hurt you?’ he said, turning to her.

‘Just enough for me to like it,’ Romola whispered, her voice so husky as to be almost a cat’s purr. ‘What sparked your ardour?’

‘It is nothing - an encounter tonight. Do not pry, Romola.’ He lay staring at the ceiling. Now that his raging lust was spent, he wanted only to sleep, but she wasn’t having it.

When he did not answer, Romola continued. ‘We are old friends, you and I. We are not fresh, dewy-eyed fools. You would not nurture that kind of ferocity for little old me. You have scented fresh meat. Who was she, some shy debutante with vast estates you wished to plunder?’

‘The debutante or the estates?’ he said, smiling down at the top of her head, but she did not see the jest.

‘Both, I should imagine.’ She sat up and lifted her hair up and pinned it where it had come loose, which made her breasts jut out most becomingly. But, of course, she knew that, which was why she did it. Rawden’s loins stirred, and he reached for her. Romola slapped him away. ‘I must be up and about my business.’

‘It is the middle of the night. What business could you have?’

‘My own and none of yours,’ she replied, shuffling off the bed and enclosing her voluptuous body in a silk robe. ‘Off with you now.’

‘Your beauty stirs me anew. Come back to bed, and let me be tender.’

‘No. I will not be a substitute for the little innocent.’

‘She was nobody, a nothing from whom I stole a kiss, that is all. It was beneath me. I should not have done it.’

‘And what you just did abed with me? Should you have done that?’

‘Don’t be jealous, Romola. It was nothing, really.’

‘Then you may stay abed and finish yourself off with her memory.’ She stood up and walked to the window.

‘Don’t be like this,’ he said wearily.

‘Why do you even come here, panting at my door like an eager dog?’ There was a taint of spite to her words now.

‘Because it diverts me, woman?’

‘Am I not a little low for the likes of an earl’s son?’

‘I am no son of an earl. And I come because, with you, I can be myself.’

‘A rogue, a drunkard and a shameless rake, you mean,’ said Romola, turning to glare at him.

‘If you like.’ Rawden sat up and crossed his arms behind his head. Desire crossed Romola’s face for a moment before she could turn away and hide it.

Any other time, he would placate her with flattery and promises, and they would be friends again. But anger at William and his own behaviour had ruined his night, and Rawden was in no mood for that. ‘It pleases me to come here, Romola, and I do so like to be pleased.’

Romola turned and looked at him over her shoulder. ‘I think you come to dull the pain.’

Her look was coquettish, but her words stung like a rapier’s slice. ‘Careful, Romola, or we might fall out,’ he snarled. ‘I do not come here to plumb the dark recesses of my soul or share confidences. I come because I like you, and at Covent Garden, I do not have to conform to the relentless boredom of life amongst the ton.’

She came over and kissed him lightly on the forehead. ‘You have one foot in the ton and one foot in hell, don’t you, Rawden?’ She trailed her fingers down his cheek and across his lips, inserting them in his mouth. It was a dominant gesture, meant to put him in his place and arouse him so that she could have her way, but he was in no mood for Romola’s games.

Rawden pushed her away and rolled over to show her his back. 'If you are done probing my heart for weaknesses, I am ready to sleep.'

'I am not probing, and you have no heart, my love.'

'I will not argue with that. Now hush and get some rest. I might have need of you in the morning.'

Soon, the combination of liquor and spirited lovemaking sent him into an exhausted sleep. He dreamed of wide, brown eyes and a full mouth yielding to his own, soft, warm, giving, not taking. But when he woke the next morning, it was to rain gusting against the window and a cold bed. Romola was gone, and so was his ardour, replaced by cold resolve.

Today, he must do the unthinkable, for Will's sake and his own.

Chapter Six

The storm which had blown in on the evening of Lady Blanchard's rout had brought blustery rain that spat against the windows of Uncle Charles' drawing room. It was a sombre corner of the house and rarely used, but the servants had lit an abundance of candles which cast a cosy glow over the dark blue panelling and Persian rug, intricately patterned in multi-coloured swirls. The last light was trickling from the day, causing Grace to shiver a little despite the roaring fire. How she was dreading the evening ahead.

Her uncle's bark rose from the hallway below as he greeted his guests. When called upon, Uncle Charles could be jovial and warm to those whose favour he sought or to his betters, though Grace rarely saw that side of him. She sighed as she surveyed the gilt-inlaid mahogany card table and fine crystal and cigars laid out for the indulgence of his card party, to which she was to be hostess.

Her stomach turned over, but she had to play the part of obedient niece. 'I attended that damned rout for your pleasure, so you can do this for me. You need not say much. Just look pretty and be gracious to my guests,' he had said. 'They are all fine young fellows I hold in high esteem, so I expect you to be modest and pleasing and keep your opinions to yourself.'

Voices sounded on the stairs, and a group of buoyant young men burst in, followed by Uncle Charles. Their conversation trailed off, and they stared at her with open mouths. Grace dearly longed to take cover behind a large fern in the corner of the room, but Uncle Charles beckoned her forward and waved a hand at her. 'My niece, Miss Grace Howden, and our most fetching hostess tonight, gentlemen,' he declared with some pride, much to Grace's surprise and mortification.

The guests were dandies to a man - that breed of gentlemen who are rich and indolent and out for pleasure. They were all overdressed for a night of cards in a private house. All sported colourful waistcoats, high-collared shirts and elaborately coiffed hair, which only served to betray their vanity. One man stood out, for he was taller than the rest, more heavy-set, and

had the most striking grey eyes Grace had ever seen. While his companions bowed in greeting to her and then hung back, he strode forward.

Shockingly, he took Grace's hand and said, 'You did not exaggerate, Charles. This is a beauty indeed. I am honoured to make your acquaintance, Miss Howden.' He held Grace in his grey-eyed gaze as he gave a low bow. 'Caville Sharp, at your service,' he murmured.

'Come now, Sharp, do not be so modest,' said Uncle Charles. 'Sharp here is the eldest son of Lord Reginald Sharp, the Viscount Peynton, Grace. He is a pillar of society and the darling of the ton.'

The young man laughed. 'Oh, I wouldn't go that far, Charles. And surely we can dispense with the formalities, for I see your plan now, Howden, old fellow. You mean to distract us from the card table with your niece's beauty and charm so that you can fleece us poor fellows.'

Grace's face grew so hot she thought it might melt off. She rarely received compliments, and her pride swelled at Caville Sharp's regard. 'Mr. Sharp, I mean, Lord Sharp, I am sure you exaggerate my virtues on such short acquaintance,' she said.

'Then we must deepen our acquaintance so you might prove me wrong. Though I doubt even the most fastidious of men could find fault with you, Miss Howden. And it is Caville to you, not Mr. Sharp or Lord. Have I not already declared that there shall be no formalities between us? In fact, I am determined that we shall be the best of friends.'

Grace tried to slide her fingers free of Caville's grip, but he held on just a little, then relented. He smiled boldly and winked as if his teasing was amusing to him. It deepened the lines at the side of his mouth, swelling his good looks. Grace was so seldom the centre of anyone's attention that she warmed to the young man. And though his easy manner was strangely unsettling, Grace had no time to dwell on it as a flurry of introductions followed with many gushing compliments about her loveliness from the young men.

Grace tried to remember their names as Uncle William called impatiently for claret and ushered them to be seated. Once they were installed at the card table, a game of whist ensued, and Grace took refuge in a wide armchair beside the fire, as far away from them as possible, and bent her head to her embroidery, bracing for a long evening.

Within the hour, darkness fell, and the room held a buoyant atmosphere as Uncle Charles won several rounds of whist, and the young men laughed and joked and flung back liquor. Grace tried to concentrate on her sewing and let the conversation wash over her. She was not part of it and never would be, and she railed at having to sit in the parlour for no better reason than to satisfy her uncle's vanity. Yet she was drawn to sneak a quick glance at Caville Sharp occasionally.

Her uncle snapped at the servants to bring his port, decrying the claret as too inferior for his honoured guests and cried, 'Grace, you cut a lonely figure there. Come and sit nearer to us on the chaise.'

'I find the light better here,' she replied.

'Aye, but we can appreciate you much better on the chaise. Indulge me, my dear, would you?' he said, eyes narrowing.

Grace had no choice but to comply and sank unhappily onto the chaise. As the evening wore on, she could not relax, for the eyes of the young men lit on her from time to time as though she were some painting hung in a gallery to be stared at. When she grew weary of their impertinent attention and met their eyes, they would have the good grace to quickly look away, apart from the Caville fellow, who smiled at her and winked instead. After that, she did not look up from her sewing, but it was as if his gaze reached out and touched her skin, making her shiver and long for her shawl.

The conversation swirling about the room grew louder as more port was consumed but did not seem to require any contribution from her, and it mainly revolved around cards and a thoroughbred horse, which one young man called Peregrine was buying. He was a frequent visitor of Uncle Charles, who seemed to esteem him very highly indeed. Eventually, talk

strayed to more serious matters and Napoleon's escape from Elba. Some of the young men dismissed his escape as nothing to be concerned about, and Grace bit her lip. Best she not insert her opinions into the cloud of cigar smoke and manly arrogance at the card table.

So intent was Grace on being invisible that when a shadow suddenly loomed over her, it made her start, and she missed a stitch on her embroidery and pricked her hand. Caville Sharp sank beside her on the chaise and made a sad face.

'A thousand pardons. Did I cause you to stab yourself? We can't have blood all over that pretty dress now, can we?' he said, withdrawing a handkerchief from his jacket with a flourish.

Grace expected him to offer it to her, but instead, he took her hand and put the injured finger into his mouth. He sucked gently on it. Her heart leapt to her throat, and she cast a panicked glance at her Uncle Charles. He saw it all but merely coughed and looked back down to his cards. Her face burst into flame, and she could not think of what to do.

'There, all better now,' said Caville smoothly, removing her finger from his mouth. He wrapped the handkerchief around the wound, and Grace was powerless to resist.

'I fear I am having appalling luck at cards, Grace. Is it too forward to call you Grace?' he added, as if sucking her finger was not forward at all.

'I...no, not at all,' she replied through a throat thick with mortification. She had promised to be courteous, and so she would be, though she longed to run from the room, for this young man seemed to be mocking her with his forward manner.

Caville Sharp leant in as if they were old friends sharing confidences, his sandy hair falling over his forehead. 'I must confess, I am finding the company a little tiresome. Are you not? Have you noticed that my friend Peregrine takes an age to choose his play? Stanton is too bold and rushes in with no plan of attack, and I fear your uncle is well in his cups now and is

likely to get fleeced this evening. He is like a lamb to the slaughter. What do you think of them all?’

‘I shouldn’t know. I rarely play cards,’ she replied.

‘Really? Not even Loo or Piquet?’

‘No.’

‘Then what do you do for pleasure, Miss Howden? What sins do you commit when your uncle’s back is turned?’ he said, stretching his arm out along the back of the chaise. The question was far too intimate.

‘Nothing. I have absolutely no pleasure in my life whatsoever,’ she snapped.

Caville Sharp leant in. ‘Then we shall have to rectify that as soon as may be,’ he said.

Grace stared at him, wanting to look away but unable to do so. From a distance, Caville Sharp would be judged handsome. The flicker of the candlelight caressed his face, highlighting the perfection of his high cheekbones and a square, aristocratic jaw. But up close, his beautiful grey eyes held mockery, where she had perceived admiration. And his demeanour was altogether jarring.

‘You are a rare find, Grace,’ he continued. ‘A beauty who does not know it - like a perfect little wildflower wilting in the glare of the ton’s disdain, or so I am told.’

‘By whom?’ Are you talking nonsense, Sir, for I do not catch your meaning?’

He smiled again. ‘No matter. We will come to understand each other in time, I am certain of it, for I insist on getting to know you better. Who knows? If you bestow your favour on me, perhaps you will bring me luck tonight?’ He glanced back at the card table and sighed as if tearing his gaze from her was a great effort of will. ‘I must return to my host and lose some money to him. Is that not polite of me? You know I do it only for your pleasure.’

With that, he rose and returned to the table, where he approached her uncle, put his hand on his shoulder, and

squeezed. Uncle Charles smiled up at him and then cast her a smug glance. Whatever could it mean?

The night wore on until Grace was almost nodding with exhaustion. The men had become raucous with drink, so she approached the table warily.

‘I fear I have grown weary and must retire for the night, Uncle Charles,’ she said.

He cast a sideways glance at Caville. ‘Yes, yes, the hour is late. Gad, it will be dawn soon, and I am quite out of money for you fellows to steal from my pockets. Be off with you all now,’ he declared to the table. He stood up unsteadily, and the others followed, and, in no time at all, they bid her farewell and left Grace to the quiet of the drawing room. The fire was almost out, and the room was growing chill, so Grace took up a poker and stoked it. No doubt, Uncle Charles would soon come and berate her on some deficit of courtesy to his guests.

Grace peeked out of the curtains to watch the men walk away in the light spilling from the downstairs windows, their shouts and laughter echoing down the street, muffled by the hiss of rain. So intent was she on watching that she started when a hand came down on her shoulder.

She turned, expecting to see Uncle Charles, but instead, Caville Sharp stood before her with a smirk on his face. ‘Alone at last,’ he said.

Chapter Seven

‘What a relief that those loud fellows have gone,’ said Caville. ‘My friends are diverting, but I confess, I am quite worn out with their chatter.’

‘Where is my uncle?’ said Grace.

‘Tattered to his bed, along with all the servants, this cold night. Best place for him, for I fear he can barely stand. The man can certainly put away the port, can he not?’

Grace’s throat thickened. ‘I should go too. I am weary, so I will say goodnight,’ she murmured, rushing past him to the door, but Caville got there first and barred her way.

‘Don’t fly away, little bird. The house is quiet, so we have a chance to get to know each other better.’

‘I should not be here with you alone. It is not seemly. Let me pass.’

‘Come now. I won’t tell anyone. Are you so chained to convention, Grace? Why not break the rules just for one night. I only want to talk to you.’

She backed away in a panic. ‘Please let me pass. It is cold, and I want to go to bed.’

‘I can warm you,’ said Caville, leaping on her so suddenly that he almost knocked her off her feet. His arms coiled about her waist, strong and grasping.

‘Please, let go,’ she cried.

‘I cannot, for I am smitten.’

‘No. If you do not let me go, Lord Sharp, I will scream for the servants, I swear.’

‘The servants have been sent to their quarters, and I will stifle your screams with kisses. Come on. The innocent act is quite rousing, Miss Howden, but you may dispense with it now. And I intend to try before I buy.’

‘What?’

He reached for her bosom and squeezed hard, and Grace beat at him with her fists as his mouth swooped onto hers. His kiss was forceful and almost violent, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, wet and quivering like an eel. Grace tried to pull away, but Caville put one hand to the back of her head, forcing her face to his.

Grace pushed him away with all her might, but it did little, for he was incredibly strong. In a blind panic, she stamped on his foot, and Caville howled and leapt back, but he was between her and the door. She dashed to the other side of the card table, and he came after her. They darted back and forth on opposite sides for a moment, Caville smiling as if it was all a great jest. It was so absurd and would have been comical had she not been so afraid.

This could not go on all night. Grace spied the heavy decanter sitting on the table. If she was quick, she might make it to the door. She feigned left, and Caville lunged that way, and she took her chance, grabbing the decanter and running for the door. But he caught her by the arm and spun her around. His face was no longer handsome and carefree but hungry and angry, so Grace swept back her arm and lashed out with the decanter, aiming for his face. A last-minute swerve by Caville had it hitting his shoulder.

He fell back onto the carpet, howling, fit to wake the dead and covered in port. The door burst open, and her uncle came crashing in. Salvation, at last.

Charles Howden stopped dead and looked down at Caville, writhing on the floor. ‘What on earth have you done?’ he gasped. ‘Mercy, is that blood?’

‘No, it is port,’ said Grace, trying to get her words out through a throat tight with distress as her uncle rushed to haul Caville to his feet.

‘He...he tried to...oh, Uncle Charles...he grabbed me and...’

‘Damn and blast it,’ growled Caville. ‘I thought she was in on the game, Howden. She has damn near broken my bloody shoulder.’

‘What is he talking about?’ gasped Grace, but her uncle paid her no heed.

‘I will put this right, Sharp,’ said Uncle Charles.

Caville brushed off his ministrations and rushed to the door, hugging his good arm across his injured shoulder. ‘You had better, Howden. I am grievously insulted. Do you know who my father is?’

‘Yes, of course, and I meant no insult. She does not know her place. A thousand pardons, Sharp,’ blubbered Uncle Charles.

‘If you do not make amends for this insult, there will be hell to pay.’

‘The insult was to me,’ shouted Grace.

With one bitter glance at her, Caville Sharp rushed away, shouting for a carriage to be summoned.

‘In on the game? What did he mean, Uncle?’ cried Grace.

Charles Howden sneered at her in disgust. ‘You have well and truly cooked your goose now, girl. With no proposal in sight, that man was your only hope of a comfortable future. It is not for me to provide for poor relations, long since estranged from the family name.’

Full realisation dawned, and tears stung Grace’s eyes. ‘You cannot be in earnest. I will not marry that man.’

‘We are not talking about marriage, you ignorant chit. You need not marry Caville to get what you want. Do you think the son of a viscount will look favourably on a nobody for a bride? He is already betrothed to the Honourable Miss Arabella Chomley.’

‘Then why is he making a proposal to me?’

Uncle Charles’ brows knit together. ‘Is that what you think? How stupid could you be? That was not a proposal of marriage. Caville intends a more flexible arrangement.’

‘No. You cannot mean to make me his mistress?’

‘It is not such a bad thing. He is rich and can provide you with an excellent situation. And a woman like you cannot afford to be so fastidious.’

‘A woman like me?’

‘A penniless nobody. That is the truth of it. Gad, you’d think I’d thrown you away on a pauper.’

Grace felt she might be sick. She had not supposed her situation to be this bad. ‘Uncle, I beg you. He is a horrible man, and I will not sacrifice my virtue to such a sordid scheme.’

‘Then you will end on the street. The season is almost over, and no husband in sight, so that means I get to choose for you,’ he huffed.

‘I cannot find a situation so quickly,’ she whispered. ‘Please, I need time.’

‘You are out of time. My patience is at an end. I must go to Lord Sharp in the morning and smooth over troubled waters before he changes his mind and chooses another.’

Grace stared at her uncle in horror. She had endured months of the horrible man’s disapproval, jibes, and grudging charity, and she could take no more. ‘How dare you. First, you cheat me out of a dowry and then try to sell me to a horrible lecher. It is unspeakable.’

The slap came from nowhere - hard enough to sting and humiliate, and for the first time, Grace confronted who her uncle really was.

‘Get to bed before I do worse,’ he snarled, and Grace fled upstairs.

She barred her door and fell on the bed, sobbing. She was trapped. She had no one and nothing. Once morning came, he might very well throw her out onto the street. She had chided herself for resenting Uncle Charles as cruel and uncaring, told herself to be grateful because he had taken her in when her father passed, given her a roof over her head. But now, she had seen his true nature. He was a villain of the first order, and she, under his power.

She needed help, but who would bother themselves over a nobody, with neither money nor connections?

Chapter Eight

Grace was loathe to go down to breakfast, but she had to face her Uncle Charles sometime. She was halfway through forcing down a crumpet, its buttery taste making her want to gag, when he barged in. He gave her a foul look and dismissed the servants. For a moment, there was a stiff silence, and Grace stared out of the window at a grey sky as bleak as the mood in the breakfast room.

‘I have had to go out in a tempest this morning, for your sake, to smooth Sharp’s ruffled feathers. I have been to grovel in the hope that he will forgive you and take you back. But you will suffer for this wound to his pride, mark my words. He is known as the vengeful type. You could have made a pretty nest for yourself and had everything you desire – wealth, patronage, security, and you throw it all away over foolish pride. Was there ever such an ungrateful chit? Fortunately for you, there are no bones broken.’

‘More’s the pity,’ murmured Grace.

Uncle Charles banged the table with his fist. ‘I will not be gainsaid. Caville seems enticed by your reluctance rather than repelled and so has not forsaken you, so you will comply, because I have a great deal riding on his good opinion.’

‘How so?’

‘Caville Sharp is investing in a scheme of mine and is firm friends with Peregrine, whom I esteem greatly. Should I lose Caville’s favour, I will most certainly lose Peregrine’s, and our friendship might be at an end.’

‘I will not be that man’s mistress for the sake of your friendship,’ said Grace.

‘You need to grow up. A woman need not marry to get what she wants. Look at all that Mrs Hamilton achieved in her lifetime, even though she came from the gutter.’

‘She was a notorious jade and adulterous wife who died in poverty.’

‘She was clever and was at Admiral Nelson’s right hand, which is no small feat. She raised herself up the ranks of society to a most elevated position. And Caville Sharp is as good a man as any. He is rich and can provide you with an excellent situation. I suggest you reflect on your reluctance, for he is coming to visit when his temper has calmed, and you will be compliant, remorseful and sweetness personified when he does. If you refuse his offer, I will put you out on the street.’

‘You would not dare. What would the ton think of you?’ said Grace.

‘Oh, they will pay no heed. Like me, the cream of the ton is heading for Brighton for the season’s end, and they will not concern themselves over my poor relations. I will have my way, Grace, or you must find a situation to support yourself.’

‘Caville Sharp is disgusting. God forbid that I should have to suffer the pawing of men as though I were a pet of theirs, with no free will of my own.’

Charles Howden frowned. ‘Then you will end on the street, Grace, or shivering as a governess in some godforsaken mansion in the north with a couple of brats clinging to your skirts. I leave for Brighton at month’s end with Peregrine, to enjoy the most fashionable of society, and I do not intend to drag a sour-faced, ungrateful chit like you in my wake.’

‘Please, Uncle Charles. Do not sell me into degradation.’

‘Why not? Who was your mother, eh? My brother never did anything so shameful as to marry beneath him. The woman had no fortune, no connections, nothing.’

‘My parents loved each other fiercely, and I shall have the same.’

Charles Howden’s face twisted into a sneer, and he leant across the table, brandishing a butter knife in her direction. ‘Here’s the thing. That genteel poverty your parents lived in would not have been so genteel were it not for my generosity?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Who do you think bought your father’s many daubings over the years. I threw money away on paintings that were worthless just to keep the wolf from your door and stop our family name from sinking further into the social mire.’

‘You bought his paintings?’

‘Yes. Who else would? And it was not me who squandered your dowry on drink and melancholy as the creditors piled up. It was your father. So forget his sainted memory, which is nought but an illusion. Grace, you have nothing to recommend you save your innocence and good looks, so you need to return my kindness by accepting Caville. That is an end to the matter.’

‘Please, Uncle. I beg you.’

Uncle Charles ignored Grace and continued stuffing crumpets into his face as if they had merely been discussing the weather and not selling her virginity to a lecher.

A knock came at the door, and her uncle’s butler, Withers, entered.

‘What is it?’ barked Uncle Charles.

‘A gentleman caller, Sir.’

Charles frowned. ‘At this hour? In the midst of my breakfast?’

‘He is asking after Miss Howden, most eagerly, Sir.’

A smirk spread across Uncle Charles’ face. ‘Egad. It seems your reluctance has sparked Caville’s ardour, and he is keener than you deserve.’

Withers held his hand up. ‘Sir, it is....’

Uncle Charles cut him off. ‘What are you standing there blathering about, Withers? Send him up at once. Hurry along. Make haste.’

How could Caville show his face after his behaviour? She could not bear it. Grace’s swallowed hard and braced herself to do battle with the odious Mr. Sharp, but it was not her lecherous suitor who came into the parlour, but a stranger.

He was youngish, about her age, with a boyish and pleasant face and unruly brown hair, and he was carrying the most enormous bouquet of flowers she had ever seen. With a sinking feeling, she recognised him from Lady Blanchard's rout.

He gave a little bow to Uncle Charles. 'A thousand pardons for the intrusion,' he said nervously. 'I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Howden at Lady Blanchard's rout two evenings ago, and I was wondering if I might be permitted to call on her today.'

'And who might you be, Sir?' barked Uncle Charles.

'I am Viscount William Fitzroy Voss, Mr. Howden,' he said, bowing with a little click of his heels. 'It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.'

'Viscount, you say?' Uncle William wiped away a smear of butter at the corner of his mouth with his napkin.

'Indeed, Sir. You might have heard of my father, the Earl of Harston.'

Uncle Charles rose, his belly banging the table with a clatter of cutlery. 'I have, indeed, a most esteemed gentleman.'

The young man darted a glance at Grace and back to her uncle.

'So, Viscount Voss, you wish to call on Grace? Upon my word,' said Uncle Charles, sweeping forward, still clutching his napkin as he extended his hand in greeting.

'Er...if Miss Howden is amenable, that is, with all the formalities observed. The rain has finally stopped, so perhaps we could all go together and feed the swans. It is but a short stroll to Hyde Park from here, is it not?'

At this, Uncle Charles paused, for he rarely walked nor stirred from the house before noon. 'I've no objection to a walk other than my gout is plaguing me today. I will arrange for my housekeeper, Mrs. Talbot, to accompany you. Grace is a great walker and likes nothing better than to be out of doors.' He smiled obsequiously at Viscount Voss and then turned to

her. 'Come, Grace, make haste and fetch your coat and bonnet. Do not keep your visitor waiting.'

Hyde Park was almost deserted due to the greyness of the inclement weather. It was quiet, too, save for the gurgling of the river and the cawing of waterfowl. Coils of mist floated just above the water's surface, and the morning seemed muted as if it held its breath.

So did her visitor, for on the ten-minute walk to the river, with the grudging housekeeper, Mrs. Talbot, huffing behind them, Viscount William Fitzroy Voss said barely a word beyond commenting on the beauty of the light in the trees and asking Grace if she was chill, to which she replied, she was not. Indeed, her face was afire with confusion.

Mrs. Talbot was a terrible gossip and had ears like a bat, and Grace could almost feel them straining to catch their conversation. But she had to know why the stranger had lied about meeting her, so she turned to Mrs. Talbot. 'Why don't you go to the water's edge and feed the birds, Mrs. Talbot? We shall not wander too far ahead.'

'As you like, Miss,' replied Mrs. Talbot with an impudent grin.

Once she was out of earshot, Grace turned to William Voss. 'Sir, you must tell me...'

'A thousand pardons....'

They spoke in unison and then fell silent. 'I apologise for intruding into your morning,' he said in a rush. 'I would have come sooner, but tracking you down took me some time.'

'Tracking me down?' said Grace.

His face reddened. 'An unfortunate turn of phrase, and I swear you are in no jeopardy. I must state my reason for such behaviour if you will allow me. It has to do with my brother, Rawden. You met him at Lady Blanchard's rout.'

'Met him!' she exclaimed. 'That is one way to put it.' Grace's face grew hotter, and she turned away from the

memory of the awful Rawden's hands on her waist, his mouth on hers, hot and hungry, yet exciting and almost pleasing. Shame flooded her chest, and her breath came short.

'Forgive me. A thousand pardons, Miss Howden. I meant only to beg forgiveness for my brother's insufferable rudeness. In his defence, Rawden is not himself at present. A family matter weighs heavily upon him, and he had rather over-indulged in punch in order to banish it. I would have apologised at the rout, but you were gone when I returned indoors.'

'My uncle declared it too hot, and we left, much to my relief, as I had no wish to encounter your brother again.'

'Yes, he does tend to make quite an impression on people.'

'He should have apologised to me himself,' said Grace.

'But that would entail you seeing him again, an honour which I feel you would rather forgo,' said William Voss, smiling and laughing a little.'

He was right. Grace could think of nothing worse than looking into those black, knowing eyes again.

'Besides, my brother rarely apologises,' continued William. 'And if it is any consolation, I was almost trampled in the melee whilst I searched all over for you. I am truly sorry for what occurred.'

Grace bridled. 'And what do you suppose occurred? Did you leap to the worst conclusion?'

'I concluded that Rawden had over-stepped the mark, as usual. He tends to be a little rough about the edges. Army life can do that to you. He is in the Life Guards, you see, and so he mixes with some rough fellows.' William Voss smiled broadly, and there was no artifice or bitterness behind his eyes. Grace wanted to trust in his goodness, for he was refreshingly charming after her encounters with men these last few days. He was all gentleness and politeness, where his brother was rough and rude.

'I only went outside to escape the crush, Lord Voss, and I did not expect your brother to be lurking in the bushes,' she

said.

‘And the bare feet?’ he said with a warm smile. ‘I noticed, you see.’

‘The grass was cool, and it was heavenly relief after the humidity indoors until your brother decided to intrude into my solitude.’

‘If it is not too forward, I can fully understand why he did.’ His eyes met hers flirtatiously, and suddenly, Grace could see the family resemblance.

‘Lord Voss. Please do not say such things.’

‘I am sorry, but I cannot contain my admiration for you standing up to my brother.’

‘You do not even know me.’

‘I know you are of a generous spirit, for you did not denounce me as a complete stranger when I met your uncle. That was kind, or he would have had me thrown onto the street. And you are spirited. Not many women would punch my brother in the face, nor men, for that matter. And I suspect you have a strong character, Miss Howden, as you are fearless to come out with me today.’

‘Or reckless. I must own, I was intrigued to hear what you had to say.’ She frowned. ‘How did you find me? I did not give your brother my name.’

‘I asked Lady Blanchard about you, and she is good friends with Lady Harriet Spencer’s mother, and that led me here. Lady Blanchard is somewhat fond of me as she has recently sought me as a suitor for her daughter.’

‘Oh. But I barely know Lady Blanchard. And how did you know I was acquainted with Lady Harriet?’

‘Ah, I must confess that you had drawn my interest earlier in the evening, and I saw you with her.’

‘A most shocking reply,’ said Grace. ‘So you were spying on me?’

‘Do not confuse spying with admiring, Miss Howden.’ William Voss swallowed hard and looked away at the river. Grace walked on in confusion, and he kept pace, hovering by her side. Suddenly, William Voss grabbed her arm and pulled Grace to one side.

‘I have had quite enough of being manhandled for one week, Sir. Get your hands off me,’ she cried.

‘Apologies, but you were about to step on a stone, and you could have turned an ankle. See.’ His fingers slid from her arm, and he pointed at a stone on the ground.

‘Oh. Yes. Then, I thank you.’

‘You will find that I am not the savage my brother is, Miss Howden.’

Her face heated, and he noticed.

‘Forgive me for mentioning him. And fear not. Rawden will not trouble you again. He is back at the barracks with his fellows, no doubt fleecing them at cards or nursing a headache from too much drinking.’

‘Why is he such a rogue? I would expect a captain to be a gentleman, Sir.’

‘Rawden will never be a gentleman, Miss Howden, but he is fearless, speaks his mind, no matter what, and goes his own way. I admire him immensely for that.’

‘Even when you have to apologise to outraged ladies on his behalf?’ said Grace, softening her words with a smile.

‘My brother eschews polite society for the most part, so I am rarely called upon to do so.’ He gave her a warm smile which raised dimples on his cheeks. He seemed rather boyish and awkward compared to his fierce brother. William Voss squared his shoulders, and there was a sudden pride in his bearing. ‘I will soon join Rawden in his barracks, for I have decided to purchase a commission. I trust I will acquit myself with more restraint than my brother.’

‘Is that a wise course, Lord Voss?’

He frowned and looked deflated.

‘What I mean is, I admire your courage, but surely there is a threat from Napoleon now that he is at large. You might have to go to war.’

‘Most people do not believe that tyrant has the stomach for more war.’

‘From what I have read of Napoleon, he will always want war more than peace. When a prideful man like that is brought low, he will want to rise again. I am sure of it.’

‘Upon my word, Miss Howden. You might have a point.’

‘Forgive me. I should not have been so outspoken.’

‘And I should not have tried to draw your admiration with talk of joining the cavalry. That was my plan, you see. Did it work?’

‘Yes. I admire your zeal to defend me from the French,’ said Grace. It felt alarmingly as though she were flirting with this young man.

‘How refreshing it is to talk to a young lady about topics which do not involve balls and dresses and the weather,’ said William. His eyes met hers, and then he gazed over the river, his cheeks reddening. ‘I find you quite remarkable,’ he said, then sighed heavily. ‘Ah, Mrs. Talbot is coming back. My time is up.’ He turned back to her. ‘May I come and call on you again?’ he said in a rush.

‘You have made your apology, and I have accepted it, so why would you want to?’ replied Grace, rather bluntly.

William frowned. ‘To see you for my own sake instead of my brother’s,’ he said with a burst of passion.

‘I...oh... Lord Voss,’ sputtered Grace.

‘Perhaps tomorrow?’ he offered. ‘We can go for another walk. And please call me, William. Now, you wouldn’t send a poor soldier off to war without granting him this small kindness, would you?’ he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

‘That is not fair, and I sincerely hope I am wrong about the war,’ said Grace. ‘But I suppose there is no harm in another walk.’

‘Excellent. I will send my card to your Uncle.’

He smiled broadly at her, bowed to Mrs. Talbot, and then hurried away.

‘What a smart young gentleman, Miss, and with such fine manners,’ said the housekeeper. ‘And though he is not a dandy, he is pleasing enough to look at, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Yes, pleasing indeed. Now, let us take a turn once about the lake. I have a great need for fresh air and exercise this morning.’

‘Yes, Miss. It will be good to work off all the excitement,’ said Mrs. Talbot, with a sideways glance at Grace. ‘Though not too far, for you look a little flushed. I do hope you are not coming down with something.’

When she returned home, Uncle Charles awaited Grace in the parlour, sporting an eager grin. He was sipping tea noisily and indulging in a plate of little cakes. He was also in possession of a vast basket of fruit.

‘For you, my dear, from Viscount Voss,’ he beamed.

‘How did he arrange that so quickly? He left me but an hour ago. And how shall I eat all this?’

‘It is not meant to be eaten. It is meant to display his wealth and status. That young man is from a great family indeed, an Earl’s son, no less, and he is smitten with you, I can tell. He already sent word that he will call tomorrow.’

Grace’s heart thudded in her chest. ‘You said Mr. Sharp might call soon.’

‘Well, we need not rush the matter,’ said her uncle nonchalantly. ‘Not when we have a bigger fish on the hook. And we must reel this one in ever so carefully.’ He paced. ‘But what to do about Sharp? Should I put him off or encourage him to visit so that their paths cross. A young man will always pursue a lady when she is sought by another.’

‘You cannot be in earnest. I barely know these men, and I do not want to entertain either of them.’

‘Aye, but you will. We will favour Viscount Voss over Sharp, and you must be gracious when he visits.’ Uncle Charles rubbed his hands together with glee. ‘He must be keen if he is to call tomorrow. Now hear me, Grace. You must be biddable, modest and even-tempered to leave him longing for more of your company. Say little, keep your opinions to yourself and smile a great deal, compliment the young man profusely. One so young is bound to be impulsive. He will soon be prostrate with love for you. An excellent station in life is within your grasp, niece, so you must secure his love at once.’

‘But I am unsure of his motives. And as to love, he barely knows me.’

‘No matter.’

‘But I did not seek his affection. I want to marry a man who truly loves me, Uncle.’

‘Love? You have no understanding of such matters. No one of any elevation marries for love, you fool. A man seeks a pretty face and a fortune from good, child-bearing stock. For a lady, fortune alone will do, and that is the only impulse for marriage. Yes, fortune, that is what you must seek, and soon. I give you until the end of the week, and if William Voss has not fallen in love with you, then you will get on your knees, aye, that will make a pretty picture, and beg Lord Sharp to take you.’

‘But William Voss is for the army and perhaps leaving to face the French, and then what will become of him. The newspapers all say that Napoleon is still a threat.’

‘Nonsense. The Duke of Wellington will put that wretch in this place.’

‘Not easily. They say Napoleon is the greatest military mind of his generation.’

‘Do not flap your lips about issues beyond a woman’s understanding. How can your feeble mind wrap itself around strategy and ordnance? Do you even know the meaning of such things?’

'Do you?' thought Grace, but instead, she said, 'Forgive me, Uncle. I spoke out of turn.'

Her uncle banged his teacup down with a clatter of impatience. 'Ring for fresh tea, Grace. This bilge is intolerable,' he said.

How could her uncle be so vain, fussy and utterly selfish? He had no understanding of women whatsoever. Grace wanted to scream, for it was so wearing, this constant appeasement of men.

She left the parlour in disgust before she said something she regretted, rushing to the sanctuary of her bed and sinking backwards onto the silk coverlet. The room was grand, with mahogany furniture and a huge gilt mirror above the fireplace. The furnishings were in the French style - striped silks, damask curtains. Money was no object to Uncle Charles, and he could easily support an orphaned niece, but he was too miserly and cruel to do so. She was so lowly that if he cast her off, no one would miss her, for she had no friends in London save Harriet.

When Grace thought of William Voss's admiring, red-faced glances, embarrassment overcame her. Could he like her? Could the earnest young man think her worthy of his admiration? It was not possible. She had been shunned, ignored, and slighted all season by lesser men than an earl's son.

The cynical part of her character doubted his motives. But the tiny, hopeful part desperately wanted his regard to be genuine so that she might have something about her life that she could take pride in. It certainly was not her relations, for Uncle Charles was already forming some devious plan to exploit William Voss's regard. If only she had not been foolish enough to wander into the darkness at Lady Blanchard's rout and fallen into Rawden Voss's clutches, then she would not have to deal with another unwanted suitor in his brother.

Rawden Voss. She could still taste him on her lips, feel his amorous ferocity in the flutter of her heart and the pulse of shame, low in her belly. How could she have behaved so

wantonly and let him prolong that kiss when she knew she should not? Rawden Voss must think ill of her indeed, so how could she even think of encouraging his brother.

She sat up with a jolt. William Voss was a different kind of man entirely. It was not his fault that he had an unfortunate brother. Why should she worry about that hateful man and his disgusting kiss ever again?

But even more disgusting was the thought of a visit from Caville Sharp. While William Voss stirred nothing in her beyond gratitude for his kindness, if he could shield her from the insufferable attentions of Caville, what choice did she have but to encourage him for the time being?

Grace hauled herself off the bed. There must be some way out of her dilemma. She could not just flutter helplessly against the bars of her cage like a panicked bird. No, she must act, and for that, she would need Harriet's counsel.

Grace rushed downstairs and found her uncle pulling on gloves and a hat. He was finely dressed in a dove grey suit with a teal waistcoat, his hair carefully coiffed to cover his burgeoning bald spot. He was obviously about to set out.

'Are you for your friend Peregrine's house, Uncle?' she said nonchalantly.

'Yes, he is most desirous to see me, for he has just purchased an excellent thoroughbred, twelve hands and black as midnight, and he wants me to take a look.'

Grace smiled and tried to look deferential. 'What time may we expect you for dinner?'

He glowered. 'Never you mind. And whilst I am gone, take the time to consider your future and what you might do to secure it, young lady.'

'Of course, Uncle,' said Grace.

She watched him enter a carriage and clatter off down the street before rushing upstairs and pulling on her pelisse and bonnet. Grace made sure not to be seen as she slipped out of the house. But if the servants told of her absence, she would have to deal with the consequences later.

Chapter Nine

Lady Harriet Spencer resided in Upper Seymour Street, an easy distance from Mayfair and the most fashionable shops in London. Hers was a sumptuous white house in a sweep of similar homes, all towering over the pretty little walled garden at their centre. Harriet was blessed in many ways beyond her perfect looks.

When Grace knocked on the door, a somewhat condescending butler said he would ‘appraise the young lady of her unexpected visit’ and, after making her wait for an age, ushered Grace upstairs to a parlour. Harriet was seated on a peach-striped chaise, which clashed horribly with her pink dress, and beside her sat her mother, Lady Gwendoline Spencer. Grace sighed inwardly, for the woman had only ever extended the barest of courtesy, as was the habit of the very wealthy and extremely pompous.

Mother and daughter rose in unison. ‘Good day to you, Miss Howden, what an unexpected pleasure,’ said Lady Spencer, as if it were no pleasure at all.

‘Good day, Lady Spencer,’ said Grace. ‘I do hope I haven’t intruded on your afternoon.’

‘Well, we were for the tea rooms, but we can delay our outing.’ Her pinched smile belied the politeness of her response. Grace had often wondered where Harriet got her good looks, for Lady Gwendoline was sallow and sour-faced, with a thin-lipped mouth that rarely broke into a smile. Where Harriet boasted a warm, golden prettiness, Lady Gwendoline was icy, pale and remote. And she was possibly the thinnest woman Grace had ever seen, bringing to mind a haughty whippet.

Harriet put her hand gently on her mother’s arm. ‘You go, Mama. Grace and I have much to discuss, and we had no time together at the rout.’

Some unspoken understanding passed between mother and daughter, and Lady Gwendoline’s face suddenly brightened. ‘Of course, dear. My good friend, Lady Blanchard, will insist

on inviting too many guests, and half the ruffians in London, to boot.’ She cast a disparaging glance at Grace. ‘You two young things share all the gossip, and I shall be back presently,’ she cried, breezing out.

‘Oh, Harriet. I had to see you. I have the most shocking news,’ said Grace.

‘As do I,’ said Harriet, and her face pinked. ‘But come, let us be seated, and I will call for tea, and you can tell me everything.’

Grace had little appetite for the plum cake and tea, which was hurriedly set forth, and she fidgeted while Harriet filled two delicate bone china cups from the teapot. As soon as that was done and the servant departed, Grace began to speak and could not stop. She blurted out her story in a rush, confining it to Rawden Voss’s mauling and William Voss declaring himself an admirer. Shame prevented her from mentioning Caville Sharp’s indecent advances. Grace squirmed as she remembered how her knees had weakened at Caville’s good looks and flirtatious manner. She had been flattered into thinking he admired her when he had merely been preying on her vanity. How could she reveal such foolishness to Harriet?

By the time she had finished, Harriet’s mouth hung open in an unladylike mixture of excitement and horror. ‘So William Voss sought you out to apologise for his dreadful brother? How gallant. And what do you think of him? At first glance, he seems rather ordinary and gauche, don’t you think?’

‘You know him then?’

‘Only in passing. I think we were introduced at some ball or other.’ She shrugged. ‘I paid him little mind, for he did not stand out in any way and is less fine of feature than his brother.’

‘His brother is a brute, Harriet.’

‘But a ravishingly handsome brute, is he not?’ She put her hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle. ‘Though I cannot believe he dared to put hands on you?’

‘Well, he did, and I did not care for his looks at all,’ said Grace in outrage. ‘And as to William, my first impression was favourable, but then any would find favour when compared to the awful Rawden.’

They both laughed, but Grace felt a need to defend William Voss. ‘Harriet, I was not long in his company, but I found William to be kind, gentlemanly and open in his manner. They are of a height and build, he and Rawden, but the resemblance ends there. William has none of his brother’s darkness.’

That darkness had menaced and excited her in equal measure, but Grace dared not voice her thoughts as she could barely acknowledge it to herself.

‘However will you face the awful Rawden for the rest of your life if William Voss presses his suit?’ teased Harriet, her bright blue eyes wide with mock horror.

‘Well, family dinners will be a chore, I should imagine,’ laughed Grace. She grabbed Harriet’s hand and patted it. ‘And you are being ridiculous, my friend, for William Voss will not press his suit, I am sure of it. He is far above me in rank and circumstance, and I suspect he was just trying to be polite. I mean, why should he favour me?’

‘Why should he not? Goodness, Grace, you must cultivate a higher opinion of yourself.’ Harriet smiled gently. ‘There are many young men of the ton who think you handsome. Including my fiancé, for one, which worries me greatly. Why only the other day he remarked that you have the most....’

‘Fiancé?’ cried Grace.

‘Yes. I am betrothed to the Honourable Gilbert Routledge,’ squealed Harriet.

‘Oh, Harriet. I must congratulate you. Such news!’ cried Grace.

‘I wanted to tell you at the rout, dear friend, but there were so many people, and Mama was hovering all night.’

Grace swallowed her envy, though it stuck in her throat. ‘Tell me. What is he like, this Gilbert?’

‘Oh, Grace, he is the most handsome young man in all of London. An excellent match, for his parents own half of Yorkshire and are extremely lofty. And Gilbert is an excellent wit and popular wherever he goes.’

‘And you like him, Harriet?’

‘Oh, I like him very much. He is so charming and attentive. And now I have a fiancé, I no longer have to endure the endless round of balls and routs and parading that is the season.’

‘And I shall not have you by my side when I still have to,’ said Grace sadly. ‘Your company has been the only saving grace of this summer.’

‘I think you will manage very well now that you have the kindly William Voss running after you,’ said Harriet, squeezing her hand.

Grace sighed. ‘I cannot trust in his regard nor rely on it. And I know nothing of him, with no means of finding out.’

‘Ask him what you want to know when he calls tomorrow.’

‘I cannot, for then he might take it as encouragement, and I barely know if I want to see him again. And besides, young men have a way of telling us what we want to know rather than what we need to know.’

Harriet frowned. ‘Goodness, how cynical you are. I should hate to have your untrusting nature, Grace, though I suppose as you have so seldom met with kindness, you might have trouble recognising it when it comes.’

Grace squirmed at her comment. It was not meant to be hurtful, but its truth made it so, and humiliation heated her cheeks.

Harriet continued, oblivious, as she tended to think only of what mattered to her in the moment rather than what lay ahead or behind. ‘I can help you, Grace. Lydia’s mama knows everyone, and she is coming to dine tonight. I will make discreet enquiries.’

‘Oh, please, do not.’

‘Do not fret. I will find out if this William Voss is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Await my letter in the morning before you put your trust in him.’ Harriet smiled broadly, lit up by some inner glow. ‘Oh, Grace. I am bursting with happiness. I must let it out. I must tell you all about Gilbert.’

True to her word, a letter came from Harriet first thing the following day, which Grace managed to intercept before Withers got his hands on it and gave it to Uncle Charles. She prayed its contents were reliable, for she had suffered several hours of Harriet’s gushing admiration for the Honourable Gilbert Routledge, which had put her own sordid situation into painful relief. Grace had tried to be generous and share her friend’s joy, but it had taken all her will to maintain an indulgent smile.

Grace clutched the letter and ran upstairs, hesitant to open it lest it betray some terrible damning secret of the man who would come calling that very day. If William Voss turned out to be a cad, like Caville Sharp, she could not bear it. She gritted her teeth and tore it open to be confronted by Harriet’s scrawling hand. As she read the letter, Grace could almost hear the breathless excitement in her friend’s voice.

Dearest Friend,

I very much enjoyed our visit yesterday. Please come again soon as I have so much running about my head concerning my wedding. Oh, but I suppose I will have little time for visits as there are endless social obligations between Gilbert’s family and my own.

Nevertheless, I have trawled the depths of Lady Granston’s conversation for news of William Voss, and according to that good lady, everyone speaks well of him. However, there is some scandal attached to the family name, which she would not elaborate on. I was loathe to press her on it in case she thought I had a personal interest in the matter.

Now, for the more general information which you requested. William Voss is the youngest son of the Earl of Harston, who owns a sprawling estate in the wilds of Suffolk. He is twenty-

one year old, a bright and personable young man with many friends, and he betrays no obvious vices. He lives quietly and decently in London, has received an excellent education, and is set to inherit the estate when his father dies. Is this not singular for a youngest son?

William Voss's only flaw seems to be his unfortunate sibling, for which he is not to blame. And now you must brace yourself, for it turns out that Rawden Voss, the elder son by six years, who so wickedly mistreated you, has been cast out by his father, and they are to this day deeply estranged. This seems to do with debauched behaviour on Rawden's account and so grievous as to make it 'unfit for my ears' as Lady Granston put it to me. But she briefly mentioned it involved low women, gaming, and even some taint on his parentage. What scandal! One hesitates to be uncharitable to any man, but Rawden Voss is, by most people's estimation, a veritable monster of a man.

Apparently, the whole of the ton was talking of his appearance at Lady Blanchard's rout, for he rarely comes into society. You were very unlucky to cross that man's path, though your entanglement with his brother William suggests this is not the last you will see of the awful Rawden Voss.

I hope we shall find a smidgeon of time to talk more, and I wish you the best of luck with William Voss. As a friend, I urge you to encourage his admiration and secure his regard as soon as may be, for he is highly eligible. What a coup it will be for you to catch a rich husband, then you may stay in London and live a fashionable life, and we will be together always.

Your loyal friend,

Harriet

Chapter Ten

Rawden stared across the narrow causeway, a little wider than a carriage's width. It stretched across a vast estuary of grey-brown choppy water and up to the brooding bulk of Marshgrave House, which rose out of an island of high ground covered in thick woods and shrubbery. How he hated the place.

He kicked his horse onward in haste, for he had but an hour or two at most before the tide crept up and stranded the house from the mainland. He could not afford to linger, for then he would be forced to spend the night. Wind-blown and with dread churning his guts, Rawden crunched up the driveway, and a servant came running.

'Master, we did not expect you,' said the man, his mouth hanging open.

'Where is my father?' cried Rawden, forced to shout over the wind and the cawing of rooks taking off from the woods in an ill-omened black cloud.

'He is in his library.'

'Take my horse and hold it for me,' Rawden commanded and rushed inside, calling over his shoulder, 'And I am not your master.'

It was dim and cold inside the house, and he did not expect his welcome to be any different. He reached the library and paused in the doorway. Cornelius Montague Voss, Earl of Harston, was seated in an armchair with a rug across his knees, staring silently into the fire. He had grown thinner, making his sharp features more hawkish, and his hair was more gunmetal grey than Rawden remembered but still thick.

Rawden took a deep breath and rushed in. When his father spotted him, his face fell.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he snarled.

Rawden ignored his bitterness. 'Do you ail?' he said, looking at the blanket.

His father stood up quickly and tossed it aside. ‘Oh, you would relish that, wouldn’t you, Rawden?’

‘More than you could know, Father.’

The earl’s face twisted in contempt, and his grey eyes locked to Rawden’s, and in them, not one flicker of kindness, warmth or even humanity.

‘If you are here with your tail between your legs begging for money, Rawden, you have come on a fool’s errand. I’ve a good mind to have you horse-whipped and sent on your way.’

‘The days are long gone when you could best me in a fight, Father. We both know that. And I have no need of your money. I have come about Will.’

‘What of him?’

‘Do you know he has purchased a commission in the Hussars?’

‘I might,’ said his father smugly.

‘And you allowed this?’ snapped Rawden.

His father rushed over to him. ‘You seem shocked. Are you not privy to all of Will’s confidences since he moved to London? My son seeks to polish the family name by gaining glory, unlike you, who tarnishes it with every breath you take.’

‘This is madness,’ snarled Rawden. ‘Will is not suited to a military life. He is soft and green and foolhardy, and yet you would have him in the vanguard of a cavalry charge.’

‘Nonsense. He can strut and preen about London in his pretty uniform and learn some discipline. No doubt, a military life will make a man of him, as it has done for many others.’

‘He will not be a man for long. Napoleon is on the loose, and England is heading to more bloodshed.’

‘Bah. They will find that broken fool and drag him back to Elba, where he will be left to rot.’

‘Don’t be too sure. He is a slippery little villain and no fool, and trust me, war will come again.’

‘No, you are the fool.’ His father’s bark was like the crack of a gun firing. Rawden remembered his temper all too well. ‘Napoleon is a small man past his prime and without the friends he once had. I doubt France will ever suffer him again, and if she does and it comes to war, you would do well to stop mewling like a little girl and finish him. That is what the army expects, is it not?’ As he raged, spittle flew from his father’s mouth into Rawden’s face.

‘Not that you would know, Father, spending your whole life squatting over your land like a greedy toad, gobbling up everything within your reach and sucking your tenants dry.’

His father sneered. ‘I make no apologies for being a landowner, nor will I bow to those snivelling liberals in parliament. My tenants can break their backs on my farms or go and cough themselves to death in the mills and factories. I care not which. I am fifth generation Voss, and we are leaders of men. And mark me, Rawden, I will do whatever it takes to uphold that proud lineage until my dying breath, which includes cutting off any rotten limb on our family tree before it infects everything. Now, you have said your piece, much good it did you, so get out of my sight.’

‘It will be my pleasure to do so, Father,’ spat Rawden. ‘I hope never to see you again.’

‘If Napoleon invades, and you go to battle, perhaps he will remove that thorn in my side that is you, Rawden. And I will look to William to uphold this family’s honour and pride,’ said the earl.

‘There is no honour on that field. Cannon fire falls where it will. It is a bloody and terrible business to go to war and sheer luck who lives and dies. You must persuade my brother to relinquish his commission and cease this folly. If Will is your heir, he must prevail to ensure the family name.’

‘Indeed, he is my heir, not you, so I will decide what to do with him.’

‘Yet I am your firstborn son,’ said Rawden quietly, reining in his temper as best he could. Had he not always known it

would be like this? But he wanted his father to say it, one last time so that he could be done with him.

The earl narrowed his eyes and looked him over. 'I see no son of mine. You suit an army life. It is a good outlet for your sadistic tendencies. I would have you stay here and learn the ways of a gentleman, how to run my estates and oversee my affairs, but you do not have it in you. Your character is wholly deficient.'

'I inherited that character from you, Father.'

'Did you now? I think you favour another.'

'Go on, say it aloud,' bellowed Rawden. 'Shame my mother to my face and see where it gets you.'

'A savage like you will do well to be far away from me,' growled his father, but he took a step back. Rawden was over six feet of lean muscle, and the time when his father could physically intimidate him was long past.

'You miserable wretch,' spat Rawden. 'You malign a dead woman for the sake of your pride. You tell lies out of spite, and you have blighted my whole life with those lies. I wish to God I had any father but you, for you are as far from a gentleman as it is possible to be.'

'And do you think you are one? You are an ingrate and a savage.'

Rawden sucked in a deep breath. 'This rift between us will not be mended and is equally desirable to both of us. I have been cast aside and sent into exile from this family. Is that not enough? Must you sacrifice my brother to your ambition and pride? If Will falls on some foreign field before he has even had a chance to live, it is on your conscience, not mine. I have said my piece. I am leaving you to rot.'

As he rushed away, his father's voice stopped him. 'I do not have that much power over William.'

'I disagree,' snarled Rawden.

'He goes his own way these days. You have undoubtedly worked upon him since he insisted on leaving for London. He

has been infected with your debauch and defiance.’

‘No, he has been freed from your bitterness, and he is happier for it.’

‘It is you who have doomed him, Rawden. Has he not always been measured against you – the dashing Rawden Voss, hero of the Life Guards? You cast a long shadow.’

‘No, you cast the longest shadow, Father, not me.’

‘Believe what you like, but in many ways, Will is a stranger to you, Rawden. If only you could see how you wound him. It is the bad blood that courses through your veins, tainting his decency, his pure heart. You claim to love him, but you will ever be a burden to William.’

Rawden could take no more. He stalked out of Marshgrave, his father’s bitter words ringing in his head. He had long known that his father wished him dead before he wanted him as his heir. He had not expected much, but this? Rawden stopped, his breath coming in angry gasps, his face burning with rage, fit to do murder. He stared up at the slate sky, the wind biting into the marrow of his bones. Slowly, he unclenched his fists and stilled the pounding of his heart. His father had always been the bully, able to reduce him to quivering mush when he was a boy, with his slights and indifference. But now, he was a grown man, and he did not need anyone’s approval. He could be done with this miserable dance, once and for all.

He shouted for his horse to be brought and mounted the beast. It fought him, and Rawden yanked its bridle about in a fury and kicked it hard. As he galloped over the causeway, his anger calmed, and he felt freer than he had in years. He had not got what he wanted, which was his father’s aid in stopping Will from going to war. But he had earned something more precious – his freedom. He headed back to the mainland and London, resolving to never see his father again.

Chapter Eleven

Waterloo - June 1815

Rawden rushed through the injured men, some still standing, some sitting, and others lying, white-faced and gasping, who were unlikely to ever rise again. He tried not to step on them. Cannon fire pounded the house, knocking him off his feet and shaking the house to the rafters, setting his ears to ringing. Plaster from the ceiling drifting down, like snow, under the onslaught, crusting his face where it stuck to the steady trickle of blood from a head wound. His collar was wet with it and chafed his neck. Rawden glanced down at his red tunic and saw the blood drying to brown in the heat. His head swam, causing bile to rise in his throat.

A strong hand took hold and hauled him to his feet.

‘Rawden, are you with me? Look at me, my friend.’

He blinked to get Hardy’s face into focus.

‘We must press on. There is no time,’ he shouted over the low, relentless boom. The French had been pounding the small town for hours, slowly reducing it to rubble.

Rawden gazed around in a daze. The farmhouse windows had long since been shattered, but no breeze was coming in. The birds had stopped singing, save for a single starling chirping in the hedgerows. Shots echoed, and men inside ducked for cover. The starling fell silent.

‘It is the horses. They are shooting the injured horses,’ shouted Hardy to the room. ‘No need to scatter like chickens, you fools.’ His eyes met Rawden’s. Hardy’s face was deathly pale, blood and mud all over his uniform, dulling the sheen on his breastplate. ‘Come on, Rawden. Move!’

They found Will at the end of the hall. He was one of the lucky ones, for he was lying on the table, not on the floor. But his luck ended there, for he was in a pool of blood, and half his calf and foot were shredded. A belt tourniquet was doing little to stop his life from ebbing away.

Rawden grabbed his hand. He tried to call his brother's name, but his throat had closed, and it came out as a whisper. Somehow, Will heard him over the hellish din of war.

'Rawden,' he cried, raising his head. 'I tried...I tried to fight, but....'

'Hush. Save your strength. I am here now. All will be well.'

'It's bad, isn't it?' he gasped.

'I've seen worse,' said Rawden with a forced smile.

Will sank back down onto the table. 'You are lying. I have always known when you do that.' His eyelids fluttered.

'What is happening. Is he bleeding out?' cried Rawden.

'No, but he is in terrible pain,' said Hardy. 'It is sapping his strength. We must act, Rawden, and quickly.'

Will's raised his head, face chalk-white, his whole body shaking uncontrollably, eyes not really focussing. 'No, I am done for. Look at me, will you.' The veins stood out in his neck, a clammy sweat dewing his brow. 'I am a mess, a broken scrap of a man. There is nothing left worth saving. Better I die here than live as a cripple.'

Their eyes met, and Rawden had to stifle a sob. A hand squeezed his arm. It was Hardy, but he barely saw him.

'The surgeon is coming, Rawden,' he said.

'Hurry,' he cried.

'Here!' bellowed Hardy, and a man in a blood-spattered apron came over.

'Make haste and see to my brother before he bleeds out,' cried Rawden.

The man took a hasty look at Will's leg. His hands were sticky with carnage and death, and his face wretched with exhaustion. 'What a mess,' he tutted. 'Cannon fire?'

He directed his question at Rawden, but Hardy answered. 'Yes. Twelve-pounders hit the left flank hard. Shot his horse out from under him.'

A cannon blast shook the house again, but the surgeon barely flinched. He shook his head. 'The lower leg is mangled beyond repair. If he is to survive the day, I must take it off and save what I can.'

'Amputate? No,' said Rawden. He had seen a field amputation once. It had been little better than butchery. He could still hear the high-pitched screams of the man whose leg had to be sawn off above the knee. To this day, he did not know if the poor fellow survived.

The surgeon shrugged. 'The leg has to come off, or else he will bleed to death or die of gangrene, and you will have to hold him down when I start sawing. Make your mind up. There are many more who need my care.' The man's face was cold and merciless, as are men who have seen too much horror for one lifetime to have any softness left in them.

'No, no, don't let them take my leg, Rawden,' cried Will. His eyes were stricken with fear, hand clutching Rawden's with astonishing strength.

Rawden turned back to the surgeon. 'Do it. Fetch what you need, and I will help you.' He stroked Will's hair off his forehead. 'You must be brave now, Will. It is the only way.'

'No. No. How can I go back to her but half a man?'

'What?'

Will raised his head to Rawden's ear. He shook with the effort. 'Her name is Grace Howden, and she is beautiful, with the face of an angel and a generous heart. I love her, Rawden. I love her, and I have promised to marry her.'

'Will, what are you talking about?'

'I told our father nothing of this, for I know he would disapprove, and her uncle is the vilest of men. She is at his mercy. Please, Rawden. When I came to war, I promised Grace that I would return and get her out of that hell. I swore an oath, and, on my honour, I cannot break it. She is waiting for me. Please, listen.' Will's voice had started to slur. 'If I do not survive this day, you must help her. She is in dire straits. Her uncle....she needs protection...I...she lives at Grosvenor

Square at Peel House. Her name is Grace Howden. Please, Rawden.'

The surgeon returned and started laying out his instruments. Rawden winced at the sight of a saw and a narrow curved blade, and Will saw it.

'No, no,' he cried. 'I cannot. You must not.'

'There is no time, Will. Trust me, please.'

'Then promise. Swear you will help Grace. Swear on your honour, Rawden.'

Will's fingers fell away. Another blast almost drowned Rawden's reply as he put his mouth to Will's ear. 'I swear it, Will. I will find this Grace Howden, and she will have my protection, always.'

Rawden turned to Hardy with tears in his eyes and swallowed hard. His friend took hold of his shoulder in a cross between a pat and a squeeze. 'We must go, Rawden. We must return to the line. The French lancers are cutting our infantry to pieces. Our orders are to hold the centre, or all is lost.'

'To hell with orders. I am not leaving him,' said Rawden.

Hardy nodded, blinking hard, face twisted in indecision, and Rawden turned to the surgeon. The man had his hand pressed to Will's neck.

'Let us do this thing,' said Rawden.

The surgeon shook his head. 'Too late. He is gone.'

Hardy's gaze veered between the heavily armed French cavalry advancing up the ridge and back to him. Tears blurred Rawden's vision, turning the folding hills into pools of green, like a watercolour painting. They merged into the dark blue mass of the enemy infantry line advancing under the protection of French cavalry.

Rawden forced his mind away from his brother lying in a foreign farmhouse in a pool of blood. He had an ache in his chest so great that it was as if a fist had burst through his

breastbone and torn his heart out. With steely determination, he tore his mind back to his enemy. If he was lucky, his pain would end this day, for French cuirassiers were brave men and good swordsmen, and it would be no easy task to beat them back. Half the ranks assembled behind him would not see home again – the brave, glory-seeking fools, the whimpering boys. But there would be no retreat, for if they succumbed, Napoleon's cavalry would cut through Wellington's hasty retreat from the centre of his line, and it would all be over. If they succeeded, they would live to fight and die another day.

Smoke rose in grey pillars into the sky, and the fields around them exploded with cannon fire, sending mud, grass and bodies into the air. A bugle sounded the charge, and by instinct alone, Rawden wiped the tears from his eyes, kicked his horse in its flanks and charged.

He hit the first man head-on, slicing him from his horse. There was an almighty clash as cuirassiers met English cavalry swords, and then there was just slicing and punching and horses screaming. And when they had hacked their way to within range, the cannon fire began to pound the ground to dust, grit in his eyes, his horse falling away beneath him, and the smell of summer grass as he hit the ground. He rolled and sprang to his feet as a French rapier swung at his head. Fuelled by unimaginable rage, Rawden became a tireless and relentless throb of violence.

Hours later, as the sun lowered to a ball of gold over the hellish battlefield, Rawden was still standing, covered in other men's blood and writhing inside in an agony of grief. He flung his head back to the sky and howled like an animal.

Chapter Twelve

The summer sun was burning her face, and all the flowers in the small garden were a kaleidoscope of colour and gaiety, but in her heart, it was winter. Hot tears made sticky tracks down her cheeks, and Grace dearly longed to stop crying but could not manage it.

It had been three weeks since word had come that a decisive battle was about to be waged at Waterloo in Belgium. Then, victory! London was abuzz with it. Her heart had soared to hear that the Duke of Wellington, his allies and the Prussians had eventually triumphed over Napoleon Bonaparte. William Voss would be coming home a hero, and he would marry her.

Now, she looked back and thought herself a pitiful fool to harbour such hopes, as the days had turned to weeks, and triumphant soldiers had returned home to a hero's welcome. They had marched proudly through the streets, resplendent in their regimentals of scarlet, gold and black. But William was not among them.

Mrs. Talbot put an arm about her shoulders. 'Surely this splendid day will give you cheer, Miss Howden. You cannot stay abed all day and not take the air. You will make yourself ill. Perhaps a letter will come today with news of your William.'

'I wrote to the barracks days ago, and still no word. I do not think they will bother themselves replying to a letter from a woman who had no real connection to him.'

'But you were betrothed, were you not?' said Mrs. Talbot.

'Nothing was officially announced.'

Uncle Charles bustled out of the house, and Grace quickly wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. He noticed her reddened eyes, of course, and was irritated anew.

'Not again. You must rally, Grace. We have no time for a long face and wailing. If that fool William Voss insisted on going off to face Napoleon, then it is his fault he is dead.'

‘Mr. Howden!’ exclaimed Mrs. Talbot in a rare act of defiance. ‘General Phelps wrote of that young man’s bravery in defending us from those brutal Frenchmen. He died with honour. How can you say such a thing?’

Charles Howden pulled on his riding gloves. ‘Yes, yes, I know, king and country and all that. But it is done now.’ He patted Grace half-heartedly on the shoulder. ‘Do not sully your pretty face with crying over spilt milk. It makes you look pink and puffy, like a little piglet, and most unbecoming. William Voss is gone, God rest his soul, and no changing it.’

‘But perhaps you were mistaken, Uncle Charles, and they confused him with some other soldier. Such things can happen in battle, can they not? Maybe he is wounded and lying in some field hospital or taken in by a kindly soul.’

‘I have been to those ghastly barracks this very day and seen his commanding officer on your account, and all he would tell me is that William Voss died at Waterloo of his wounds and will not be coming back. How and when I do not know. I passed on your request for information, but why should they tell you? It is not as if you are connected to him. Which means that you are once again without an admirer, adrift in a cruel world.’

‘It is you who brings the cruelty to this world,’ thought Grace, but no good would come of saying it aloud, and she was too defeated for a quarrel.

Mrs Talbot obviously agreed with her thoughts, for she stood up and said through a clenched jaw, ‘Excuse me. I must go and pluck some lavender to scent the drawers.’

When she was out of earshot, Uncle Charles continued his whining. ‘Damn that you did not wed before he departed,’ he said, turning sour eyes to her. ‘Could you not have used your womanly wiles to hurry him along? Then I might be looking at a rich widow for a niece instead of a husbandless burden on my finances.’

Grace swallowed her contempt. ‘Uncle Charles, if I am to come to terms with William’s death, may I at least purchase some mourning clothes to show respect for him.’

He looked aghast. ‘No, you may not squander my money on such pointless items. It’s not as if the ton was aware of your engagement, if indeed it were an engagement at all.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you scarcely knew the fellow before he went off to war, and perhaps his affection was exaggerated, and he was playing with your feelings as some men do, or he never expected to return and make good on his promise. His insistence on secrecy was suspicious, and he always visited here, not in public and not before the ton. And sometimes, men do impetuous things when facing a battle. Emotions are heightened, and a young man can feel he is in love when he is not. Such things happen and with no formal offer....’ He trailed off before adding, ‘You were rather naive about him, after all.’

‘But you encouraged his suit, Uncle.’

‘For your sake, my dear. And look where that got me?’

‘But William promised that he would come back to me. He was a decent man who meant what he said.’

‘Well, now we will never know. I would have you rally and seek another. There is nothing else to be done. Now, I am going to visit my friend Peregrine, so dry your tears and pretty yourself up a bit, for we have a dinner invitation at Lord Harcroft’s manor this evening, and I want you to look your best.’

‘Uncle, I cannot go into company.’

‘Yes, you can. Lord Harcroft is old and recently bereaved, with no issue. He will be eager for an heir and want to remarry as soon as possible, and you will do very nicely.’

So, Uncle Charles had already pivoted to a new plan.

‘Please, Uncle. Do not give me to some old man. He is utterly repulsive. I am begging you.’

‘You cannot afford to turn your nose up.’

‘But he is barely in possession of teeth and must be approaching seventy.’

He regarded her with a stern look on his face. 'I will leave you to ponder your invitation and conjure some charm for Lord Harcroft. You know, people are beginning to gossip about your foolish infatuation with William Voss and your disappointed hopes. None of that has made you more appealing, especially with your lack of dowry. Think on that.' He tutted and shook his head. 'This whole business was badly played.'

As Uncle Charles rushed off, leaving emotional carnage in his wake, Mrs. Talbot returned and folded a sobbing Grace into her bosomy embrace. 'There, there, Miss Howden. Do not distress yourself. So the world turns, and there is nothing we can do about it. But trust me, a broken heart will mend in time, and you will find solace in another.' She hammered home her words with a quick shake of Grace's shoulders. 'One day, you will be able to forget your first love.'

Love? Could she lay claim to such a feeling for William? Guilt twisted her heart. 'I was not worthy of him, Mrs. Talbot,' said Grace, but it gave her no respite to say it aloud.

The look of pity on Mrs Talbot's face had Grace tearing from her embrace and rushing upstairs to her bedroom. She pressed her head against the window pane, warmed where the sun hit it, and chided herself as a fool. Did she cry for William Voss or herself? Her feelings for the poor dead soul were a confusion of gratitude, pity and sadness. But nowhere in her heart could she find some corner which had harboured passionate love for the eager young man. It had all happened so quickly, and William had come calling a mere handful of times before pointing his abject love in her direction.

Grace sobbed as she recalled their final meeting in her uncle's parlour. He had been resplendent in his red and white uniform, yet it had made him seem more formal and less William somehow, as though the army was already gobbling him up. His demeanour was fidgety, and excitement shone in his eyes. He had stumbled over his words, and they had been thick with longing.

'I know I should not declare myself so quickly, and it is not fair to ask you, seeing as I am to go to war. But I want you,

Grace,' he had said. 'You have my heart in chains, and only marriage can make us one and free me from my torment. Wait for me. When I return, I will go to my father and get his blessing to make you mine. I would do it now, but I have no time. The troops are mustering, and I must leave for the continent this evening.'

'Make her his?' Grace recalled looking into his smiling face. It was pleasing and honest and handsome enough, in a bland, well-bred way, but nothing out of the ordinary to make a young girl swoon with longing. It was his character that made William rise above other men of her acquaintance, though there were scant few to compare him with beyond his odious brother, the despicable Caville Sharp and a handful of aristocratic young men who barely noticed her, for they were so full of their own importance. But William had noticed her.

Because of his good heart, Grace had accepted his halting proposal. She remembered her face growing hot as she had tried to imagine lying in the same bed as William Voss, kissing him and letting him touch her body as a husband would. It had been a mortifying picture, but she was prepared to do it, understanding that he would be gentle and respectful. Now, she would never know what it was like to be held in a man's arms.

Was William in the grip of some war fever to have given his heart when she had been little more than a stranger to him? Was it because she had behaved as her uncle bid her – playing a charming, smiling, empty-headed fool with no opinions to call her own. She had kept her true self locked away with iron determination because she wanted to escape her precarious and unloved existence. Would his love have been enough for both of them to be happy? Did her accepting him give him comfort as he had gone to war? Surely, to be loved by another would do that. Or had she done an unforgivable thing and misled a young man, sending him to his death with a lie? Self-loathing rose like bile in her throat.

No. It could not be. If William had returned from war, she would have been content to marry him. There was much to be said for contentment. It was as much as she could hope for in

this life. But even that weak feeling seemed beyond reach in her present situation.

‘So the world turns.’ Mrs. Talbot’s words echoed as she stared out at the street where a poor, middle-aged woman in tatty clothes was approaching well-to-do people and holding out posies of colourful flowers for sale. She went from one to another and was rebuffed with a dismissive wave each time. She would undoubtedly spend hours struggling to gather enough coins to make ends meet.

If she did not follow her uncle’s advice, she could end up as that woman - alone, with no protector and no means of earning an income to support herself. Her uncle’s bitterness and selfishness had already swollen like a boil about to burst, and it was at a point where it would squeeze her out of his home and his life. Soon, he was for Brighton with Peregrine to partake of late summer’s season of balls, house parties and sea bathing.

Grace let the tears come again, for her, for William and all he could have been. For once in her life, she was utterly without hope.

Chapter Thirteen

Rawden woke to a pounding, like a horse and carriage thundering through his brain. He groaned aloud, disturbing the woman sleeping beside him. The redhead stirred and squinted up at him in the half-light of dawn trickling in through the threadbare curtains. The sheet fell from her curvaceous body, revealing ample breasts and pale amber nipples standing proud in the morning's chill. Rawden vaguely remembered burying his head between them for comfort and wanting to sob himself to sleep with his manhood still inside her the night before.

He groaned again. God, how much ale had he downed last night? Too much, for his temples pounded like a drumbeat, and his stomach roiled. He dearly hoped he had not shamed himself by a quivering show of weakness as his grief had come upon him like an unstoppable wave of agony.

He jerked when cold fingers circled his manhood and grasped him tightly. 'Ready again, Sir? You so tireless and so hard and strong, like a bull.' Her bad English irritated him for no good reason. The whore's other hand stroked his chest hair as she kissed his cheek. He smelled cheap perfume, sex and stale sheets.

Rawden threw himself out of bed, rushed to the fireplace and vomited.

'That not polite,' wailed the whore, followed by some expletives which Rawden was at a loss to translate.

'Nothing we did to each other last night was even vaguely in the realm of polite, woman,' snapped Rawden with unnecessary harshness.

'Que? You not like, but I still want pay!' she continued.

'What the devil is going on?' The voice came from the depths of a curtained, four-poster bed on the other side of the room. Hardy emerged and scratched his head, bleary-eyed and yawning. He was followed by a brunette who frowned and snuggled against his back.

‘What is amiss that you would wake me at dawn with all this shrieking?’ said his friend.

‘Nothing. Go back to sleep, Hardy.’

The whore started hurling a torrent of Belgian insults at Rawden. She had been all seduction and smiles last night, and by the alchemy of candlelight and far too much ale, he had almost imagined her soft and pretty. But her cries of pleasure and cooed words of affection were bought and paid for and meant nothing. Worse still, his efforts to drown his feelings in pleasure and oblivion had failed miserably. In this cold dawn, he was still the pitiful wretch he had been last night, and she had turned to a harpy whose voice grated on his nerves.

Hardy approached her, shushing and holding out his hands. ‘Come into my bed, little dove, if you are cold. Viens ici,’ he continued, and the whore scuttled out of Rawden’s bed and disappeared behind the curtains with an acid look in his direction.

‘See that she is paid, would you? I will pay you back,’ sighed Rawden.

‘Why. Where are you going?’

‘Outside. I need air, and after that, I hope to drink myself into an early grave.’

Hardy took him by the shoulders. His grey eyes, lilac-shadowed from a night of debauch, looked solemn. ‘This must stop, Rawden. Drowning in self-pity will not help. It is time we went home.’

‘Why? Are we not content here? Are you not enjoying yourself?’

‘After a fashion, for I have always been a hedonistic devil, indolent and irresponsible. We all need a way to forget, and I never give too much mind to the past or the future, whereas you....’

‘I have no future.’

‘That is not true. You must rally, Rawden, and we must return to England and leave the dead behind. Life has to be

faced, as does your promise. It is what Will would have wanted.'

Rawden stared into his friend's eyes and tried to claw his way out of his anger and hopelessness, for Hardy's concern on his behalf pained him deeply. What could he say? *'I failed Will, and I will fail him again. I regret my promise to a dying man, and even if I did not, how can I honour it when I am broken inside, and life holds no meaning or hope anymore?'*

'We have talked of this, Hardy, and I told you to let it lie,' said Rawden.

'Rawden, a promise is a promise.'

'That woman duped Will into proposing. I had heard nothing of it. If he was in earnest, he would have told me. Will was fooled into thinking he was in love.'

'As you are fooling yourself now that his dying wish meant nothing. He thought of this woman at his end, Rawden, when he was in agony. He was in love with her. You should at least....'

'Enough,' snarled Rawden, making his head pulse with pain.

A sharp knock on the door had them both frowning. Rawden rushed to open it and found a soldier there. He could not have been more than eighteen, and his adam's apple bobbed violently in his throat as he held out a letter in shaking hands. Rawden was shamefully aware that his bad-tempered reputation must have preceded him.

'A letter, Captain. The General said you were to have this at once.'

Rawden waved away the soldier, tore open the letter and read it quickly. All the breath seemed to exit his lungs at once. He crumpled the letter into a ball in a clenched fist and turned to Hardy.

'We are going home tonight.'

'Why the sudden haste?'

‘News from England. It seems my days as a drunken, whoring reprobate are over.’

Hardy frowned. ‘What the devil do you mean by that?’ he said.

‘I need some air,’ said Rawden, and he rushed out onto the landing, slamming the door behind him. For the longest time, he was frozen, unsure what to do or how to feel. He roused himself out of his shock, and high-pitched giggles followed his headlong flight down the stairs, away from Hardy, the whores, the four walls which suddenly closed in on him.

He burst out into the sunshine, blinking, bile souring his mouth, his heart a thudding fist against his breastbone. Damn his life, damn his vicious, spiteful bastard of a father for dying, and most of all, damn the promise he had made to William, which would force him to be something he was not and never would be – a gentleman.

There was nothing to do but get on with it. No matter how much he loathed the idea, he was going to pay a visit to this money-grubbing, gold-digger, Miss Grace Howden.

Chapter Fourteen

Grace stared out of the window. The house had become a prison, for Uncle Charles would not allow her to go outside for any other reason than to visit with the old lord he sought to marry her off to. And as she had steadfastly refused to even meet him, Uncle Charles' irritation had grown until he had bullied and shouted and stomped and declared her an ungrateful good-for-nothing whose stubbornness would be the death of him.

She dearly wanted to go for a walk and remember happier times with Will, walking by the river as the swans glided by. His eyes had been alight with admiration, his tone gentle, hanging on her every word. Though she had been guarded, careful not to offend with her forthright opinions, she had enjoyed those quiet, calm moments in a sea of uncertainty.

A discreet knock had her turning to see a servant. He was new to the house and very young, a nervous little fellow called Dawson, who got scant kindness from his employer, nor Withers, the butler, who had taken to bullying him mercilessly. Dawson's main qualification for his position was that he was cheap and desperate for employment and a roof over his head.

'A gentleman caller, Miss Howden,' he announced, falling over his words. 'He is downstairs and begging an audience with you. Shall I send him up?'

'Who is it?'

He reddened. 'I...erm...he did say his name, but I..., oh dear, I seem to have forgotten it on the way up the stairs.'

Grace tried not to give in to irritation. 'Then I will have to guess it, Dawson. Was he young or old?'

'Oh, not old. In the prime, I would say. Indeed, he is a very imposing man. Tall, well dressed,' he offered finally, with a timid smile.

Thank goodness it was not old Lord Harcroft come to ambush her. Perhaps it was one of William's comrades from the barracks, come to talk following Uncle Charles' visit.

‘Send him up, and tell Mrs Talbot to bring tea.’

‘Very well, Miss.’

The servant hurried off, and Grace smoothed her hair and stood to receive her visitor, acutely aware that she was wearing an old tatty dress and that her hands were covered in ink stains from reading the morning’s newspaper.

When her visitor swept into the parlour, her spine stiffened.

‘So glad to find you at leisure this morning, Miss Howden,’ declared Caville Sharp, flopping into a chair beside the fire as if he owned the place.

‘What are you doing here?’ she cried.

He put his head to one side and shrugged. ‘Why, I am come to call and enquire as to your welfare, Miss Howden. I understand that you recently received some distressing news. As soon as was seemly, I have come to condole with you.’

Seemly? What did he know of that? With disgust and a sinking heart, Grace realised that he had been waiting in the wings for dire news, like a vulture, and now he had come to scoop her up in his claws.

‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ she said.

‘Yes, you do, so let us not pretend you did not harbour some vain hope of making a union with William Voss. An earl’s son. You aim high, don’t you?’

‘I do not need your condolences, not that they are sincere in any case, and your presence here is no more welcome than last I saw you, Mr. Sharp.’

His handsome face fell into a mocking pout. ‘Oh, don’t be so uncharitable, Grace. Much like your Uncle Charles, I overplayed my hand at cards that night and bitterly regret offending you. I can only offer my utter infatuation as an excuse.’

He smiled warmly at her, and it lit up his face. Indeed, it was the kind of face that would make most young ladies weak at the knees. But Grace saw only calculation in his expression as he continued in a teasing, over-familiar tone.

‘Can we not let bygones be bygones and start afresh, dear heart? Will you forgive me? You must, for I am not as bad as you have painted me.’

Perhaps if she placated him, he would leave. ‘I suppose so. But I wish to be alone, and I ask that you leave me to grieve.’

‘But I cannot leave until you hear my offer, and it is the best you can hope for now. You will have a house in Mayfair, servants, jewels, more lavish dresses than you can wear, though you’ll not need to wear much in my company. You will have the best life has to offer. I will call upon you whenever I am in town. Whilst I am away, you can live as you please as long as you do not take any other man into your bed. We can have a merry old time, Grace. I know we got off to a bad start, but I can make you happy if you let me, and I will find ways to make you grow fond of me in time.’

Caville Sharp was confident, so sure that she would leap at the chance of comfort and ease. Nowhere on his face was any element of doubt, or even embarrassment, at his appalling proposal.

Grace took a deep breath. ‘Do you think I will throw my honour at your head for a few trinkets just because you are rich? And how on earth can you make me happy when you are nothing but a snake?’

The insult bounced off him. ‘Oh, you have no idea. There are many ways to put a smile on that serious but lovely face of yours. And what good is honour when you have nothing and no one? If you come to your senses, I can make you forget the tragic news from Waterloo. For an earl’s son to slip through your fingers must be very galling indeed. A secret betrothal, wasn’t it?’

‘How do you know that?’ Uncle Charles had told Caville. It had to be him.

Caville side-stepped her question. ‘I doubt this so-called betrothal would ever have come to fruition. Voss’s father, the Earl of Harston, would have put a stop to it. But you seemed to swallow the lie.’

‘It was no lie. William would never lie. Now, you may leave, Mr. Sharp.’

‘So, you defend him. But come now, do not try to let on that you actually loved him. In your brief courtship, you must have seen what a dull dog he was. Rich, I’ll give him that, but hardly a sparkling wit. Not the kind to excite any great anticipation for your wedding night.’ He frowned, holding her gaze. It was as if he slithered inside her soul with those cool grey eyes. ‘Or am I mistaken, Grace? Did you send him off to war with your honour as a prize to seal the bargain, as it were?’

‘Get out,’ said Grace, grabbing a heavy candelabra from the table beside her. ‘If you do not, I will give you the same as you got last time.’

Caville got up and strolled casually towards her with such a cold look on his face that, suddenly, she was frightened. She could not move. He gently brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and put his mouth to it.

‘My pride will not stand rejection, Miss Howden,’ he whispered. ‘Your uncle has promised you to me, and sooner or later, I will find you in desperate circumstances, and then I might not be so generous with my terms, and you will have a rougher initiation into my service.’ He ran his thumb down her cheek and touched her lips briefly with his before grabbing his hat and leaving her to her thumping heart and burning cheeks.

Grace brought her hands to her face and paced. ‘No, no. This cannot be,’ she murmured to herself. She rushed in Caville’s wake to make sure the door was bolted behind him, but when she hurried down the stairs, he was gone, and Mrs. Talbot was opening the door to another caller.

A man stood on the threshold, dark and tall, wearing regimentals. He rushed inside, his face rigid with anger.

Chapter Fifteen

Grace gasped and gripped the bannister before her legs gave way. As for the man, his mouth fell open. He faltered and then rushed forward to stand before her.

‘I am Captain Rawden Voss,’ he barked, with no effort at civility.

‘You,’ she said.

‘William Voss was my brother, and I have come to talk of him.’ His face was tight with tension. The words hissed from gritted teeth. ‘Forgive me for not sending word of an intention to visit. I was not sure that I would be received,’ he snarled.

Rawden Voss’ mouth had been on hers, his hands too. The humid night of Lady Blanchard’s rout flooded back – the smell of jasmine carried on the breeze, his dark, devilish voice, and his mouth, teasing, coaxing her towards sin and damnation. And she had entered a secret betrothal to his brother. What must he think of her?

“Miss Howden?” he said, snapping Grace back to the present and his dark bulk, filling the hallway. ‘Might we speak alone on this most private of matters.’ He glanced dismissively at Mrs. Talbot and leant in, lowering his voice to a whisper. ‘I feel it best your sheepdog over there does not witness what I have to say on several subjects, including a certain rout in early summer.’

Heat rose in Grace’s face as she remembered the slide of his lips on hers, the shame of that kiss, the throb of lust in her belly. Somehow, she held on to her composure.

‘Mrs. Talbot, please leave us,’ she said brightly, and the good lady bobbed and left with one last withering look at their fearsome visitor.

Grace led the way up to the parlour. It seemed too small a room to contain Rawden Voss as he began pacing before the fireplace without looking at her. ‘Won’t you take a seat, Mr. Voss,’ she said.

‘It is Earl Voss now. My father died recently,’ he said, giving her a bleak look.

‘Oh. I am sorry,’ she said, pitying him for the loss of both brother and father.

That pity was quickly dispelled when he replied, ‘My father and I did not get along. He was not fond of me, nor I of him.’ With no further explanation on that subject, he continued pacing, and so Grace held her tongue.

‘I did not know it was you,’ he said in a snarl which oozed contempt. ‘My brother kept your attachment secret, even from me. I only recently learned your name.’

Grace said nothing. Why was he here? Did someone at the barracks send him with word of William? Why had William not told his brother of their engagement? Was it because it was all a lie? Her uncle’s words flooded back. ‘You were rather naive.’

‘You must be at a loss to account for my visit today,’ snapped Rawden Voss. ‘Indeed, I came here on an impulse. I did not want to come, but duty compelled me, and I saw no point in delaying the unhappy task.’

His demeanour was so belligerent that Grace’s mind whirled in confusion. She was about to ask him why he came at all if he did not want to, when he abruptly stopped pacing. ‘I see that I am not the first visitor of the day. I am acquainted with Lord Sharp.’

His words bore an edge of insult, heavy with sarcasm. They cut her like a whip, and his hard brown gaze set her hands to shaking. Grace swallowed hard. Rawden Voss’s gimlet eyes bore into her, waiting for an explanation as if he was owed one. How dare this man speak to her so rudely. She determined not to be bullied.

‘Lord Sharp is a friend of my uncle, Charles Howden,’ she said as calmly as possible.

Rawden Voss narrowed his eyes, and Grace felt his gaze penetrate her defences, laying bare her shame.

‘And is your uncle at home this morning?’ he barked.

‘No. What do you want with him?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Won’t you please sit down,’ she said. Perhaps that would calm him.

Her unhappy visitor took a seat and brushed a speck of lint off his perfectly pressed black breeches. How dark he was, his hair shining like jet in the sunlight streaming through the window, stubble shadowing his jaw. A vein pulsed in his temple. ‘My brother died at Waterloo. You may have heard.’ He fixed her with a stare from brown eyes so bleak, they took her breath away.

Grace fought back tears and said, ‘I did hear, and I am sorry for your loss.’

‘Was it not also your loss, Miss Howden?’ he said with a sneer.

Silence engulfed the room like a poisonous cloud. The thick ticking of the grandfather clock seemed to go for an age before Rawden could get his anger under control. He had expected to find William’s fiancé to be either a quiet, little mouse of a woman or a seductive predator. Not the pretty young woman who had so enchanted him in a summer garden just a few months ago, before his world turned to carnage and grief. Not the apparent innocent who had stoked his lust and whose soft, generous mouth had felt like sweetness and sin all at once. And worst of all, William was barely cold in his grave, and she was already moving on to a new suitor, entangled with Caville Sharp. It spoke volumes about the kind of woman she was.

When Rawden spoke again, it was with barely contained irritation. ‘I am aware that there was some connection between you and my brother. Am I mistaken?’

Grace Howden maintained her composure and defended herself. ‘You are not mistaken. William had asked me to marry him, and I said yes.’

His chest heaved up and down. He was so angry, perched on the edge of the chair, that he sprang up, and before he could gain command of his feelings, he unleashed his anger on her.

‘What are you, Miss Howden - innocent, fortune hunter, ruthless jade for sale to the highest bidder?’

‘How dare you,’ she gasped, rising to her feet.

‘Did you seek my brother out to lure him into an unfortunate marriage? Did you prey on his naivety?’

‘I am sure you would know all about preying on people. Your reputation precedes you, Earl Voss.’

‘Ah. So my brother told you about my many vices, did he?’

‘No, he was far too honourable and loved you far too much to ever speak ill of you. He barely spoke of his family, but when he did, he declared that he admired and loved you dearly. But I heard everything I need to know about you from others.’

He gave a bitter laugh. ‘Like Lady Granston and those simpletons you were with at the rout. Oh, I am sure they had plenty to say about me, vacuous fools.’

Grace Howden had reddened, but she spoke softly, obviously in more command of her temper than he was. ‘They described you as Lucifer himself. By your conduct so far today, it would seem they are correct, yet Will worshipped you. He told me that, deep down, you were the most honourable man he knew.’

‘Deep down?’ What the hell did that mean?

Grace Howden squared her shoulders. ‘I think he must have been sorely mistaken in your character, Sir, judging by your behaviour here today. And there is also the matter of what you did at Lady Blanchard’s rout.’

‘What?’

‘You...you manhandled me. It was not honourable. It was how I came to meet Will. He visited me to apologise for your shameful conduct.’

‘Ah, I see.’ Rawden’s hands fisted. ‘So this is all my doing, is it? But it turned out to your advantage, did it not? You managed to trap yourself a nice husband. And do not lecture me on honour, a woman who duped my poor brother....’

‘I duped no one. I cared for Will.’

‘I do not believe you,’ said Rawden. ‘He is dead, yet you are not even in mourning garb. So much for caring for him. I think you convinced Will you were in love with him, and he was too honourable to leave you stranded before going off to war.’

‘I did not have to convince him of anything. Your brother declared his love for me. He sought me out. It was Will who pursued me.’

Rawden shook his head. ‘That was not the Will that I knew.’

‘Is it so hard to believe that a man might love me?’ she cried.

‘No,’ he spat. ‘But that is not the point.’

Looking at her, Rawden could well believe that any man could fall for the lovely Miss Howden at first sight. She was infinitely protectable with that anguished look on her wide-eyed face, her stunning, fiery hair and the blush to her cheeks. She was all delicacy and softness, just waiting for a strong man to offer his protection and claim her innocence.

Rawden’s lip curled in a sneer. ‘My brother’s adoration was your salvation from poverty, was it not? Have you not been spurned by the suitors in the ton for your lack of dowry and fortune? I made enquiries before I called on you, you see.’

‘You may judge my character as wanting without knowing me, but know this, Earl Voss. I prayed for your brother’s safe return and grieved at his death, not because of the ruin of my own prospects but because he was fine and young and did not deserve that fate. And I had to learn it from an obituary in the newspaper. It was there, in black and white, with no warning, shattering my hopes.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Had we married, you would have been family, and I would have had to endure your company. But William is gone, and he is not coming back, so I do not need to put up with you.’ She wiped away tears. ‘I have endured much these last weeks, but I

will not stand for your insults. You may leave, Earl Voss, for I am heartily sick of appeasing men's cruelty.'

How dare she dismiss him when he had come to help her? Gripped by anger, Rawden took Grace Howden by the shoulders and put his face in hers.

'Maybe I did not express myself well, but I have a right to the truth. My accusation is not baseless. When we met, you were alone, outside, in the dark. Not very ladylike behaviour. Did I not just see Caville Sharp leave this house? Is he not a notorious rake and seducer? Are you not in desperate circumstances? Put all that together, and is it such a stretch to think your honour for sale, Miss Howden? After all, you let me do what I wanted that night at the rout.'

Her lip quivered, and Rawden let go of her, regretting the harshness of his words. But his regret was painfully dispelled in the next instant when Grace Howden slapped his face soundly.

Rawden grabbed her hand before she could withdraw it. 'Don't ever do that again,' he snarled.

'Don't ever impugn my honour again.'

'Well now, that just goes to show what a little alley cat you really are,' said Rawden, rubbing his cheek, which stung like the blazes. 'You have some nerve to hit me, woman.'

'Why, because I am a penniless nobody, and you are so high and mighty?'

'No, because if you had the slightest understanding of my character, you might find I will hit you back.'

'Go on then. Punish me for having your brother's love. Do your worst. I care not. Hit me, and then get out.'

Rawden stared down into her anguished face, her lips inches from his own, his chest pressed to hers. How had it come to this? He had not expected her to be so lovely nor to be the young woman from whom he had stolen a kiss. He had come to get the measure of her, but that kiss was still seared on his memory as sweet and exciting. It sparked a passion he could

not forget, making him want to possess and devour her and rip away her pretence of innocence.

‘The face of an angel,’ Will had gasped at the end, and Grace Howden was undeniably pretty, in a tragic kind of way. There were dark circles beneath her eyes. Her face had lost its roundness from the summer, and was pale and gaunt, and held undeniable suffering. He had meant to carefully sound her out but Caville Sharp’s appearance had sparked unreasonable jealousy and brought his calm crashing down. And she looked at him with such revulsion that Rawden hated himself.

This would not do. Rawden released her and stepped back. ‘Forgive me. I did not mean to lay hands on you.’

‘I think you should go,’ she whimpered, as if all the fight had gone out of her.

‘I cannot. I must tell you of William.’ He stared down at the swirl of blue and red in the Persian rug. ‘He made me promise with his dying breath.’

‘You were with him when he died?’ she gasped.

‘Yes.’ He looked up into wide hazel eyes shining with tears. She was either a good actress or genuinely distressed. ‘Will was severely wounded. I held his hand as he slipped away.’

She put her hands to her stomach and made a sound between a cry and a moan. ‘Oh, that is a relief. I had pictured him dying alone on some foreign field. But it is such a comfort to know he had you with him.’

Rawden shut his eyes to banish the memory of blood, so much blood, and the cries of dying men, the squalor, the stink of fear. He swallowed hard, and when he opened them again, she was watching him intently, tears rolling down her cheeks. He concentrated on the hazel depths of her lovely eyes to stop himself from falling apart.

‘Believe me, it was no comfort to me to witness my brother’s passing or to hear that he had entered a betrothal without confiding in me. Was there a reason for such haste? He can barely have known you?’ His eyes dipped to her stomach. ‘Are you in trouble, Miss Howden?’

Her palm went to her chest. ‘What are you implying?’

‘The obvious.’

‘Well, it is not true. You need not worry on that score.’

‘So why the haste?’

‘He said he was to go to war and made me promise to wait for him. He said we would be married the moment he returned. It was hurried. There was no time.’

‘Even to send word to his father or brother? You can see why I am sceptical of the depth of feeling between you two.’

‘Think what you will. I care not. I thank you for bringing me some comfort in knowing the manner of William’s passing, but you should leave now.’

He sighed. ‘Will made a request of me at the end.’

Her stricken face gave him pause. He could leave now and never fulfil his obligation, and no one would ever know. He could abandon Grace Howden to her fate, be it with Caville Sharp or another lecher, and never set eyes on her pretty, lying face again. He was sure she was keeping something from him. ‘William’s last words were of you. He said he loved you, and he made me promise.’

‘Promise what?’ she asked.

‘That I take care of you in his stead. Apparently, you are in desperate circumstances, and I am to offer you protection.’

‘I neither want nor need your protection, Sir.’

‘If you are in the company of Caville Sharp, I would venture that you do.’

‘I am not in his company nor do I want yours.’ She rushed and opened the door, clinging to it, white-knuckled.

‘You have not let me say my piece. I have a duty to fulfil.’

‘We are not acquainted, Sir,’ she said sharply. ‘Nor do I wish to be bullied by you any longer. You have to go.’ The last words were a sob, and she was shaking with anger.

There seemed to be no gaining Grace Howden's good opinion, and Rawden did not desire it. He stormed past her, feeling like the worst cad and fool, and rushed down the stairs and out into the street.

Rawden hardly knew where he was going as anger raged like a beast in his heart. Grace Howden had taken advantage of his brother's good nature. Nothing he had seen or heard from this meeting had made him think he was mistaken. Pretty but hard, Grace Howden was a burden he did not ask for, and he bitterly resented the twisted feelings she stirred in him – lust for her comeliness, a foolish desire to gain her good opinion, and worst of all, humiliation at her distaste for him that she did not try to hide.

She had compared him to Will and found him wanting, as had so many others in his life. She talked of his brother with a soft tenderness and to him with contempt, when he had come here today to show kindness and act with honour. It had been an act of charity, yet she spurned him as a rogue with the blackest hearts.

Rawden stopped dead in the street and cursed, to the alarm of an elderly couple strolling by. Grace Howden had seen him precisely as he was. She was not his equal in station, experience or fortune, yet she had dissected his careful politeness and grudging charity in a few minutes. So it was done - promise fulfilled, honour and duty satisfied. He would never stand to see her again, and the little fool could sink or swim on her own.

Chapter Sixteen

The noise from the crowd was deafening, but Rawden blotted it out and focussed on the meaty fist flying at his face. He swerved and ducked, and it met thin air. The brawny Irishman coming at him was a triumph of heavy muscle over agility, and he was tiring already, but one wrong move would send Rawden crashing to the sawdust floor with a broken jaw or worse.

Boxing was, for many, a gentlemanly pursuit, where the softer members of the ton indulged themselves by thinking they could fight. But there was no real jeopardy in entering a ring with a man you had paid to spar with you. In the cellars of Midwitch Tavern, on the seedy side of London, reeking of stale ale and sweat, it was altogether the opposite of gentlemanly. Here, men fought bare-knuckled and bare-chested, and the rough underbelly of London rubbed shoulders with the well-bred. Ravaged street whores mingled with the primped mistresses of wealthy men. The women hung on the arms of their benefactors, hungry for violence and excitement.

A right hook grazed his ear with a whoosh of air. The man was fast, almost too fast, but Rawden countered with a hard punch to the Irishman's stomach. The man groaned and fell to his knees, spitting blood that oozed into the sawdust. Rawden turned to a pretty woman in the crowd and grabbed an ale from her hand with a wink, and she smiled back at him. He downed the ale in a few gulps, wiping sweat and blood off with a swollen knuckle, and turned back to his opponent, who was hauling himself to his feet. Rawden felled the man with a vicious right hook, and the crowd roared in delight.

He bounced on his toes, still seething with restless energy. Damn that this violence had not settled his mind nor the anger and guilt warring in his chest. It seemed he would just have to drink himself into oblivion or perhaps visit Romola to work it off another way, if she would have him after their last quarrel.

'Well played, Voss,' drawled a voice, and Rawden groaned inwardly. George Sanders, dandy and inveterate gambler,

patted him on the back, grimaced, then wiped his hand on his perfectly tailored jacket.

‘It is just honest sweat, Sanders. It will wash off,’ said Rawden.

‘Yes, but you know I don’t like to get my hands dirty. I’d rather you did it for me. Everyone thought the Irishman would beat you, but I had faith, my friend, so you made me a pretty penny.’

‘I live to serve, and we are not friends,’ said Rawden. He had endured the oaf’s toadying at boarding school, but now he did not have to. No matter how he insulted the man, Sanders would persist in thinking they were friends, and with his blood still up, Rawden was in no mood to indulge the idiot.

Sanders brushed off his rudeness. If he had one quality, it was a thick skin. ‘You never change, Voss, always courting scandal and snarling your way through life.’

‘As opposed to slithering my way through life, like some people,’ Rawden replied, wishing the man would move away, for Sanders was nought but a weak fool with a spiteful temperament – a greasy rat of a man.

Sanders leant back, watching Rawden wipe the sweat off his chest with a towel. ‘I heard you are softening of late.’

‘How so?’

‘A little bird told me that you have been asking around about a certain young lady who has caught your jaded eye, a respectable one at that, though not for long if rumours are correct.’

‘What are you babbling about? Out with it, Sanders.’

‘A certain Miss Grace Howden. Though I heard that your brother....’

Rawden cut him off, grabbing him by the lapels. ‘What about my brother?’

‘Nothing. Calm yourself, Rawden,’ said Sanders, wriggling free and brushing himself off. ‘I was going to say that there

were rumours that your brother was interested in the lady, and she was interested in him. Did you know that?’

‘Do not talk of my brother, ever, not if you know what’s good for you.’ snapped Rawden.

‘As you like. I was sorry to hear of his passing, genuinely so. And I was only going to say that if you have an interest in that lady’s direction, then you had better make haste.’

‘Really?’ said Rawden, feigning disinterest by smiling at the woman who had smiled at him earlier.

‘I hear that Sharp has his eye on her.’

‘Why? Has he not just married into the most exalted circles of society?’

Sanders’ eyes brightened at the thought he knew something Rawden did not. ‘It is not marriage that Lord Sharp has in mind. I heard a scurrilous rumour that Miss Howden’s uncle was trying to pass her off some time ago. He apparently arranged a gaming night, with her as the hostess and the prize as well. But there was only ever going to be one winner, and that was Caville Sharp. Is that not rather sordid?’

‘The prize?’ Rawden said casually, but every sense was screaming an alert.

‘Yes. The blackguard let it be known that his niece was available to become a rich man’s mistress. But, of course, the lady was not informed of this fact, and when Sharp made his move, I believe he got a slapped face for his insolence. Is that not splendid?’ Sanders smirked. While supposedly friends with Caville Sharp, he still enjoyed seeing the man humiliated. Sanders was not a person who inspired loyalty.

‘I’ve no time for your womanish tittle-tattle, Sanders,’ said Rawden.

‘As you like. And I am sure I am mistaken in your regard for the lady. But if you show interest in her, it piques that of other men. And I only sought to do you a service in telling you.’ Sanders sighed. ‘But I pity the poor lady, for her uncle seems intent on throwing her to the wolves. So it goes with defenceless ladies, I am afraid. She will be passed around the

gentlemen of the ton, and it will all end badly. I've seen Grace Howden out and about. Such a face on her - a sweet little morsel, to be sure, like a pretty sugared almond. I am almost tempted myself.'

Rawden grabbed hold of him. 'We both know you are not. But you would do well to leave the young lady be and not spread idle gossip, for she is under my protection.'

'Maybe she does not need it. The delectable Miss Howden is not altogether defenceless, for I heard that she had made enquiries about your brother's situation some months ago via a certain Lady Alice Granston.' Sanders chuckled. 'I think it must have been just before Waterloo. The young lady was probing for information from a most indiscreet source, as you know how that old sow could never keep a juicy secret to herself.'

'She is not the only gossip, is she?' said Rawden, glaring at Sanders.

'I only wished to be of service, as always. But if my warning has fallen on stony ground, I will bid you good day, Rawden.'

'You would do well to hold your tongue in future and not malign the lady further. As I said, she is under my protection, Sanders.'

'Well, if you have entered the fray, I will withdraw. How could I possibly compete with your handsome face?'

Rawden watched him go. George Sanders had no intention of pursuing Grace Howden, or any other young lady for that matter. His interests had always lain elsewhere, which was why his fawning attentions irritated Rawden. But he did wonder why Sanders had made a point of telling him of Caville Sharp's interest in Grace and of her investigating William.

His face was starting to swell, and every muscle ached from the fight, and yet still, his mind would not be turned from the troublesome Miss Grace Howden. It was rare that a woman

intrigued him. He was used to charming them, bedding them and growing weary of them in rapid succession.

Rawden sighed and wiped away blood that was crusting in his nose. It seemed he was not the only man currently bullying Grace Howden, and if he was to be true to his brother's last wish, it was time to do something about it.

Chapter Seventeen

Late summer was bathing London in warm sunlight, and the parks were alive with people promenading, couples linking arms, mothers cooing over babies. But Grace was not allowed out. Her uncle had kept her a virtual prisoner since her latest rejection of Caville Sharp. The servants had, no doubt, gossiped to Uncle Charles of a tall, dark-haired gentleman visiting, but Grace had lied and said it was an officer from the barracks sent in response to her request for news of William's death.

Uncle Charles had shrugged and asked nothing further, for he was absorbed with getting the servants to pack a vast array of luggage for his trip to Brighton and decrying the fact that he could never decide which outfit to wear and that Peregrine should be here to help him. As to her fate when he departed for Brighton, Uncle Charles had been unusually quiet on that subject, which did not bode well.

Since Rawden's visit, Grace had been feverishly enquiring through Harriet about positions as a governess or companion she might take if the worst happened and she was cast off. So far, Harriet had done little beyond writing to complain, *'But how shall we ever see each other again if you are in service in some northern hellhole of a place. We will not mix in the same circles.'* Grace longed for Harriet to visit with her so that she could share her fears and the shocking news of Rawden's visit. But no one came to the house.

Grace could not blame her friend for her lack of interest. Harriet had everything she could wish for in a dashing young fiancé and a genteel wedding. And who would want to swim next to a sinking ship and be dragged down with it? Still, she had never felt so alone and hopeless. In the dead of night, the uncharitable part of her character cursed Harriet's careless indifference to her plight.

It was into this loneliness that Rawden Voss crashed back into her life. His arrival was heralded by him barking loudly at Dawson. 'I demand to see Miss Howden. Go and tell her I am here, and be quick about it.' When Dawson nervously declared

Rawden's presence, Grace told him she was not receiving visitors, hoping the awful man would go away. Dawson bowed and hurried off.

Moments later, there was a huge fuss. 'Where the devil is she, you fool,' barked Rawden out in the corridor. He had obviously headed for her uncle's parlour, where she had last received him, but she was in a smaller, prettier one that she loved to frequent. The high windows let sunlight flood in, and the soft yellow curtains and chair coverings mirrored its warmth.

Grace gave in to a nervous snigger. Perhaps if she hid, he would not find her and have to go blustering out into the street again. She had a brief inclination to duck behind the heavy curtains, but moments later, Rawden Voss burst into the room.

'There you are. I told that nincompoop to take himself off and not bother us.'

Grace remained seated to put him on the back foot and said with more courage than she felt, 'Do you always demand rather than ask? I am not in the habit of receiving callers this early in the morning, Sir.'

'And I am not in the habit of being waved away by an underling when I come calling.' Rawden Voss glared and tossed his hat onto a side table with a clatter. 'I have something important to say to you, and I will damned well say it.'

'Very well,' sighed Grace. 'If you will not leave, I suppose I shall have to hear you out. Will you not be seated?' Grace folded her hands in her lap, and Rawden sat on a chair opposite her. There was nowhere to hide now.

He perched himself on the very edge of the chair as if he were trying to get as close to her as possible. It was low and delicate, designed for a lady, and he had to bunch his knees up to fit. It diminished his ferocity a little.

For a while, he contented himself with staring, his eyes hard and searching. Rawden's was a compelling face. His eyes held such ferocity and impatience but confusion, too, and they had

a dark beauty. No woman alive would fail to find him attractive, for his physique had a bulk that dominated a room. Had the loathsome oaf possessed any charm, he would have been a truly dazzling man.

Rawden raked his fingers through his shiny black hair, and Grace wondered if it was soft to the touch. A blush torched her cheeks, and she looked down at her hands.

‘This is utter folly, and I am an utter fool,’ he said, more to himself than her. ‘But I will not be turned from my promise to my brother, so if I must grovel and debase myself for his sake, I will. I am here to propose an arrangement that is beneficial to you, Miss Howden.’

‘An arrangement?’ Grace had the awful suspicion that he was going to offend her honour more than Caville Sharp had, but then the words were out of his mouth.

‘I believe there is a certain tradition to how these offers are made, but I am a novice at this, so I will just come out with it as best I can. It would be my great honour if you would accept my hand in marriage.’

‘Marriage? To you!’ she cried in horror, before she could stop herself.

His face darkened. ‘Of course, to me. Do you see another poor fellow sitting here like a fool?’

‘I...I do not know what to say, Earl Voss, other than....’

He cut her off. ‘You only need to say yes, Miss Howden. I will take care of all the arrangements with your uncle and so forth. I am sure he will be in agreement. It is not as if you have other suitors beating down your door.’ He frowned and leant forward. ‘You don’t, do you?’

‘Sir, I do not.’ Grace could barely speak for shock.

‘Good. Now, you should know why I am proposing this union and go into it with your eyes open. I promised my brother, as he lay dying that I would offer you my protection.’ He sighed heavily as if it weighed upon him. ‘I suppose I could just settle a sum on you, but I believe others would soon swindle it out of you or use it as a means to suggest you are

my...erm...kept woman, which will not do. I must secure both your future and reputation in order to fulfil my promise to William.'

'Others, you say. And who might they be?'

'Your Uncle Charles, for one,' he said, fixing her with an impatient glare. 'I know he is all but bankrupt.'

'What?'

How could Uncle Charles be bankrupt? He had just spent a small fortune on clothes for his Brighton trip.

'Yes. I have a reliable source on that score,' replied Rawden, triumph in his voice. 'So, as I was saying, it is through marriage that I can best provide for you in a respectable manner and act in your best interests, which you seem unable to do.'

'Control me, you mean,' said Grace, unable to believe the man's arrogance.

'No, look out for your best interests to honour my brother's memory,' said Rawden slowly, as though he were addressing an infant.

'I am not a thing to be passed around your family. I am a person with feelings.'

'Yes, you are a person with feelings, one of which seems to be misplaced pride. You are wholly without means. Pride without means is all folly. Am I wrong?' He did not wait for a reply. 'Now, I suppose I should list my qualities as a husband, one of which is that I have considerable wealth, having recently inherited an earldom from my father's passing.'

'Earl Voss,' began Grace, stressing his title in a sarcastic manner, 'I must stop you there. I was betrothed to your brother, but I no more belonged to him than I belong to you. I cannot entertain the notion of marriage to you or to anyone.'

'And yet your circumstances dictate that you must. Please hear me out. I mean us to be married in name only. I will make no other demands upon your person. I will have many

deficiencies as a husband and will not make a gentle one. I don't know how.'

Grace felt as though her face was frozen in horror, and he must have noticed. Rawden Voss stood up and approached her, hands fisted at his sides. 'I prefer to be honest about my motives and shortcomings, Grace. May I call you by your first name?'

'You seem the type of man who does whatever he wants, Earl Voss. Who am I to say otherwise?'

He narrowed his eyes at her insolence. 'Good. So we are being honest with each other. As I said, I will not make a gentle or attentive husband. I am thoroughly deficient in all ways. I am not of good character, nor will I suffer efforts to redeem me. Have no illusions that you will ever come to love me. But in my defence, I am of good health, possessed of a vast fortune, and I will provide everything you could need – wealth, a fine home, and even children, should you desire them, though I have no particular wish in that regard. I will not lay a finger on you that is not welcome, though if I am being abjectly honest, it costs me to do so, as I find you rather appealing in looks.' He frowned down at her.

Rawden's compliment and a smouldering flash of hunger in his eyes made her face burn. Grace stood and tried to get away from him, but he put his hand on her arm. His touch was like a bolt of lightning coursing through her veins. Her heart picked up its beat.

'I need a wife to help run my estates, Grace, but I will be absent for much of the time, and you will have more freedom than you could ever dream of here. As to sharing the marital bed, I will forgo that pleasure, so you need have no fear in that regard if you are, indeed, the innocent you claim to be.'

'Please stop,' she said. His arrogance and the intensity of his gaze overwhelmed her.

'Marry me, Grace, and you could find some happiness, which is more than I can say for myself.'

Grace shuddered. With these bleak words, he sought to possess her, and she had no idea why this heartless brute of a man should wish to. She tried to find her courage, but Rawden chilled her to the core as he stared down at her like a hawk hovering over a mouse.

This would not do. She could not be a mouse. Grace pushed his arm away. ‘Why on earth would you want to marry a complete stranger?’

He shrugged. ‘Most people stand at the altar as strangers and stay that way many years into marriage, which, if we can be honest, is all about keeping wealth within the family or climbing society’s slippery ladder.’

‘That cannot be true.’

‘Most fools in the ton look for wealth, breeding, polished manners and a blandly pretty face. You have none of those things besides the pretty, and that you have to excess. Any man would be proud to have you on his arm. But I also sense a strength in you and a certain resilience. I watched you at that rout as your friends mocked me. You seemed forlorn behind your forced smiles. You know you are an outsider who will never fit in, nor do you want to. And yet your pride rails against their disdain.’

‘I am sure I would not dare to contradict your observations,’ said Grace.

‘Yes, you would. I noticed that there was no aimless twittering, as was the way of your peers. I would venture that you either disdained them as fools or you were terrified of drawing their contempt. A clever young woman like you, I would venture it was the fear of contempt.’

‘How is this for contempt then? Earl Voss, your proposal is ridiculous.’

‘Why?’ he snapped.

‘I entered into an arrangement with your brother. I wanted to marry him because William was gentle, kind and honest.’

‘All the qualities I lack.’ He bent his head to her ear. ‘But he was also naïve and far too trusting, which I am not. My

brother had an open heart which had not known the fickleness of a woman's affections. I am sure he was easily duped.'

'All the more reason not to marry me if I am nothing but a devious jade out for a fortune. Now, you must leave and never come here again.'

'On very little acquaintance, my brother fell hopelessly in love with you, Grace. I doubt his devotion was reciprocated, but that is neither here nor there. But it must mean something. He must have seen something in you to pass you his heart on a platter.'

'You talk about him as if he were a fool. Will was good to me, and I cared for him.'

'As did I. But answer me this. Were you in love with him? Did you burn with passion at his touch?'

'I...I cared for him. I held him in high esteem.'

'Esteem is not passion. Passion is where you are consumed by another. It is being unable to live without them, to think of anything but them.'

'His advances were chaste and respectful, unlike yours, Earl Voss. He never laid a hand on me that was unwelcome or without regard to propriety.'

'Did you keep him at arm's length to spur his ardour, to keep him in suspense?'

'No. How can you say such a thing?'

'You took advantage of Will going off to war to force a proposal. He kept you a secret from his friends, his father. Was that at your behest so they could not intervene and advise him that it was all folly?'

'I took no advantage. And what if my circumstances were dire? That was not my fault. What would you have done in my place? Are you such a paragon that you would not cling to kindness in a sea of cruelty and loneliness?'

'Perhaps, but Will would have regretted it. You would never have made him happy.'

‘I would have spent my life trying.’

‘Out of gratitude,’ spat Rawden.

‘Out of compassion. Our acquaintance was short, but I could see that William was lonely. I can recognise that all too easily. As of late, there has been much of that in my life. And no matter what you say, Will wanted me, and I would have made him happy.’

‘My soft brother did not know what he wanted.’ Rawden’s voice had risen to a shout, making Grace flinch. He sighed heavily and moderated his next words. ‘My brother was adrift in life and frightened of going off to war.’

‘If he clung to me as I clung to him, what is so wrong with that? If it comforted William that he had someone in this life who cared for him as he rode into danger, why is that so terrible?’

‘Because it was a lie.’

‘It was not. But you seem determined to brand me a liar regardless of what I say.’

‘So tell me? How would you have cared for him? What did a future with my brother look like?’

‘Is it not a wife’s duty to care for her husband, support him, and offer him comfort?’

‘And what would you have done when he lost his fortune, for my father apparently knew nothing of this match, and when he found out, he would have cut Will off.’

‘I had no mind to his fortune. I wanted a kind companion to stand by my side, and yes, I wanted protection, but for a woman in this world, that is only achievable with a husband. Whatever you think of me, I would have been good to William.’

‘Would you be good to me?’ said Rawden.

‘You do not need my goodness, nor do you deserve it.’

‘Don’t I? Does a broken heart not beat in this breast, Grace,’ he said, his face awfully close to hers. ‘I feel William’s loss

keenly. If I do not make good on my promise, I will be letting him down all over again, and that I cannot live with.'

Such a look of anguish came over Rawden's face, the ferocious mask slipping for a moment, that Grace's heart lurched in her breast.

'Do I not need comfort in this world, Grace?' He gave a bitter smile. 'I have a feeling I might find it with you, or am I just a fool? Tell me.'

Before she could gather her thoughts or put into words how appalling his proposal was, Rawden Voss kissed her. His arm came about her waist, holding her firmly but not pressed against him like the last time. The other hand went to the back of her head and held it gently. All Grace could think of at first was a way to wriggle out of his clutches, but with the slow slide of his lips against hers, all thought went out of her head, and there was just warmth, tenderness and some measure of comfort in being in the strength of his arms.

She clutched onto Rawden's jacket, feeling rock-hard muscles underneath. A little whimper of confusion escaped her lips, and his kiss became harder, hungrier, hotter, until he was plundering her mouth. Grace was lost in him, overpowered and helpless. Only the sound of a door slamming downstairs brought her back to her senses.

'No. I will not,' she said, pushing Rawden away.

'Your words say 'no,' but your mouth says 'yes.' he said, wiping away the kiss with the back of his hand. There was a feverish look of triumph in his eyes.

'I have not given you an answer to your proposal.'

'And what is it?' he said, with absolutely no expectation of rejection.

Grace squared her shoulders. 'I cannot accept that my fate is to enter a loveless marriage to a bully.'

'I am no bully.'

'You are, and my answer is no.'

'Are you seriously rejecting me after that kiss?' he spat.

‘I am.’

‘Then why did you do it, kiss me like you wanted to?’

‘Because I pity you.’

‘Pity me? You pity me?’ he cried.

‘Yes, for I think you a wretched creature. I have given you an answer, and you have fulfilled your duty to William. Do not come here again, please.’

His chest heaved up and down. ‘Very well. Then I will leave you to your fate, Miss Howden. Please forgive the violence of my feelings just now. I can only be ashamed to have displayed them to one so indifferent and changeable.’

Rawden could not look at Grace Howden any longer. A whiplash of humiliation swept through him as he stared incredulously at her delicate and beautiful brown eyes, and he saw pity and contempt sitting there, clear as day. Before he said something he regretted, he whirled and rushed from the room.

Out in the street, he leant on a tree. He felt sick. He had failed William. He had once again harried a helpless woman for no good reason other than his pride and lust. He was the monster she thought him to be. For an age, Rawden stood there, contemplating his shortcomings. He heard a door slam, and the hapless servant who had received him came running out, sent on an errand, no doubt.

Rawden followed him along the street until he reached the junction of an alley, where he pounced and dragged the man into the shadows. He pinned him against the wall with a forearm to the fellow’s throat.

‘What do you want? I have no money,’ stammered the unfortunate youth.

‘Not yet, but you will have if you tell me all you know about Miss Howden.’

‘No. I heard you shouting at her. Don’t you hurt her. She is kind to me.’

Rawden relaxed his grip. 'I have the opposite intention. I mean to protect the young lady.' He fished a coin out of his pocket, and the young man's eyes lit up. 'Here is some money to loosen your tongue. Speak, and quickly.'

Chapter Eighteen

Rawden sat in a fog of cigar smoke and swirled a whisky around in his glass. It gave off a heady aroma, and its burn on his throat calmed him. The gruff-voiced conversation of his gentleman's club washed over him, and he was acutely aware that Hardy was staring in his direction. How he longed to escape his friend's scrutiny, for Hardy could smell a rat a mile away. Rawden tried to divert him.

'I suppose your family is well and pleased to see you home safely, welcoming you with open arms.'

'They would welcome you too if you would only seek company.'

'I have much to settle with my father's estate, Hardy.'

'I hate to leave you alone, for you will only end up getting into trouble. My sister insists on us all going to Brighton for the end of the summer season – a family tradition which deserves to die, in my opinion. Honestly, sea bathing, of all things. It is more tortuous than war.'

'And how is Prudence?'

'As troublesome as ever.'

'And her friend, the lovely Miss....'

'Enough, Rawden. I spoke of her when I was extremely drunk, and we agreed to forget I ever mentioned it. And on the subject of Prudence, my parents have despaired of ever finding my sister a match. Now that you are an earl and have come into a vast fortune, you might meet their high expectations. I don't suppose you would take her off my hands for the sake of friendship?'

Rawden laughed. 'Not a chance. And besides, I might be embracing matrimony elsewhere.'

'What lady would ever be foolish enough to marry a snarling creature like you?' laughed Hardy.

'Miss Grace Howden.'

‘Will’s betrothed? The one you said duped him into making an offer.’ His face fell. ‘My friend, you cannot be in earnest. Your obligation to his final request does not extend that far. He asked only that you protect her.’

‘You haven’t seen her. She is pretty, quite charmingly so, and sad - a beautiful bird with a broken wing.’

‘God save us. All those cannon blasts have stewed your brain, Rawden. Since when did you rush to the aid of damsels in distress? What is this, some search for redemption? You think that by rescuing Miss Howden, you can assuage your guilt over Will. His death was not your fault, Rawden. How many times must I say it? There is nothing to reproach yourself about.’

When Rawden did not answer, Hardy pressed him. ‘What makes you think she will want you if she was in love with William?’

‘Grace Howden was not in love with him. She was desperate to be married, and he was a young fool, too agreeable for his own good.’

‘Well, that’s as maybe, but you are the opposite and certainly not suited to matrimony. You never cared for anyone or anything other than yourself, to which your brother was a notable exception.’

‘I know what I am, my friend, and I have no illusions about my character. And as to redemption, there is none to be had in this world. But I loved Will, and I made a promise to him on his deathbed, which I intend to honour.’

‘Yes. You swore to look after that young woman, to provide for her, if necessary, but don’t marry her. No, this is utter foolishness. You are not yourself, Rawden. I can see that you grieve most terribly. But I will put a stop to this here and now, as your friend, or it will end in the most dreadful unhappiness on both sides.’

‘You cannot stop it,’ said Rawden.

‘Good God, you didn’t propose already, did you?’

Rawden stared down into his whisky as the humiliation of being soundly rejected bruised him anew.

‘Oh, God. And did the poor lady accept you?’ said Hardy.

‘No. And my pride is still smarting from her rejection.’

Hardy laughed with relief. ‘I should think it is. So, the matter is settled then. She has had a lucky escape, and you have fulfilled your promise.’

‘Not in the slightest. Firstly, I do not appreciate being bested by a young lady of no means or connections. Secondly, I swore an oath that I will not break just because some silly chit is too stubborn or blind to see that I have her best interests at heart. And thirdly...’ Rawden trailed off as he could not bring himself to say the words aloud.

‘Thirdly?’ said Hardy.

Rawden shifted in his seat. ‘I want her.’

‘God, Rawden. With your new fortune, you can have anyone you want, even with your shocking reputation. There are any number of infinitely more suitable women you can wed and forget - a mutually beneficial arrangement that suits everyone. But not this, not some girl who was entangled with your brother. You cannot simply scoop her up and carry her off. Throw some money at Miss Howden and forget her.’

‘I have no intention of accepting rejection.’

‘Then you are a fool.’

Rawden narrowed his eyes. ‘I am no more of a fool than you are. And there is more to this, my friend. Miss Howden is in danger. There are others sniffing around her. It is rumoured that her uncle is trying to pass her off as a mistress to the highest bidder. And one of them is Caville Sharp.’

‘Sharp? Is he not recently wed and very well, too? What does he want with this, Miss Howden?’

‘What do you think he wants?’

Realisation dawned on Hardy’s face. He sat forward. ‘Sharp is a dangerous man, Rawden. He is vastly wealthy, and his

father wields considerable power within the ton.'

'What care I for the opinion of the ton?'

'You will become more of an outcast if you get on the wrong side of them, as will anyone entangled with you. Do not be shut out from society just because of pride and disdain. If you are serious about being a husband, you must consider the welfare of a wife. Do you want her to be spurned as well?' Hardy sat back and shook his head. 'And don't pretend that you are acting honourably here, either. Not if you are as keen to seduce her as Sharp.'

'I will marry her, and, in time, she will come around,' said Rawden. 'She might even become fond of me.'

'I doubt that. I am your best friend, and even I am not particularly fond of you,' said Hardy with a glare.

Rawden smiled. 'I know.'

Chapter Nineteen

A picnic in Hyde Park should have been a joy, and Grace had looked forward to it after Uncle Charles' imprisonment. She had been invited to attend, along with Harriet's friends, the loathsome Lydia and others, and the occasion was to mark Harriet's return from honeymoon after marrying the honourable and esteemed Gilbert Routledge.

The hum of conversation carried over the steady drone of bees plundering the last summer flowers. There was much talk of the sumptuousness of the wedding, but Grace could not join in, for she had not been invited. Harriet had explained that Gilbert's family had wanted just close friends at the ceremony, but there was no escaping the fact that she had been excluded due to her lowly station in life. It hurt that Harriet had not insisted on her old friend being present. Surely she could have swayed her intended if she had tried?

The outing was not as Grace had hoped. The sun was searing, the company tiresome, and Harriet's husband, though handsome enough, was an insufferable bore who talked only of himself and fawned over her friend as if she were a child, not a grown woman.

'Take more refreshment, or you might swoon in this heat, and do keep your parasol up, dearest. We must not coarsen that flawless complexion,' he said, then called out to his friends, 'Am I not the luckiest man in England to have secured such a beauty.'

His equally odious friends patted him on the back and congratulated him. They seemed eager to agree with everything he said, even if it was nonsense. Harriet blushed and smiled up at Gilbert. How could she stand to be treated like a cosseted pet? So far, they had spoken only a few words, and Harriet seemed remote somehow, as if their friendship was fading away along with Grace's hopes.

She tried to endure the afternoon by making herself invisible, but another member of the party made that impossible and was the cause of her thudding heart and

trembling hands. Caville Sharp had fixed his gaze on her all afternoon, insolently smirking whenever she met his eye. Yet he did not approach her, nor would he, for Mrs. Talbot had come as a chaperone and was seated with the other ladies' maids a short distance away.

'Damn you, Gilbert, my friend, you have secured the most beautiful, fashionable lady in the whole of London. I am riven with jealousy,' declared Caville. He smirked in Grace's direction, ignoring his new wife, Lady Arabella Chomley, a plump little thing with mousy hair and sallow skin. The young woman's cheeks reddened and not from the heat, and Grace seethed at Caville's cruelty. He had married the woman for her fortune, but why humiliate her with such open disdain? It only served to harden Grace's resolve never to have anything to do with him, no matter what her uncle said.

Lydia fanned herself furiously. 'I need respite from this heat. I fear I might swoon at any minute.'

'Then I will catch you,' said Caville flirtatiously, turning to her with outstretched arms.

Lydia giggled. 'Oh, are you not the most shameful man, Caville Sharp, with all your teasing.' He leaned over and whispered something in Lydia's ear, and she laughed, her friends joining in.

Arabella's eyes swam with tears, and Grace could no longer stand the company. Caville's back was turned, so she stood up. 'I think I will take a walk down to the river. It might be cooler there. Would you like to accompany me,' she said to Arabella.

The woman glanced at Caville, who was too engrossed in flirting to notice. 'I would,' she replied. They both strolled off, but no one paid them any heed.

Grace linked arms with Arabella. 'They have not noticed we have gone. So we can get some peace at last.' She smiled and received a sincere smile in return.

For a while, they enjoyed the cool of the river, moving away from their party into the shade of a group of willow trees at its edge. Arabella was a quiet little thing who did not seem to

require much conversation. She made a few remarks on the hot weather, the beauty of Harriet, and how handsome Gilbert was. Eventually, she said, 'I think we should return to the others, or my husband will come looking, and he will not be pleased.'

'If you like,' said Grace.

Arabella frowned, and her eyes glistened. 'I know Caville admires you,' she said suddenly. 'He makes no secret of his other life. Indeed, he likes to tell me about his mistresses every chance he gets.'

'I am not his mistress,' cried Grace.

'No, not yet, I know, but Caville always gets what he wants. He is tireless in all things. Forgive me for saying it aloud, but you seem honest and a little kinder than the other ladies, and I would rather confront my humiliation than fall prey to the games he plays. We are newly married, and I had hoped for respect if not love, but my illusions have been dispelled rather quickly.'

'I am sorry, and I swear I have no intention of becoming his mistress.'

'I hope for your sake, you do not,' she said, grabbing Grace's arm with such a look of despair that no reply came to mind that would possibly comfort her.

'Why? What has he done for you to fear him so?'

'I must return, or there will be consequences. I am glad we had a chance to talk.'

Grace watched her stride away, head down – a pitiful sight. She bit her lip hard to stem the tears that threatened at the woman's plight, but was she not equally trapped? She sighed out at the river. It was an idyllic scene, with the water sliding by and swallows swooping for flies, but everything was turmoil, ugliness and worry.

A pounding sound had Grace turning to see an enormous black horse barrelling towards her. It looked fit to run straight into the river before its masked rider pulled it to a sliding halt, reached down and scooped Grace up in his arms before she

could utter one word of protest. He whirled the horse around and sped away from the river, clutching her tightly.

‘Who are you? Let go of me,’ she cried, but he did not reply, and they rode furiously out of the park to the outrage of several onlookers. But there was nothing they could do to help her, and Grace had a terrible feeling that Caville Sharp had a hand in her current danger.

That fear was quickly dispelled when they reached a carriage, and she was bundled off the horse and inside. Her captor followed and tore down his mask.

‘You!’ she cried.

‘Indeed, it is. Good afternoon, Miss Howden. You and I are going to take a little trip,’ said Rawden Voss with a broad smile. He leaned back against the red silk seat and smirked.

Grace’s heart sank. If she thought Caville Sharp was the worst thing that could happen to her, she was about to be proved wrong.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Into your future.’

‘What? I have to go back,’ she cried. ‘I will be missed. My party will come looking for me.’

He shrugged. ‘I sincerely hope they do.’

‘Why would you do this? It is madness.’

Rawden leant forward, and she leapt back. ‘I do not like getting no for an answer, and by day’s end, all that will change.’

‘Why? What are you going to do?’

‘Whatever the hell I like,’ he said with a slow smirk that sent her heart leaping into her throat.

‘You will not touch me.’

He leant forward. ‘All in good time, Miss Howden, all in good time.’

‘Rawden Voss, you must let me go, now.’

‘Not a chance. Calm down and enjoy the ride, Grace.’ He looked her over slowly, and a smile spread across his roguish face. ‘I must say the sun has given you a most delicious glow to your cheeks. You look exceptionally well today.’

The hunger in Rawden’s eyes made her turn away from him, and she spoke no more as they made their way out of Hyde Park. Her mind whirled as the coach clattered through London, leaving behind the wide avenues and tree-lined squares with elegant houses for narrower, more crowded roads and buildings pressed closely together. The shouts of hawkers and tradesmen filled the air, along with a tang of rot from the Thames.

After an age, Rawden banged the top of the carriage with his fist, and it ground to a halt. They appeared to be on some kind of dock at the riverside. Ships rocked in the water, and the smell of freshly baked bread from a nearby shop warred with raw meat from the butcher’s just a little further along. A clanging noise made her ears ring. In Grace’s limited view through the window, they seemed to be in a rough part of London, its mud-clogged streets and wan-faced population, alien and frightening to her.

‘Do you want to get outside and stretch your legs?’ said Rawden.

‘No,’ she replied, glaring at him.

‘I thought not. These streets are rank, are they not? So many people pressed cheek by jowl. Poverty is rather claustrophobic, do you not agree?’

‘Tell me why we are here.’

‘See that baker over there,’ he said, pointing.

Grace glanced towards a fat man wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hands.

‘Imagine who you will belong to once I move on, taking my proposal with me. Think of that baker’s chubby red fingers on you at night. Or a clerk living in a damp attic above a shop, a man who pores over paper all day and comes home stinking of desperation and ink.’ Rawden leapt into the seat next to her,

which had her cringing back from him. ‘Or a blacksmith with filth under his fingernails.’ He reached up and brushed a strand of hair off her face. ‘And if you go as a governess, do you think the lord of the manor will refrain from fondling his pretty servant when the mistress is not around?’

‘Why are you doing this?’ cried Grace.

‘Down here, there are thieves, whores, beggars and broken men. This cesspit of an existence is yours if you refuse my offer, and there is no safety or happiness to it, just a slow, downward slide to degradation. I hate to take a blade to your childish dreams of love, Grace, but you must open your eyes to reality.’

‘I cannot marry you.’

‘Marriage to me is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and yet you would squander it.’ His voice had become coaxing, seductive, and Grace could imagine it melting any woman’s heart, as could his face, so strong, so handsome, so close. ‘You could be so much more than you are, Grace.’

‘I do not think it possible for you to be less than you are, for you sit so low in my esteem.’

‘Is that so?’ he breathed, holding her eyes prisoner.

‘How can I contemplate marriage to you when your brother was a far better man.’

Rawden blinked rapidly. His smile faded, and she knew she had hurt him. Grace had a momentary pang of guilt.

‘No argument there,’ he replied. ‘But the wolves of the ton have the sweet scent of fresh meat, and they are circling, are they not?’

‘I will not submit to their bullying or yours. I choose my own path in life.’

‘No, you do not. I think the current situation is particularly tortuous for someone like you.’

‘Like me?’

‘Indeed, you are intelligent enough to know just how bad your circumstances are, how doomed to an unhappy outcome. A life of misery stretches before you, so you grabbed onto my brother like a starving infant to the teat.’

‘No. And if you think I will be forced into a union that is not of my choosing, you are wrong.’

‘Then it will end up in a different kind of union. I heard a rumour that your uncle traded you away over a game of cards.’

‘No. That is not true.’

‘I think it is. I have it on good authority that Caville Sharp intends to have you as a mistress. He is already boasting about it. And trust me, after your shine has worn off and he has ruined you, the best you can hope for is to be passed on to one of his friends. Not a pleasant future, is it?’

‘None of that is my fault.’ Grace looked down at her hands in mortification.

Rawden took hold of them. His hands were hot and huge, and his body so close she could smell him – clean linen, cologne, danger.

‘I’m not saying it is. But you are trapped, nonetheless. Marry me, and all this worry will be over. How old are you?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘What a shame it would be to squander all that youth and beauty on a life of spinsterhood or a rough brute of a man who cannot appreciate it.’

Rawden’s demeanour was coaxing and reasonable, which was far more frightening than his anger. He was older, wealthy, confident and powerful. She had no means to fight him.

Grace swallowed hard. ‘You are insufferably arrogant and hateful.’

‘And you are insufferably poor, so say yes.’

Grace took in the slimy streets and damp dwellings, grimy and dilapidated. ‘Must you be so brutal about my

circumstances?’ she said.

‘Must you be so naive, Grace. I could put your situation more gently, but you must see it as it is. Like it or not, you need rescuing from your plight.’

‘But not by you. Anyone but you.’

His jaw worked as if she had hurt him. ‘There is no one else to do it,’ he said.

Grace bit her lip. ‘Why offer marriage. There is no compulsion for you to marry. What use is a wife to a man who enjoys the life of a libertine and a seducer.’

‘I can think of several uses for a wife, which I will forego for my brother’s sake. I will not lay a hand on you. See here, I made a promise to the only person I have ever loved in this world, and I intend to honour it no matter what the cost to myself or others. And there is the added incentive of my father’s disapproval.’

‘I thought you said he was dead?’

‘He is, and I will enjoy picturing him in hell raging at me about polluting our bloodline with a nobody. It is what he would have said to my brother on hearing of his entanglement. I am certain he would have forbidden the match, and do not be offended by the cruelty of that, for I find you to be a worthy enough bride in all the essentials.’

Rawden stared into her eyes, willing her to say yes, and a feeling of hopelessness overcame her. ‘What happened to make you so horrible, Rawden?’

He frowned, his dark eyes bleak and, for a moment, sad. ‘It is how God made me, Grace, and I cannot be otherwise. Now, I must insist on this marriage even if I have to drag you screaming to church by your hair.’

‘No matter the cost to me?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am the last person in the world you should marry. I have no money, no dowry, no grand name.’

‘You have other virtues that I may come to appreciate. I enjoy the sight of you, and you will warm to me in time. We will learn to get along, so it need not be a misery.’ He took a deep, slow breath, like a dog breathing in her scent, and his face softened for a moment, making her weak at the knees. ‘When I look at you, I can see myself rather enjoying matrimony.’ Rawden brought her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to it, lingering far too long for comfort.

She pushed him away. ‘You said in name only.’

He rolled his eyes.

‘Do you swear it? In name only. I did not like it when you mauled me at the rout.’

Rawden looked her over insolently, his eyes brightened by her possible surrender to his will. ‘Only a fool or a eunuch would swear to that while looking in those beautiful hazel eyes. But if I am to do one honourable thing in this worthless life, it can be this. Wed me, and I swear I will not lay one hand on you that is not welcome.’

His hand gently touched her cheek, and she was frozen in his grasp. A wanton, traitorous part of her had enjoyed this man’s kiss. The devil in her wanted him to do it again.

‘You cannot force me into marriage, Rawden,’ she gasped. ‘I can say no, and I need never see you again.’

‘But where is the sport in that? And besides, I already have forced you. We have been alone in my carriage, so you are compromised.’

‘I am not. There has been no seduction of any kind.’

He smirked. ‘Oh, I see. You find me wanting, Grace. That can be remedied easily enough. Should I seduce you, then? I have no objection to performing the deed if you do not. And like it or not, you are as good as ruined.’

‘But you kidnapped me, you villain.’

He shrugged. ‘What difference does it make? Is it not often the fashion of you young ladies to lure a man into a

compromising position and arrange discovery so that you may force the poor fellow to wed, thus preserving your honour?’

‘Some may do that, but I do not, and I will not succumb to this...this....’

‘Marriage that will save you from poverty,’ he interrupted. ‘I admit that I am not the best prospect in terms of character, but I am all you have unless you wish to become Caville Sharp’s mistress. Now he is a nasty fellow.’

‘He cannot be nastier than you.’

Rawden ignored her. ‘Wed to me, you will rarely be troubled. We will live separate lives. Or you could settle for poverty, a soot-crusting blacksmith, or maybe a red-faced baker as a husband. Think about it tonight. I will call tomorrow and offer my hand formally. I suppose it is the done thing, but now I have disgraced you with my very presence, I could just dispense with that. It is done. Squirm all you like on the hook, but I will make you my wife, Grace, and thus do my duty by my brother.’

‘Duty. Is that all I am to you?’

He frowned, and there was a flash of sadness in his eyes, a fleeting vulnerability. ‘What else could you possibly be? I mean no offence, Grace, truly, but we are both in a bind and have the solution before us. I swear, if you marry me, you will be safe.’

‘And you will uphold your vow not to touch me.’

‘Not unless you ask me to. I owe William that, at least. So is your answer yes?’

‘Do I have a choice?’

He gave her a broad smile, waiting for her to confirm his triumph. What else was she to do?

‘Yes. I will marry you, Earl Voss.’

‘As my betrothed, you may call me Rawden.’ He turned away and banged the carriage roof, and it lurched onwards.

‘Tell me. Why did your father not provide for you, Grace?’

He may as well know the worst of it. 'He lost his fortune when he married my mother. His father did not approve of the match, nor did my uncle, so he was cut from the family. We lived in genteel poverty until his death.'

'Why did your uncle not approve of your father's bride?'

'Her lowly birth. She was the daughter of a country clergyman. So if you marry me, you will get only half a lady.' Grace smiled bitterly, hoping that would hurt him, but Rawden just shrugged.

'I can't think of anything worse than being married to a lady,' he scoffed.

After that, Rawden said nothing more, and Grace hoped she might have changed his mind. But when they got to Uncle Charles' house, he took her hand as she alighted from the carriage and looked at her solemnly.

'Damned if I will wait until tomorrow. It is time to face your Uncle Charles and tell him of our impending nuptials.'

Chapter Twenty

Charles Howden paced the drawing room, breathless and red-faced, for Rawden had not put his proposal to Grace in gentlemanly terms.

‘How dare you come in here and make such a demand on me? I have guardianship of my niece, and you shall not have her.’

‘I only require your consent, Howden, but I will wed without it. I have been alone in a carriage for hours with your niece, where all manner of wickedness occurred between us.’

‘It did not,’ cried Grace.

Rawden turned to her and winked. He was rather enjoying torturing Charles Howden. From what he had heard of the man, the oaf thoroughly deserved it. And Rawden was unexpectedly happy about the prospect of having Grace Howden as his wife, and he was eager to get on with it.

‘I will have the magistrate onto you for such criminality,’ cried Howden. ‘Kidnapping a young lady and seducing her in such a manner. I heard all about it from my housekeeper, who saw it all when she went in search of her. I must cover up this outrage, or my niece will be ruined.’ Howden turned on Grace. ‘How could you throw away your honour so recklessly, you strumpet? Shame on you,’ he spat.

‘Throw it away, as opposed to selling it, you mean?’ said Rawden, going in for the kill. ‘Did you not plan to barter her honour to the highest bidder? I know all about Caville Sharp, and I would not put a dog under his care, let alone a helpless young woman.’

‘That is a repugnant and preposterous accusation. You have it all wrong,’ said Howden, all bluster and excuses.

Rawden turned to Grace. ‘This wretch really is a bad liar. No wonder he has massive gambling debts and is currently veering towards bankruptcy.’

Grace’s mouth fell open, and she turned to her uncle. ‘Can this be true?’

‘No, of course not. I have suffered a momentary embarrassment in my finances. That is all. This fiend exaggerates.’

‘Do me the courtesy of not lying to her, Howden. You were going to sell her to Caville Sharp in return for him bailing you out of debt, you worm. I know it all.’ Rawden grabbed Charles Howden by the lapels of his fine, velvet jacket and shook him hard. ‘Now tell her before I throttle you.’

Howden hung his head and glanced at his niece. ‘Grace, I am sorry. But I was in dire straits, and I had no choice. Caville is a fine young man, and you would be well taken care of.’

‘No, he is not, and no, she would not. Now give us your consent and put a sheen of respectability on this business,’ growled Rawden.

‘I cannot. She is promised,’ said Howden, his voice rising to a screech. ‘And I will have the law on you, Voss, see if I don’t.’

How he longed to plant a fist firmly into Charles Howden’s bloated, pathetic face. ‘Ah, so Sharp already paid, did he?’

Howden set his jaw and looked at Grace, who sobbed and turned her back on him.

‘A terrible choice lies before you,’ said Rawden. ‘You can consent to my marrying your niece, not that I need or care about it particularly, but it will make the whole thing more respectable, for her sake. Alternatively, if you are unhappy with my behaviour, then as Miss Howden’s only male relative, you may challenge me, and we will settle this matter like gentlemen.’

‘Do you mean a duel?’ blubbered Howden. ‘I cannot...what I mean is....a duel! I will tell the whole of the ton about this seduction of yours. You will be disgraced, and so will she.’

‘If you release this information and bring the disapproval of the ton down on my head and hers, you will die at my hand, or you may choose the wise course.’

‘And that is?’

‘You will consent to Grace becoming my wife and look happy about it too, and there will be no stain on her honour.’

‘But she will be married to you - a blackguard who kidnapped her and stained her honour in the first place.’

‘Yes, quite the dilemma for you, isn’t it? Do you see another suitor beating down your door to offer for your niece? Grace will marry me, and you will gain an earl for your family instead of a scandal, a bullet, and whatever kind of burial you can afford in your straightened circumstances. I doubt many would miss you. So, which is it to be?’

Howden was clearly not a quick thinker. He swallowed hard. ‘Let me think on it.’

‘While you think on it, shall I polish my duelling pistols, Howden? We both know you have no choice.’

‘What...what about Grace?’

‘Oh, she has no choice in anything. You made sure of that, didn’t you, by renegeing on her dowry. But fear not. I will not ask for payment, and we shall be married immediately. I will obtain the necessary licences.’

‘And will you settle a sum on the occasion of the marriage,’ said Howden with a sickly smile.

‘Yes, but on Grace, not you. For you, I will do no more than to settle your debts. I think you have abused your power over Grace long enough.’

‘But I must have something for my trouble. I have had her bed and board for months, and she has bled me dry.’

‘That is a lie,’ said Grace angrily. ‘He has done the bare minimum for me, so do not dare give him anything.’

Rawden smiled inside. The lady had some fire in her, and already she was taking his side against her own family. It gave him satisfaction to know Grace had some trust in him, albeit not much.

‘You heard the lady. You will get nothing, Howden, so run along now and let me have some time alone with my betrothed.’

When Charles Howden had retreated, wailing, 'This is not to be suffered,' Rawden turned to Grace with a smile. 'What a fat old windbag,' he said into the silence between them.

'You threatened him. You are unspeakable.'

'So is he. It is clear that I am the lesser of two evils, Grace.'

'Would you have done that – duel with him? He would not have stood a chance.'

'Exactly, which is why I threatened him with death at dawn. I enjoyed that immensely. I knew he would refuse.' Rawden shrugged. 'Such an opponent would be beneath me.'

'Must you bully everyone around you?' she sighed.

'Yes, if it makes them come to their senses. This will be a short engagement. I am sure we can be married by week's end, and with that in mind, I must leave and attend to the formalities.'

'Wait, Rawden.' She rushed towards him.

'Are you loath to part with me, my dear?' he said mockingly.

'No.' She reddened. 'But what about Lord Sharp? If my uncle favours him, he might come here?' Her hand went to her breast. She was clearly more frightened of Sharp than she let on.

Rawden took hold of her by the forearms. 'You make a sound point. I will send a man to watch the house. If that wretch comes within an inch of you, I will deal with him, and once we are wed, no one will touch you except me, of course, if you want me to.'

She stared up at him, and he was struck by how pretty and soulful her eyes were – a warm brown shot through with a sunburst of gold, and dark about the edges. He would get lost in them if he did not guard himself. 'A week from now, it will all be done and over with,' he said.

'What if I get another offer between then and now?' she said defiantly.

Rawden laughed at her insolence. ‘You have no dowry, and no matter how great a woman’s charms, I doubt yours can overcome that deficiency.’

‘Are you not also deficient in character after what you did today?’

Guilt stabbed at his heart. ‘That has ever been the way I am described. But I trust I am not so deficient as to renege on a promise made to a dying man. And are you not a little bit glad that your Uncle Charles had got his comeuppance and that you have thwarted Caville Sharp.’

‘Yes.’ She gave a wan smile and then looked down. ‘I will admit I am, but that is very wrong of me.’

‘No, it is very human of you. Given how awful your uncle is, I can see why you leapt at the chance to wed my brother. I do not blame you for taking an opportunity when it was offered. It seems you have been badly treated by men.’

‘William was the exception. He was a good man.’

‘I could be good to you if you would let me,’ said Rawden, feeling like the worst, weakest fool, for she clearly despised him.

‘How can I, when you have forced your company on me from the first moment I met you, Earl Voss?’ said Grace steadily.

‘My name is Rawden. Get used to using it,’ he said, his tone harsh, though he had not meant it to be. He sighed and tried to be kind. There was no point in terrifying his future bride. ‘I can be gentler, softer, and we can become closer in time and rub along nicely together.’

‘But you are a stranger to me. I know nothing of you, Rawden, and I doubt I ever will.’

His name falling off her tongue gave him a spurt of pleasure. ‘I can teach you anything you need to know, Grace,’ he said with the sudden urge to kiss the resistance out of her full, wide mouth. He took hold of a tendril of wavy hair that had come loose and let it slide like fiery silk through his fingers, holding her eyes as he did so.

Her lips parted, and her eyes widened. *'To hell with it,'* he thought, pulling her to his chest and brushing his lips against hers. She stiffened at first, but she did not pull away as he gently deepened his kiss. Encouraged and aroused, Rawden flicked his tongue inside her mouth, and she clung to him and gave a little moan of surprise. His hands went around her back and into her hair, and his mouth slid down her neck. She smelled exquisite, the nape of her neck warm and soft, her waist delicate between his hands.

Grace pushed gently at him, but her heart was not in it. She broke away. *'We should not. You must not.'* Her eyes were bright, her cheeks pink, and she looked down as if ashamed.

Rawden took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gently raised her face to his. *'Who is to say we cannot. It is you and I here, no one else, and there is no shame in it, only pleasure.'* A smile came to him. *'I am beginning to think that discharging my vow is not so bad after all.'*

Grace did not resist as he kissed her again, his hunger growing, a heaviness filling his groin, shredding his restraint. She softened in his arms, and her surrender turned his kiss hungry, his hand roaming downwards from her throat to cup one perfect, pert, silk-covered breast. Spirited, aloof Grace Howden was his for the taking. He could make her want him. All he needed was time and patience.

He plundered her willing mouth, but as they clung to each other, his brother's words came back to him like icy water thrown all over him. *'She needs protection. Swear on your honour, Rawden.'*

Rawden leapt back like a scalded cat. Grace put her hand to her mouth. *'Oh,'* she cried, wide-eyed, horrified, and so very lovely.

He forced down the yearning in his breast. *'Forgive me. We had an agreement, and I have broken it. Rest assured, it will not happen again.'* He took hold of her arm in a vague effort to comfort Grace, for her face was so stricken.

'Get your hands off me, Rawden,' she snapped.

He was more angry with himself than her, but he could not contain it. 'Enough of that tone. Do not mistake me for my brother who would jump at your every command, Grace. You will find I am a harder man entirely.'

'No one could ever mistake you for your brother.'

It hurt like a punch to the gut. 'I will leave you now and send word of when you should prepare for our wedding. Do you have suitable clothes?' he barked.

'What do you think?' she said.

'Order whatever you like from the dressmaker and have the account sent to me. My card,' he said, presenting it as if they were transacting business and had not had their bodies passionately entwined just moments ago.

Grace took the card and held it in shaking hands. She would not look at him.

'I will leave you now as you have much to think about. Wait for me to send word of when I will collect you for church.' Rawden hurried to the door, paused and looked back. She was still staring down at his card, frozen with mortification.

'All will be well, Grace. Trust me.'

She looked up at him with teary eyes, and he rushed away. Rawden burst into the street and hurried along the pavement. Part of him never wanted to go back to her. How much easier it had been when he thought of pretty little Grace Howden as a duty to be suffered, a scheming jade who had misled William, a nobody beneath his notice. Well, he had definitely noticed her now.

And he had made a cross for his back by marrying a woman he desired but could not touch without tarnishing his brother's memory, a woman who did not want him and would only belong to him out of desperation. She would have married William with no complaint and made him happy. Now, Rawden was gripped with a desire to win her grudging affection and approval.

But she did not care for him, and why should she care for the feelings of a monster? As he hurried away from Grosvenor

Square and Peel House, Rawden acknowledged that he was jealous of a dead man and hated himself for it.

Chapter Twenty-One

Grace wriggled out of her wedding dress, crafted from the softest cream muslin and overlaid with a net of gold. It was simple, having been made in great haste, but it was the finest thing she had ever worn. And it should have been fine, for she had spent as much as possible on it just to spite Rawden. She might have been backed into a corner with this marriage, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Harriet had been equally unhappy with the match, almost more so than Grace, and she was still not reconciled to it. 'You look beautiful in that dress. So very pure and pretty. It brings out the fire in your hair and suits your complexion very well. What a pity I shall not be there to see you wear it at your wedding.'

'Rawden wants a quiet ceremony and no guests. I am sorry.'

'One might think he was ashamed of you,' said Harriet with a child's pout playing about her lips.

Her friend's comment stung, but Grace tried not to take it to heart. Perhaps she was right, and Rawden was ashamed to have such a lowly bride. Grace had not seen him since he had made his cold proposal, when she had dropped her guard and let him kiss her. Oh, it was too mortifying. She would not think of that now.

Harriet was not finished with her condemnation. 'Oh, forgive me, but I have such misgivings about this whole affair, and I cannot contain them. Are you sure about this marriage, Grace? I cannot believe you are to marry Rawden Voss. Remember when you said if you married his brother, you would have to face him at family dinners and how awful that would be. Now you have to share his bed!' she said, almost quivering with revulsion.

'I know. But it must be done. I have no other path,' wailed Grace, but inside, she wrestled with shameful feelings. She had wanted Rawden's hands on her and the warmth of his tongue sliding inside her mouth. It may have been shocking and a little violating, yet it was oddly stirring. Being held in

Rawden's strong arms was like being embraced by an oak tree - so solid, warm, and, unexpectedly, safe. But his kiss had been anything but safe, and his character was far from ideal.

Grace knew she had long teetered on the brink of disaster. Married or not, there was no comfortable certainty in her life. And now she had chosen Rawden as the lesser of two evils. But what did he think of her? When Rawden had broken off their embrace, it had been the shame of her life. He must think the worst of her – that she was a jade, a tease and a shameless hussy.

'Grace,' cried Harriet. 'Do pay attention. You were far away then.'

'I am sorry. I have not slept well of late, and I am tired. And as to marrying Rawden, I don't think I have much choice. With no dowry, no connections, and the season at an end, so are my prospects. And my Uncle Charles is determined to be rid of me. I suppose I will just have to make the best of it.'

'But Rawden Voss is a blackguard, a rake, a very bad man. He is barely received by the ton.'

'That makes two of us.'

Harriet shook her head. 'That is not true. And how can you entertain such a notion? The man is a monster!'

Grace bridled at her friend's condemnation. 'Please do not say that. Whatever he is, Rawden will be my husband by week's end, and I must ask you not to speak of him so, Harriet.'

'But you know his reputation. What will you do when he goes philandering all over London while you are his wife?'

'I will have to bear it. And if he is trying to fulfil William's dying wish, then he is not totally without honour, surely?'

Harriet twirled her pale little fingers through some ribbons and grimaced. 'I suppose that is honourable, in a bleak kind of way, and forgive my pessimism. It is just that your secret engagement to William Voss was so romantic, like something out of a novel. But this Rawden Voss terrifies me a little. He is so big and rough-looking. I should not want to be under his

power.’ She shrugged. ‘But if you cannot see the truth of it, then what can I do?’

Grace bit her lip. ‘We cannot all marry for love, like you, dear Harriet,’ she said.

Harriet met her eye. There was such sadness in her expression that it gave Grace pause. Could her friend’s concern be justified? Was she really heading into danger and misery? She was about to ask Harriet when the dressmaker bustled in with a froth of lacy undergarments.

‘These will be essential additions to your trousseau and make your wedding night one to remember. They are guaranteed to inflame your husband’s passion,’ said the woman with a grin, holding up a diaphanous concoction of cream silk, ruched under the bosom and extremely low-cut.

‘*What passions?*’ Grace wanted to say, but she bit her tongue. ‘I am not sure I want to inflame anything, Mrs Frederick.’

‘Feel how smooth and sleek the silk is,’ said the dressmaker, looking nonplussed. ‘Feel how the hand slides over it.’

It was lovely, but Grace shuddered to think what Rawden was like when aroused. His kiss had left her breathless and weak-kneed. She could not cope with more. ‘Have you nothing more practical?’ she asked.

‘Practical? Nonsense!’ shrieked the woman. ‘Such a beauty you are, and with an exquisite figure. You should not hide it. The petticoat is perfect for you.’

‘But there is not much of it, and you can see right through it.’

‘That is rather the point, is it not? But I will go and find some thicker ones if you like,’ sniffed the dressmaker, hurrying off with a scowl at them both.

‘I think you have offended Mrs. Frederick, Grace,’ said Harriet, chewing on a nail. ‘Yet she is right, you know. You must have some excitement on your wedding night. Mama told me that with the right petticoats, a man can be eating out of your hand in no time.’ She blushed and looked down at her

feet. 'It is what she said anyway, and as you have no mama, I am passing her advice on.'

'You think I should wear all that nonsense?'

'You may do with it what you will. And I have to be frank, Grace. I do not think any amount of petticoats will tame Rawden Voss.'

Grace swallowed hard. Harriet was right. He was untameable, yet she was gripped with a desire to know more about him. There was no one to ask, though.

Harriet sighed. 'Oh, poor you, with no mother to advise and comfort you. Mama did ask me to pass on some advice. In fact, she was most tiresome and insisted on it, however mortifying for me. She said that whatever your husband does abed, just pretend to enjoy it.'

'And if I do not?'

'Endure silently, with a smile on your face.'

'She really said that?'

'Oh yes, and might I ask an impertinent question?' said Harriet. 'All this haste to marry is rather perplexing. Forgive me, but you are not with child, are you?'

'Oh no, quite the opposite.' Grace hesitated. 'In fact, I will tell you a secret. This is a marriage in name only. Rawden is doing this to fulfil his vow to his brother and has sworn never to touch me. We have an arrangement. So you see, all that lace and silk is a waste.'

'I see,' said Harriet with a frown.

'Yes. So as to my undergarments, I would rather have something practical and comfortable.'

'Beware, for it is a man's nature to say one thing and do the opposite. But if he is in earnest, then I approve of your arrangement with Rawden Voss,' said Harriet, with more insight than she usually displayed but with a bitter edge to her words. 'It is more civilised than I would have expected of him. But surely, you will one day want children, or he will? The

production of an heir is every wife's duty, no matter how onerous to one's person.'

'Rawden said he would give me a child if I ask him, but he will not press me on the matter. And I suppose I might want a child one day, but I must cross that bridge when I come to it.'

'And that day will come soon if you wear this,' said Mrs. Frederick, with an encouraging leer, as she swept back in and presented a scarlet petticoat embellished with little black bows.'

Harriet looked down her nose at it and shook her head. 'Goodness, Mrs. Frederick, you cannot be in earnest. Why, even Lady Hamilton would have blanched at wearing that,' she said.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Black clouds suffocated the blue sky on Rawden's wedding day, threatening a storm. It seemed like a bad omen, as if God was rebuking him for doing the right thing instead of praising him.

In a flurry of impatience to get it over with, Rawden rushed from his carriage into Charles Howden's Grosvenor Square house and barked at the hapless Dawson to fetch his bride and her uncle. The man gave a nervous smile and rushed to do his bidding, and so he should, since he had been paid a tidy sum to spy on Grace's every move, thus becoming an ally in Rawden's campaign to get his own way. It was money well spent. He had been able to ambush Grace in the park and force her to see sense because of Dawson giving away her location for the day.

Rawden smoothed back his hair nervously and straightened the tunic on his Life Guards uniform. He was soon to be discharged from that duty, but he wanted to wear it one last time in honour of William. With great effort, he banished his brother from his thoughts and hardened his heart. This was no time for sentiment and nostalgia.

After an age, his bride appeared. *'Like an angel from heaven,'* he thought as he watched her descend the stairs in a stunning pale gown, shimmering as she moved and set off by an ochre coat embroidered with gold thread. The whole ensemble made her look as though she was glowing. Rawden could see nothing else but the pretty young woman gliding gracefully towards him. The sight of Grace warmed him like a shaft of sunlight bursting from behind a cloud, bringing with it a sudden pang of regret and a twist of pity in his gut.

'Good day, Grace,' he said, like a fool, his tongue suddenly seeming too big for his mouth. 'You look very well. I am glad to see that my money was well spent.' For a moment, she met his gaze, and Rawden seemed to fall into the warm depths of her hazel eyes.

But then she cast her eyes down and murmured something in reply. A blush spread across her face and down to her heaving bosom. Out of decency, Rawden tore his eyes from that succulent flesh and back up to a pretty coronet set in her coppery hair. The blasted thing was superfluous, for she had the most beautiful hair, which needed no adornment. It was teased into ringlets about her face, with a single fat one dangling over her breasts. He quelled the urge to pull it through his fingers and relish its softness.

Every bit of her beauty burst into Rawden's consciousness at once, and its effect was shocking, sending a bolt of desire straight to his loins and a stab of pride tightening his chest. Grace was lovely. She was his, and he wanted her in his bed. Oh, to be married already, for her to be willing. What a delight it would be to pull her underneath him and take her, over and over, all night long.

'Rawden. Did you hear me,' she said, and he snapped back to the moment. 'I said you look very well in your regimentals.'

For an instant, Rawden thought there was admiration in her eyes and a kind of plea, but then her cursed Uncle Charles bustled in between them.

'Let us get on with this abomination, if we must, for it threatens to rain, and I'll not have my velvets ruined in a tempest,' he cried. Rawden could have happily slapped the man.

Charles Howden rushed to the waiting carriage, leaving his niece behind, so Rawden held out his arm. She took it, and he placed his hand on top of hers and smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging way.

'Let's be off to church before I knock your uncle flat.' he said.

It was a painfully strained journey to the church, which seemed to be on the outskirts of London. There was no conversation in the carriage, and the icy silence frayed Grace's nerves. Uncle Charles was in a great huff over the whole affair

and would not look Rawden in the eye. Her husband-to-be was equally terse and had relinquished her arm as soon as they were seated. Rawden did not look at her. Instead, he seemed intent on staring angrily out of the window, his hands clenched in his lap.

Grace dearly wished to be alone in the carriage to seek reassurance from Rawden. But her uncle had been told to give her away to maintain propriety, so they were stuck with him.

What a sight Rawden had been when she had come down the stairs - simultaneously splendid and terrifying. He had looked heartbreakingly handsome in his stiff uniform of scarlet and gold and with his unruly black hair brushed back. But it stirred memories of William going off to war in the same colours, and guilt left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Their journey took them through the cobbled streets of London to the edge of a park, where a little grey-stone church sent its spire heavenwards. It was nestled out of sight, overshadowed by tall oaks, their leaves already yellowing to autumn's colours. A carriage stood outside it, but other than that, the place was deserted and a little desolate. Was their marriage a shameful undertaking that Rawden took no pride in?

As he took her hand to help her from the carriage, Grace caught a look of cold determination on his face. A summer full of hope was now over, and all she could look forward to was a wintery union with a man who was fulfilling a promise, clenching his jaw at the duty that must be done. Perhaps Harriet was right, and Rawden had brought her here alone to be married because he was ashamed of her and did not want the world to see. Or there could be a chance that this new path would bring some measure of happiness and security. Oh, how cruel a thing was hope!

A man was waiting at the church door in similar regimentals to Rawden. He rushed forward with a friendly smile. Rawden introduced him as Captain James Hardy, and he beamed at Grace.

‘My word, Rawden did not exaggerate your virtues, Miss Howden, and he definitely does not deserve you,’ he said, bowing to kiss her hand. He nodded a greeting at Uncle Charles, who grunted in return, and then a strange look passed between Captain Hardy and Rawden, and Grace wondered if there was hidden meaning in the man’s compliment.

But before she could think on it further, they were hustled inside the church, and she was walking stiffly towards an altar in a daze. Once the vicar began to speak, it was as if she was sleepwalking. Her mouth said the words, but a stranger stood in her place, shivering within the cold, whitewashed walls, as God looked down from the stained glass windows and judged her ill. She was entering a binding contract of matrimony, promising to love, honour and obey the fierce stranger next to her until the day she died. Yet she was numb inside and took no joy in her vows.

Grace could barely look at Rawden as the vicar declared them bound together as man and wife. Within minutes, her capitulation was complete, and she had gone from an unwanted, poor relation to a countess and one who was entirely under Rawden’s power.

‘You may kiss the bride,’ said the vicar.

Rawden’s jaw was rigid with some inner turmoil, and the rapier scar seemed more vivid in his pale face. ‘All in good time,’ he said curtly, and Grace was left in no doubt that her fortunes had not elevated but might just have taken a turn for the worse.

‘We must be going,’ said Rawden, and with a nod to the vicar and Hardy, he took her hand and led her from the church. They emerged to the hiss of rain and a clap of thunder, and Rawden rushed Grace into the carriage, slamming the door behind them.

‘What about me,’ wailed Uncle Charles, following in their wake, and in his rush to catch up, he slipped and fell into the mud.

‘You may return with Hardy,’ called Rawden out of the window. He sank back against the seat, brushing his wet hair

back from his face. ‘Good riddance,’ he muttered before turning bleak eyes to her.

‘Where are we going in such haste?’ cried Grace.

‘I have a house in London where we will stay.’

‘But I thought I would return to my uncle’s house today,’ cried Grace.

‘Why on earth would you think that? You are my wife now. You have no place but by my side.’

‘But nothing was arranged. I was not told.’

Rawden’s face was stony as he said, ‘Well, I am telling you now. I have arranged to have your things sent over to my residence.’

‘That is rather high-handed of you.’

He shrugged, ignoring her accusation. ‘Our stay in my London house will be of short duration as we both adjust to our new situation.’

‘And after that?’ said Grace.

‘We shall see,’ was his reply. Rawden stared at her in silence, making her squirm inside, and then he reached out and brushed a strand of wet hair off her face. ‘Now you are mine, I need to take care of you,’ he said, with all kinds of dark meaning flashing in his brown eyes.

Grace had to look away at the rain lashing against the carriage windows as it rattled onward to her uncertain future. She had a husband now, and her free will was already being eroded. She had never felt so alone in the world, and her hands clenched to fists at the thought of what her wedding night may bring. She prayed that Rawden was a man of his word.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They arrived at Rawden's house in fading light. Ivy choked its red brick walls, but a sign was just visible, reading Causton House. It lurked in a somewhat disreputable area of the city, which Grace was unfamiliar with. Many carriages and carts choked the roads, which were greasy with rain, and the neighbouring houses were dreary. Grace could hear the rush of the Thames nearby.

'Come,' said Rawden, offering his hand to help her alight the carriage. He did not relinquish his grip as he hurried Grace to the front door. He banged on it, fit to break it down. After an age, it was swung open by an old man who looked her up and down, saying nothing as he beckoned them inside. It was colder inside the hallway than without, and there seemed to be no other staff. A candelabra cast a dingy, flickering light onto a small side table.

'You took your time. I thought I told you to await our arrival,' snarled Rawden.

The man seemed unperturbed. 'Greetings, Earl Voss,' said the man. He had thinning hair scraped over a bald pate, food-stained clothing, and was rail thin, yet there was the shadow of a handsome man written in his fine-boned face and piercing blue eyes.

'Don't call me that, Reeves, for I know you mean only insolence by it,' said Rawden. 'Did you make the place ready?'

'Aye, as best I could. But she'll not suit for a bride, this draughty old place,' he grumbled, eyeing Grace with a pinched expression which held little welcome.

'Let me make the introductions,' said Rawden, pulling Grace forward. 'This is my man Reeves. He attends to the house and my every need when I am in town. Reeves, this is Grace, Countess of Voss, and your new mistress.'

'Pleased to make acquaintance,' said Reeves, making an approximation of a bow, but he was so old and stiff he barely managed it.

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance, Countess,’ said Rawden, glaring at the man who just glared back. ‘As you can see, Grace, my man is a savage like his master.’

‘Oh, there is no need to call me Countess,’ said Grace to Reeves. ‘I am sure it could become tiresome for both of us in time.’

‘As you like, Lady,’ said the man, smirking at Rawden most brazenly.

Rawden rolled his eyes. ‘Is the bedroom aired and a meal readied?’

‘Aye, as you commanded.’

‘Bring it then, and make haste.’

Rawden led Grace up a dark stairway to a bedroom that was even chillier than below and equally gloomy. The room was rather hellish, with dark wallpaper and heavy black velvet drapes around the four-poster bed, set with a scarlet coverlet. Lumpen oak furniture was set all about, and the whole scene was presided over by a murky painting of a dark-haired water nymph hung above the fireplace. Rawden’s bulk made the walls close in even more as he towered over her like a bad-tempered cliff face.

‘This will have to suffice for now. It has few comforts, as we are not used to female company.’ Grace looked him in the eye and could have sworn he reddened at what was clearly a lie. Rawden threw more coal on the fire. ‘This chamber has a fine view of the river on a sunny day and a southern aspect. That is why I chose it for you.’

‘I see.’ Grace’s eye was drawn to a trunk sitting in one corner, and he noticed.

‘You see. Your clothes have been sent over, so there was no need to complain.’

Grace was determined to stick up for herself. ‘I suppose I should be thankful I do not have to go naked.’

As soon as the words were out, she bitterly regretted them. Her cheeks took flame, and when their eyes locked, there was

a heated intensity to Rawden's gaze.

He coughed and said, 'What do you think of the place, wife?'

'It is a fine house, Rawden.'

'Yet your face shows only dismay. Is that with me or this place?'

His question took Grace off guard, for it was so candid. What could she say? Honesty was best. 'I had not thought you would live somewhere so...so unloved,' she said.

'Yes, it is a dreary place, but no matter. You will not have to live in this squalor for long. As Earl, I have other residences. I have had little interest in improvements over the years, as the house is nothing but a bolt-hole when I am in London, and I spend little time here. That will not change now I am married. I intend to be absent much of the time attending to my affairs, so I have little interest in furnishings and such. You may do as you please and make it into the sort of pretty little pastel confection you are used to.'

Must he belittle her? Did he think her an empty-headed ninny? 'I am sure I can make it comfortable with a few practical changes,' she said stiffly.

'Yes, that will keep you busy. And do not mind, Reeves. He does not spend much time in the company of delicate ladies. You may engage a lady's maid if you so desire, but tonight, you must shift for yourself.'

Grace tried to appease Rawden, for he seemed remote and ill at ease. 'Thank you, Rawden. I am sure I will manage to get settled,' she said. Goodness, how formal they were. This was no way to start a marriage, even one of convenience.

Rawden went to the window, and without looking at her, he said, 'You looked very well today.'

'As did you,' she replied.

He turned to her, his black eyes burning into her soul. 'In all honesty, I think I made this marriage in a fog of grief. I did not expect much of it, yet I was proud to be standing at the altar

with you. I think you will make a most worthy wife and Grace, I hope....’

A sharp rap at the door had them both jumping.

‘Come in,’ bellowed Rawden.

Reeves entered bearing a tray laden with a steaming broth and a glass of wine.

‘Reeves will build up the fire and leave you in peace. I bid you goodnight,’ said Rawden, and then he was gone, leaving Grace curiously bereft. Could he not have stayed awhile to keep her company, and what was he about to say – kind words or cruel? She caught Reeves looking at her and thought she saw a hint of pity on his face.

‘Don’t mind him,’ said the man. ‘He has a tricky temper, the master, but he has been brought up hard, so you must forgive him the rough edges.’ Reeves turned to go.

‘What do you mean, brought up hard?’ said Grace.

He shrugged. ‘Kick a pup all its life, torture it, and it will grow up either grovelling, or vicious.’

‘I do not take your meaning, Reeves.’

‘All I’m saying is, vicious has served master better, or he would not still be breathing. Best you try to see the good in him if it is your wish to make a marriage and not a fortune.’

‘How dare you! That is impertinent.’

‘I speak as I find. Forgive me if I have offended you.’

‘Have you already judged me on a moment’s acquaintance and found me wanting in some way, Reeves?’ said Grace.

‘No, but I know full well that you made enquiries about William, asking around the ton about his situation, his fortune.’

The man’s disdain was wounding. ‘I did. I will own to it, but you misjudge my motives most terribly. I merely wished to know if he was of good character. I am no fortune hunter.’

Reeves shrugged. ‘If you like. I do not know you enough to judge you ill or otherwise, but this I know for certain. Rawden does not know how to be a husband. You will have to teach him if you are sincere and seek some measure of happiness in this union.’

Reeves turned to go, and Grace cried after him, ‘And what if I do not know how to be a wife?’

‘I am sure the master will instruct you.’ His face softened for a moment. ‘I wish you luck with that, for I would hate to see another soft heart crushed under the weight of contempt.’

With these puzzling words, Reeves left, and Grace was alone. There would be no relief for her confusion as her new husband seemed keen to escape her company. His house was far shabbier than she had expected – more a prison than a home.

Grace flung open her trunk and found a shawl to wrap about her shoulders. The view from her window was bleak – shreds of clouds sweeping across a wan sunset. The river oozed by, black, fathomless and icy. It seemed the man she had married was no different. Grace threw herself onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, longing for sleep to bring sweet oblivion.

Grace woke in the night, still in her wedding dress and coat. She must have drifted off, and now she was terribly cold as if ice had formed inside her. A crash echoed through the house. It came from down below, followed by a horrible keening sound, like the wail of a ghost. She sat up with a start and a little cry. A door banged downstairs, and rain spat so hard at the windows it was as if pebbles had been thrown against it.

Was someone hurt? Grace eased out of bed, heart thumping, and wrapped her shawl about her. She hesitated but then decided she had to know the origin of the strange sound, and standing still was no good as her feet were aching with cold.

Taking a candle, she made her way downstairs towards a flickering light coming from beneath a doorway. She pushed it open gingerly to find Rawden sunk in an armchair before the

fire, with one leg sprawled over the side, nursing a bottle. He still wore his boots and breeches, but he had removed his red jacket from the wedding and loosened his shirt. Looking utterly dishevelled and miserable, he cast her a bitter look.

‘You may enter.’ he growled. ‘You don’t need my leave anyway, now that you are my wife.’

‘Will I be safe if I do?’ said Grace.

‘A rogue, I may be, but an utter fiend, I am not,’ he said bluntly, giving her a cold look. ‘I would never force myself on any woman, no matter how delectable.’

‘I did not mean that,’ she said, and his lip curled into a sneer.

‘Can I interest you in some port?’ he said, holding out the bottle.

Grace shook her head.

‘I thought not. Far too virtuous, more’s the pity for me,’ he mumbled. He swigged from the bottle and then narrowed his eyes. ‘Have you not been to bed?’

‘I lay on the bed and must have fallen asleep. Rawden, what was that noise?’ said Grace, stepping closer. ‘I heard a voice.’

‘Stay back,’ he growled. ‘Broken glass.’

He pointed with the bottle to her feet where a glass vase lay smashed. Pieces glittered in the firelight.

‘Did you have an accident?’

‘Something like that,’ he said with a twisted smile. When Grace bent to pick up the pieces, he growled, ‘Leave it. This is my mess to clear up, not yours.’

‘But you might cut yourself.’

‘No more than I deserve.’ He gave a bleak laugh and rose in one smooth movement. Before she could say anything, Rawden picked her up and deposited her in the armchair before the fire. He still held the bottle. Grace could see it was almost empty and wondered how drunk he was.

Rawden stared down at her. ‘Do you know what it says in the Bible? If a man takes his brother’s wife, it is an unclean thing.’

‘I was not William’s wife, Rawden.’

‘No, and I don’t get to take you, do I? So, I suppose God cannot judge us ill. Tell me, truly, are you a virgin, or did my brother take liberties?’

‘No, of course, he did not.’

‘Then he was a fool.’

Treacherous tears pricked the back of her eyes at the bitterness held in Rawden’s words. He took another swig of the bottle and pierced her with his gaze. How dark he was. He had a shadow of stubble on his chin and seemed more animal than man, his face licked by firelight, eyes glaring, the scar, a shiny blemish on his fiercely beautiful countenance.

He leant forward. ‘Do you want to stay innocent, or have you some smidgeon of curiosity?’

‘I know what men’s appetites are, and I have no wish to satisfy them,’ she said, shrinking back in the armchair.

Rawden’s mouth twisted into a sneer. ‘You know, do you? Ah, you must have been talking to your little friend, Harriet. Is she not happy with her paragon of a husband? Routledge is rich and has the breeding of a thoroughbred, so, surely, suffering him clumsily bedding her is a small sacrifice on her part.’

‘You know nothing of a woman’s feelings and do not speak of Harriet in that sordid way.’

He smiled and shook his head. ‘You are angry that she was not at our wedding, aren’t you, even though you did not go to hers?’

‘I was sorry she was not there. It would have been good to have one friend at church today.’

‘She resents you, Grace.’

Rawden's words hit like punches and were all the more painful for her having suspected as much. 'That is ridiculous,' she retorted. 'Why should Harriet resent me?'

'Because you are more beautiful than her, cleverer, and now you have caught a better husband.'

'I would soundly dispute that at this moment.'

He laughed. 'Oh, this little kitten has claws, I see. Tell me, then. Do you favour Gilbert Routledge over me?'

'He is a gentleman, at least, and people often remark that he is handsome and charming.'

'He looks like a spaniel with all that ridiculous hair flopping everywhere.' Rawden sneered. 'I cannot abide a dandy.'

'Well, there is no chance of you ever being one. You look more like a thug or a highwayman,' said Grace.

He laughed and swigged from the bottle again. His shirt hung open, exposing an expanse of black hair and a solid, muscular chest. Rawden might be an animal, but he was a sleek, beautiful one. He brought to mind a panther she had once seen in a zoo, for there was a perilous grace about him which was mesmerising and ruinous to anyone who fell for it.

'A highwayman, I like that,' he said. Rawden's black eyes met hers and held her prisoner. 'What if I was to come and steal away your virtue in the dead of night, Grace?'

Her belly coiled with tension when he hissed her name. 'You made a promise, Rawden, and even you are not so dishonourable as to break it.'

'You think you know me well enough to be sure? Ah, Grace, if you only knew what despicable thoughts are running through my mind at this very moment.'

'Do not tell me, for I have no wish to see into your soul.'

'I can see into yours.' Rawden leant over, his arms braced on the armchair and put his face in hers. Grace could see down his shirt to his taut belly. She could smell him, and he smelled good. His lips hovered an inch from her own.

‘You are thinking what a despicable husband I am, that you hate this house, and you hate me even more,’ he said quietly. ‘You have an honest face that cannot hold a lie well.’

‘I never said that I hate this house.’

‘I hate it, so why should you not? I hate my estates and my birthright even more.’

Grace swallowed down anger. ‘How can you have all these gifts – wealth, land and title - and yet shun them?’

‘Because they were never meant to be mine. And are you a gift, Grace? Should I shun you or make good on my wedding vows?’

‘No, Rawden.’

Suddenly, he pulled her up by her elbow, his face in hers, mouth close, eyes glazed with lust. Grace wriggled but could not get free. ‘I thought you might have a scrap of honour in your soul, but you are just like the others, Rawden.’

He stepped closer. ‘No, I am worse.’ He shook her gently. ‘Have you any idea what it has cost me in shame and guilt to marry you? So tell me, should I do the right thing and let you run off to your cage now, little bird, before my restraint shrinks as my loins swell. Or should we both succumb to my wicked character?’

Rawden was so close that Grace could almost taste the port on his lips. ‘You swore you would not lay a hand on me,’ she squeaked.

‘I did not swear on a bible, and maybe I have changed my mind.’

‘You cannot.’

‘I can, and do you know why? Because I think you want me to touch you. You are curious about where it would lead, and that is why you came downstairs. Be honest with yourself. When we kissed, you did not end it at once. Tell me you don’t want my hands on you, Grace. Look me in the eye and say it, and then you will be safe.’

Grace stared up into his fierce eyes and was overwhelmed by her feelings. Rawden Voss was terrifying and beautiful all at once. She tried to take her eyes off his snarl of a mouth, so sensual, his lips slightly parted, ready to join with her own. And the look of fierce admiration he gave her, as if, at that moment, he saw no one and nothing but her, brought a flush to Grace's cheeks and a pulse of reckless desire to her loins. No one had ever wanted her before, and she had a burning need to reach out and touch him. Her world spun as wickedness took hold of her heart and would not let go.

'I...I cannot say it,' she whispered, for all the air seemed to have left her lungs at the hungry look in his eyes.

As soon as she confessed to her attraction, Rawden's mouth was on her, roaming from a deep, searching kiss on the mouth and then to her neck and behind her ear. 'Your hair smells like summer,' he breathed, his lips leaving warm pools of desire behind on her flesh, which suddenly ached for him. 'What is between us cannot be denied,' he growled, sinking his fingers into her hair and holding her mouth against his. 'We both feel it. Let me make you mine, Grace.'

His mouth tasted sweet and heady from the port, and she wanted to gorge on it. The bottle hit the floor with a thud and, as if she had no free will, Grace let Rawden take her hand in his and lead her up the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was cold in Grace's bedchamber, but Rawden was on fire with anticipation. He took hold of her and nudged her onto the bed, taking care not to crush her small body with his own, and together, they writhed against the coverlet in an exquisite agony of kisses and caresses. It seemed that once Grace admitted she desired him, she held nothing back and stared up at him with those wide, beautiful eyes as he took what he wanted.

There was no protest, only gasped pleasure, as he pulled off her shawl and began to remove her clothes, like shedding the petals of a pretty, gilded flower. He took his time, slowly undoing Grace's buttons and pulling her dress off, all the while fighting his swollen manhood and willing himself to be patient. He distracted her with kisses and murmured words of reassurance. Only when she pressed herself against him, and her sighs and little moans grew louder and more urgent, did Rawden begin to shed her undergarments.

Grace was still in her corset, so he turned her and kissed the back of her neck as he undid the laces. Her hair had started coming down in dark red coils, and he swept them over her shoulder. How silken was her skin, her shoulder blades small and delicate, making his manhood stiffen to bursting with the need to possess her. Grace gasped as he slid her silken petticoats down her body to reveal a bottom of utter perfection - pert and rounded.

'Do not be afraid,' he breathed onto her back, and she turned and gave him a look of utter vulnerability. He shed her corset, leaving Grace naked and trembling before him, her skin pale against the red coverlet, licked by shadows from the dying fire.

'Rawden, I should not.'

'Yes, you should. We were married today. It is allowed. Everything is allowed.'

When Rawden rolled Grace onto her back, she covered her breasts with her hands, but he gently pulled them aside. Her

corset had been laced too tightly, leaving little pink indents in her skin. Rawden bent his head and kissed them, then on to her pert, luscious breasts, pulling them into his mouth where his tongue teased her nipples to hard nubs of desire. Her body had betrayed her. Grace was as aroused as he was.

Rawden kissed her all over - to the side of her plump little breasts, on her belly, and down to where a bright fuzz of hair gave off her delicious musky scent. He would have gone further, bringing her to a release with his tongue, but she sank her fingers into his hair to stop him and sat up.

‘Too much?’ he gasped.

Grace nodded, and Rawden smiled up at her, giving her a gentle nudge back onto the bed where she still tried to cover her nakedness.

He lay over her. ‘Warmer?’ he asked

‘Yes. That is better.’

‘Touch me,’ he said as he guided her delicate fingers down his chest. ‘Lower.’ Grace found his manhood and then jerked away.

‘Oh, forgive me,’ she cried, and he laughed.

‘Nothing to forgive,’ said Rawden, taking her hand and putting it back. ‘I like being touched like this. Would you like the same?’

‘I don’t know.’

He slid his hand into the downy hair between her legs, and Grace gasped as he found her soft folds and drew his fingers slowing up, circling and sliding until she gripped him hard and called his name. She was ready and open. All he had to do was take what belonged to him.

Grace dug her nails into Rawden’s back through his shirt, and he reached back and tore the damn thing off over his head with one hand. They now lay skin to skin. Rawden took hold of Grace around the back of her head and spread her legs with his knee. Then he slowly kissed his way down her body, nestling his head in her neck, circling her nipples with his

tongue, feeling them peak like little acorns. The skin on her belly was velvet-soft and warmed by lust. When he reached the dark red hair between her legs once more, he stopped and drank in her musky, womanly scent. It was intoxicating as he gently spread her open.

‘I really want to kiss you here,’ he said, looking up and darting his tongue against her.

‘Oh, Rawden,’ she squeaked. He did it again, deeper and more leisurely, and she gasped and bucked her hips towards his mouth.

Rawden gripped her long, smooth thighs, hot against his face, and set to work arousing his bride.

‘Rawden, no, please,’ she gasped, but her fingers in his hair and the way she arched her back towards his eager mouth meant she wanted him to continue. He did so gladly, worshipping the moist, hot centre of her, wanting so much to open her eyes to all the pleasure he could give.

It did not take long for Grace to stiffen and give a little gasping cry, gripping his head with her thighs, bottom rising off the bed. Such fire, she had inside her, begging for a release. How it must have built up as she was sheltered, corseted and forced to conform to the demands of modest, demure behaviour dictated by the ton.

He could have her now, take everything that should have been his brother’s, and be done with it. But as Grace stared up at him, so trusting, with a wide-eyed look full of hope, Rawden could not do it. An wave of guilt rolled right over him, and he hesitated, poised above her supine body, which was utterly helpless and vulnerable.

‘Damn it to hell,’ he said through gritted teeth as his good side wrestled with his bad. He would have rolled off her and taken himself in hand to gain a release but for one thing. Grace reached up, coiled a hand about his neck, and pulled his mouth to hers, giving him a tentative and sweet kiss. Then, he was all but lost, and instead of doing the right thing, he took hold of her hips and entered her in one reckless surge of passion.

Grace flinched under him and gave a little yelp as he ripped into her chastity, and Rawden cursed himself for a blackguard, but he was a slave to the overwhelming urge to be inside her, to possess her completely. All he could do was slow down and try to be kind, holding himself back as best he could.

‘Forgive me. I am not gentle enough, but it will all be over soon,’ he gasped into Grace’s neck as his loins flooded with heat, and he spilt his seed inside her. She gave a little moan as Rawden jerked and stiffened against her. His breathing was thick in the silence that followed, and Grace lay like a statue underneath him. He must be suffocating her.

‘Forgive me. I did not mean to do that.’ Rawden rolled aside and sat up. He could not face his bride. He was ashamed of his passion, his need for human contact. He grabbed his shirt and pulled it on, unsure what to do. Grace was his wife, so he could not just leave as he would with one of his casual paramours. She was his to protect, and he already seemed to be doing a woeful job of that.

A warm hand on his back made him start. ‘What is wrong, Rawden,’ said Grace in a small voice. ‘Did I not please you?’

Why was she thinking of his feelings when he had just taken advantage, broken a vow, and ripped away her innocence? Shame and frustrated desire clawed at Rawden and made him harsh.

‘You did please me, woman,’ he snapped, turning to her.

Grace was sitting up with the coverlet pulled up around her, her voice fearful and tremulous. ‘Then why are you turning away from me?’

He sighed and gave a bitter laugh. ‘It seems you are an innocent after all, and I misjudged you. You know nothing of how to please a man and be pleased in return, do you?’

‘No,’ she said, and her face was sad.

‘Well, that was your first lesson, and you did very well. Was it what you expected, hoped for? Did I please you?’ Suddenly, her answer really mattered.

‘I don’t know what I hoped for, and parts of it did please me. It felt very sinful, and yet I enjoyed it. It hurt a little, Rawden, but there was pleasure beyond it. Oh, but I should not speak of it,’ she said, lowering her eyes.

Rawden tilted her chin up. ‘Yes, you should.’

‘But there can’t have been any pleasure in that for you?’

He laughed and leant over and kissed her. ‘On the contrary. I liked it very much, especially the way you called out my name as you found your release.’

‘Don’t speak so, Rawden. It is...so...shameful.’

‘Oh, my words shock you now, after what I just did to your body? How can that be so?’

Grace put her face over her hands and groaned. ‘Oh, do stop.’

‘Very well.’ With a strange ache in his heart, Rawden leant in and kissed her forehead. ‘I should go and let you sleep.’

‘Oh,’ she said, looking stricken. ‘Must you? This house is so very strange to me. It creaks and groans.’

‘She has old bones. And I should go before my restraint leaves me and I do something I regret to your beautiful body, Grace.’ Rawden fisted his hands, for his lust was rising again. ‘I am trying to be a gentleman here.’ He shook his head. ‘I made a vow to you, and I just broke it. Do not tempt me to add to my shame, for I have not been a good man this day.’

She gave him the softest, loveliest smile, and Rawden was struck anew by her beauty, her inner glow. ‘I think you might have delivered me from a terrible fate by making me your wife. For that, I thank you, Rawden.’

Guilt was like a dagger plunging into his belly, over and over. ‘Do you not see that I might have delivered you into a worse one, Grace?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That I am in no way an ideal husband, and I cannot be trusted. I acted for selfish reasons just now. But no matter how

selfish, I do not regret it, nor what happened between us. I confess that I have wanted to put my hands on you from the first moment I saw you wriggling your bare toes in the grass. Tell me, do you regret what happened between us just now?

‘I don’t think I do, no.’

Rawden had to steel himself against climbing back into bed with her, but suddenly Grace put her hands up to her face and wailed, ‘Oh, but what would he think of us, William, I mean?’ she said with a frown.

Unshed tears burned his eyes, and Rawden’s heart clenched. ‘My brother had a generous heart, so he would have wanted you to be happy. He would not have resented us for this. William made me vow that I would see you safe, and so you are, now that you are my wife.’

‘Then why do I feel so guilty, Rawden?’

He gave a bitter smile. ‘You think that I don’t? My young brother should be here on his wedding night with a bride who wants him. I should have been the one to die at Waterloo, for not a soul would have missed me, save for him.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Why not,’ he sighed.

‘Because I would not want that for you. I am sorry that you do not have anyone who cares for you, Rawden.’

The softness in her eyes humiliated him. ‘Stop it,’ he snarled. ‘Reject me, despise me, but do not dare give me your pity, Grace.’

Her face twisted. ‘It is not I who rejects you. It is the other way around, for you are leaving my bed on our wedding night.’

‘Ah, so your vanity is pricked from my scruples about consummating our union.’ He sighed, feeling frustration bubble up in his gut like acid and pity wring his heart into knots. ‘Do you want to know why I took you to bed, Grace?’

‘I’m not sure that I do.’

He took hold of her in a tight grip. 'It was because I was lonely. I saw that you were, too. I was sitting in the dark with thoughts of William torturing me. And I wanted you so badly, but when it came to it, I almost held back from dishonouring you, for William's sake.'

'What about for my sake?'

'You are my wife and mine to dishonour if I want to. And as we are wed, there is no shame in it as far as society is concerned. And now I've had a taste, I will always want more. In truth, having you is all I have thought about for days since you said yes, Grace. I thought if I had you, then I would put his ghost to rest, but now it rises again and points an accusing finger at me. 'Lout, despoiler, liar,' it says. Which is why I should leave before I do more damage.'

'Don't.'

'I should leave, or I might assault you again,' he said abruptly.

'You could swear not to. Please, Rawden. I am too raw, too full of feeling to be alone.' Grace reached out and took his hand. 'Please stay, Rawden.'

He sighed. This is what women did - binding a man with soft, clinging ropes of pity. How could he resist temptation when it was not in his nature?

Grace was sure Rawden would leave her, but then he climbed back into bed and folded her into his arms. Grace pressed her head to his hot chest, and his arms enveloped her. It was awkward to lie there with an almost stranger, to feel the heat of his skin warm her own, so she tried to lie as still as possible.

'It has been a long day. Go to sleep now,' he said, and Grace was in such a fever of confusion that she could not think of a way to soothe him. Rawden had retreated from her as quickly and surprisingly as he had advanced. And within moments, his breathing slowed, and he found oblivion. Grace could not.

She could hardly believe she had ended up in Rawden's arms and let him take all manner of liberties. His body had

been shocking. His chest was hairy, like a dog's and as to the rest of him, well, that was almost too shameful to think about. Grace bit her lip. How could the married ladies of her acquaintance present such untroubled countenances to the world having regularly endured such a carnal mauling?

She frowned into the darkness at the strangeness of Rawden's manhood – so heavy, hard and unyielding, like marble, but so warm to the touch as if a fire burned inside it. His manhood was an invading army wreaking havoc on her flesh, and it was a bloody, messy business. A slippery ache lingered between her thighs. Yes, there was a violence to it, but beyond that, a sinful ecstasy, a surge of pleasure, as if she had left all she was behind and become a wanton version of herself – all raw feeling and abandon. She breathed in the scent of Rawden Voss in the darkness and realised that she wanted Rawden's hands on her, to have him inside her again.

How could she feel so much for a stranger? Their bodies had connected, but beyond the physical, there had been a shared pleasure and a coupling more intimate than the carnal. It was as if they had seen inside each other's souls. Grace smiled to herself in the darkness as a tiny spurt of happiness and wonder took hold. She frowned at it, for such feelings were strangers to her, and then snuggled closer to Rawden.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Grace stared down at her tray of burnt toast, kedgeree and hard muffins, which Reeves had brought for breakfast. Thank goodness it was all accompanied by a pot of hot chocolate, or else it would stick in her throat when she tried to swallow it. She drank the chocolate and gagged. It was sludgy and overly sweet, but her stomach growled in hunger, so she forced down a bite of toast.

Reeves had grudgingly prepared it when she had come sheepishly down the stairs in search of Rawden, only to be told that he had gone out. Enquiries as to his possible whereabouts gleaned nothing from this servant other than, ‘Don’t know. I am not his keeper. He comes and goes as he pleases. Rushed off on urgent business, he did, first thing.’

‘I see. And what am I to do all day?’ she had said.

Reeves had shrugged. ‘Not my business. I told the Earl that I am no lady’s maid. I cannot be dealing with women’s business, so why should it fall on me to tend you? Now I am for the market. Best stay in as the weather is filthy, but if you want to go visiting, venture outside and hail a carriage.’

The rattle of carts and carriages and the hoard of people in the street outside assaulted her nerves. ‘But I never did such a thing in my life,’ declared Grace.

‘Well, there’s nought I can do about it until I get back,’ the infuriating man had said, and with that, he had taken himself off.

Grace cast her rock-hard toast onto her plate with a clatter, which seemed to echo about the cavernous house. Reeves was the worst servant she had ever encountered. And how could Rawden leave her after what they had done last night? Was she already abandoned just a day into her marriage? She must have disappointed him somehow, or did he consider her a slattern for giving herself to him? Well, it served nothing to sit here all day while she withered inside with hurt feelings and boredom. Over the summer, she had become accustomed to

organizing her uncle's life and running his house. As Rawden's wife, her duty was to do the same.

Rawden's passion crept back into her mind as she sat alone in the brooding house. To be married was such a strange affair, and Grace could not untangle her feelings – confusion, wonder, anticipation at his return, and a strong taint of shame. Grace found herself longing for a sight of his snarling, handsome face, those flashing, sardonic eyes – so devilish, yet tender now and then. Yet she dreaded Rawden's return in equal measure, for that handsome face could curl into a lofty sneer of disapproval instantly, those eyes could flash with icy anger, and his words could cut like a knife. And she had just opened her legs and let him inside her to do as he wanted.

‘Oh, get a grip, you fool,’ she said aloud.

She must calm down and count her blessings. What were they exactly? Well, for one, she was not poor and walking the streets. She was married to a rich and handsome man with a roof over her head, albeit a dark, gloomy one – both man and house. Uncle Charles' many petty cruelties could no longer reach her.

Grace acknowledged that she was lucky in many ways. Oh, but her handsome, rich husband was a stranger who had married her on sufferance. She was a man's possession and slave, to be housed, clothed and fed according to his wishes. He had dominion over her body and could use it and place it wherever he liked for his pleasure. She had no agency, no money of her own and no means of earning any. Was she to become a shadow of a person, an appendage, a ghost?

She stood up with a burning face and an urgent need to take her mind off her disgraceful behaviour with Rawden, a man who obviously cared nothing for her. All was still quiet in the house, save for the hum of activity from the street outside, so Grace made her way through it, trying to get the measure of the man who had married, bedded and abandoned her all in one day.

Causton House yielded no joy on further exploration. It was a graceless, empty place, and beyond the parlour downstairs, it

boasted room after room left empty, curtains drawn, dust sheets flung like lurking phantoms over furniture, the air musty. Upstairs was no better. Most of the bedrooms were similarly bereft, save one, which she supposed must be Rawden's.

It had a cell-like quality and was more suited to a monk than an elegant man about town. The only comfort was a huge, canopied dark-oak bed and a tatty armchair, its upholstery shiny from prolonged use. His clothes were draped over it. Grace picked up his shirt and sniffed it. There it was, that delicious manly smell from last night when his body had covered hers – musky, strong, so alien.

Besides that, there was little to illuminate the man she had married, as he seemed to live a sparse existence. Shaving implements lay about a small table along with a wine glass with a dried red puddle in its base. So, the Devil shaved and drank wine, but other than that, she learned nothing from her snooping. This was no home, no comforting nest to retire to for sanctuary. It almost seemed as though, by denying himself basic comforts, Rawden was in some way doing penance.

She could stand the emptiness of the house no longer. Surely, Reeves must be back by now, so Grace went downstairs to the kitchen. But it was deserted, and Reeves' lair left a lot to be desired. The walls were black with age and cooking fumes, and the floor was dirty. A quick peer out of the window revealed a small garden, overgrown with nettles, its stone walls spongy with moss and the gravel path almost swallowed by weeds. A rank breeze blew in under the kitchen door, ripe with river rot and damp. But the kitchen was cosier than the echoing emptiness upstairs, with a small fire and a grey-muzzled dog lounging before it, which continued dozing with insulting indifference. Grace was loathe to return upstairs, as every creak of the floorboards or rattle of wind on the panes made her heart leap.

Grace eyed the dog in dismay. 'Well, you are not much in the way of company,' she said aloud to comfort herself. A noise came from upstairs, and the hair stood up on the back of her neck, but the dog did not move, so she calmed a little. She

went over, squatted beside it, holding her skirts out of the dirt, and patted its warm head. It shrank from her at first, but eventually, the dog pressed its head into her hand and rolled onto its belly. Its tail thump-thumped against the floor.

‘That’s better. It seems you are a little starved of company, too,’ she said. ‘Thank goodness you are here.’ She scratched its belly, and it flicked out a long tongue, leaving a trail of slime on the hem of her dress, but she did not mind.

A loud and urgent banging on the kitchen door made Grace shriek and freeze. The dog started barking, hackles up. The banging came again, shaking the door on its hinges. Whoever wanted entry they were in a fearful hurry. Grace leapt to her feet, heart thumping, and hesitated. The banging continued and was unbearable, so she rushed to the door, slid back the bolts and flung it open.

She was confronted with a blonde woman, garishly dressed, with her hands on her hips. She wore an expression of utter desolation on her face, which was painted like a doll’s. Her hard eyes roamed all over Grace, from head to toe.

‘So I suppose you are her – Rawden’s wife?’ she snapped.

‘Yes, and who are you?’ cried Grace.

‘You don’t know me, and God save me, I’ve no wish to know you. I just had to see for myself to believe it.’ Her words were spat out like little drops of poison.

‘Believe what?’

‘Rawden, getting married. Magnificent, wild, hedonistic Rawden Voss, tying himself to some milksop of a wife.’ She stepped inside before Grace could stop her.

Now, she was trapped. ‘What are you doing?’ she cried.

The woman ignored the question. ‘How could he wound me so, and all over a bland little nobody like you. And I can see you are just that – nought but a breeder to carry on the noble Voss lineage. But you’ll soon find that Rawden’s not so noble,’ she sneered.

Her insults put Grace on the back foot. She wanted the awful woman to stop talking in riddles. 'I say again, who are you, and what do you want?'

'My name is Romola Bianchi. I am a singer in the chorus at the opera at Covent Garden.'

'So why are you here speaking about my husband?'

'Your husband! Oh, possessive already, are we? You will soon learn that such emotion is pointless where Rawden is concerned. He cannot be held, especially not by one such as you,' she said, looking down her nose at Grace.

'You will tell me what your business is before I have you thrown off these premises,' said Grace.

'Come now, Countess Voss, you are opening your own door like a servant, so I doubt you can manage that by yourself. Is that guard dog Reeves not about the place?' she said, looking over Grace's shoulder and around the kitchen.

'Never you mind, where he is.'

'Oh, but I do mind, for that snivelling old wretch is not fond of me, and I had best avoid him. Now, I will say my piece and be gone. You should know that I am an old friend of Rawden's.'

'And?'

The awful woman snickered. 'I told you my profession, and surely, even a dunderhead like you can guess what else I have shared with your husband beyond friendship?' Her face fell. 'Or at least, I did, until last night, when he dared to throw me over.'

'I see,' said Grace. The broken glass, the wailing sound - it all made sense, save for one thing. The woman's revelation caused her heart to squeeze in her chest.

Romola Bianchi stepped closer, and Grace held her ground. The woman's fierce blue eyes roamed over her with utter contempt. 'Hear this. Rawden bores easily, and now he has a shiny new toy to play with, he does not want his broken ones. But his obsession will turn to indifference soon enough, and

then you will feel as I do today. My God, it is the day after your wedding, and where is he? Not by your side warming your bed, so I would venture his regard wanes already.'

'So are you saying you were lovers?' whispered Grace, for she could hardly bear the thought of Rawden with this creature.

'The penny drops,' replied Romola, smug now she could see that her words had cut. 'And we will be lovers again, soon enough, for I doubt you can hold him once he has had you a few times. I do long for him back in my bed. He will come crawling for forgiveness, as always, and I will let him in. Do you want to know why?'

'Not especially,' said Grace.

'Because Rawden is a cruel wretch but so gifted abed. I do declare I hold a searing hatred of him at present, yet even I must admit that he is the best of lovers – bold, tireless, passionate, and willing to test the borders of what is decent if the fancy takes him. Many's a time, he has shocked even me. What can an innocent like you offer a lion of a man like him beyond schoolgirl love that he will never return?'

Grace fisted her hands into her skirts. Never had she been the subject of so much vitriol in so short a time, but she had never enjoyed the shelter of her peers, or even of family. That deficiency and her uncle's slights had forced her to form a tough shell, so Grace summoned her courage and faced down Romola Bianchi.

'If you have come here to wound me, you have wasted your time. I have no intention of loving Rawden, and I pity you if you do. And as to his character, I already know how black it is, so your spiteful words are no great revelation. I married for rational reasons, not blind affection because I am no fool.'

Romola's face fell, and all the anger went out of her. 'You take him from me, and yet, you do not even love him?' she cried.

Grace grabbed the woman by the arm, flung her outside, planted her feet, and put both hands on the door jamb. 'It is no

business of yours what I feel,' said Grace, slamming the door. She hurriedly drew the bolt across and pressed her back against it.

A boot hit the door with enough force to fling her forward. 'I hope for your sake you do not love him, for Rawden will be back in my bed in no time, or he will crawl into another's. He cannot help himself. I am one of many, you know. Ignorant girl. It is the day after your wedding, and yet where is Rawden? Not with you. Quite the doting husband, is he not?' Another kick pounded the door, and Grace held her breath, ears straining. Silence, for an age, and then footsteps crunched down the gravel path, fading away until she could hear them no more.

Grace rushed from the door and sank beside the dog, holding it close to her breast. Tears welled and spilled onto its back. 'I hope the nettles got your ankles on the way out,' she shouted at the door in childish rage. Was there ever such a fool as her? It was all just a beautiful illusion - Rawden wanting her, his being faithful to her. A searing jealousy grabbed her in its jaws. How could she even want Rawden, much less be prepared to fight over him like a common strumpet? She had spent the morning anticipating his return with butterflies in her stomach, a mix of excitement and apprehension. Now, there was just humiliation.

Had she been taken for a fool, lured into his arms with false promises and lying words? No. She had given away her honour willingly enough. But the stark truth was that she could not depend on her husband. And from the beginning, he had told her exactly who he was. Rawden Voss had offered a marriage of convenience, a cold arrangement, which she had ended up with, and it was unbearable. Perhaps she deserved it for marrying William's brother – the ultimate betrayal of his memory. She was a faithless, feckless nincompoop.

All of Grace's silly, naive dreams of happiness in marriage melted away. All she had in this world was herself. It was all she'd ever had, and from now on, she would trust in that and no one else. If she was to make the best of her new life, she had to ensure that Rawden could not cast her off as he had

Romola and leave her to rot in this dank house, as unloved and dust-covered as the furniture. She had to ensure that her marriage stood fast.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rawden returned mid-afternoon to be told by Reeves that Grace was in her room and had remained there all day. ‘Seemed put out, she did, and would not eat a bite when I offered it,’ was all he would say before shuffling off, muttering, ‘changeable females’ and ‘be the death of me.’

‘We must both adapt now that I am a married man, you old grump,’ shouted Rawden after him.

‘Then get a cook, or she’ll fade away,’ replied the man.

Rawden’s heart sank. He had been in feverish anticipation all day at the thought of returning to Grace – a folly he had tried to banish but could not. So he took the stairs two at a time and rushed in. Grace was lying on the bed. She frowned at him and looked a little dazed as if she had been far away.

‘Are you well?’ he said. ‘Reeves said you have not left your room all day.’

‘I was tired. The events of yesterday....’ She trailed off with a forlorn little break in her voice.

‘Of course,’ said Rawden, smiling in what he hoped was a reassuring way. ‘It was a long night, and you have much to adapt to.’ He read her face for signs of distress or regret, for though he had tried to be gentle, how could he be sure she liked his attentions? There was nothing. Her face was as still as a pond, not a ripple of emotion upon it, just those searching, hazel eyes fixed on him.

He took a step forward. ‘I suppose Reeves’ appalling cuisine has not been too tempting.’

‘That man simply cannot cook,’ said Grace, getting to her feet and wrapping a shawl about her shoulders, a gesture which he interpreted as defensive. She kept her eyes on him as if she expected him to do her harm.

‘Yes, I am aware. I will see to it,’ he said. There was a distinct chill in the room, and it was emanating from his wife. ‘The fire has gone out,’ offered Rawden, into an awkward silence.

‘Indeed, it has,’ she said, lifting her chin, and he got the distinct impression that she was spoiling for a fight. The soft, yielding Grace, who had writhed in ecstasy under his hands and tongue last night, was gone, and a suspicious, hard-eyed stranger who was not at all welcoming stood in her place. Disappointment doused his eagerness, but he approached Grace and took her hand, reaching into his pocket with the other. ‘I got something for you,’ he said. ‘A wedding present.’

As she lifted the lid on the box, he felt a spurt of childish pride, which dissolved when her face showed no sign of pleasure.

‘A ring?’ she said flatly.

‘I felt the wedding band a little plain. Now that you are a Countess, you should adorn yourself accordingly. I hope it fits, for I had to guess the size of your finger.’

‘I am sure it will do very well,’ she said, staring at the fat emerald ring, sparkling on its cushion of scarlet. ‘Is it a reward?’

‘A reward?’ said Rawden.

‘For my obedience last night, for letting you do what you want with me. Will I get jewellery whenever I let you into my bed, Rawden?’

She was so cold, so matter of fact, that Rawden stepped back from her. ‘Obedience? I thought there was more than that between us?’

She frowned and bit her lip hard enough to leave a white crescent. It warmed slowly to pink again as the blood rushed back. ‘Forgive me. I chose my words unwisely, and the ring is beautiful. I am grateful for the present and for everything you have done for me, Rawden.’ She gave him a bright smile, but he saw through it.

‘Did I offend you somehow, Grace?’

‘No, I am just adjusting to married life. It is a big change for me.’

‘I hope it is not an altogether unpleasant one.’

She stared up at him, eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears. ‘I wish you had not left me alone, Rawden.’

She was angry at him, and rightly so. ‘Forgive me, but I had the idea of the ring, and so I was in great haste to fetch it,’ he said. ‘And you were sleeping so soundly and looked so at peace that I was loathe to wake you.’

That was a lie. The violent stir of tenderness that had overcome him on waking next to her made him leap out of bed and get away as fast as possible. Guilt had propelled him to the jewellers, and shame had urged him to spend a king’s ransom on a damned ring in order to banish it.

Rawden took the ring and slid it onto her long, elegant finger, and Grace stared down at it, swallowing hard. She refused to meet his eye.

‘I am sorry I was gone so long. You must have been bored.’

‘I thought of going to see Harriet, but I did not relish the idea of hailing a carriage.’

‘Reeves should have done it for you. Damn the man. I told him to keep an eye on you.’

Her head snapped up. ‘Well, he did not. And I can learn to shift for myself in time. I must be more independent and not always rely on a man’s protection.’

Rawden frowned. What was she not saying? A spurt of frustration made him harsh. ‘As to visiting Harriet, it would be wise not to rely on her friendship, Grace.’

‘Why do you speak against her? Harriet and I have known each other since school, and we are the best of friends.’

‘I am sorry if my opinion discomfited you, Grace. Ignore it if you wish.’

‘No, tell me.’

‘What I meant, though I put it rather bluntly, is that she seems to be a fair-weather friend. Do you not see that your gifts are far greater than hers – a generous heart, beauty, and the strength to triumph over adversity?’ He tried to make her smile at him. ‘I would also venture that your husband is richer,

more powerful and, dare I say it, more handsome than hers.’ His teasing earned no smile, and so Rawden blundered on. ‘You came from nothing, and I admire your fortitude, Grace. But Harriet does not. Your rise in society irks her, as she is used to looking down on you.’

‘That is preposterous,’ she said coldly. ‘She is well-married, with a man of her choice, and Gilbert Routledge is....’

‘Horrible.’

‘What?’

‘Gilbert Routledge is awful, and he is far from a moral man. He has several mistresses, none of whom speak well of him, even though he has their keep.’

‘Mistresses. More than one? That is foul.’

Rawden nodded and strolled to the window to stare out at the oily black slide of the Thames. Disappointment slid into his heart like that dark river, for Grace was not how he had left her.

‘Why do people not speak well of him, Rawden?’ she demanded.

‘It is not for me to say.’

‘Tell me, please.’

Rawden turned. Her face was pink, and it was no blush. It was anger. ‘Leave it be, Grace, for you cannot insert yourself into your friend’s marriage. She will not welcome it, and it would be a form of cruelty to show her how far you have risen and she having fallen. I should not have spoken of it.’

‘If my friend is in danger or being treated cruelly, then I would know of it.’

Rawden sighed heavily. ‘Alright. They say that Gilbert rules women with an iron hand. He views them as chattel, slaves to do with as he wishes, and he cares not one jot for their feelings. I would guess that he is an indifferent husband, at best, definitely an adulterous one and a cruel one at his worst.’

‘Rawden, you cannot know that with any certainty.’

‘Ah, but I do. Remember, I mix with his friends at my club. Ask Hardy. He will support everything I am saying. When men are in their cups, they are rarely discreet, and Gilbert is often in his cups.’

‘I see.’ Grace squared her shoulders. ‘And what kind of husband will you be, Rawden – indifferent, adulterous, cruel, all three?’ she said.

Her question stole his breath for a moment. ‘What we did abed last night proves that I am anything but indifferent,’ he spat.

Grace swallowed hard at his anger, and her eyes widened. He was painfully aware of the rush of blood to his loins, lust rising with anger at the thought of pinning her to the bed, her thighs pressing onto his head, her little yelps and cries as he gave her pleasure. He wanted the soft, sweet surrender of just a few hours ago, not this interrogation, this cold rejection.

‘Why these questions when we agreed to see where this thing takes us?’

‘I need to know. Are you adulterous and cruel, Rawden? Be truthful, I beg you.’

‘No, of course not,’ he said. ‘And I was the opposite of cruel last night, was I not? I tried to be kind to you, Grace, and I would be kind to you again if you let me.’

‘I am asking for the truth, Rawden, just this once.’

‘I was always honest about who I am, Grace.’

‘And so was your lover, Romola. She paid me a visit, and it was most instructive.’

His breath caught. ‘Romola was here?’

‘Yes.’

His bride fixed him with a look that laid his soul bare, as if she had seen inside to the rotten core, seen the miserable, lost wretch that he was.

‘And what did she have to say?’

‘That she was your mistress and that you had thrown her over for me – a temporary state of affairs, according to her.’

How calm Grace was, staring him down as if they were discussing the parlous state of the weather or the latest fashions. Her strength impressed and shocked in equal measure. ‘What do you have to say for yourself, Rawden?’

He had never liked being cornered. ‘Do not speak to me like I am some errant child,’ he growled, fists clenched, and she flinched. Rawden tried to calm his temper, which was more for Romola than for her. ‘Yes, Romola was a friend of mine.’

‘Friend? What a charming word for it,’ said Grace, quietly but with venom.

‘Whatever I had with Romola, I have finished it because it had run its course and because I am a married man now. I went to see her and told her it was over, and if it gives you consolation, it was a bloody affair with a great deal of recrimination on both sides. But I did it to be fair to our agreement and to spare you humiliation.’

‘In the latter, you failed miserably. Your mistress stood and denounced you on your own doorstep. Are there to be more women paying me a visit, or do you intend to continue your other liaisons?’

‘I have no others, no matter what the gossips of the ton say. And what of it if I do? I made no promises, and nor did you.’ he snarled.

The desolation on Grace’s face made him want to hold her, but she stepped back when he reached a hand out. ‘Why Rawden. Why do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘Why drag me into your bed and use me? Why consummate our vows if you have no intention of honouring them?’

His temper, held by a thread, snapped. ‘Because they were lies said by two strangers.’ He took Grace by the shoulders. ‘We agreed to marry for duty and convenience, as do most couples in the ton. Those words we said meant nothing.’

‘But actions do. So what was last night – a diversion because you were bored, a cruel jest?’ Her face was stricken, which only made him angrier, with her, with Romola and, most of all, himself.

‘You tell me. Did you welcome my attentions, or were you stamping on my pride, laughing at me, toying with my feelings?’

‘You don’t have any feelings. And I did my duty by you, Rawden. It was what was expected of a bride, and I knew no better.’

‘Same for me. It was a moment of madness brought on by loneliness. I knew you did not really want me, Grace. You merely tolerated it, didn’t you?’

Grace did not dispute him, and his pity for her predicament sank under the weight of slighted pride. ‘I made no secret of what kind of man I am, so you should not be surprised if I am a blackguard.’

‘No, I should not. But if we were not strangers, and if you knew me at all, you would know I have no intention of being humiliated by you. From now on, we will stick to the terms of our marriage. You may do as you wish, Rawden. Go back to your mistress, take ten new ones if you like, but you may never touch me again.’

‘It is a husband’s right to touch his wife,’ he snarled.

‘I am not a thing to be used and thrown away. I will not have you discard this marriage when you tire of being charitable.’

He would not tire of her. It was a certainty that came upon him in that moment, rocking his selfish world to its core. He wanted her, even now, when she was shrieking at him like a fishwife. Grace Howden was like a poison in his blood, rotting him from the heart outward.

‘Grace, I do not see you that way. I have told you that Romola and I are finished.’ He took a step towards her, and she backed away. ‘I ended it because I want you, I burn for

you, and because of that, I could not bear to touch her anymore.'

'How can I believe that from a rake such as you?'

'Believe the worst of me, but there is no changing this. It is done, and we will go on, the two of us, and make this marriage a success.'

'No,' she said, turning her back on him.

Rawden twisted her around. 'Can you not see that you are far better off with me than your dreadful uncle? This marriage has saved you, yet you expect me to apologise for who I used to be, to become something I am not, to grovel at your feet.'

'You are wrong. This is no salvation and no marriage, either. It is just a finer kind of prison, with a jailor I despise.'

'I married you, woman. That is for life.'

She shook him off, but he grabbed hold of her. 'Leave me be, Rawden,' she cried.

'No. You will not tell me what to do, woman. You are mine. I made you mine last night, and there is no escape, Grace, from your prison or its jailor, who wants you with a vengeance.' He stared down into her wide-eyed face, burning for her, wanting to soothe, conquer and claim her.

Grace stopped struggling. 'Please, Rawden,' she breathed.

'Romola means nothing. She is nothing to us, nor will she ever be again. I swear on Will's grave.'

'Don't talk of Will.'

'Alright then, no talking.'

Rawden's kiss was fiery yet tender, urgent but gentle, and the ache which bloomed in Grace's heart could not be denied. She wanted him more than she hated him. This man was hers, and an insane urge to keep him from Romola and any other woman rose up and consumed Grace. So when Rawden picked her up and threw her onto the bed, she made no protest. When he covered her body with his own, flinging up her dress and

releasing his manhood from his breeches, she did not push him off, for then he would stop.

Grace wanted the oblivion of his touch. She wanted the thrill spreading through her loins at being pinned by his bulk. And when he surged inside her slick, eager body, harder and in far more haste than before, Grace could only cling to him and cry out. Rawden rocked inside her in a frenzy of anger and desire, his mouth crushing hers while she tore at his jacket with her nails, their bodies a tangle of limbs and hurt feelings. A spasm of pleasure tightened her belly and grew with every thrust of his loins until it burst through Grace like a sweet fire, burning her jealousy to ashes. Rawden reached a groaning release soon afterwards, stiffening and jerking in a seizure of ecstasy.

Rawden heaved himself off her almost immediately, and they both stared at the ceiling in a tense silence. Grace pulled down her dress, her face burning, and she started to cry silently. She could not stop. The feeling of power and wonder at her release faded to confusion. No heart should hold this much feeling. Had she just debased herself for an uncaring man? Rawden was probably triumphing in her surrender. Now that her lust was sated, mortification crept in, along with its bedfellow of regret.

His hand came to her face, and Grace jerked away.

‘Are you crying? What is it? Forgive me. I was angry. I should not have....’

‘No. I should not. It was my fault, my weakness.’ She leapt off the bed. ‘Please go. I would like to be alone, Rawden.’

‘I cannot leave if you are in distress,’ he said, adjusting his clothes for modesty’s sake.

‘I am well,’ said Grace, wiping away a treacherous tear. It left a sticky track on her cheek. ‘It has been a long and trying day, and I want to be alone. Please, Rawden. I am begging you to leave me be. Do you have enough honour in you to do that at least?’

His lip curled, and anger flared on his face, to be instantly replaced by indifference. 'If you wish me to go, I will go,' he said, shrugging his shoulders, standing up and fastening his breeches. He gave her one last frustrated look. 'See what you drive me to, Grace. Can you be in any doubt of my wanting you now?' When she did not respond, he came close but did not touch her. 'I do not want this bitterness and mistrust between us.' He gave a tortured little smile.

If it was meant to make her feel better, it did not. That smile creased his handsome face and brought a light to his eyes and a hunger that set a pulse of lust low in Grace's belly. Oh, what woman with a heart beating in her breast could withstand the onslaught of Rawden's sudden and rare charm? But she must, for he was false in every way, and that smile was but a weapon to cut down a woman's good sense so that she would be his puppet.

'You had better go now, Rawden,' she said.

He shook his head and rolled his eyes, and then he was gone. The room seemed huge, cold and bleak without his stalking presence.

She hated her husband. She could not trust him an inch.

So why did she miss him already?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dawn could not come soon enough for Grace. A sleepless night had brought her to a terrible conclusion. She could not bear the humiliation of being around Rawden any longer. Marriage was nothing but a maelstrom of hurt feelings and servitude to a man's needs, and one who cared nothing for her. It was insupportable, and it had been a disastrous mistake. Why had she not listened to him when he declared himself an inveterate rake who would never mend his ways.

Grace dressed quickly in semi-darkness, grabbed her most basic possessions in a bag, and then crept downstairs. A soupy mist had crept up from the Thames and made it hard to hail a carriage, but she eventually found one and sank back against the seat as it rattled away from Causton House and the mercurial Rawden Voss.

When Grace reached her destination and knocked on the door, she struggled to swallow the lump in her throat. She could not cry and collapse in distress – not here, not now. A servant opened the door, eyes widening in recognition when she stated her purpose, and he beckoned Grace inside before leaving her shivering and alone in a cold drawing room.

She leapt to her feet when Harriet rushed in. Her friend's hair was still bound in ringlets, and she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

'Grace, what on earth is going on?' she cried.

'I have left him, Harriet. I have run away from Rawden. Please, may I have sanctuary with you?'

Harriet glanced at the open door behind her with a horrified look and rushed to close it. 'I must ask Gilbert. I cannot just have guests to stay without his leave.'

'Then ask him, please, Harriet. My uncle will not have me, I am sure of it, and I have nowhere else to go.'

'Gilbert is not here for me to ask him. He is away. Oh, Grace, what has happened?'

‘I cannot stay with Rawden. He is a bad man, marriage is awful, and I think I have made a terrible mistake.’

At that point, the dam of feeling broke and tears came. Harriet rushed over and folded Grace into her arms. ‘Hush now. Hush.’ She rubbed Grace’s back repeatedly and gasped, ‘Did I not warn you that Rawden Voss was a monster?’

Rawden woke late with a pounding headache. Self-loathing had led him to consume far too much port in search of oblivion. The light streaming in his open window seared his eyes as he considered whether to go to Grace. She had clearly wanted him out of her sight last night after their passionate and somewhat angry coupling. He should have restrained himself, but he wanted her badly, and when they had come together, he sensed a passion which matched his own.

He sighed and flung back his head. He had not been gentle, and she was only recently an innocent. Their wedding night had taught him that much, at least. A wiser man would have gently wooed and seduced Grace until she was putty in his hands. But he was not a wise man, and she had just been confronted with the spite of his mistress’s revelations. Her anger had sparked his lust in a way that soft innocence did not. Rawden could still feel her smooth curves under his hands, hear the little moans she gave against his kisses and feel the surge of her hips to his when she had reached a peak. It had been real - that surrender to passion - as absolute as his own. How could such a woman tangle his good sense? He was all pity one moment, lust the next. He wanted to protect and ravage in equal measure. He was not a good husband, and he never would be.

Rawden leapt out of bed. He would not wait like a patient dog to gain entry to his wife’s bedchamber. Grace would hear him out. He would apologise again. He was forever apologising to her, it seemed. There must be some way to put this right and start again. But when he reached her bedroom, Grace was not there. He cast about the room. Drawers were flung open, and dresses and possessions lay across the bed in disarray.

Damn her to hell. Wherever she had gone, he should just let her rot.

By mid-afternoon, Grace had shed all her tears and sat in Harriet's pretty parlour, sipping tea and sweet cakes as though her life were ordered and normal and not a hopeless tangle of disappointed hopes. Harriet's face bore a look of desperate worry. She had been watching Grace like a hawk all day. She sighed and placed her tea cup down, sending a little clink into the silence between them.

'Well, this a fine mess, Grace,' she said.

'I am sorry for bringing it to your door, Harriet.'

'Well, it is all very vexing, but then, what civilised woman could handle Rawden Voss? You do not have to tell me all the particulars, but is your current distress to do with him consummating the marriage?' Harriet gave a delicate shudder. 'Unfortunate as that might be, I would hope it did occur, for if you did not seal your union, then you are not safe. He can declare the marriage void, throw you over, and you will be penniless.'

Grace swallowed hard and looked down at her tea. Rawden's hands, hot and eager, all over every inch of her body, his mouth merging sinfully with her own, her fingers sinking into the hard muscle of his back, feeling it ripple and move as he filled her with his manhood. Yes, she had let him have her, and she had liked it far too much.

'You need have no fear on that score. We are legally married, in all respects,' she said.

'I see.' Harriet bore a look of utter distaste. 'How horrid an ordeal for you,' she declared.

'Ordeal?' said a hard voice.

They both jumped. Gilbert Routledge stood behind them, sending a glare in Harriet's direction. Why had he not declared himself? Grace was mortified. He must have heard everything.

Harriet leapt up. 'Gilbert...I....'

‘Do continue, Harriet,’ drawled Gilbert.

Harriet stood, wringing her hands. ‘Rawden Voss is no gentleman like you, Gilbert,’ she said, with a shake in her voice. ‘Have you not often declared the man to be a savage?’

‘Indeed, I have. When military men are without honour, they become little better than animals.’

‘Gilbert, Grace is here because....’

‘I know full well why she is here,’ he snapped, cutting Harriet off. ‘She is running from her husband, as the duties of a married woman do not suit her.’ His voice dripped with disapproval. ‘The servants enlightened me of the situation as soon as I returned. As mistress, you must chastise them again for listening at doorways, Harriet. And unhappy or not, the marriage stands in a legal sense, so there is no escape from it.’ Gilbert directed his comments to Harriet as though Grace was invisible.

‘What do you mean, dearest?’ said Harriet.

He waved a hand at Grace. ‘She belongs to Voss now. This cannot be undone. But if the marriage has been consummated, he also has an obligation to care for her financially, and no matter what kind of brute he is, she must rely on his charity.’

Though her face burned at Gilbert speaking of such intimate subjects in front of her and so brutally, Grace spoke up. ‘Gilbert, you misunderstand. Rawden is not a brute, and he has not been violent to me in any way.’

‘Then run back to him and beg forgiveness,’ he snapped. ‘I cannot concern myself with women’s petty grievances, and I cannot harbour a runaway bride in my home.’

‘But we are not suited, and I fear the marriage is a mistake,’ cried Grace.

‘Too bad for you. Rawden Voss is your husband. You are his, to do with as he wishes.’

‘I am no man’s possession,’ said Grace.

‘You most certainly are.’ Gilbert turned to his wife. ‘Talk some sense into your friend. I cannot have this.’

Harriet tried to placate him. 'Of course, my dear. But can we not let Grace stay just a few days whilst she reconciles herself to her situation and determines what to do? I am sure she will calm her fears in time. Please, Gilbert.'

His jaw worked as he tried to slip the mask of a gentleman back on. 'Very well.' He kissed her hand. 'Anything for my lovely wife.' He looked at Harriet with an intensity which embarrassed Grace. 'Now, we are expecting visitors, so get cook to provide refreshments.'

'When?'

'Any minute now,' he said, taking out his pocket watch and frowning at it.

'But at such short notice?'

Gilbert put a finger to Harriet's lips to stifle her protests. 'No arguments. See to it, my dear.'

It was the kind of pompous dismissal one would direct at a servant, and as Gilbert swept out, Grace squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. Harriet's face pinked, and she rushed to ring the bell for a servant. 'Do not mind Gilbert. He can be quite changeable at times,' she said. 'I never know what he is thinking from one moment to the next.' She gave a brittle little laugh.

'I can go if my presence here is an imposition,' said Grace.

'It is nothing of the sort. Now, I must make haste and organise the servants. I wonder who is coming to visit? Oh, I must find Gilbert and ask him, for some of his friends are most particular in their tastes.'

Grace was left alone to the thick ticking of a grandfather clock. It was gilded cedar and very expensive-looking. But were the finer things in life worth enduring Gilbert's condescension? How strange that in her current situation, she should pity Harriet. Was Rawden right in his assessment of Gilbert's character?

After a long while, a doorbell chimed downstairs, and Grace heard a servant say, 'In the parlour, Sir.' Moments later, the

door swung open, and in breezed Caville Sharp. He stopped in his tracks and stared open-mouthed.

‘Well, this is an unexpected surprise,’ he said, a sly smile lighting up his fine grey eyes.

Grace stood with a sharp intake of breath.

‘What brings you to the Routledge’s this fine afternoon,’ said Caville, rushing up to take her hand and kiss it. Grace snatched her fingers free and backed away.

‘I am visiting with Harriet,’ she said.

‘Of course you are,’ he replied. ‘But leaving your husband alone so early in your honeymoon does not bode well, Grace. If you are not careful, he will slip through your grasping little fingers.’

Caville knew. She could see it, slithering in his eyes.

‘I must fetch our hostess,’ said Grace.

He grasped her arm in a firm grip. ‘She will come along presently. I think she is much engaged with her husband and is ever the obedient wife, always quick to jump to his command. I have a fine, blonde pointer on my estate, and that bitch is much the same. Whereas you are an entirely different matter. Such a defiant soul you have, Grace. I will own that it gets a man’s blood up, but it has only served you ill.’

‘Let go of me. I will not talk to you anymore.’

‘Oh, you will hear me out, you little fool. I would have given you the world, but you chose that ruffian, Voss, over me, and now here you are, hiding from him.’

‘I am doing nothing of the sort.’

‘Oh yes, you are. Gilbert told me everything. What did he do – take your innocence a little too roughly or not take it at all. Did he spurn you? You will have cause to bitterly regret spurning my generosity, as will your husband. I cannot abide a man taking what is mine.’

‘I am not yours, nor will I ever be,’ cried Grace. ‘I would rather die than spend one more minute in your presence.’

Caville's fingers tightened, and his face veered closer. Their breath mingled, and the ticking of the clock seemed to boom in Grace's ears. Suddenly, the door burst open, and Harriet came in. She stopped short, and her face reddened. Caville instantly released Grace's arm and gave a smooth bow of greeting and a broad smile.

'Good morning, Lord Sharp,' stammered Harriet. 'I was just coming to ask Grace if she wants to promenade with me.'

'Oh, yes,' said Grace, rushing to Harriet's side. 'I will bid you good day, Lord Sharp.'

Harriet grabbed Grace's hand and pulled her from the room. Thankfully, Caville Sharp did not follow them or protest.

'Thank you for rescuing me, Harriet,' said Grace.

'Rescuing you? See here, Grace, I do not know what you two were about, but it will not do.' Her nails sank into Grace's hand most painfully. 'Is this why you left your husband, over some foolish infatuation for another man? I was not aware you even knew Caville.'

'No. You misread what you just saw. I loathe him.'

Her brows knitted. 'Why do you loathe that gentleman when he is all chivalry and generosity when he has been in my company?'

Of course he was chivalrous to a woman who was not penniless and helpless and thus prey to his appetites. Grace considered telling Harriet the truth about Caville, but how could she when he was a firm friend of Gilbert? Caville's attempt to make her his mistress was disgusting, revealing his degenerate character, but if she confessed it, then it would only degrade her in her friend's eyes. So she dissembled.

'Caville is a friend of my Uncle Charles and I find him rather proud and vain, that is all.'

'Oh, so you are determined to taint him by association with your Uncle Charles.'

'No, Harriet...I...it is just that...'

‘Oh, never mind,’ said Harriet with an impatient shake of her head, blonde curls bobbing. ‘Let us make haste. Go and get your coat, Grace. We must go before Gilbert finds out.’

In a temper of epic proportions, Rawden burst into the kitchen at Causton House to find Reeves seated before the fireplace, calmly patting his dog’s head. He did not flinch when Rawden started shouting.

‘Why are you here, Reeves? I told you to go and search the streets.’

‘I take it she was not at her uncle’s, or he would not own to it,’ the man replied.

‘She was not there. If she had been, the fool would have confessed because he is afraid of me.’

‘No point in searching then. I have been all over and found no trace of your wife,’ he shrugged. ‘If she wants nought to do with you, best let the little rabbit run. She will write to you when she wants money.’

‘What?’

Reeves sighed. ‘What were you thinking, Master, taking a wife and one destined for your brother, too?’

‘Hold your tongue, or I swear I will cut it out,’ hissed Rawden.

‘No, you won’t because I am speaking sense and the truth, as I always do, whether you want to hear it or not. You are too rough for that gentle young soul to handle, and you know it. What did you hope to gain?’

‘A home. A family. A marriage, Reeves. I wanted something sweet and clean and pure for a change.’

‘With an unwilling, desperate bride. You are not your brother, Rawden. He was a calm, steady soul.’

‘And I am the opposite, of course. Bad blood will out, as they say.’

‘Aye, there is a black river of folly running through your soul, to be sure. But you are not so black of heart as the late earl - cold, selfish and uncaring. I would not still be in your employ if you were.’

‘Carry on, old man, and you will find yourself out of my employ.’

‘What I mean to say is, do not become a bully where you seek to protect. That is what your father would do. If you set out on an honourable course, you must stick to it.’

‘I have been honourable, as far as I am able. When last I left Grace, she seemed downcast but not distressed enough to run away.’

‘Surely you know that women hide themselves well, and a great deal festers beneath the surface. One never knows what they are thinking, and it’s not as if you ever troubled yourself with asking.’

Reeves sighed into the fire, and the dog rolled over and showed its belly. Rawden boiled with frustration and worry. His pride would not accept that Grace had run away. ‘What if she did not run? What if she was taken?’

‘Taken?’

‘Get me a carriage. I am going to pay a visit to a certain Caville Sharp.’

Frobisher’s, a well-frequented gentleman’s club and establishment of some ill-repute, hummed with conversation, which stopped abruptly when Rawden burst through its elegant rooms, shouting. ‘Sharp! Where is Caville Sharp?’

The members turned and stared in outrage at his interrupting an afternoon of cards, brandy and pompous chit-chat.

‘I want to know where I can find Caville Sharp,’ said Rawden, spotting George Sanders in the corner. He rushed over and grabbed him out of his chair by his collar. ‘Tell me what you know.’

‘Unhand me, Rawden and I might do so,’ said George. Rawden relented, and George brushed smooth his lapels. ‘What on earth has brought on this attack of the vapours, my good fellow? You are positively savage,’ he added gleefully. George had always relished drama.

‘Speak or lose some teeth,’ said Rawden.

‘Alright, I will, but keep your voice down or you will be barred from this club. We are not at some back street brawl now, Rawden. You must at least feign being a gentleman. You will find Sharp in the private rooms above, entertaining a certain redhead.’

‘Redhead?’

‘Oh yes. He’s been up there some time, too.’

Rawden flung George back down in his seat and sped away, with the slimy man calling after him with laughter in his voice, ‘Some discretion might be advisable, Rawden, and a cool head, if you can manage it.’

He took the stairs two at a time and was confronted with a long corridor. An anguished shriek led him to a room at the end of the hall. Rawden burst in to find Caville gripping a red-haired woman by the neck. He tore them apart and was relieved to see it was not Grace but another, less comely woman with a plump face and teary eyes. The woman scuttled into a corner, sensing violence. One of her cheeks was bright red, and Rawden supposed it to be from a slap.

‘What the devil are you about, Voss?’ cried Sharp. He was half-dressed and began stuffing an engorged member back into his breeches.

‘Where is my wife?’ snarled Rawden.

‘How should I know?’

‘You were stalking her like a predator, Sharp, so I ask again, where is she?’

‘If you have already lost your wife, then that is your affair, so I suggest you leave me to my business with this whore.’

The woman's eyes widened, darting from one to the other of them. It seemed she was not enjoying her liaison with Sharp.

'If you know anything and don't tell me, I will kill you, I swear,' said Rawden.

'I do not have your wife, and if I know anything of Grace Howden, it is that she is fickle with her affections. First, one brother, then the other. Did your rough charms finally fail you, Voss?'

'Stop talking.'

'Perhaps she has left you for another, moved on to a man instead of a beast. I must get in line, for when she is unattached, I will give her exactly what she needs.'

'You will leave her be,' shouted Rawden.

'Why? If she is alone, she is fair game,' sneered Caville. 'She is a loose little bitch, and it is only a matter of time before I get her under me.'

In a blazing fury, Rawden hurled a fist at Sharp's face. It connected with a sickening crack, and the man fell back against the bed, bounced off it, and back onto his feet. The whore shrieked like a banshee. Caville was on Rawden instantly, barrelling into him, sweeping him off his feet. A table overturned, sending a vase crashing to the floor as they rolled around. Sharp got a good right hook into Rawden's face, dazing him for an instant before he managed to haul the worm to his feet and rain punches into his face.

'Enough. I concede,' whined Caville, but Rawden's blood was up, and he would not relent until firm hands took him by the arms and hauled him off Caville.

'Leave him, you fool,' shouted one man as they tried to restrain him.

'You have almost killed the fellow,' cried another.

Caville swayed to his feet, his nose bloody and eyes beginning to swell.

'Unfortunately not,' spat Rawden, shaking himself free. 'The rat still breathes.'

‘This club is for gentlemen, which you clearly are not,’ said a whiskery old man. ‘Leave, Sir, of your own volition, or I will have you thrown out.’

‘Do not vex yourself. I am leaving.’

Rawden took one more look at Caville, bloodied and gasping. As he left, he caught the whore’s eye. She glanced at Caville’s bloodied face, and then a smile bloomed, and she winked at Rawden. It seemed he was not the only one who thought Caville had it coming.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Grace pushed her food around her plate, squirming under the tense atmosphere at the breakfast table. Harriet would not look her in the eye, and she avoided Gilbert's gaze altogether as it had a venomous quality.

Yesterday's walk had not been pleasant, for Grace was painfully aware that Harriet was angry with her, even though she hid it well, talking politely now and then through gritted teeth. Grace and Harriet had exchanged awkward pleasantries for some time, with no real, meaningful conversation, until Harriet had pressed her again on her reason for fleeing Rawden. Grace could not bring herself to tell Harriet about Romola Bianchi, for it shamed her so much. It seemed she was destined to bear the dishonour of men's bad behaviour as though it were her fault and not theirs.

Harriet had been keen to know the nature of her conversation with Caville, but Grace could hardly own to it. 'Just the usual pleasantries, but as I said, his manner is a little forward for my liking,' she said.

'Oh, that is because he is not proud and haughty, as he should be, given he is the son of a viscount. He has an easy, affable manner and often visits, for he and Gilbert are firm friends. He plays rummy with me and always lets me win. I find that so very charming.'

How naïve her friend was not to see the beast slithering behind Caville's striking good looks. 'I am sorry if I have given offence, Harriet,' said Grace.

'Not at all. You have always been very forthcoming with your opinions. I should be used to your plain way of speaking by now,' replied Harriet. She gave Grace a sweet smile, but there was a barb pricking her words.

They had returned from the walk in the late afternoon to a glaring Gilbert, who had maintained an icy silence to both his wife and Grace, before leaving the house for his gentleman's club. So, mercifully, they had been spared his presence all evening.

Harriet seemed unperturbed by this series of events, as though it were normal for Gilbert to take himself off whenever it suited him. She had spent the remainder of the day chatting happily about mundane household matters, reminiscing about school days, and passing on gossip about acquaintances. Harriet betrayed no sign of discomfort or unhappiness with her husband.

And yet, Grace was uneasy for her friend. In the dead of night, she had heard raised voices – a man shouting and then came sobbing, which sounded like a woman's. When she had asked Harriet about it, she had simply remarked, 'Oh, the servants are always squabbling. I must tell the butler to have a word with them. I stay out of such matters as much as I can and leave the running of the household to him.'

Harriet nibbled daintily on a piece of buttered toast as if she had no care in the world. She was so perfectly beautiful and poised – the very picture of what a lady should be. But if she did not run her household, what on earth did she do all day? Grace had a sneaking suspicion that Harriet's married life consisted of waiting for her husband to come home and then entertaining his whims. Was her friend just a pretty ornament of a wife, an empty vessel for people to look at and admire? Perhaps she should not have judged her own marriage so harshly. Maybe this bland co-existence of man and wife was the way of it for those who married for convenience, not love. Or was she just a fool to expect affection and respect from a husband?

'So, do you have any plans to avoid our guests this morning, Harriet?' said Gilbert, with some rancour.

Harriet stared down at her plate. 'No, my dear. I will be at home all day.'

'Both of you?' snarled Gilbert, flicking Grace a resentful look.

'Yes, dearest. And I am sorry we could not entertain your friend, Caville when he called.'

'Indeed, Caville was most disappointed that you chose to promenade over his company as he so enjoys his visits here.'

He shot a look of irritation at Grace. 'Perhaps you need more instruction as to a wife's duties to her husband, Harriet, and you are not the only one.'

Grace caught Harriet's eye, and her friend reddened.

'Right,' said Gilbert, slapping his napkin onto the table. 'See that you stay indoors as the weather is inclement. I shouldn't want you to take a chill, and that goes for Grace, too, as it seems we are responsible for her.'

'I would not wish to outstay my welcome,' said Grace.

'Oh, do not vex yourself on that score,' said Gilbert, unsmiling. 'I am sure your company is very diverting for my wife. She has few friends who visit and is sorely in need of stimulating conversation, which she can hardly have with the servants.'

'Of course,' said Grace, hating Gilbert for his condescension to his wife. Though he was right about the weather, as the rain had started to pit-pat against the windows. There would be no escape from the house or its leaden atmosphere today. The chime of the doorbell had Grace stiffening. Surely Caville would not return? She glanced at Gilbert, who smirked at her most alarmingly. It could only mean one thing.

'I have a sudden headache,' she said. 'I think I will return to my room for a lie down.'

Suddenly, the door opened, and Rawden burst into the room, casting her the bleakest glare before giving a quick bow to Gilbert. He had a black eye, a swollen jaw and purple bruises on the back of his hands. He looked every inch the street thug and regarded her with a seething intensity that had her heart racing.

'I came as quickly as I could,' he said to Gilbert, who did not seem at all surprised to see him.

'Will you partake of some breakfast?' drawled Gilbert.

'I thank you, no. I have come for my wife, and we will leave directly.' He turned back to Grace, and his jaw worked

as he said, 'Get your things. We are leaving.' Every word bristled with suppressed rage.

'No. I...I am not,' said Grace.

'It is for the best, Grace,' said Harriet into the void of silence around the table.

'Whatever can you mean?' cried Grace.

Harriet would not look at her as she said, 'Your place is with your husband, Grace.' She took a delicate bite of butter cake and wiped the corners of her mouth with a napkin as if she had not a care in the world.

'I cannot. Harriet, please.'

Harriet put her cutlery down with a clatter. 'Please, Grace. You have to go with him. Do not make a scene.'

Rawden covered the distance between them in a few strides and took Grace's hand in a grip of iron.

'What of her things, Earl Voss?' said Harriet calmly.

'Keep them,' he snapped. 'She has nothing of value.'

Within moments, Grace found herself out in the rain. Rawden bundled her into a carriage and banged on the roof for the driver to move off. He fixed her with a piercing gaze. 'Do not dare to run from me again, especially not to those people,' he snarled.

'I had every right to run from you.'

'You are my wife!' he bellowed, making Grace jump. 'You have no right to go anywhere without my leave.'

'I am your wife in name only, it seems.'

'What does that mean?'

Grace was too angry to speak, so she stared out of the window, shivering in her dress, damp from rain. His black eyes bore into her, and she pressed herself into the carriage door to be as far away from him as possible.

'Damn it to hell,' snarled Rawden, tearing off his cloak and flinging it at her.

Grace stared mutely down at it.

‘Put it on before you freeze to death. Obey me in that, at least.’

Grace pulled the jacket on. It still held the warmth of Rawden’s body and his smell. The remembered feel of his hot flesh sliding against her own made her face burn.

He noticed, of course. ‘You may well blush, Grace. Your little escape attempt will be the talk of the ton for the rest of the season. Gilbert will undoubtedly revel in this scandal, and it will cement my reputation as a monstrous man who mistreated his new bride.’

‘I am sorry, Rawden,’ said Grace. Her words came out weakly, almost a sob, for he looked so crestfallen all of a sudden. ‘That was not my intention.’

‘No matter. I care little for the opinion of fools.’ He rubbed his thumb into his palm and met her eye. ‘Did I so mistreat you, Grace?’

‘No. Oh I cannot explain.’

He gave a bitter smile and sighed. ‘But why would you run if I treated you well? Did you hate it when I took you to my bed that last time? Were you too afraid to tell me to stop?’

‘Please, Rawden. I do not wish to speak of it.’ She bit her lip and stared out of the carriage.

He leant back. ‘And there is my answer,’ he sighed

The carriage rattled on, and Grace wanted to say that she had not hated his touch. Indeed, she had found a guilty pleasure in it, and his caresses had sparked a hunger that haunted her still. But how could she own to such a thing? It would only make her his fool. But Grace had to ask. ‘How did you find me?’

‘Gilbert wanted rid of you, and apparently, it was his wife’s idea to send for me.’

Tears welled in Grace’s eyes.

‘I was right about her,’ said Rawden.

‘So you would leave me completely friendless.’

‘She was no friend to you, Grace. Best you let her go and turn your mind to us. We are married and no escaping it. We will go on and make the best of this, for there is no other way.’

‘I will not let you abandon me in that gloomy old house while you go off and chase your mistresses.’

‘Anyone might think you are jealous, Grace.’ Rawden searched her face, but she turned away. ‘And do not concern yourself on that score,’ continued Rawden. ‘I do not intend to let you slip through my fingers again, so we are not returning to Causton House.’

‘So where are we going?’ She hardly dared ask.

‘You will see. Best you settle yourself for a long journey this day and make your peace with it, for you’ll not see London again in the near future.’

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Grace woke with a start and a little cry. Her face was pressed into warm wool, and it smelled good. It took a moment for her to realise she was leaning against Rawden's broad chest, his arm about her shoulders. She leapt back and came up against the side of the carriage.

'Awake at last. Good. Now, you must compose yourself, for we are at our destination.' His voice was gentle, kindly almost, as was his expression. He leapt out of the carriage and held out his hand for her to take. She did so in a daze, and what she saw outside the carriage gave little comfort. A forbidding house loomed over them. It was grey stone, choked in ivy, and its many mullioned windows reflected only emptiness as if they were blind eyes in a bleak face. When she looked about her, Grace's heart sank. A causeway led across a wind-scoured estuary whose grey-green waters were already sucking at its edge. Soon, the water would swallow the path back to the mainland, which was but a blurry streak of green in the distance.

'When the tide turns, Marshgrave is cut off twice a day,' said Rawden, confirming her worst fears.

'Marshgrave?'

'Yes, morbidly named for several hapless ancestors who misjudged the tide and so met a grisly end in the mud of the estuary.'

Grace stared out at the frigid waters, slowly swallowing the path they had just travelled, and shuddered.

'This is my father's house,' continued Rawden. 'It squats on this island like a hermit, eschewing the world. We have vast tracts of land back on the mainland and several more genteel homes, but my father did not much care for the company of others, so this house and its solitude suited his character.'

'*Yours too,*' thought Grace, but she was too wary to say it aloud.

‘Even at full tide, the island is quite large – a mile round about and with some excellent woods for walks. It can be pleasant on a sunny day, and the view quite breathtaking.’

Grace swallowed hard as a brisk wind tore at her hair. ‘Is this a prison, Rawden?’

‘It doesn’t have to be. Now let us get you out of this wind,’ he said, taking her hand and guiding Grace up the steps.

A portly middle-aged woman opened the door and rushed out, wiping her hands on a stained apron. ‘Lord Voss, welcome home,’ she said, bobbing a curtsey. ‘We did not expect you.’

‘My journey here was spontaneous.’

‘I see. If we had known, we would have ordered appropriate provisions for your comfort.’

‘No matter, Mrs. Percy. My appetites are simple, as are those of my wife. May I introduce Grace, the new Lady Voss. She is your mistress now, and you will defer to her in all things.’

‘Yes, of course. Welcome, Lady Voss.’

‘Mrs Percy is the housekeeper at Marshgrave,’ said Rawden to Grace.

The woman’s eyes widened at Grace’s attire, and Grace could not meet her gaze, for she must surely look dishevelled after her long carriage journey.

‘Won’t you please come in, out of the wind? It can scour your bones clean sometimes,’ she said with a kindly smile, and Grace warmed a little to Mrs. Percy.

The house boasted a dark, cavernous hall with a wide staircase leading upwards in an arc. It was grand, but its dark green walls and oak panelling gave it an oppressive, suffocating air, and Grace shivered at the wind blowing in behind them through the open door.

‘Is there a fire, Mrs. Percy?’ said Rawden, rather brusquely, but Mrs. Percy seemed unoffended by his manner.

‘Your father’s...erm...your study has a roaring one and will be warmest,’ said the housekeeper. ‘The weather has been most inclement of late now the season is turning,’ she babbled. ‘Sometimes we have been cut off for days.’

Grace caught Rawden’s eye, and he looked away, steering her into a small, cosy study that boasted a roaring fire. She rushed up to it to warm her hands as the housekeeper took her leave.

‘I will prepare some refreshments,’ said the woman. ‘Hot tea will be needed, I am sure.’

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Rawden.

Once the housekeeper had gone, Grace tried to gather her senses. Exhausted and confused, she tried to be brave and confront Rawden. She squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath and prepared to do battle. ‘Rawden, what did Mrs. Percy mean when she said, ‘cut off for days?’

He stared intently at her, his face as gloomy as the dusk falling over the churning water outside. ‘The sea can be very rough, and some days it is not possible to make the crossing over the causeway as the waves crash over it and can sweep the unsuspecting into the waters. Take this warning, Grace. The currents sweeping about this island are treacherous to the unwary. Do not attempt the folly of trying to run from Marshgrave or from me.’

‘You would just drag me back.’

‘I would, yes.’

‘Why bother, Rawden? You do not want to be married.’

‘Nevertheless, I am, and I will do right by you. I think it is high time we got to know each other.’

‘I thought we already did that, as much as either of us wanted to?’ said Grace.

His jaw worked. ‘Sharing a bed is not the same as knowing each other.’ He took her arm and steered her to a chair before the fire. His touch was like a burn, lingering after he had removed his hand. Rawden grabbed another chair and dragged

it across to sit before her. The sound it made seared her nerves, which were at breaking point.

‘So, tell me why you ran,’ he said.

‘I thought I had made a terrible mistake after that woman came to see me. Rawden, on our wedding night, you let me think you might care for me after we shared a bed, and then the humiliation was too great. In truth, I do not know why I did it.’

‘No, it was not a well-planned escape by any means. What were you planning to do for the long term?’

‘I had no idea. I just wanted to get away. It was a childish tantrum, which I regret.’

‘Indeed, it was. You need to learn to stay and fight your battles, not run from them. But all in good time. You are young and impulsive.’ His face grew dark. ‘But you should not have gone to Harriet’s.’

‘She is my friend.’

‘Again, I say she is not, and there is another reason you shall never go there again. Caville Sharp frequents that household.’ His face reddened. ‘Tell me. Do you favour him over me?’

‘No. And do you favour Romola Bianchi over me?’

‘Absolutely not,’ he said with a grimace. ‘She meant something once, but that was before I really knew her grasping character.’ He took her hand and smiled down at it. ‘Do I sense jealousy, Grace? It does not make you a fool to own to it.’

‘I have no right to be jealous. You married for duty, and I, out of desperation. Who am I to demand trust, loyalty or affection?’ I should not be so naïve.’

Rawden stroked the back of her hand with the pad of his thumb, over and over, setting her face alight. ‘Duty and desperation make poor bedfellows, it seems, although when it comes to bed, I have no complaints on that score.’ Rawden gave a little smile, but again, those dark eyes came searching

for signs of weakness, an admission that she had liked his touch, his kiss. Did his manly pride demand it? Well, she would not give it to him so he could triumph over her.

He took a deep breath. ‘Here is the rub, Grace. We need to be honest with each other if we are to survive a lifetime together. I know you do not like my character, and I would not have you tolerate my attentions. I would not force myself on you in that way. I could not bear to. See, I am not that much of a blackguard, whatever else you may think me.’

Grace stared into his bleak, dark eyes. They seemed to be pleading with her, and so she relented. She let her hand stay within his, unable to break from his touch. ‘You did not force me, Rawden. What I did on my wedding night and after was of my own free will, though I suppose I thought it was expected of me – a wife’s duty. Would that I was stronger and not so easily led by you and your rakish ways.’

‘Duty brought me to marry you, but, for my part, it had nothing to do with what happened on our wedding night. And I suppose, if we are being honest, there is a part of me that married you for a less lofty reason than duty.’

‘And what was that – pity?’

‘No. I wanted you. I burned for you after our first meeting in that garden and ever since. That is why I stole a kiss. It is why I dearly long to steal one now.’

He leaned in, and their lips almost touched. The clatter of Mrs. Percy entering with the tea tray had them springing apart.

‘Here we are. This will warm you both,’ she said, setting the tray down with a big grin. She clearly thought they were two honeymooners who could not keep their hands off each other. ‘It is so good to have you home, Lord Voss.’

Grace sprang to her feet once the housekeeper had gone. She was in danger of succumbing to Rawden again. It would not do. Repelling him would have been much easier if he had been angry and shouting, but he was kind and patient, and she longed to throw herself into his arms for comfort.

‘I am tired. I would like to lie down,’ she said.

‘With or without me?’ said Rawden, and, for a moment, she imagined the warmth of his skin on hers, his sensual mouth claiming her own and making her feel desired, beautiful, worthy, his hands coaxing her to pleasure and abandon. When he had her, it felt like freedom, but it was an illusion. And hope was the cruellest torment of all.

‘I want to be alone, Rawden.’

‘Then you shall have your wish. And I will be leaving soon, so you may have your solitude and need no longer be discomforted by my attentions.’

She saw a flicker of disappointment on his face, but it hardened immediately to disdain, and, in an instant, Rawden was gone.

With a leaden step, Grace followed Mrs. Percy to the room which was to be hers. Expecting a dark dungeon of a place, she was pleasantly surprised to find it elegant and cosy, a delight to the eye, in fact. The walls were papered in a duck-egg chinoiserie style, depicting exotic flowers, peacocks, and all manner of colourful birds. The bed boasted a pretty, gilded headboard and was draped in generous swathes of pale yellow silk. Gilt-edged chairs in the French style stood before the crackling fireplace, and an enormous mirror sent the sun’s dying rays bouncing off the walls. The room felt like a warm embrace after the deprivations of Rawden’s gloomy London house.

Most surprising of all was the dressing table, laid with silver brushes, tortoiseshell combs and everything a fine lady would need to complete her toilette each day. In the immense rosewood wardrobe, Grace found a myriad of exquisite dresses in every colour she could want, along with velvet coats and bonnets embellished with feathers.

In his rush to bring her to Marshgrave, Rawden could not possibly have organised the clothing and other items in time. She had the uncharitable thought that maybe the clothes belonged to one of his old mistresses. Did he spoil them when

he brought them here? Had he once torn these dresses off other women in a fit of passion?

Grace grabbed a stunning teal dress and held it against herself. It seemed a perfect fit and brand new, as if bought with her in mind. Surely Rawden had not intended these for her? If he had, it was a kindness that made her heart clench a little, but even if it was true, and he did have a kindly side, he was not likely to show it again after her attempt to escape him.

Grace sank onto the bed, still clutching the teal silk to her bosom. Rawden slipped into her thoughts, and warmth spread to her belly at the thought of his handsome face close to hers. She sat up and shook her head. 'Damn you for a fool, Lady Voss.'

Chapter Thirty

So, he was home again. But Marshgrave had never been that, more a version of hell to his younger self. What had brought him scurrying back here like a rat to its burrow? Was it anger, fear, hurt, or the need to punish Grace? Where she was concerned, he could not separate his feelings. Rawden stared out of his bedroom at the sunrise silvering the estuary's waters. Dawn did nothing to soften the place, and Rawden longed to tear Marshgrave down, and with it, all the bullying and misery seeped into its walls over the years. Now, he had brought his new wife here on instinct, but was that instinct to protect or imprison, to forge some kind of truce or to lock up another of his belongings, as one would put diamonds in a safe? How could Grace ever be more than a possession? A weak part of him wanted her to be.

Rawden had done her the kindness of having breakfast sent to her room so she did not have to sit with him. After their almost-kiss, Grace had excused herself and begged to be shown to her room so that she might rest. She had wanted to be as far from him as possible.

Perhaps it was best he get her settled and just leave. She would not miss him, yet the thought of returning to his old ways in London only inspired a sense of dread. He had been a miserable creature there in spite of his pleasure-seeking lifestyle. Even his army life now seemed driven by a need to embrace danger and death as a means of escaping himself and his misery. At Marshgrave, he had a purpose in keeping Grace from harm or folly. And beyond that, he had a strange desire to win her over.

Rawden cursed aloud and went in search of his wife. He found her in his father's dusty old library. She was engrossed in an ancient tome by Homer and jumped when she heard his approach. 'Did you sleep well,' he sputtered, somewhat taken aback by how fetching she looked, albeit in the plainest of grey cotton dresses. No doubt Grace had eschewed the more lavish ones he had provided to snub his attempt at generosity. The morning light burnished her hair, which was simply but

neatly tied in a bun. Despite his efforts to debauch his wife, her face still bore a sweet, wide-eyed innocence.

‘I slept very well, thank you,’ she said.

So, they were to be formal strangers, were they? He could not allow it. ‘So how do you fare this morning?’

‘Well enough, thank you. I thought you would be gone by now.’

‘I must disappoint you on that score. I have a mind to remain for a few days to order my affairs here. And there is the small matter of us being joined forever in matrimony, so I have decided that today, we must get to know each other.’

‘The prisoner to know her jailor,’ said Grace, with more fight in her voice than the night before.

Rawden rather enjoyed her spirit. ‘I would not have it so,’ he said.

‘I would, for I am trapped here. And I suppose you have set the servants to spy on me?’

‘On the contrary. They are at your beck and call, and there are few enough of them for spying. Should you wish to go to the village, a man will take you. This house has been a dusty old ruin, mouldering away in lonely desolation for years. As my wife, you may spend my late father’s considerable funds on giving it a new lease of life. You may decorate, rip out and rebuild whatever you like without my leave. I will not be here to interfere.’

‘Where will you be?’

‘I will go back to London. I said we would live separate lives, and I will be true to my word. I will visit occasionally to ensure you are well looked after, and we will find a way to make this marriage a success.’

‘And how will you measure that success, Rawden?’

‘Well, you not hating me will be a start.’

‘I have never hated you. It is just that you are ...’

‘What?’

‘Unknowable, Rawden.’

‘If you took the trouble, you might find I am not so bad.’

‘How can I possibly know a man who keeps himself hidden and who is about to escape my company for the delights of London.’

‘Trust me, I find no delight in London society. I have business to attend to regarding my father’s estate. And it is for the best, as you should not drag my character out into the light. It dwells in darkness and is comfortable there.’

She frowned and sighed. ‘See, you remain hidden.’

‘Alright. Let us cast light on each other, for we had no courtship to do so.’

Grace regarded him with suspicion.

‘I will start. Tell me what accomplishments you possess, Grace. Am I to expect you to play and sing for my entertainment?’ he said.

‘I have no accomplishments that might interest you.’

‘Now that cannot be true, so which of us is hiding now? William was obviously captivated, so he must have seen something in you. Come, we must have some conversation while we await Mrs. Percy, for she will soon sniff us out and be bearing down on us with her tea tray.’

A shadow of a smile played on Grace’s lips. ‘I can play the piano tolerably well, but not for your entertainment. I am proficient in Latin and French, though I rather regret the latter now that Napoleon has wreaked havoc in Europe and taken someone dear to me. I want nothing to do with the French at this point in time.’

‘Is it not important to know your enemy?’ said Rawden.

‘Perhaps,’ she shrugged. ‘Is that why you are questioning me now?’

Rawden smiled at her verbal sparring. She had a quick wit. ‘What else?’

‘I pride myself on being well-read.’

Rawden took the book from her hand, brushing his fingers against hers. ‘And where does that take you, Grace?’

‘In truth, the more I discover through my reading, the more downcast I become by knowing a world beyond my reach. I sink into books and disappear to the vineyards of Italy, the heroic battlefields of Greek mythology.’

‘A lovers tryst in an exotic palace somewhere.’

Grace’s cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink, and she cast her eyes down. Rawden was taken by how beautiful and thick were her coppery lashes. ‘So you dream of worlds you cannot touch, taste or feel. There is a certain cruelty to hope, isn’t there?’

Her eyes widened, and for an instant, there was a spark of understanding between them. ‘So you think it unwise to read books,’ she said in a high little voice.

‘No. But the world outside this window is a far more stirring place than my imagination can give rise to. I like to be outdoors and cannot bear to be confined within some dusty old pages, living a second-hand life.’

‘See, we are opposites. Not suited at all,’ she said.

‘Yet in some ways, we fit perfectly,’ he replied, tilting her chin up. ‘I can see you described in the dusty pages of some self-important tome of poetry. Were I a Wordsworth or a Keats, I would gush that your hair is like a flame, your eyes the colour of hazelnut shells, your lips a cushion of carnality into which I long to sink. But no words can convey the drum of my heart when my fingers caress your gentle curves, the tightening in my belly and the twitch in my crotch as it stirs for your beauty, the longing to press you beneath me and plunder your body. No dusty book can hold all that longing, all that sin.’

Her eyes widened. ‘That is not very romantic, Rawden, and it certainly is not poetry,’ she said breathlessly.

‘No, but there it is. I speak as I find. Don’t you want to live life instead of experiencing it through musty pages and the

eyes of others? I think you are a caged bird who longs to stretch her wings and fly free?’

‘I long for a great many things, but the course of my life is ordained by men. I do not have the indulgence of exploring my desires.’

‘Yes, you do. You are my wife, so I would heartily support you indulging your desires.’

‘Stop it, Rawden. You are teasing me, and it is not kind.’

He laughed. ‘What I mean is, you can live life as you please.’

‘As long as it pleases you.’

‘What is wrong with pleasing me if I please you in return? And I can, you know, if you would only trust me. I think you want to.’

‘You will lead me to ruin, Rawden.’

‘I already ruined you, remember?’

‘How could I forget, and I meant my heart, Rawden.’

‘That, I can understand. Neither of us has a trusting nature, and I have a wicked past to drag behind me. Yet, it does not have to be this way. This is your home now. Spend my money, make it what you will, and enjoy yourself for a change. I will return in a few weeks, by which time, I hope you will have become accustomed to your newfound freedom.’

‘When are you going?’ she said evenly.

‘In a day or two,’ he said, watching to see where his words landed. But he saw no relief on her face, or sadness. He could not read anything but indifference as Grace looked down at her book again. Yet how could he leave her behind, all alone in a dark old house with only the servants for company? And why do it? Because he feared a wound to his pride when he failed to win her approval? But surely he could bear it, and what harm was there in trying?

‘Why not take a walk about the grounds and the house? I will show you all the best spots for finding solitude and shady

glades for reading your dusty old Homer on a summer's day.' With that, he tore the book from Grace's hands and tossed it aside.

Why had she let him bully her into coming?

Grace cast furtive glances at Rawden as they walked along a narrow path through the woods surrounding Marshgrave. The sun winking through the trees shone on his jet-black hair, and his hand over hers, where it snaked through his arm, was warm and firm. How long his fingers were, and how heavy his hand, dwarfing her own. Rawden was so tall, towering over her, but she was beginning to feel less nervous in his presence since he had revealed a little of himself. No one would dispute his dazzling good looks, and if he were consistently charming, which he was not, then he would be the ruin of any woman's heart. And yet this man now belonged to her, or so the law and the church would have it. What was she to do with him?

Would he go away tomorrow or the day after? If he truly belonged to her, he would not be able to. What was this devilish disappointment clawing at her breast at his apparent indifference? What a fool she was to want him to renew his attentions to her after what he had kept secret. She could be no ninny who trusted in him after that awful mistress of his had laid bare his sins.

'There are many walks around Marshgrave, though do not stray too far, for the weather can be very wild at times. Trees come down, and the path becomes mired in mud.' Rawden spoke suddenly, looking down into her face.

Grace was wrenched out of her dark thoughts and looked up to see the sky matching them as purple clouds skidded across the sun. It threatened to rain all of a sudden.

'Do you like your room?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' she said more enthusiastically than she intended. 'It is charming, and I should like to renovate the house as you said so that it might one day accommodate guests most comfortably, should you invite any.'

‘We will see,’ he said.

Grace had the feeling she had displeased him. ‘I should think many of the rooms would have stirring views over the water.’

‘I can think of more stirring views than this mouldy old pile of bricks,’ he said, and his meaning sent heat up her neck and into her cheeks.

She took a deep breath, for she had to ask. ‘Rawden, the dresses in the wardrobe, were they for me?’

‘Who else would they be for?’ he said with a frown.

‘When did you get them?’

‘I had them made by the same dressmaker who made your wedding dress. She had your measurements, so when she sent her bill, I decided to pay her a visit.’

Grace felt a lump in her throat at his kindness, and renewed guilt at running away in anger. ‘That is very generous. Thank you.’

‘I’ll say. That woman’s bill was huge. And it is nothing, Grace. I can hardly let my bride go naked, can I,’ he said, staring into her eyes with that intensity which weakened her knees. He smirked. ‘Though now I come to think of it, that might have been a better plan. Let us return them all.’

Goodness, that smile would weaken the strongest of knees. Grace took her hand from Rawden’s arm, hoping he was teasing and willing herself to be strong. ‘No, I will not return them, for they are finer than I have ever owned. And that is a shocking reply, by the way.’

‘It is an honest one.’

Grace had to look away from him as a surge of longing took hold. If Rawden kissed her now, she would not mind it. But he did not. He scuffed the earth with his foot, eyes fixed on the ground. Grace felt the need to build bridges with the handsome man who was now her husband. There had to be a way forward for the two of them.

‘Rawden, I am sorry for running and shaming you before Harriet and Gilbert. It was not my intention to do that.’

‘Oh, that is by no means the worst humiliation I have suffered. And my reputation can bear it, for it is already damaged beyond repair.’

‘But you were so very angry in the carriage.’

‘I was concerned for your welfare, but it came out as anger. As I said, Caville Sharp frequents that household and it is best you never find yourself at his mercy. He has a nose for weakness and a cruel disposition.’

‘But once that woman, Romola, came, I thought you would not care that I had gone. I thought you would be glad to be rid of an unwanted burden.’

‘A burden you may be, but what makes you think you are unwanted?’

‘I am not the bride you would have dreamed of marrying, with no fortune or connections.’

He took hold of her face and said passionately, ‘You are so used to the disdain of lesser men and women that you do not see your own worth, Grace. On the contrary, you are just the type of bride to suit me. Do you not see that you are proud, stubborn and infuriating? But you are also clever, brave, and heartbreakingly pretty, and I want you with a vengeance.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes,’ he said, and the woods and the sky held their breath as he sank his lips towards hers.

‘But how can I trust in anything you say?’ she whispered.

‘Trust this,’ he said, and his mouth claimed hers. Rawden’s kiss was sublime, so full of longing and warmth, that Grace melted her mouth against his and all her worries disappeared. He took hold of her waist and pushed her back against a tree, and she was boneless, everything inside her turning to mush under his mouth and hands, the feel of his hard thigh pressed to hers. Emboldened by his regard, Grace let her hands roam

up into his thick hair and returned his ardour with her own as if it was not her kissing Rawden but a wicked, hungry stranger.

It continued until Grace had a fire in her belly, melting her loins. His hardness pressed against her belly, and a surge of triumph took hold. Rawden found her desirable. Perhaps she could compete with Romola Bianchi. Dare she even try? His hands roamed all over her, and he pulled her close, his kiss deepening, making her moan. Grace flinched but did not stop him as he lifted her skirt, and his cold fingers slid up her thigh to her centre. Rawden's cool, practised fingers were a relief of sorts as they melted the fire at her core to a puddle of lust. Her whole being seemed swollen with desire, aching for him as he gently brushed the back of his hand along her downy cleft.

'Rawden, please,' she gasped.

'Please, what?' he breathed against her mouth

'Don't stop.'

'Not a chance.'

His cool fingers slid inwards, and after that, Grace let herself be taken by his touch. Within moments, she was gasping her pleasure to the sky, a joy so intense it almost brought her to tears. She would have crumpled to a heap were it not for the tree against her back and Rawden's strong arms holding her up. Her gasping breaths took flight and mingled with the rush of wind in the trees.

'I would take you now if you would welcome it,' he gasped, kissing her neck.

'Here in the open,' she cried.

'Yes. And why not? I own everything you see, including you, and no one is around to spy on us.'

Rawden would take his pleasure now, as he had on their wedding night, and she would let him. 'Yes, yes, Rawden,' she cried, turning her face up to the sky.

There was such freedom in his touch, in this soaring feeling of ecstasy and release, and why stop him when she felt truly, deeply alive for the first time in her life? Grace clung to

Rawden's broad shoulders as he opened his breeches and took himself in hand. He parted her legs with the gentlest of nudges, and instead of a tense bracing, she felt only a rampant desire to have all of him inside her. Grace cried out as he lifted her leg and pressed against the entrance to her body.

Suddenly, fat drops of rain spattered on her cheeks. The heavens opened, and fierce rain hissed down, soaking the trees and the path. It ran down Rawden's face and into her mouth as he kissed her fiercely. The wind picked up, and the trees started lashing around them.

'Damn,' he exclaimed, with a look of intense frustration. 'We must return to the house, hurry.'

Grace could have cried in disappointment. 'But, Rawden, why?'

'I cannot take you out here. These woods are treacherous in a storm. We must go,' he said, stuffing his swollen manhood back in his breeches and then taking her hand.

They ran through the woods like playful children, his firm grip holding Grace up when she slipped on the path, which had quickly turned to mud. Thunder boomed overhead, and Grace squealed and laughed along with Rawden. When they crashed breathlessly into the hall, there was no respite as Rawden dragged her quickly up the stairs and into his bedchamber.

Grace got a quick glance at oak furniture and midnight-blue drapes, everything manly and sparse, before Rawden flung her onto the bed and pressed down on her. From then on, there was nothing but his eyes burning with lust, his wet hands tugging down her bodice, his hot mouth all over her breasts, his knee pushing her legs apart – a glorious, welcome onslaught as he held himself just outside her body.

'Tell me you want this, or I shall go mad,' he growled.

In answer, Grace sunk her hands into his storm-blown hair and pulled his mouth back to hers. And then he was inside her, quickly, before she could cry out, and all she could do was

wrap herself around him and hold him close as he worshipped her flesh with his.

The storm boomed on, rattling window panes, piercing the room with sudden flashes of lightning, throwing in stark relief Rawden's dark, ferocious beauty, the potent hunger on his face, as if the Devil himself was making love to her. Thunder soon drowned out Grace's little cries of pleasure.

Afterwards, Rawden pulled the coverlet about them and held her in his arms. Neither dared say a word as if that would break the spell and send them back to circling each other like wary dogs. Grace gave in to the exhaustion of the last few days and drifted off to sleep, cocooned in his warm embrace, lulled by his deep breathing.

She woke to Rawden's hand in her hair, his mouth on hers – tender and slow. He took her again during that long, dark afternoon, in a leisurely way, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for them to come together. Rawden spread her out beneath him and teased her to a peak, making her gasp, beg, and cry out his name. Only then did he take his own pleasure, his bulk pressing on her and squeezing her tightly as if he would consume her. It was a breathless, delicious suffocation.

Chapter Thirty-One

Grace woke with a start in a cold room and a strange bed. Rawden was gone.

Her heart sank. Rawden Voss was like the sun. When he shone his light on you, everything was good with the world. But when he turned away, a coldness crept into your heart. The virile, handsome earl had a hold over women, and she did not doubt there had been many. How could she ever hang onto such a man, gain his loyalty, and keep him happy, no matter how much she wriggled for his pleasure between the sheets?

Grace fell back on the bed as her utter surrender of the night before came back to mock her. She covered her face with her hands and moaned into them as a light tap came at the door, and then Mrs. Percy bustled in. Her face betrayed not one flicker of surprise to find Grace in Rawden's bed.

'Good morning, Lady Voss. Here's a hearty breakfast to warm you and keep your strength up.'

Grace could have sworn the woman was stifling amusement. Perhaps she was used to coming into Rawden's room to find signs of a passionate night – clothes strewn everywhere, rumpled covers, and a dazed, pink-faced woman in his bed.

'What a storm that was, whipping up the estuary and sending branches crashing down all around the woods,' she said. 'And the master would go out in the dregs of it, first thing.'

Grace attempted indifference and failed. 'And where did the master go?' she wailed.

'Oh, I am not privy to that information, but he left a note there on the tray.'

The note was short and to the point.

Grace,

I have business which takes me to the notary in the village. I trust you rested well. I will endeavour to return before

nightfall if the tide allows.

Fond regards,

Rawden.

‘When he was a youngster, he had a habit of disappearing and reappearing whenever he felt like it, much to his father’s chagrin,’ said Mrs. Percy. ‘And it seems he has not changed.’

Mrs. Percy gabbled on as disappointment and anger soured Grace’s stomach. ‘Fond regards,’ indeed. She would give him, ‘Fond regards,’ when he returned. How dare he address her so formally after the heated activities of the night!

‘No doubt he will be back soon enough, Lady, and how could he not with such a lovely young bride here waiting for him? So do not fret.’

‘I am not fretting, nor shall I spend my time idly awaiting the Earl’s return. I shall breakfast and then be up and about my duties. I wish to know everything about Marshgrave, and then I mean to explore the island in its entirety.’

‘Oh, very well, but there’s a visitor come this morning.’

‘What visitor?’

‘A fellow from London - Dawes, I think his name is. One of your old servants, I believe.’

‘Good God. Do you mean Dawson?’

‘Oh, that’s it, yes. Forgive my impertinence, but a more gangly, awkward string bean of a thing you could scarcely find and with not a word of sense to be had from him. Been sent to bolster the help at Marshgrave, he is, or so the master informs me. Goodness knows why. We have shifted well enough for ourselves to this point. But everything changes when a new master takes the reins. They all want things done this way or that.’

Grace was confined indoors for the morning as the storm, which had borne witness to her surrender to Rawden, left its dregs lashing the windows with rain and hail. In high dudgeon,

she sought out Dawson, who had been put to work piling firewood before the hearth in the library. He stiffened when he saw her, and his face turned pink.

‘What are you doing here, Dawson?’ she demanded.

‘I...er...the Earl bid me come to your employ, Mistress.’

‘You address an Earl’s wife as ‘Lady’, Dawson.’

‘Forgive me, Lady Voss,’ he sputtered.

‘And why should he engage you out of all the servants at my Uncle Charles’ house?’

‘Oh, Lady, forgive me. The Earl bid me keep an eye on the goings on at Grosvenor Square to pass on information about who came and went and so forth.’

‘When was this?’

‘On the second occasion he visited.’

‘And you agreed?’ cried Grace.

‘Yes, to my eternal shame, but in my defence, the Earl swore it was in your best interests. He said that man, Caville Sharp, was a danger to your person and that he was determined to protect you from his villainy.’

‘How could you, Dawson? Where is your loyalty? Was I not always kind to you?’

‘That is why I did it. I wanted you safe, Lady. And the Earl is not the sort of man one can say ‘no’ to.’

Well, on that subject, they could agree, for she hadn’t exactly fought Rawden off last night. Grace’s face flooded with heat, and Dawson mistook it for anger, for he looked distraught suddenly, his adam’s apple bobbing.

She relented out of pity. ‘See here, Dawson, I am most disappointed in this turn of events. I thought you were more trustworthy than to collude with a stranger. But I am willing to overlook it, if you swear never to do so again and to give me loyal service.’

‘I will. I do. I will be your most loyal servant, Mistress, I mean, Lady Voss.’ He gave an exaggerated bow, and Grace dismissed him.

What to do now? She could not spend all day hanging about Marshgrave like some unwanted ghost, achieving nothing and consumed with angry yet yearning thoughts of Rawden. So Grace pulled on a shawl and set about exploring each wing of the house, enlisting Mrs. Percy as a guide.

Most of the upstairs was shut off – each bedroom as unloved and bone-cold as the next, pieces of furniture draped in sheets, just like Rawden’s London home. Grace concluded that Rawden’s father had not entertained visitors much. And Mrs. Percy remarked that the old man had retreated to Marshgrave in the years before his death, ‘like a grumpy old badger backing into its burrow,’ and from there, he had shunned society of any kind.

‘But he set such store by William, his younger son. You will have heard of him from the master.’

Grace blinked back tears. Nobody had heard of her at Marshgrave because William had kept her a secret.

‘What hopes he had for him,’ continued Mrs. Percy before catching the expression on Grace’s face and excusing herself. ‘Forgive me. I should not rattle on so about private matters.’

‘And what of Rawden? Did the late earl not have high hopes for his eldest son, too?’ asked Grace, ravenous for gossip.

‘No.’ She bit her lip. ‘I should not speak so and do not tell the master, but his father was rotten and cruel to him. As a boy, he bore it with fortitude, but when he became a man, he fought back, and there were vicious rows, broken crockery and windows. Why, they even fired pistols at each other once.’ She put her hand to her heart. ‘Rawden has his mother’s good looks but his father’s black temper, so it made for a very uncomfortable few years until he came of age and ran off and purchased a commission.’

‘Oh. Then I pity him for his unhappiness,’ said Grace.

‘Aye, but never show it, is my advice,’ said Mrs. Percy with a horrified expression. ‘He will not like your pity, not a bit, for he is proud, very proud indeed. And he has changed a great deal recently. He is less taciturn, less morose. I suppose it is because now he has you to give him cheer. I can see it on his countenance. Now, let us go below where it is more cosy. We will make for the kitchen where you may meet cook and the other servants.’

After a dizzying round of introductions, Grace retired to her room and waited out the rest of the day for Rawden’s return, but night fell, and he did not come. Grace could not sleep, torn between longing for his arms about her and irritation that he did not seek her company. Surely, if he liked her, he would have rushed back to her bed, tide or no tide. In a fit of pique, she sprang out of bed, took her candle and set off for the library. She might strain her eyes reading in semi-darkness, but it would calm her whirling mind.

When she padded into the library, it was to find a figure sprawled over the desk, illuminated by a few candles, all burned low. Rawden’s broad shoulders were unmistakable, heaving gently in sleep, and there were papers spread all over the desk. A Messrs. Gable and Gilchrist, Solicitors, appeared on the letterhead. It was too dark to make out their nature, and Grace did not want to pry, but it seemed Rawden had told the truth when he said he was going to see his notary. He had not run away from her company after all.

Grace shivered. It was cold in the library, and Rawden was deep in sleep, his dark hair flopping over his eyes. How vulnerable and boyish he looked, with no glare or irritation to mark his fine features. It was as if she were looking down on the unloved boy he had once been, lonely and abused. In a fit of pity, she took the shawl from her shoulders and draped it over Rawden’s. She smiled as she reached out and gently brushed the hair out of his eyes.

Rawden woke with a start and a curse. His hand shot out and grabbed her wrist in a fierce grip. ‘What are you about?’ he demanded.

The change in him was staggering. ‘I saw you were asleep, and I...’

‘You were spying on me?’

‘I came to get a book. Rawden, you were cold, so I put my shawl about you.’

He looked down at her shawl in amazement and frowned. ‘You do not have to coddle me like an infant.’

‘I had best go then,’ said Grace.

Rawden’s grip softened, and he shook his head at her. ‘Forgive my sourness. Your gesture was well-meaning. It is just that I am not used to such small kindnesses.’

‘Rawden, if I am to leave you in peace, you must let go,’ cried Grace.

He stood up and cast aside the shawl. ‘I’ve a mind to hang on,’ he said, pulling her close. ‘Did you miss me today?’ he breathed in a voice like velvet running down her skin, making Grace acutely aware that she was naked under her nightgown. He began to kiss his way down her neck to her collarbone.

‘Yes. I mean, no. I kept myself busy,’ she answered. After all, he chose to leave her. The warmth of his lips on her cold flesh confused her thoughts. The press of his body against the flimsy nightgown set her heart racing. Her skin prickled with goosebumps as he put his mouth to her ear and breathed, ‘I think you did, but you won’t own to it. I missed you, Grace. Can’t you tell?’

She could most certainly tell, for his manhood was an iron bar against her belly. Grace was about to wriggle out of his grasp and get to the safety of her bedroom when he suddenly kissed her hard, taking her breath away. She could summon no protest as he swept her up onto the edge of the desk, sending his important papers fluttering to the floor, or when he lifted her nightgown and parted her thighs.

‘No, Rawden. I will not be with you after you go off without so much as a by your leave.’

‘I didn’t want to wake you this morning, for you looked so lovely in sleep. And I had business to attend to with some urgency, as I do now,’ he breathed, sliding cool fingers up the outside of her thighs.

‘What business?’

‘Making you cry my name as I take you, over and over.’

Chapter Thirty-Two

Grace's instinct was to push Rawden away and go back to bed. She should reject the hunger in his eyes and the urgency of his mouth, claiming hers. But Grace could only moan and cling to him as he wriggled out of his jacket in great haste. There was a tearing sound as he tore down her nightgown, and his hands found her breasts, which had tightened to peaks of desire under his touch. His tongue flicked into her mouth, distracting Grace momentarily from the exquisite fullness of Rawden entering her. He held her forcefully against his thrusting manhood by a handful of her bottom. A hot, pulsing joy surged through her, and Grace did cry his name and he, hers.

It was a short-lived, feverish coupling, and when it was over, Grace's inhibitions had melted like the dying candles – into a puddle of abject lust. Rawden's hand slid into her hair and fisted as he pulled her shuddering body to his. Grace had never felt such delicious shame in her life. And when Rawden took her cheeks in his hands and kissed her forehead, she could imagine there was tenderness in his touch, even fondness in his heart.

Rawden pulled up her nightgown abruptly and withdrew from her warmth, picking up the shawl where he had cast it aside and wrapping it around her briskly. 'Forgive my ardour. It seems to know no bounds around you,' he muttered.

'There is nothing to forgive, Rawden. I think I rather enjoy your ardour,' she said, pressing her forehead to his chest in mortification at her own boldness.

'You must go back to bed and warm yourself, Grace,' he said, bending to retrieve his papers.

Grace hopped off the desk. She could not quite believe she had defiled it in such a way, but Rawden brought out the worst in her. 'Are you coming?' she asked.

He jerked his head in the direction of the door. 'Hurry now, or you will catch a chill.'

Grace hesitated for a moment and then hurried away with the dreadful feeling that she had been dismissed. She shivered as if a draught had blown in from the sea. Was that carnal release all that Rawden wanted from her? If so, she would take it for the brief happiness it brought. She would never beg for it, nor would she reject it. It was as if their pride could only let them come together in the physical act. It was their path to an intimacy of sorts, but she could not trust in it.

She slid between her bed sheets and curled into a ball, knees to chest, Rawden's seed sticky between her legs, making her feel like the worst slattern. Expecting a long, cold night of remorse, Grace was amazed and delighted to hear the click of the doorknob turning and then the mattress sagging as Rawden slid in beside her. His strong arms pulled her in, his belly to her back, and she smiled in the darkness. Grace turned and boldly kissed him and snuggled into his chest, slipping her hands into his shirt to feel the fuzz of warm hair. Rawden sighed and kissed the top of her head.

'Safe now,' he breathed. 'No more adventures for today, you wanton.'

She hardly dared ask. 'Did I please you, Rawden?'

He chuckled. 'A good deal more than a rogue like me deserves. I am beginning to think that perhaps marriage is not so bad after all. Did I please you, Grace? I felt that I did?'

'I should not have behaved in such a way.'

'Oh yes, you should. I command you to be wanton more often. And you have worked a miracle, Grace.'

'What is that?'

'With you in my bed, I am almost happy to be at Marshgrave.'

'And that is a miracle?' she asked, Mrs Percy's words echoing in her head. 'His father was rotten and cruel to him.'

'Yes,' he replied. Rawden let out a shuddering sigh. 'I have not stayed the night here for years. It holds bleak memories and is a draughty old pile. It softens with you in it.' He paused. 'As you soften, with me in you.'

Grace gasped and slapped his chest, and he tugged her in close.

‘Why are you so surly and snarling, Rawden?’

‘To keep the world at bay.’

‘I think perhaps you do it so that no one can see you have a heart beating in this chest.’ Grace kissed the warm hair at his heart, and he pulled her closer.

‘I was born here, you know. This is where I entered the world, with a lusty cry of protest apparently.’ He stroked her hair gently, the pad of his thumb brushing her forehead. ‘I was but a few days old when my father named me a bastard.’

Grace jerked back from him. ‘No.’

‘Don’t pretend you haven’t heard the rumours.’

‘Yes, from the more spiteful members of the ton, and they have my contempt for saying such nonsense. But it is your business, Rawden. You need not discuss it with me.’

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her. ‘I came too early to be his, my father said. It was an arranged marriage between my parents, much like ours - one of mutual prosperity and convenience – appropriate, I suppose, by the standards of the ton. But it was a hasty affair. My mother’s family were apparently keen to expedite the union as soon as may be. I have heard different versions over the years and cannot rely on the sources. For I have also heard that my father was the keen one, eager to ensnare my mother, the Honourable Agatha Radcliffe, for she was so very beautiful.’

‘He was in love, then?’

‘My father might have been besotted, but it is hard to imagine him truly in love. He had a rock for a heart. I like to believe that in the beginning, there was mutual respect in the marriage, but if there was, it quickly turned to mutual loathing. They were ill-suited. My father, so stern and cold, and my mother, amiable, outgoing, an impulsive woman with a free spirit, which he sought to break.’

‘So she was not happy in the marriage.’

‘Apparently, my father was little better than her jailor, and she was a disappointment as a wife, for she would not bend to his will. She was disobedient, fey and hedonistic. Yet, somehow, an heir was conceived just weeks into the marriage, after which my mother, duty done, eschewed his bed. They tolerated each other long enough to do their duty and conceive me, and then the marriage was over in all material respects. I have most of this from Reeves, who was in my father’s employ for years.’

‘He does not seem the sort to serve a gentleman or a grand house.’

‘No, for his manner is woefully rough, but my mother liked him, for he has always spoken his mind. And he, in return, had a fierce loyalty to her and to William and I by association.’

There was silence for a while, but Grace desperately wanted to know Rawden, so she had to ask. ‘So they were unhappy together. But what made your father name you as a...’

‘A bastard? You may say the word, for it no longer offends me. In fact, I take pride in not sharing that man’s blood. The truth is, my mother is rumoured to have lost her honour before marriage. My father declared that I was conceived with a lover. So she was tainted, and it was all my fault.’

‘How could you be to blame, Rawden?’

‘Because it was my fault, Grace. If only I had been in less of a rush to enter this world. Reeves told me I was big for a newborn, coming weeks early and taking everyone by surprise, though perhaps not my mother. Newborns are usually tiny, sagging bags of flesh, malformed little runts, but I was not. I was a sturdy boy with a loud cry, so my father’s suspicions were aroused. After that, he saw betrayal everywhere, in the haste with which they wed, my mother’s utter lack of interest in him as a husband, her shunning his bed. She denied the accusation, of course, but his desire for my mother had turned to resentment, so his jaded eye moved on. I grew up more her son than his. My father all but disowned me as a bastard. It all became a terrible scandal.’

‘But many couples come together before marriage if they are in love, so why would anyone think you were illegitimate?’

‘Rumours started to circulate that my mother was not chaste upon marriage, and it was only later in life that I found out the source was none other than my father. He set people to whispering behind her back. He subjected her to the scorn of society and the taint of loose morals, and then he sent my mother to this estate at Marshgrave, where he all but left her to rot until he needed another heir. I was sent here too, and it made for a miserable childhood, the servants looking at me sideways as a bastard and my mother, half mad with loneliness and disappointment.’

‘But they had William. I wonder that they would come together again, given they were so at odds.’

‘Indeed. It is somewhat of a puzzle. Reeves told me there was a grand ball held at Marshgrave the year of Will’s birth. For some reason, my father decided to allow my mother to attend, or she persuaded him to let her. Reeves said she was at her glittering best – sociable, graceful and very lovely. Perhaps the two of them imbibed too much that night, perhaps they came together for appearances, or my mother let my father into her bed to tempt his money from his pockets, but whatever the reason, by some miracle, William was conceived, at which point my father departed once more.’

‘I am sorry for your mother. She must have been very unhappy.’

‘Yes, but she took solace in her children. She was a kind and loving mother. And when William came along, I also took solace in him, for he had not a vicious bone in his body, not even as a child. He was clumsy and needed looking after, always falling over and following me everywhere. And we would play together in these woods, along the rocks on the shoreline, fishing for crabs, climbing trees, skinning our knees. So, I do have some happy memories of Marshgrave before I was sent away to school. It was while I was there that my mother died.’

‘How?’

‘Pneumonia. She liked to walk in all weathers and got soaked one day and was taken very quickly. When she passed, I think it shocked my father to the core. I remember he was desolate.’

‘So he relented towards you?’

‘Not for long. He still liked to punish her, even unto the grave. As I grew up, my father favoured William over me and made no secret of it. Oh, he twisted that knife, I can tell you.’

‘He did?’

‘I was sent away to school at an early age, where I was mercilessly bullied. The rumours of my mother’s supposed infidelity had preceded me, you see. Some wither under such abuse, but I thrived on it and became vicious, self-reliant and strong. I did not feel worthy of love, so I avoided it at all costs. I grew a cold, hard shell. So, perhaps I am my father’s son after all.’

‘And William?’ Grace could hardly bring herself to say his name, given what she and Rawden had just shared. She held her breath lest it anger him.

He gave a great, heaving sigh. ‘William was brought up at home and treated as the heir to the Voss fortune. He grew up in my mother’s image, not my father’s, so he turned out well, the finest of men. I, on the other hand, grew up in bitterness, and I have neither my father’s cold, calculating temperament nor my mother’s loving one. I take after whatever black fiend sired me.’

‘Rawden, why say that? You do not know that you are a bastard.’

‘Of course I am, for I am sinful, reckless and loveless to my core, Grace.’

‘You are not loveless, Rawden.’

He put his lips to her forehead. ‘Why not?’

Damn her foolishness for saying such a thing. Rawden would hate her pity. ‘I think everyone is capable of love, even

the blackest of hearts. Please say you do not believe it - the rumour that your mother strayed before marriage. It only tarnishes her memory, and then your father would have won.'

'I do not know what to believe, and I will never know the truth, so I have long since forsaken punishing her or myself for it. I loved her, and she loved me, and there you have it. Who am I to judge my mother for wanting to find some happiness in this world?'

'We all want that.'

'But you do not have it with me,' he said.

'I could, if you would just...if I could trust in you, Rawden.'

His lips moved closer. 'You can,' he breathed.

'But you are locking me up here, and you brought Dawson, your spy, to whisper my secrets into your ear.'

'Ah, yes. I was going to explain that to you.'

'Well, he did your explaining for you.'

'Desperate times called for desperate measures, Grace. I needed eyes in your Uncle Charles' household, and he seemed an easy mark. That is how I found you in the park and kidnapped you that day, though I neglected to tell Dawson that was my intention.'

'Well, Dawson will not be spilling any more secrets, as I shall have none to spill. So you have no need to lock me away,' said Grace.

'When you have a precious jewel, do you leave it lying around so that others may steal it?' Rawden kissed her so deeply and for so long, Grace thought she might swoon. 'I brought you here so that I don't lose you, Grace,' he whispered. 'I will not let you run from me again.'

'I...I don't think I want to,' she gasped.

'You should.' Rawden turned her onto her belly and lay his hard body over hers. 'For I have wicked designs on you,' he

breathed, parting her legs with his knee and nipping her earlobe with his teeth. 'Very wicked designs indeed.'

Rawden woke to blue-green sunlit heaven. For a moment, he did not know where he was until the night's passion rushed back. He was lying in bed in Grace's room. Everything was soft and warm – the pretty wallpaper, bright in early sunshine, her clothes strewn about in a profusion of lace and silks, the delicate furniture - female-sized and curvaceously carved. Her bottom was equally curvaceous and currently pressed to his groin, which began to stir when she wriggled and moaned in her sleep.

Rawden froze, lest he wake her, for he was not ready to talk, nor was he prepared to sink back inside her welcoming body and worship it with his. There would be too much feeling, too much tenderness, in that. His face was buried in Grace's cloudy red-brown hair. Rawden sucked in its scent - apples and apricots mixed with rose, perhaps? He had no knowledge of such things and had never taken the trouble to enquire. He recalled holding onto its silky coils as he had pinned and taken her in the library. His groin heated at Grace's remembered surrender and her passion, which had risen to match his own.

And afterwards, there had been that strange compulsion to talk, that twisting of his heart that was almost painful. Bitterness had bubbled to the surface, along with that old heady brew of guilt, love and resentment, all tied to his regard for William. Rawden had loved his brother fiercely, but he had also envied him his place in his father's heart and home, one he could never occupy. Was his desire for Grace some way of taking back some small piece of William's advantages?

Grace sighed and muttered his name in her sleep, and Rawden slid quickly out of bed. He frowned down at her. She was so unspoiled and lovely in repose. Confusion racked him. This was not the triumphant afterglow of mutual satisfaction – fleeting, selfish, smug. He had been as intent on her pleasure as his own last night. No, this was infatuation – hot, urgent, all-consuming, and it terrified him. He could not give his heart to Grace for her to crush with eventual indifference. Had the

hard knocks of life taught him nothing? Was he to be reduced to a babbling, weak fool on account of a woman?

Rawden rushed from Grace as quickly as his legs could carry him. He dressed for the road and called for his horse to be brought, and within the hour, he was galloping across the causeway against a headwind of guilt and desire.

But instead of spinning his horse around and galloping back to Marshgrave, and his wife's bed, he did as he had always done. Rawden locked all tenderness out of his heart and pushed on alone.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Grace stared out at the tide surging over the causeway. Gulls whirled against a biting wind rushing across the stretch of grey water and already the sun was low on the horizon, so he would not come back tonight. What a fool she had become, watching for Rawden for three long weeks. He regularly sent presents of jewellery and little trinkets, along with letters enquiring about her welfare, but otherwise avoided her as though she were a leper. One thing he had sent had been especially galling.

She glanced back, and there he was, whittling at some wood under the shade of a tree. He had turned up unannounced three days after Rawden's departure. The scrape of his knife on wood irritated her beyond measure.

'Do you not grow weary of spying on me, Reeves?' she shouted.

'No,' he replied, not looking up from his labour.

'Yet you insist on following me everywhere, like some lurking ghoul, a shadow I cannot shake, no matter that I stand in the sunshine.'

'For my lurking, I beg forgiveness, but I am no spy. Rawden, I mean, the Earl, sent me to have a care for your person.'

'He thinks I will run away again, doesn't he?'

'Maybe you will, maybe you won't, but I aim to see that you are here, safe and sound when he comes back.'

'If he is so concerned for my welfare, why doesn't he come home?' said Grace.

He shrugged. 'How am I to know his mind if you do not? Only orders I got was, 'Look out for my wife. See that she is not lonely and comes to no harm.' And as to coming home, Rawden hates this place, and it has never been home to him.'

'Oh, I see. Well, Reeves, you should take yourself off as I can hardly swim my way out of here tonight.'

Reeves looked up and met her eye at last. 'His orders were kindly meant, Lady Voss. If you dig deep enough, you will find that the Earl has a softer heart than many would believe. Most people just don't get close enough to see it.'

'If you say so,' she replied in a great huff.

While Grace was exasperated with Reeves as a companion, his presence had become tolerable. The man was content with saying little as he walked behind her as she strolled about Marshgrave's woods, speaking only when she spoke. And he had taken her into the village in the little carriage whenever she wanted and was her guide to the surrounding countryside, which was quite pretty away from the chill sea air. The village was a small place of modest dwellings, a handful of shops and a little whitewashed church where they had spent a few Sundays worshipping in ice cold pews. Reeves thoroughly resented these trips, fidgeting and grumbling beside her, so Grace had determined never to miss church. His glower prevented her from socialising with the other gentlefolk who attended, but as they largely viewed her with suspicion, that was no great loss.

Reeves coughed to draw her attention and gave her a direct gaze. His eyes seemed to reach into her very soul. Was Reeves hoping to see a genuine heart and kindness sitting there, and instead, seeing a gold-digging jade? Was that why he was always so blunt with her, out of loyalty to Rawden?

'I must be off now as I have an urgent task to attend to,' said Reeves, as if he were dismissing her, not the other way around.

Grace could not imagine what urgent task awaited him, but it might have to do with seeking out Mrs. Percy and taking tea, sitting before the kitchen fire with their heads close together. This, despite the housekeeper having dismissed Reeves as 'a sullen old soul at the best of times. We shall not be very merry with him about the place,' she had said, when he first arrived.

And Reeves' task was most certainly not keeping a watchful eye on the other servants. This very morning, Grace had endured an awkward encounter whilst taking carrots down to

the stables to feed the horses. She had blundered in upon Dawson and the scullery maid entwined in each other's arms, his hand up her skirt, her head thrown back and moaning. Thank goodness they had not spotted her, and she had been able to make her escape. It seemed everyone around her felt the warmth of friendship and lust, yet she shivered in the cold blast of Rawden's indifference. Like all the old rooms in Marshgrave, she had been shuttered and left to become dusty and derelict and rot her youth and vitality away on a narrow spit of land, entombed in a gloomy house. It was insupportable.

Harriet had written. Her letter was trite and full of meaningless gossip about mutual acquaintances. She made no apology for her betrayal in giving her up to Rawden, as though it had never happened. Grace could imagine Harriet brushing it off as a minor inconvenience, a small shadow skidding across her perfectly ordered world. She asked after Grace's welfare, but Grace was not inclined to reply with any warmth. Perhaps Rawden had been right about Harriet being a fair-weather friend, and so Grace had responded, thanking her for her enquiry and that, yes, all was well and that she was enjoying her time at Marshgrave. To some extent, that was no lie. It was far better being mistress of her own house than clinging to her uncle's grudging charity.

The only blight to her new-found freedom was that she could not share it with Rawden. Perhaps she should have listened when he said he would not be the 'best of husbands.' In time, she could reconcile herself to being alone, and the coward in her did not want her husband to return and stir up those feelings of desire, excitement and longing, because the inevitable withdrawal of his affection and admiration would be worse than Rawden's indifference.

Rawden sat in the little stone folly overlooking the grey water as the sun hovered on the horizon, turning the ocean to gold. The snap of a twig gave Reeves away.

'Why did you not tell her you were back? Sneaking into your own house is not your way.'

Rawden turned and sighed. 'I wanted to talk to you first. How does she fare?'

'Your wife fares well enough, considering you are no husband to her.'

'Have a care, Reeves, and answer my question.'

'She gets along nicely and is never idle. She has opened one entire wing of the house, washed the drapes and aired out the rooms. Got a terrible fright one day when some pigeons nesting in the fireplace rushed out at her all at once. Endless shrieking, there was.'

'I would have liked to see that. But why are livestock making a home in Marshgrave?'

'A broken window. Your wife got us to mend it.'

'What else has she been up to? Have you talked much?'

'Oh, aye. The lady is chatty, gallingly so. She rattles on endlessly of nothing in particular - the decorations for the house, how many woodpeckers she spots in the woods on her walks. Seems she has a fondness for them. And she visits the village but only socialises a little. In fact, she seems keen to avoid it. She is constantly vexed by that nincompoop, Dawson, though she will own he is becoming a more reliable servant. I cannot see it, as the lad is too busy fumbling in the scullery maid's skirts to attend to his duties diligently. But the lad worships her Ladyship, maybe a little too much for my liking.'

Rawden smirked. 'Give him a slap if he gets out of line.'

'With the scullery maid or the mistress?'

'You will earn yourself a slap with that comment.' Rawden stared out to sea in an agony of hope. 'What else, Reeves? Does Grace talk of me?'

'Not as much as your vanity would like,' replied Reeves. 'But she took the trouble to ask cook what your favourite dinner is so that she may organise it upon your return, and she watches the causeway every day and is endlessly disappointed.'

So, she had asked on his behalf, taking some trouble over his needs. Rawden was as touched by that as he was wracked with guilt.

‘She plays the pianoforte with remarkable accomplishment, you know. Lovely to hear music at Marshgrave once more,’ offered Reeves.

Rawden frowned. She had not owned to any skill when he had asked her.

‘I often find her curled up on the chaise in the library with her head in a dusty book? God knows why. I often wonder where she goes in her head.’

‘Away from Marshgrave and her cruel husband,’ thought Rawden.

‘You should be here,’ said Reeves.

‘I had business, as you well know.’

‘And is that business settled?’

‘Yes. I paid her off. She will not trouble me again.’ Reeves’ eyes met his. ‘It was a bad business, Reeves, and not well done on my part.’

‘These things never are. But here, you have a marriage and a wife. This is not some sordid entanglement with a woman who knows what she will get out of it. This is permanent.’

Rawden shook his head. ‘It is an illusion. This life was to have been William’s. I stand in a dead man’s shoes. I lie with a dead man’s sweetheart and demand she loves and obeys me. All that I have, I have stolen from another. How can I ever forgive myself for that?’

‘He is gone. You have to let him go.’

‘I cannot forget William.’

‘I am not talking about William,’ snarled Reeves. ‘I am talking about your father, the man who put his poison into your soul, and made you feel unworthy all your life. You must cut out his influence and open your heart to happiness. You are the lucky one.’

‘How so? How am I lucky, Reeves?’

‘You did not earn a French musket ball at Waterloo as did so many poor souls who fell beside you. Get on and live your life, for William’s sake and hers, if not yours. We’ll all be mouldering in our graves soon enough, so there’s no time to waste in looking backwards.’

‘What a miserable old soul you are, Reeves.’

‘Then we are two peas in a pod, Earl Voss,’ said Reeves.

‘Save for one thing. Women find me charming, whereas you seem to repel them with your glowering countenance,’ said Rawden, softening his words with a smile.

‘Do I now?’

‘Has that not always been the case?’

Reeves stood up stiffly. ‘It was not always the case. In my prime, when I was hopeful and foolhardy, I knew the meaning of true love.’

‘You astonish me.’

‘There’s many things about me you don’t know, and it is best we leave it that way.’

Rawden clapped the old man on the back. ‘I agree. Now, I suppose I must follow your advice, seek out my bride, and try to be a better husband.’

‘Aye, and you know I don’t need to talk you into it, either. Be off with you.’

‘You really are the most insolent servant a man ever had, Reeves.’

‘Thank you, Master.’

Rawden walked briskly back towards Marshgrave and soon spied Grace, cutting a forlorn figure standing at the water’s edge and staring off into the horizon, the wind flattening her skirt to her slender legs. The thought of them wrapped around his back made Rawden pick up his pace.

The crunch of his boot on the shingle had her whirling around. Grace looked unutterably fair - her cheeks rosy from the bite of the wind, her nose too, and the sunset turning her hair to fire and setting a light in those wide, pretty eyes. Her mouth fell open in surprise, but she did not smile at him.

‘I am back,’ he declared pointlessly, a little tongue-tied at her beauty and cool demeanour.

‘So it would seem. Did you have a good trip, Rawden?’ she said stiffly.

‘I did.’

‘Good,’ she said, turning back to the water.

‘Grace, have you been comfortable here at Marshgrave?’

‘Yes, I have had my every need attended to.’

Rawden could tell from her tone that not every need had been attended to. ‘I hear you have been busy with the house, and I can credit you for its more welcoming atmosphere, though I am not feeling it particularly at this moment.’ He gave her a wry smile, but she ignored him, so he walked over to stand beside her. There was silence for a while as they both contemplated the horizon.

‘I have kept myself busy, Rawden. What did you expect me to do, just sit around waiting with bated breath for your return?’

‘No, of course not. But I do hope you have not become too comfortable, for we are soon going on a trip together.’

‘Where?’

‘Back to London. I have imprisoned you here for long enough. It is time we re-entered society as we are currently the gossip of the ton. The cruel Earl Voss has whisked away his mysterious bride before anyone got a good look at her.’

‘So you are to appease the ton. I thought those fools meant nothing to you,’ she said.

‘They do not, but we can’t have them nursing a bad opinion of you, now can we? And I have a mind to spoil you a little

with the indulgences of town. I want to show off my beautiful young bride.’ Rawden tried to take Grace in his arms, but she rebuffed him.

‘No, Rawden. You cannot pick me up and then drop me when you get bored. I am not your opera mistress. I am your wife.’

He flinched as if she had slapped him. ‘It is not like that. I should not have stayed away so long.’

‘It has been over three weeks.’

‘And I missed you every moment of it, Grace. I will make it up to you if you let me,’ he said, nuzzling her neck. It was fragrant and warm, but her response was not.

‘If you have an itch, I suggest you scratch it elsewhere. I am done with being an occasional wife, and I shall lock my door tonight.’

Grace walked away from him, and Rawden followed all the way into Marshgrave and up to her bedroom, where she did not lock the door. Instead, she let him inside, and when he took her in his arms, stiff and unyielding, Grace let him kiss her. Slowly, she softened under his caresses and suffered his attentions without any show of resentment or reluctance but without the passion she had displayed before he went away.

Grace was keeping him at arm’s length, and it was his fault. For his part, Rawden found that his desire for her company had only intensified while he was away, and as he lay inside her compliant body, he felt an ache in his heart and reached a release of such perfection that it made him cry her name into the night, in agony and ecstasy.

In the afterglow of lovemaking, Rawden was forced to acknowledge that he was veering dangerously close to falling for his wife.

It terrified him.

He pulled Grace close and whispered into her hair, ‘Once I climb back into your bed, I find it increasingly hard to climb out again.’

‘I suppose that comes as a surprise to us both,’ she replied, and Rawden had no idea what she meant and dared not ask as she wriggled around, turning her back on him.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Their journey back to London was blessed with bright sunshine, so London seemed more cheery than when she had left it to face an uncertain future. Little was said between them, and Grace felt a gulf had opened up in her marriage, which she had no idea how to breach. She had let Rawden make love to her but had been careful to guard her heart, for she could not make out Rawden's motives for sharing her bed beyond sating a need. He was quiet, too, and probably offended by her lack of passion the previous night.

But there was no discussing it, so they sat like two surly strangers as they sped through lush parkland. It was dotted with herds of fallow deer and veined with bridle paths along which fashionable people rode to see and be seen. In the distance, Grace spied smoke from the chimneys of the poor, crammed into slums like the one Rawden had taken her to. Poverty was never far away in London. It had been stalking her all her life.

Eventually, they alighted the carriage at a grand house on the outskirts of the park. Grace stared up at the elegant, buttery façade set with white windows and graceful columns and turned to Rawden in confusion.

'Why are we here? Are we visiting someone?' she asked Rawden.

'No. This is Oak Park House, and it will be our home whilst we are in London. I have taken a lease on it for the rest of the year. The owner is touring on the continent and let me have it on excellent terms as we saw action together at Waterloo.'

'But what about Causton House?'

'Reeves once said it was not fit for a lady – too rough about the edges, and I think he was right.'

Was Rawden talking of the house or himself?

Rawden gave a boyish grin, grabbed her hand and drew Grace from the carriage and into the house, where several servants bobbed a greeting. He did not tarry long over

introductions before whisking her through a series of high-ceiling rooms, filled with sunlight, each more opulent than the rest with plaster fireplaces, intricately carved, resting like icing on a cake against expensively papered walls.

‘Does all this please you?’ he said with a frown.

‘Oh, Rawden, it is beautiful and far too grand for me.’

‘On the contrary. A plain setting will not do for a fine diamond.’

Grace frowned at his gushing compliment, and he coughed and turned away. He was not being himself at all.

‘Come, Grace, let me show you the bedrooms, for the views over the park are quite spectacular, especially at dawn when everything is misty and at peace.’

Her wariness must have shown in her face, for all the excitement seemed to go out of Rawden. ‘I intend to show you to the bedroom so that you may rest,’ he added, his eyes searching her face.

Grace followed him up the grand, curving staircase along a pretty hallway to her bedchamber. She gasped when she entered, for it was the prettiest room she had ever been in. Soft grey doors perfectly complimented the wallpaper of heavy pink flowers held on pale green swirling stems. It was like entering a bouquet. White lace curtains wafted inwards on a breeze from the tall, open windows. The scent of sun-warmed grass delighted Grace’s senses, and she turned to Rawden.

‘This is really mine?’ she said.

‘Well, it is really Colonel Richard Montague’s, but it can be yours until he returns from the fleshpots of Rome.’

‘It is so beautiful. It is beyond compare, Rawden. Thank you.’

On impulse, Grace rushed to him and kissed his cheek. A hint of cologne lingered on his skin, making her long to cling to his strong shoulders and lay her head on his chest. But she stepped away and continued to explore the room. She could

feel Rawden's eyes on her, like a caress, and was overcome with awkwardness.

'Tomorrow, we will attend a ball, if you want to, that is,' he said.

'A ball? Where?'

'My friend, Captain James Hardy, has family who live in town. They have invited us, and I thought you might like to go into society.'

'I thought you did not like such occasions,' she said.

'I have not sought them out, that is true. But you ladies like to socialise, do you not?'

She was the Countess Voss now. It was her duty to attend such events, like it or not, so Grace replied, 'Yes, of course. I would like to become better acquainted with Captain Hardy. He seems a very gentlemanly man.' She unfurled a pretty white and gold fan on the dressing table.

'Yet is it a wonder we are friends, for his character is the very opposite of my own,' said Rawden. When Grace turned to him, he gave her a dark look of such intensity that her knees almost buckled with lust. 'I must leave you alone to rest, Grace,' he said.

A reckless desire rose up in Grace. If she wanted her husband in her bed, why could she not have him? Was she always to do the right thing instead of grabbing at happiness? 'If you leave, Rawden, how am I to thank you properly for this lovely room?' she said, in what she hoped was a seductive way.

It obviously wasn't, for Rawden side-stepped her question, his jaw working. 'You may think of this as a sanctuary of sorts. I have decided to mend my ways, so I will not trouble you in this chamber unless you want me to.'

'Oh,' she said, deflated by his lack of interest and mortified that he must think her the worst kind of slattern for trying to tempt him. 'I do not quite take your meaning, Rawden?'

‘Grace, do you want me to stay and take you to bed? Is that it?’ he barked.

‘Rawden, I only meant...oh, leave if you must,’ she replied.

‘Woman, I am trying to mend my ways. I have forced my attentions on you when you did not welcome them, and I would make amends for that. Please allow me the grace to do that, at least.’

‘But you did not force me, Rawden. And I want to have a proper marriage, with all that it entails.’

‘You don’t know what you want, Grace, and unfortunately, neither do I, for I am not a mind-reader and until I can be sure I am welcome in your bed, I intend to avoid it.’

‘For another’s?’ she cried.

‘Now, there, you are uncharitable to me, Grace.’

Rawden gave a quick bow and took his leave.

Damn the man. Grace flopped onto the bed. How infuriating. One minute, he was devouring her with his eyes, and the next, he could not wait to leave. She cursed herself for a fool for trying to seduce him and a worse fool for wanting to when he only used her when it suited him. What about her needs, her desires? Grace lay back, staring at the pure white of the plaster ceiling. The breeze coming in the window did absolutely nothing to cool her heated face or the rush of lust pulsing low in her belly. Grace clutched her hand between her legs until it calmed.

Worst of all, she now had a cursed ball to go to.

James Hardy’s family turned out to be far grander than Grace had supposed, their house a curving façade of pure white offset with Grecian columns. The ballroom was vast and packed with elegant guests, and for some reason, they all turned as one and fell silent when she and Rawden entered. Grace’s face burned under many pairs of eyes as Rawden introduced her to Mr. and Mrs. Hardy and their daughter,

Prudence – a lively young woman who greeted Grace with gushing enthusiasm.

‘How lovely to finally meet you. I had despaired of Rawden ever finding a woman willing to put up with him,’ she teased, with a smirk at Rawden.

‘Oh, my bride was far from willing, and I had to kidnap her and steal her away before she said yes to me,’ he replied with a wink.

‘Oh, Rawden, you are too shocking for words. Is he not, Grace? May I call you Grace. I would like us to be friends, and if you come to Brighton for a season, it will be so diverting.’

Grace glanced at Rawden. Brighton? She had heard nothing of a plan to go there. And she was surprised to see him so warm and at ease with Prudence when he was usually so snarling with people in general. A spurt of jealousy rose in her.

‘We really must mingle, Prudence, and your other guests are piling up behind us,’ whispered Rawden.

‘Oh, very well. But I will find you later and interrogate Grace as to what kind of husband you are,’ said Prudence. As Rawden hurried Grace away, Prudence called out, ‘And since when did you mingle, Rawden?’

‘Yes, Rawden, since when did you mingle?’ said Grace with a frown.

He drew himself up. ‘I have been known to when the fancy takes me, and this might also shock you. On rare occasions, I have been known to cut an elegant figure on the ballroom floor. And this is one of those occasions.’ Rawden took Grace’s hand and swept her out into the midst of the whirling couples.

‘Rawden, what are you doing?’ she cried.

‘Dancing with my wife, who I must say looks enchanting tonight.’

‘I wish you would not.’

‘Why? Don’t you know how to dance, Grace? Just give yourself up to your partner.’

The look in Rawden's eyes belied his true meaning. 'I do dance, but not terribly well.'

'But you look extremely well, which makes up for it. All these people want an eyeful of you, so let them take their fill, and they might leave us be and move on to other fodder for gossip.'

'Very well. I will try not to step on your toes.'

A minute later, Grace did just that, and though Rawden winced, he hid his pain well and laughed it off. He was graceful and light-footed, and she felt like a clumsy oaf, but his strong arm on her waist and tight grip on her hand guided her expertly. Rawden stared down at her throughout, his lips mere inches from hers, making Grace giddy with longing. He was so fine in his evening clothes of black, and he had even donned a colourful waistcoat for the occasion – royal blue embroidered with gold. Not being able to touch him was delicious torture.

'You look very well this evening,' she said. 'You almost seem happy, Rawden.'

'And why should I not be when I have a wife I can take great pride in? You are lovely tonight, Grace. I must confess I feel my good intentions of keeping my distance slipping away from me. You might have to lock your door tonight.'

The music ended. His lips were almost on hers. If Rawden touched her, she would burst into flames, and in that moment, she would have let him do anything he wanted, anywhere he wanted. Such was her passion for him.

Just when Grace thought he would kiss her in front of the entire ton, they were interrupted by James Hardy crashing into their embrace. 'Rawden, you hound. You cannot hog your wife all night. I demand a dance.'

Rawden passed her to Hardy's embrace with good grace. 'See you take good care of her, and mind your toes.'

Grace was whisked out to dance and could hardly draw breath while Hardy bombarded her with compliments about her gown and how happy she seemed to have made Rawden.

He was a friendly, jolly kind of man, lively, like his sister, and Grace warmed to him. He lapsed into silence for a while, and Grace concentrated on not stepping on his toes. She caught sight of Rawden, laughing at something Prudence was saying, smiling along in easy conversation with Hardy's parents and others. It was strange to see him amongst friends as he had always seemed such a loner. Her heart twisted with resentment at having to come into society and share him, and suddenly, Grace felt wholly unworthy of her rich, handsome husband.

Hardy spoke, snapping her out of her mood. 'I must tell you that my surly friend, Rawden, seems to have softened under your care. I hope he makes you as happy as you have made him.'

'He is a most generous and considerate husband. I have no complaints.'

'Good.' He smiled. 'I am also glad to see him vanquish his grief over William's death. It was a bad business at Waterloo, and he suffered most grievously.'

Grace did not quite know what to say, but Hardy's face was kind as he stared down at her. 'I know that it was not just Rawden who suffered a loss that day.'

Did he think she was using Rawden? 'Captain Hardy, I intend to be a good wife and make him happy. My loyalty lies with Rawden.'

'I know it does. I can see it. But be kind to him, for Rawden does not always know how to control his temper or worst impulses. I should know, for I have been his friend these many years. Would you care to dance another?'

'No, and give thanks for no broken toes, Captain Hardy. I do not pretend to dance well.'

'You held your own quite admirably,' he said. 'Shall we find a glass or two of champagne?'

'Yes. I would like that very much,' said Grace. If she was to get through this evening, she needed to bolster her courage.

They retired to a quiet corner, and Hardy continued to be most attentive, but every now and then, his gaze slid to the

other side of the room. Grace soon saw that it focussed on a lovely young lady whose pert beauty made her impossible to ignore. She possessed the perfect patrician looks – ebony hair and blue eyes in a face of doll-like perfection, all high cheekbones and rosebud lips. She was quick to smile and laugh and was mesmerising in her vitality. Eager admirers would soon fill her dance card, and she would be the centre of attention, like a beautiful butterfly taking its pick of summer flowers.

‘Who is that fine young lady over there?’ she asked Hardy.

He reddened and fingered his collar, and his tone became melancholy. ‘It is of no importance,’ he said as if he could not bear to say her name aloud. ‘The lady and I were firm friends in childhood, but now she has become a captivating young woman who does not see me.’

‘I am sorry for it. Perhaps you should find another who is more appreciative of your admiration.’

Hardy gave a tight smile. ‘Once the heart is given away, one cannot easily retrieve it. I fear I nurture an affection born in childhood and thus rooted too deeply. It is a fault I wrestle with daily.’

‘Loyalty is not a fault, Captain Hardy.’

‘No, but it can be a great source of pain, can it not? Ah, I see Rawden bearing down on us. I must give way to him.’ He smiled, gave a curt bow and moved away. Grace had a pang of pity for Rawden’s rakish friend as the lovely object of his affection swirled out into the middle of the ballroom with a tall suitor.

As the evening wore on, Rawden could not tear his eyes off Grace. He suffered the polite chit-chat of the ton for as long as he could until the urge to kiss the life out of his wife overcame him. He grabbed Grace’s hand and led her from the ballroom and upstairs.

‘Come on. Let us explore,’ he said.

‘We are guests. We cannot.’

‘I know the Hardy’s well, and this house, like the back of my hand. Do you trust me?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Grace with a smile, but she followed all the same.

They hurried down candle-lit corridors until Rawden found a door and pulled her inside. ‘The billiard room,’ he declared, turning the key in the lock with a click.

The curtains were open to a moonlit night, and a lone candle stood on the mantelpiece, sending a flickering light bouncing off a huge gilt mirror above a billiard table.

‘And why do we need to see this, Rawden?’ said Grace.

‘Because I had an overwhelming urge to kiss you, Grace, and you know it. And I could hardly scandalise the ton by doing it in front of them.’ Rawden pulled her to him. ‘Are you willing?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she cried, and then she was in his arms, and he was all over her, in her mouth, hands tangled in her hair, stroking, grabbing, possessing.

What happened next would no doubt cause Grace to blush for many years to come, but Rawden was beyond caring. He lifted her onto the table, pulled up her skirts and entered her in a rush. He took her in a pounding passion as if he could not get close enough, deep enough, and Grace clung to him, encouraging him with little stifled moans gasped into his chest. He had never reached a peak so quickly, and as he spilt his hot release inside her slippery warmth, it was the most intense experience of his life – an insatiable, searing need.

To his surprise, Grace was not angry with his shamelessness. She giggled against his chest. ‘Oh, Rawden, we are so very wicked, aren’t we?’

‘And I am glad of it,’ he said, planting a hearty kiss on her mouth, plump from his kisses. ‘Now I think we should return to the ballroom for the sake of appearances, don’t you. Or we can go home if you would prefer.’

‘No, the Hardy’s are wonderful hosts, and I am beginning to enjoy myself.’

‘So I noticed.’

Grace gave him a feeble punch to the chest. ‘We can stay, but I must rearrange myself. I am sure I look a fright.’

‘That is a good plan. But I see not a hair out of place, which is surprising, given the violence of your affections.’

She thumped him again.

‘As far as passionate trysts go, you are a quick study, Grace. Are you sure you do not have a wicked past I should be aware of,’ he said, stroking her cheek.

‘Stop teasing. We both know it is you who has a wicked past.’

‘I concede. Come, let us make haste and return to the battlefield of the ballroom.’

No one seemed to notice when they slipped back into the ballroom, and Rawden was keen to dance with Grace again, to show her off, for some of the ton at the ball were the same people who had looked down on her at Lady Blanchard’s rout. He had the urge to champion her for all to see. But Hardy would insist they discuss a business venture he was interested in, so Rawden had to withdraw to his friend’s study for a while.

Grace was left to Prudence’s tender mercies, and Rawden could only hope she would survive the onslaught of impertinent questions from Hardy’s sister.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The evening wore on, and Grace's feet had begun to pinch in her elegant new shoes after yet another round of dancing. She had managed to escape Prudence's attention but now she was trapped by Mr. Hardy who had insisted upon a dance. She dearly wanted to sit, but he was such a gracious host that she could hardly refuse him. Luckily, he was old and didn't seem to mind her lack of proficiency or require much conversation.

'Might I cut in,' came a sardonic voice over her shoulder.

Grace turned and was greeted with the sight of Caville Sharp.

'The Countess Voss and I are old friends,' said Caville with his usual self-assurance. He gave a curt bow to Mr. Hardy.

'Oh, yes, of course,' said Mr. Hardy, far too polite to refuse, as he relinquished her to Caville's grip.

'I would prefer to sit a while,' squeaked Grace through a throat closed in horror.

'Nonsense,' said Caville. 'The evening is yet young, and you should be showing off your beauty, Countess Voss, not hiding in some corner. Don't you agree, Mr. Hardy?'

'She should indeed be dancing, and I am too old a partner to keep up. In the absence of the lady's husband, I am sure you will be a most chivalrous escort, Lord Sharp.' With that, Mr. Hardy tottered away, leaving Grace trapped.

'Mr. Hardy can have no notion of your real character if he names you as chivalrous,' said Grace, full of revulsion at having Caville's hands on her body.

Caville had a firm grip and held her far too close, and though Grace dearly longed to tear herself free of his grasp, it would certainly cause a stir. There were many eyes on them, so she must avoid that at all costs.

'Lead me from the floor so I may return to my party,' she demanded.

His grip tightened. 'I will do no such thing. It has been a while, and I must say, you have blossomed since last I saw you, Grace.'

She turned her face from Caville, determined to ignore him. Surely the music would finish soon so she could escape, but he insisted on whispering in her ear.

'There is a glow about you, Countess Voss. It must be married life. How I wish I had been the one to put it there, as I am sure Voss does, night after night, monstrously and forcefully, for it cannot be otherwise. Your frigidity would not allow you to respond to his caresses with any vigour.'

'How dare you speak to me so. Let go of me,' hissed Grace.

'No, I will not. I suppose Rawden is a man of experience,' drawled Caville. 'Your husband had the right idea. Do not take no for an answer, whereas I waited for compliance. Tell me? Do you like being bedded by an animal? Does that scar on his face repel or excite you, I wonder?'

Grace deliberately stepped on Caville's foot, and he winced but held onto her, his grip now painful. 'Touched a nerve, have I? Do that again, and I will make you suffer for it.'

'Unhand me.'

'No.'

'You dance too close. People are staring.'

'Let these vapid fools stare. Why worry about the opinion of sheep when you should be more concerned with pleasing the wolf?' He smiled, malice swirling in his grey eyes. What was he after, seeking her out, forcing his company on her when Rawden was with her?

She cast desperately about the ballroom, but Rawden had not returned. 'What do you want, Lord Sharp?' she said.

'What I have always wanted - you.'

'That will never happen, for I want to be as far away from you as possible.'

‘I do not relish being denied that which I covet, Grace. And deep down, you know you want me in return. Just because you are married doesn’t mean you can’t have your pleasures, as Rawden has his.’

Grace frowned up at him.

‘Ah, I see I have your attention. How much do you know about Romola Bianchi?’

‘What?’

Grace could not hide her dismay, and Caville saw it. A smile spread across his face, and it was a handsome, open and disarming one, but to Grace, it was the face of a snake about to sink his fangs into her flesh. Her legs almost buckled, but Caville held her up.

Her tormentor’s voice softened to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘You will have heard that Romola and Rawden are old friends and more. Rawden has been seen visiting that lady’s abode of late. For what purpose, one can only imagine?’ Caville steered her to the edge of the dancers, and for a moment, Grace thought he would let her go. ‘I will tell you more once we are alone,’ he breathed. Before she could protest, he dragged her by the hand through the throng and out of the ballroom. Grace found herself in a corridor beyond the music, candlelight, and safety. She wrenched at his hand, but Caville held her fast and dragged her into the gathering darkness of a long corridor.

A door opened, light spilt out, and suddenly Grace was face to face with James Hardy and Rawden, her hand still held tightly by Caville Sharp.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Rawden took one look at Grace with Caville Sharp and snapped. ‘What the devil is this, a tryst?’ cried Rawden, plucking their hands apart and shoving Caville violently against the wall by his lapels, sending a painting askew and almost crashing to the floor.

‘Hold, Rawden. Calm yourself,’ cried Hardy, but his rage would not be contained.

‘Rawden, no,’ cried Grace. ‘Stop it.’

‘How dare you put hands on my wife,’ spat Rawden.

‘She likes me to put hands on her, and it is not the first time,’ snarled Sharp.

‘You liar,’ cried Grace.

Caville ignored her. ‘I have tasted your wife, Voss, and I am not afraid to tell the truth, though she may be, given your violent nature,’ hissed Caville.

Rawden drew back his arm and hurled a savage punch at Caville’s face, sending him crashing to the floor. He would have followed it with a rib-breaking kick, save for Hardy, who stepped between them and hauled Caville to his feet.

‘We cannot have a scandal here at my family’s house,’ he cried, dragging the senseless Caville through the open doorway. Rawden followed, grabbing Grace and sweeping her into the room.

For a moment, there was horrified silence, punctuated by moaning as Caville came to his senses. The sound of his own enraged breathing filled Rawden’s head. A red mist came down, and Rawden wanted only to tear, punch, and break every bone in Caville’s body. He could not even look at Grace lest he explode with jealousy.

‘I’ll kill you for this insult,’ spat Rawden at the stunned man.

Hardy put out his hand. ‘No, you will not. You will calm down this instant. Rawden. You must return to the ballroom

and ascertain if anyone is aware of what has occurred. Act as if all is well. If we have been overheard, say it was a servants' squabble that got out of hand. And when you can, send my father's butler here.'

'I will not. I will stay and finish this worm.'

'That is the last thing you will do in my parents' house,' hissed Hardy.

Caville started to come around and find his feet. Hardy leant him on the edge of a desk to steady him. The wretch wiped blood from his nose and glared at Rawden.

'You are an animal,' he snarled.

'Another word, and I will end you,' said Rawden, looming over him.

'Please, stop,' cried Grace. She put a hand on his arm. Was she actually defending the bastard? He rounded on her. 'You best say nothing when my blood is up. I will deal with you later.'

'Deal with me? How will you do that, by hitting me too?' she cried.

'She is right. 'You must control yourself, Rawden.' Hardy's outrage cut through.

'Then get her out of here. Take her home. Would you do that for me?'

'Yes, but I cannot leave you two alone to tear each other to shreds in my father's house.'

'I swear I will not lay another hand on him, Hardy.'

'And you, Caville? Do you swear to be civilised?' said Hardy.

'If this brute can be, then so can I,' snarled Caville.

Hardy shook his head in disgust. 'Rawden is not the brute here. We both know it.' He put his face into Caville's. 'If you look for trouble, you will find it and suffer the consequences. Whatever you have unleashed here tonight, you have no one to blame but yourself.'

Grace approached him with tears in her eyes. ‘Rawden, please come home with me now. I can explain.’

‘Hardy, take her. Now,’ said Rawden, for he could not bear her tears. He was an open wound – raw, pulsing with pain. All the fight went out of Grace, and she let herself be led away by Hardy. An ominous silence fell, and a chilly calm settled over Rawden. His purpose became clear.

‘You have dishonoured me this night, Caville,’ he said.

‘Ah, just like when we were at school. That Voss pride will not let you acknowledge my superiority as a gentleman over a brute like you.’

‘You are no gentleman, nor could you ever be. You cast dishonour on my wife.’

‘Your wife, aye, by sufferance. It’s hardly a love match, is it? No wonder she looks elsewhere for her pleasures.’

‘Better than being bought by you and enslaved to your base desires.’

‘They are no baser than yours. Do you not force yourself on the lady? Don’t try and tell me you forgo your marital rights. You are no saint, Rawden Voss. And as to me buying Grace, did you not pay Charles Howden a goodly sum and clear his debts so that you could have her? You think yourself better than me, but you are not. You are nought but a thief because I saw Grace first, and you stole her from under my nose. I want her, Rawden, and she should have been mine.’

‘You are like a spoilt child, crying over your toy being taken away. With all your wealth, your rich wife, your homes and estates, still, it is not enough. You have to covet what belongs to others.’

‘As you coveted what belonged to your brother?’ said Sharp with absolute venom.

‘Hold your tongue.’ Rawden’s hands fisted at his side.

Caville gave a high, thin laugh. ‘What a thug you are at heart, and all those beatings at school made no difference, did they? Bad blood will out in the end.’

‘I may be a thug, but at least I have some shred of honour, Caville.’

‘You hit me tonight without warning or challenge. Where is the honour in that?’ cried Caville.

‘Alright. I will tell you where to find honour – at dawn, two days hence, on Putney Heath. I propose pistols.’

‘What?’

‘I challenge you to a duel. Find a second, Caville, or come alone and die alone.’

‘I will not dance to your tune, you ill-bred ruffian.’

‘Then be shamed before all the ton, for I will name you a coward before your family, friends, wife. That is the kind of taint that never washes out. I will make you the biggest fool in London.’

‘You would taint your wife’s reputation in the same breath,’ spat Sharp.

‘No. On the contrary, she will be the injured party. Remember, she has the protection of marriage now, the respectability of a husband who is an earl. I demand satisfaction, Sharp. Do you accept, worm?’

Sharp narrowed his eyes. ‘Very well. If you insist, then I accept. I will be there with my second.’ There was a flash of triumph in his eyes. ‘And I have always been an excellent shot. Soon, Grace will be a widow, and then she will fall into my hands like a ripe apple from a tree.’

‘I hope you feasted your eyes on my wife tonight,’ said Rawden. ‘For, two days hence, I will close them for good and rid this world of the pestilence that is Caville Sharp.’

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Grace cradled a hot chocolate for comfort as she stared at the park, stretching off in the green, misty distance. Autumn was creeping in and stripping the leaves bare, and they fell as she watched, like red, russet and yellow confetti. Had the warmth of Rawden's regard faded and died, too?

She burned at the injustice of Rawden's accusation of the night before. He had not come home, though Grace had lain in bed, longing for him and yet dreading his return as the hours ticked by. The morning was getting on, and still, he did not come. It was all so unfair. Yet beyond her sense of outrage lay shame, which any contact with Caville always evoked. And while she did not believe anything that came from that snake's mouth, his words about Romola had burrowed into her heart and made a bitter home there.

Rawden had lied. He had not thrown over his mistress. She was a fool for believing him. Oh, but was she a greater fool for believing Caville? There was only one way to find out for certain.

Grace called for a carriage, donned her coat and headed for Covent Garden.

In the cold morning light, the heat of Rawden's anger had dissolved into remorse, and Hardy was not about to let him off lightly.

'Your temper will be the death of us all, Rawden, and it will most certainly kill any regard Grace holds for you. But of course, that won't matter, for you will probably be dead or in prison for duelling, and she will be a most relieved widow.'

'I cannot let his insult stand.'

'Do not do this, Rawden. Caville Sharp is not worth it.'

'I must. So tell me, will I see you at dawn tomorrow?' he said.

Hardy shook his head. 'If you will not be turned from your purpose, then, yes. But I declare this is madness, Rawden. If the law discovers you, the consequences will be dire for both parties, and it will achieve nothing but ruination.'

'I have no other course,' said Rawden.

'And Grace? Are you going to tell her what you are about, seeing as it is because of her so-called dallying with the man that we are in this mess?'

Rawden gave his friend a hard stare, but Hardy was not to be turned.

'She gave Sharp no encouragement, and you know it, Rawden.'

'How am I ever to know it for certain?'

'She is your wife. You should feel in your heart that you can trust her. If I can see what kind of woman Grace is, surely you can, unless you are blind to her virtues? My own father spoke highly of Grace. He told me what happened when he danced with her. 'Some young blade swooped in and stole her from my arms, mid-dance, like a dashed highwayman.' That is his account of Sharp's interference.

'Does your father know of our troubles?'

'No, nor shall he. We are most fortunate that it is not already the talk of the ton this morning,' said Hardy. 'It would only bring scandal onto my family name.'

'Of course. And we cannot have that indifferent little fool you chase after thinking anything ill of you, can we?'

'You will hold your tongue on that subject, Rawden. I warn you.'

'I am merely pointing out that I am not the only fool for love here, nor the only one of us who is blind.'

'And you regard treating your wife as a child to be scolded and sent to her room for some imaginary transgression, love, do you?' shouted Hardy.

Hardy had a way of bluntly dissecting Rawden's character and not being afraid to speak his mind. His acute observations hurt all the more because they were true.

'I will not prostrate myself before Grace and become her whipping boy,' said Rawden. 'Now, enough of this blather. Will you be there tomorrow at dawn?'

'You know I will, for I am a fool, and I am in this as much as you.' Hardy headed to the door, then paused and looked Rawden in the eye. 'Duels have uncertain outcomes, so for the love of God, Rawden, go home and build bridges with your wife before you fight. Should you fall and...'

'I doubt she will have me,' snapped Rawden.

'And who is to blame for that, I wonder,' was Hardy's parting shot.

Covent Garden was a malodorous and overwhelming place, seething with people and trade, stinking from the mess of mud, manure and hundreds of dwellings pressed cheek to jowl. The grander of its buildings, frequented by the rich when they needed diversion, were beacons of light and beauty in a sea of deprivation.

Grace marched inside the opera house and found the manager. Once he learned she was a countess, he gave up the whereabouts of Romola Bianchi in a heartbeat. Whether or not he was scandalised by a woman of rank seeking a humble singer in a seedy part of London, he did not say, but Grace had the impression he was used to being discreet. As was her husband, it seemed.

A dark journey down dingy corridors brought her to Romola's lodgings. All around her, Grace could hear voices raised in laughter, cries and shouting, and her palms grew moist, and her heart started to gallop. Was this folly of the worst kind? But the manager banged on Romola's door with the side of his fist and declared her presence before she could take flight.

'Romola. Rouse yourself.'

An angry voice hit back from within. 'I paid my rent. Go away, you bloodsucker.'

He banged again. 'If you've company, declare it, for I have a visitor for you. High-class, too.'

'Go to hell and stay there, Morbius. I know you lie.'

The man turned to Grace. 'She's hoping for a fine gentleman. What a jape when she sees you instead. Her pretty face will fall, to be sure.'

There was a scrabbling noise, and the door swung open. 'This had better be good, Morbius or else....' Romola Bianchi's voice trailed away, and her mouth fell open. But she soon regained her composure. 'What do you want?' she sneered.

'I need to speak to you regarding my husband,' said Grace.

The opera manager leaned in to listen. 'You may go. I thank you for your trouble,' said Grace, pressing a coin into his greedy fingers. The man nodded and withdrew, though she could see him lurking within earshot.

Romola gave him a lazy glance. 'You'd best come in, if you dare, so that he can come back and press his ear to the door. He is a terrible sneak, you see.'

Grace entered, and Romola closed the door with a bang. She stood and stared at Grace, eyes scouring up and down. Then suddenly, she banged on the door with astonishing violence. A howl came from the other side of it, and she grinned. 'Now we are shot of him. What can I do for you, Lady Voss?' she said archly.

Grace could not imagine the source of her arrogance for Romola Bianchi was much changed since their last encounter. She wore no garish makeup, and without it, her face had a mere bland prettiness. There was an air of tragedy to it, evidenced by dark-circled eyes and cheekbones standing proud on her face. The woman had lost a great deal of weight and her voluptuousness along with it. Romola seemed pitiful in her shabby robe and stained nightdress, squaring her shoulders for a fight.

‘You need not fear what I have come to say,’ said Grace. ‘I do not mean to berate you for your connection with my husband. I merely ask for the truth of it.’

‘Oh, the truth is dangerous, Lady Voss. It can be the death of you.’ Romola reached up to tether a strand of hair that had come loose from her bun.

Grace froze as her eyes travelled to Romola’s arms. The woman quickly tugged down the sleeves of her robe, but it was too late. Two jagged pink slashes, one on each arm, told the tale. This was not the angry, frightening woman who had challenged her for Rawden’s affection. This was a broken and desperate woman. Her eyes met Romola’s. ‘What happened?’ said Grace.

‘Since when did I share confidences with the likes of you?’ replied Romola.

‘Since you saw my husband recently. Miss Bianchi, I need to know if he makes fools of us both.’

‘Aren’t you fancy women of the ton supposed to turn a blind eye to your husbands’ indulgences?’ Romola laughed bitterly and walked to the bedside table. It was littered with trinkets, an old plate with a crust of food scraps hardened on, and a bottle of what appeared to be gin. Romola took a swig from it and stared out the window at the bustle of London below. ‘Do not fear, Lady Voss. Your husband only makes a fool of me.’

‘But I heard that he came to see you lately. Is that true?’

‘It is. But he did not come to make love to me. As you can see, my light is somewhat dimmed of late.’ Romola gave a high, little laugh.

‘Dimmed by him?’

There was a pause. ‘Dimmed by life itself, the curse that is my womanhood, the cruelty of men. I could go on, but you did not come to hear me whine. You came here to find out if your husband still creeps into my bed.’ She turned to Grace, her lip twisting into a sneer. ‘I wonder that you can demean yourself so, and you a countess too.’

‘I would suffer any humiliation for Rawden,’ blurted Grace with horrible honesty. For the first time, she realised it to be true.

‘Why?’ said Romola.

‘I have grown fond of him.’

Romola’s face fell, and all her pride with it, like leaves falling from a tree, leaving just bare emotion. ‘Then you have my sympathies, truly.’

‘Please, tell me the truth of what Rawden is to you. Do me that kindness, at least.’

‘There is no kindness in the truth. Even your cossetted upbringing should have taught you that by now.’

‘I was not brought up as gently as you might think, and I am here, humbling myself before my husband’s mistress because I have to know. I am begging you for the truth, Miss Bianchi.’

Romola rushed up to Grace, her face so close the stink of gin was evident. ‘You want the truth? I hardly dare utter it. But here it is, and I say this for your sake, not his, not my own. Rawden does not love me. He never has, not me or another soul on this earth, save William. He talked of his brother often, you know. He took pride in him. He often said, ‘I wanted to guide him into manhood, to protect him from the worst of my father’s character, but I have failed him.’ Well, William was not the only one he failed.’

‘How did he fail you, Romola?’ said Grace quietly.

‘By not loving me as I loved him.’

‘But I thought...’

‘Ah, you thought I wanted his money. I did because that is my trade, getting money from men’s pockets. But the rub is, I never thought to fall for him. He is Earl Voss now, but he was a different animal when he first came to my bed – a lusty captain at arms, tested by battle, keen to live life to the fullest and taste all it had to offer, having danced so close to death. Battle makes men reckless, out for pleasure, or sends them to drowning their sins and sorrows. He was easy prey for one

such as me, and Rawden intrigued me. He is a tricky one – thorny, cold, and, some would say, callous. But now and again, he will let you see his soft underbelly, and that is the trap we fall for – that vulnerable, boyish side you want to protect and heal.’

It was all too much to bear – this remembered intimacy with her husband. Grace longed to run from this bitter woman, whose flesh had pressed to Rawden’s, whose touch he had once coveted. ‘So, are you still lovers?’ said Grace bluntly.

‘No, nor have we been since he wed you and threw me over for duty and honour. As far as I know, Rawden has been a faithful husband since he said his wedding vows, though God knows I tried to turn him from you. But your youth and innocence have soured my bed for Rawden. I repel now, where once, I attracted. He was always so sure of himself until you came along. Now, he is all confusion and weakness. Rawden longs for you. I can see it is love, and it has devastated him. For that, I truly hate you, Lady Voss.’

‘If my husband ended your attachment, why did he come to see you lately?’

‘Because he did not want my fall to sit on his conscience. I have been in low spirits, you see, and I begged him to come back to me. How it humbled my pride to do it. See what Rawden does to us. See how he twists our hearts and minds into ruin and despair, and all for the want of him.’

Romola turned back to the window, and Grace suddenly wanted to be as far away from this bitter woman and her degradation. ‘I thank you for your honesty,’ she said. ‘You did not owe me that.’

Romola took another swig from the bottle, pointing it toward Grace. ‘Your turn. Truth for truth. Why did you marry Rawden? Was it for his money?’

‘We barely knew each other. It was impulsive to agree to marriage. I cannot say why I did, in all honesty, other than I felt I had to.’

‘Yes. You gentlewomen have so few opportunities beyond wedlock. I may have to scheme and bed men I don’t particularly want, but having power over my own destiny is a kind of freedom you will never feel.’

‘You are right. I have few paths to choose from, but in Rawden, I have chosen well.’

A bitter smirk broke on Romola’s face. ‘Because he is handsome, with deep pockets?’

‘Because I think I could love him with all my heart.’

Romola flinched. ‘His own is a black one.’

‘Well, there, you do not know Rawden at all. Perhaps you never took the trouble to while you were dipping your hand into those deep pockets.’

‘If you like.’ A sly smile came to Romola’s face, unmasking the predator behind it. ‘Perhaps you can recompense me for my candour. I could have lied and twisted the knife, but I did not. That has to be worth something.’ She held out her hand.

Grace rummaged in her purse and held out some guineas. ‘This is all I have to give you.’

‘Then it must suffice,’ shrugged Romola. ‘You may go now,’ she said.

‘I am sorry about Rawden,’ said Grace.

‘No matter. I hope he does not break you, as he does all his toys.’

Grace hurried away, eager to escape the suffocating maze of rooms and corridors, with their grime-smearred walls, smelling of damp, dust and desperation. She was met by the manager at the end of the hallway.

‘Get what you wanted, Lady?’ he asked.

‘Yes, now please be so kind as to lead me back to the entrance, for I fear I could lose my way.’

He bowed and pointed the way, and Grace followed.

‘You are not the first lady to come in high dudgeon to see Romola,’ he said. ‘There’s always gentlemen coming and going, eager to savour her company, and when their wives find out, there is hell to pay.’

‘I am sure that is none of my business or yours,’ she replied.

‘As you like. One visitor in particular, stands out, came just yesterday. Handsome, he was, a finely-dressed gentleman. One of her richer admirers, I would say. Is that who you came to enquire about? I can tell you everything, for he was here just this morning – early for him. He usually comes after midnight.’

Could Romola have lied? Could Rawden still be visiting her? The loathsome man was after coin and baiting her to get it. He was relishing her discomfort, her desperation to know.

‘What did he look like, this gentleman?’ Grace asked, her heart hammering in her chest.

The man grinned, enjoying his triumph. ‘Light-haired, and he had pale eyes - grey, like stormy skies. The chorus girls were all sighing over him, to be sure. But Romola will chew him up and spit him out just like the rest.’

‘Stop,’ said Grace. ‘I don’t need you to point me in the right direction. I am sure I can find my way by myself.’

Somehow, Grace made her way outside, thankful to be out of the rank air. Caville Sharp had been the man visiting Romola, not her husband. Suddenly, it dawned on her that Caville’s obsession might not be with her but with Rawden. He coveted everything Rawden had, be it mistress, wife, friends, or anyone on whom Rawden relied. Caville’s pursuit of her and his professed regard were no more real than Romola’s affection for her admirers, but it might have ruined her in Rawden’s eyes just the same.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Grace rushed back to Oak Park House, urging her carriage driver to go as fast as he could. On arrival, she was informed that her husband had returned, so she hurried through the house, eager to see Rawden. She found him in her bedroom, standing before the window which gave the most panoramic view of the park, a dark shadow silhouetted against the blinding afternoon sun.

‘So you have returned from today’s adventure,’ he said. She would have gone to him, but something in his tone stopped Grace in her tracks.

Rawden turned and fixed her with a steely look. ‘Well? I am waiting,’ he snarled.

‘For what?’ said Grace.

‘An explanation of your behaviour last night.’

Her chest tightened, and her heart picked up its beat. ‘I have nothing to reproach myself for, Rawden.’

‘Have I been dishonoured because of you?’ he said so quietly it was almost a whisper. Rawden’s whole being seemed taut and set to snap at any moment. A wise woman would have appeased his anger, but the unfairness of his accusation sparked Grace’s ire.

‘I was dishonoured, not you, Rawden. Your pride and vanity may have been wounded, but Caville accused me of loose morals, a charge which you seem all too eager to embrace.’

‘And why not? You were hand in hand in a dark corridor, going, God knows where with a man who has tried to seduce you in the past.’

‘Rawden, he cut in while I was dancing with Mr. Hardy, and when the dance ended, he pulled me outside the ballroom. I did not know what to do. It all happened so quickly, and I did not want to cause a scene.’

His lip curled into a sneer. ‘Since when did you ever care about the opinion of the ton. Grace, tell the truth. Have you

always secretly favoured Caville, no matter that you protest otherwise?’

‘I have loathed Caville Sharp almost from the first moment I met him, Rawden. You must know this.’

‘Yet appearances would suggest otherwise,’ he said. Rawden took a step towards her, his hands fisted at his sides. The wounds on his knuckles, evidencing recent violence, were still raw. ‘Time and again, I find you in his presence as if you seek him out.’

‘No. It is the other way around. Oh, why can you not believe me?’

His anger deflated and turned to something worse – bitterness. ‘I suppose I should not care. This marriage was an arrangement, nothing more. I told you at the start that you would not come to love me, nor I you. But I must insist on one thing. I will have no bastards brought up in my name.’

‘How can you say such a thing to me?’

‘I say it because I will not stain any child with that reputation. And we should save this conversation for another day when my temper does not hang by a thread. Whatever you think of me, Grace, I ask that you comport yourself in a respectable manner.’

‘While you parade your mistresses and spread your affections all over London,’ she countered.

‘What is it to you if I do? You neither love nor desire me.’ Rawden flung back his head and sighed. ‘No matter the truth of it, or otherwise, here is my truth, Grace. I will not let anyone take what is mine.’

‘I am not yours, Rawden.’

He gave her such a bleak stare that she gasped. ‘No, you are not, and maybe you never will be.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘That Caville Sharp has always been there between us.’

‘Not by my choice or design, but by his own.’

‘Tell me, Grace. I will not be angry. I will accept it. Is Caville Sharp your lover?’

‘My lover?’ gasped Grace. ‘Rawden, do not be ridiculous.’

‘Oh, so I am ridiculous now. Am I also a cuckold?’

‘Of course, not. How can you have such a low opinion of me? I rushed home to find you today because I missed you. I was worried about you last night when you did not come home.’

‘Rushed home from where? As I have it, you took a carriage without telling the servants where you were going. Was it to him?’

‘No. I went to see Romola Bianchi because you also have your secrets, Rawden.’

Rawden’s whole world tumbled and fell. Grace did not trust him. She had gone to Romola to get the truth, for she had not felt able to ask him outright, even after all they had shared - their past, their hopes and fears, their bodies. It all meant nothing.

‘I have broken with Romola. There is nothing between us now, but decency compelled me to help her,’ he said, and even to his own ears, it felt like a paltry excuse.

‘Decency, is it? Yet you have been to see her these past weeks when I was left alone at Marshgrave,’ said Grace, her face twisting in anguish.

He took a deep breath. He had spent the night wracked with jealousy at the image of Grace and Sharp, hand in hand. And yet Grace had plenty to be jealous about, too.

‘You lied to me, Rawden,’ continued Grace. ‘I never lied to you about anything.’

‘No. You have it all wrong. I did see Romola out of old loyalties, but I said nothing in order to spare your feelings. I could not have you thinking ill of me.’

‘No, you are beyond reproach, while I am accused of all kinds of villainy.’

‘Grace, forgive me the secrecy. I have seen her, but it was to save her from herself. She was in dire straits and begged for my assistance. I only went because she tried to harm herself. There is nothing more to it. You have to believe me.’

‘I do, Rawden because she told me as much from her own lips and I believe her. Yet you cannot believe me when I say there is nothing between me and Caville, nor has there ever been.’

‘That is a different matter entirely. He put his hands on you. That wretch was with you when I first met you at your uncle’s house. He visited whilst you were at the Routledges, that time when you were seeking sanctuary from me. And last night, to see you with him was unbearable.’

‘So all this jealousy and suspicion has been there from the moment we met. Rawden. You have harboured this bitterness in your breast the whole time we have been married - while you left me at Marshgrave alone, while you came to my bed, while we lay together as man and wife. Good heavens, Rawden, I trusted your word, but you never trust mine.’

‘Grace, stop.’

‘How can you have such a low opinion of me when I was always forgiving your shortcomings of tenderness, kindness and honesty? All I get for my loyalty is jealousy and a rough affection whenever you feel like it.’

‘I said stop talking,’ he howled.

But Grace could not. ‘I get no trust, honesty, or love, not that I expected or demanded it. In fact, I ask nothing from you, and that is precisely what I get.’

‘I said, be silent,’ bellowed Rawden, and she must have tasted his anger, for she said nothing more. The horror and disgust on her face confirmed his worst fears – that she thought him an animal, that she was afraid of him and worst of all, that he was not worthy of her. It was a charge he had levelled at himself repeatedly since their first meeting at the rout – Grace, so enchantingly fresh and unspoiled, and he, so world-weary, cynical and corrupted.

Rawden clawed his fingers into his hair, his breath tightening. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, planted his feet and squared his shoulders. He spoke as gently as he could. 'You misunderstand me at every turn, Grace. How can I not be jealous to see you with another man when I am fast in love with you, though I am sure to be damned for it?'

Her lovely, gentle eyes grew round, and her mouth fell open. Rawden longed to kiss her in the silence that followed instead of standing before Grace to face her scorn, like an impotent fool.

'What did you say, Rawden?' she gasped.

'I said that I love you.' He pulled at his fingers in frustration. 'There. It is out, and you may do with those words what you will - rejoice in your victory, sneer at my weakness.'

'You love me, Rawden? You will own to it?' Grace's voice was a whisper, but he detected no triumph there, only uncertainty.

'Yes, of course I love you, but it is a kind of torture, a feeling I would rather banish because it blights my life.'

'Why? Because I am beneath you in wealth, status and accomplishments? You are ashamed of the poor woman with loose morals you were forced to marry out of duty. That is what you think of me, isn't it?'

A lump came to his throat. 'Was there ever a woman more intent on sparking my ire? I was never forced to marry you.'

'Then why did you?'

'Because I took one look at you, and I had to have you. There it is, and it is not pretty. It had nothing to do with duty or honour, not even rescuing you from your plight of reduced circumstances. And it is not your lack of fortune or elevation in society, nor your reluctance, that damns my regard for you. It is this.'

Rawden took hold of Grace by her shoulders. 'I cannot be apart from you without feeling a hole, here, in my heart.' He pressed her palm to his chest. 'It is like an ache that will not relent. I cannot bear for you to give your regard to any other

man, yet I feel I have not earned that regard. I bought it. I cannot take you into my arms, and my bed without thinking the pleasure of it must be fleeting, unwanted by you, undeserved by me, and dissolving to nothing come morning. With you, I cannot find solid ground.'

'Rawden. I don't understand.'

Words tumbled out of him. He could not stop them. 'Don't you see? I don't care if you have been unfaithful, Grace. I don't care if you have betrayed me a thousand times over. I cannot break free of the chains you have put around my heart, so if you wound me, I am forced to stay and bear it. This is what you do to me.'

Silence followed this revelation as tears welled in Grace's eyes.

'Forgive the violence of my feelings. Please, say something,' he demanded.

Grace blinked, squeezing tears down her cheeks. Rawden focussed on the smattering of amber freckles across her nose so that he would not have to feel the pain of her rejection, but instead, she took his face in her hands.

'I have never betrayed you, Rawden. I swear it.'

'How could you, when you are so perfect?' he said. His words were strangled in his throat.

'How could I, when there is no other in this world for me?' she replied, her eyes gentle pools of golden brown.

'How can you say that? I am vengeful, cold and unkind. I have abandoned you, forced you into a union against your will, abused you grievously.'

'All that is true, but you have also seen me, Rawden. You have made love to me, and with you, I am no longer invisible, lowly, unworthy. And that is why there is no other for me. That is why I love you, Rawden Voss, fool that you are.'

Grace's lips pressed to his in the most tender of kisses – deep, heartfelt, searing his soul. He could taste her tears and her sincerity.

‘Do not say it out of pity or obligation. That I could not bear,’ he cried against her mouth.

Her fingers slid into his hair. ‘I mean every word, Rawden,’ she said, somewhere between a cry and a laugh. ‘I did not always love you. I thought I hated you. But I love you now more than I can ever say.’

‘Then show me,’ he said gruffly.

Rawden lifted Grace into his arms and laid her on the bed, and there was not much talking after that.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Rawden shivered and pulled his jacket tightly around him as Hardy stamped his feet and blew on his hands. The fields of Putney Heath were furred white with autumn frost. Every hedgerow, every tree, cold and stiff as a corpse, and he would have to keep his hand steady and head clear if he was not to become one by the time the sun was high. Caville Sharp had always enjoyed a reputation as an excellent marksman.

It had been agony to tear himself from the warmth of Grace's bed before dawn. How he longed to be pressed against her in the bliss of their newly declared love. But if they were to be happy, the spectre of Sharp had to be banished, one way or another. His evil had to be cowed into submission, either by an apology before witnesses or a well-placed lead shot.

'I hope to blazes your opponent arrives soon before we are discovered. Time is running on.'

'If he does not show his face, then he is shamed as a coward.'

'Are you calm, Rawden?' said Hardy. 'We need sober heads to prevail here.'

'Yes, I am calm.'

'Let us hope Sharp has come to his senses and withdraws, or you must be ready to break the law.'

'I doubt he has the sense to withdraw, Hardy,' said Rawden. 'He will keep coming like a mad dog until he is put down.'

Hardy grimaced at his words. 'I wish I could disagree, but Sharp has always had a faint whiff of lunacy about him. His recklessness is beyond youthful folly. It is, dare I say it, unhinged.'

'Well, mad or not, I see him coming.'

Hardy glanced towards the trees. 'Good God, Rawden, I would implore you not to end a life this day, especially not your own. You have finally found happiness, and have far too much to lose.'

Two horses approached from the woods, racing across the grass and skidding to a halt. Caville Sharp leapt off and strode up to Rawden, all bluster and impatience. ‘Well, are you ready to meet your maker, Voss, for if you face me, there will be no mercy?’ he snarled.

‘Surely this is to first blood only, not to the death,’ said his companion - a white-faced Gilbert Routledge. His startled gaze veered from one man to the other. ‘Caville, say it is not so. We don’t need a murder to settle a matter of honour.’

Caville rounded on Gilbert. ‘To be here today, I have torn myself out of a brothel bed and foregone the ministrations of a very skilled whore, even more skilled than Voss’s wife, in fact. I am in no temper for half-measures, Routledge.’

‘I am sure you had to pay a goodly sum for the woman to suffer you, Sharp,’ said Rawden.

‘As did you, for your bride, Voss,’ spat Sharp. ‘But enough of these pleasantries. For the inconvenience of coming here, I propose we keep firing until only one of us still stands. What do you say, Voss?’

‘I say let us get on with it,’ said Rawden. He needed to, before Sharp’s well-aimed jibes summoned his temper.

‘No, I did not agree to this,’ exclaimed Gilbert Routledge. ‘This is barbarous. A gentleman settles a matter of honour with first blood. Surely the matter is not so serious as to merit this carnage?’

‘It is a matter of honour,’ said Caville.

‘Yes, Sharp here has none, and I mean to teach him the meaning of the word,’ said Rawden.

‘As if you know, Voss. It is a trial for me to even challenge a social inferior, such as yourself. There will be scant honour in putting a bullet through your heart.’

‘This is insupportable,’ cried Gilbert. ‘I was brought here on false pretences. Withdraw your slight to the lady, Sharp, and accept an apology, Voss, and let us go home.’

Rawden considered Routledge an unlikely second, as he had the courage of a sheep. He prayed the man would be discreet about their meeting, for duelling was punishable under the law, and he could be charged with murder if he killed Sharp.

Gilbert's howls of protest were thoroughly ignored. Hardy clapped him on the back. 'If they are determined to do this, Routledge, then we must act accordingly. You have agreed to be Lord Sharp's second, so, seeing as you have come all this way, inspect this weapon before we are discovered and the law set upon us, with dire consequences for every man here.' Hardy gave Rawden a stricken look and passed the weapon to Routledge.

'Be sure he does not cheat, Gilbert,' sneered Sharp.

'Your weapon, Sharp,' said Hardy through gritted teeth. He inspected it and handed it back, and Rawden's was returned to him. It would all be over soon.

Hardy squared his shoulders. 'Let us set the rules of engagement, gentlemen. The usual convention is ten paces, turn and fire. One shot only, and then it is done.'

'I object,' said Sharp. 'As the challenged party in this sordid affair, I demand that we face each other five paces apart, and I get to fire first.'

'Are you so afraid that you want to take every advantage, you coward?' Rawden spat on the ground to underline his contempt.

'No, but I will not turn my back on a villain of the lower orders bearing a pistol. And you laid hands on me, Voss. I have the bruises to prove it. My name is old and honourable, and only the satisfaction of killing you will appease such a grave insult. I demand these rules apply, or you may ride away now.'

'Very well. If you insist, I will happily oblige your insistence on dying this day.' He turned to Hardy, who had gone very pale. 'Five paces, then give the signal, at which point we will fire. The shots will be heard by anyone out

riding the park, so when it is done, the survivor and his second must leave at once.'

'I must insist on ten paces, gentlemen,' said Hardy. 'We are not savages. If it is not a distance of ten paces, I will ride away now and leave you fools to it, both of you.'

'I agree wholeheartedly,' squeaked Gilbert.

Sharp's jaw worked, and then he nodded his agreement, as did Rawden. Hardy was still shaking his head in despair as Rawden stalked away and shrugged off his jacket. His skin tightened with cold and anticipation, every nerve screaming to act, to move, violence swirling in his gut like poison.

'Rawden, are you not afraid?' Hardy had approached him, leaving Gilbert Routledge and Caville Sharp talking in agitated whispers. 'This is no battle line you are in. This is more like a firing squad. Do you not remember the deserters? Men lined up and staring down the barrel of a pistol, pissing themselves in the dirt, unable to flee.'

'I do, and it changes nothing. I will face him head-on.'

'Sharp is an excellent shot, my friend, even from ten paces.'

'So am I, and remember, we have faced lines of French lancers intent on killing us. We had to hold the line with the roar of a cavalry charge and the pound of canon in our ears. Sharp is more used to showing off his prowess to the other dandies or to impress the ladies. My mind is made up. Grace's person and reputation will never be safe while he spouts his poison. One way or another, it ends here today. But I would ask for one promise. If I fall, keep my wife safe from that brute.'

'If he goes anywhere near her, I will end him myself, Rawden. On that, you can rely.'

'The sun climbs higher. Let us do this,' shouted Sharp.

They stood back to back, Rawden recoiling at the touch of the other man's shoulder blades through his shirt. The sun was burning off the frost, warming his face, the trees alive with a chorus of birdsong, the smell of grass sweet in his nostrils. Every sense was heightened as if he had never noticed those

things before. It had always been like this. At the edge of death, life rushed in with all its beauty.

Rawden's heart seemed to beat right out of his throat, and for a moment, he recognised that he was truly, sublimely happy. His love for Grace surged in his breast and almost overcame him in a wave of longing and hope. It was a good day to die for a cause he believed in. Suddenly, he was fuelled by reckless excitement and a steely resolve. Only death would stop him from returning to Grace and the life he was building for the two of them.

'Walk ten paces, turn to face each other and await my signal.' Hardy's shout crashed into the quiet dawn.

Rawden counted out the paces and turned to face Caville Sharp. He held out his pistol in a steady hand, ears straining for Hardy's command.

A crack rent the air, setting a high-pitched ringing in his ears, and beyond it, muffled shouts. Then a burn hit him, driving into his shoulder like someone was forcing a red-hot poker into his body. A hot, wet sensation flooded his senses, and he looked down to see his hand covered in blood.

Rawden staggered backwards. He blinked hard to clear the fog that seemed to have descended over his eyes and prayed he would not pass out. His vision cleared enough for him to see Caville Sharp, arm outstretched and a puff of smoke hanging in the air around his pistol. It took a few seconds for Rawden to understand that his opponent had fired before the signal, the cheating bastard.

Outrage kept him upright. He held out a hand to Hardy, who was rushing towards him. 'Stay back. I must take my shot,' he snarled through teeth gritted with pain.

Hardy froze, and Rawden extended his arm once more. His pistol was like a lump of lead, suddenly much too heavy for his arm. He managed to point it at Sharp's chest. He was light-headed. He did not have much time.

Rawden took a deep breath. It was ragged, everything ringing, his senses foggy. He could not think straight. Sharp

stared into his eyes, his face frozen, mouth pulled back from his teeth in a grimace of absolute terror. A dark stain began to spread from his groin and down his breeches. The man began to sob.

‘Please, no,’ he cried.

‘Curse you to hell,’ snarled Rawden as he pulled the trigger. A high-pitched scream ripped into the morning. Leaves fluttered to the ground around Rawden, brushing his face, but he barely felt them. He was cold, and everything started to feel unreal – the grass and trees turning grey.

‘Why did you not shoot him, Rawden?’ came Hardy’s voice, wrenching him back to consciousness. ‘The coward is running.’

Sharp was becoming a steadily shrinking white blur, his shirt billowing in the breeze as he ran for his life across the fields. A grip like iron held Rawden up. ‘Why did you shoot into the air? Sharp cheated. He fired before my signal. Routledge was a witness, and now Sharp will get away.’

The pain was becoming unbearable, making it hard to speak. ‘And all the ton will hear of it, Hardy,’ said Rawden. ‘Hopefully, the rat will keep running all the way out of London and England until he finds a hole to hide in. His kind always do.’

‘Do not speak so, I beg you. The man is still my friend,’ said Routledge.

‘You diminish yourself with such a connection, Routledge,’ barked Hardy at the man’s misplaced loyalty. ‘Honour has not been satisfied, and you will bear witness to the fact, or you will face me in this very same field. Have I been heard?’

‘Yes. Very well,’ said Routledge. ‘We must get you to a physician, Voss. My God, there is so much blood.’ He gagged and turned away.

Hardy shouted at his back. ‘Make yourself useful and get the horses, you fool. Make haste.’

All the shouting was so tiresome. Hardy’s voice began to slip away. ‘Do not be afeared, my friend. We will get you to a

physician and patch you up, good as new.'

'I am not afraid of dying. But I fear what Grace will do when she finds out I have been duelling.'

'Indeed, and I am damned along with you. We must leave the country with Sharp, eh?' Hardy's smile was strained.

'That is a good plan,' said Rawden, but his words seemed to come from someone else's mouth. He wanted so very badly to sleep. If he just closed his eyes, maybe he could rest. The world receded, and his last thought was a vision of Grace, her fiery hair loose and filled with sunlight. She was warm, so very warm, and he was suddenly as cold as the grave.

Epilogue

Grace's sturdy old mare trotted across the fields, snuggled under a soft blanket of white from winter's first snowfall. The landscape was utterly beautiful, lit with a golden light from the sun, crisp against a pale sky. She stopped just before Oak Parl House and stared back. Her horse's hooves had left dark track marks through the pure white. What a long way she had travelled these last months, in so many ways.

She hurried to the entrance, handed off her horse and hurried inside. It was the first time she had managed to ride alone, and, apart from some frozen fingers, she felt very pleased with herself, until she opened her bedroom door. The complaining began as soon as she entered.

'Grace, that damned physician was here, telling me what to do. Pompous old fool. I am not an infant or in my dotage to be so confined. Where in God's name have you been?' said Rawden. He was lounging on the bed, his arm in a sling. His fringe was too long, flopping in his eyes, and he scraped it back impatiently. Even in a foul temper, he was still heart-meltingly handsome. It would be warm under the coverlet, pressed to the heat of his body. How he would flinch when she put her cold hands on him. Serve him right, too, for being grumpy and impatient.

'Well? Am I to get an answer?' he barked.

Grace suppressed a smirk. It was cruel of her to bait Rawden, but she could not help herself. She held her arms out, showing off her riding habit. 'Can you not guess, or did that shot addle your brains as well as your shoulder?'

His eyes flashed with anger, and something heated. 'So, you have been for yet another ride. I said I would come with you, so why did you not wake me?'

Grace sauntered over to Rawden and planted a kiss on his forehead. 'Because you might have fallen and hurt yourself. Doctor Armitage says you must let the muscle heal before undertaking vigorous activities.'

‘Damn the man for a fool.’ He caught her wrist, planting a kiss there. ‘What kind of activity qualifies as vigorous, my love?’

‘Anything that gets your blood up, I should imagine.’

‘In that case, I am about to set my recovery back some weeks,’ said Rawden, pulling her onto the bed in one swift movement. He pinned her with his body, wincing slightly as he did so.

‘Get off, you great hound, you will hurt yourself,’ squealed Grace, but her heart wasn’t in it.

‘I care not,’ said Rawden. ‘Curse Hardy for teaching you to ride when you should be at home warming your husband’s bed. Should I be worried about him? Can I trust him around my desirable little wife?’

‘Oh, no, not at all,’ said Grace. ‘Hardy and I are having breathless, illicit liaisons daily while you sit indoors complaining. It is your punishment for duelling.’

Rawden’s teeth nipped her neck, and his hand slid to undo the buttons on the front of the riding habit. He plucked them open as he said, ‘Then I shall have to challenge him to a duel.’

‘No, you won’t.’ A shadow seemed to fall over the day. Grace pushed Rawden off. ‘You were badly hurt, Rawden. Do not jest about such a matter, ever.’

His mouth found hers, and he gave her a searing kiss and returned to nibbling her neck. ‘I am sorry. I promise not to shoot Hardy. Now, I think we were discussing your penance for ignoring me in favour of flirting with my friend.’

‘I have not been flirting, Rawden, I swear.’ She squealed and wriggled as he tickled her.

‘It is high time you flirted with me, you little tease.’ His hot hand slipped down the bodice of her gown, slid over one eager breast, and squeezed gently, sending a surge of desire through her loins. ‘Here is your punishment, woman,’ he breathed.

Grace sighed, rolled on top of Rawden and lifted her skirts. ‘And here is yours,’ she said, sliding her frozen hand over his

belly. He did not flinch, merely smiling at her boldness, which had grown over the last few months as she had nursed him back to health. ‘And you know, Rawden, it is no punishment if I like it.’

‘Then I must punish you some more, my love, until you beg for mercy.’

‘I want none, and I will show you none, Rawden Voss,’ she said, kissing him and undoing his breeches. He was stiff and heavy in her hand, and she slid him inside her quickly, deliciously, rapturously.

‘God, you are lovely with your cheeks pink from the cold and your hair coming down. I want you so badly,’ he said, his hand fisting in her hair, the other on her hip, pressing her body to his. She slid over him, her pleasure building and surging as he said, ‘You ride me far better than you ride that damned horse.’

‘There is no excuse for you, Rawden Voss. Now stop talking, and make love to me.’

The morning became lost to passion, and afterwards, they lay abed in each other’s arms. Grace snuggled against his furred chest, sliding her fingers through its silky warmth.

‘You are not really jealous of Hardy, are you, Rawden?’ she said.

He laughed. ‘I hope not, for he could certainly best me in a duel.’

‘Serve you right if you did duel, for I still have not forgiven you, and I doubt I ever will.’ She stared up at him. ‘Rawden, you must know that I could not bear to lose you.’

‘And you will not,’ he said, smiling and stroking her hair. ‘I know you did not ride with Hardy today, for he came to see me this morning bearing some alarming news.’

Grace sat up. ‘What news?’

‘It concerns Caville Sharp.’

Grace swallowed hard. His name still had the power to fill her with dread. Now, it crashed into her sunlit, snowy morning

like a black shadow. 'The very mention of his name fills me with dread. Is it wrong to wish you had ended his villainy that day on Putney Heath?'

'I have little enough honour, my love, but even I cannot shoot an unarmed man in the back.'

'The fiend had just shot you in the shoulder.'

Rawden gave Grace a deep, searching kiss. 'By running away that day, he revealed himself to be a snivelling coward, and all know it. What more is there to say?'

'So what is your news? What has he done now?'

'You know that he went to ground for many weeks. Well, Hardy tells me he resurfaced in London a month ago, discreetly, of course. His reputation is in tatters, and he is not well received, apart from some of his older, less discerning friends - Gilbert Routledge being amongst them. That fool took him in. Since his father has recently cut him off, and his wife has abandoned him for the sanctuary of her parents' estate, taking much of her fortune with her, Caville has been seeking money from his friends to invest in a scheme in the colonies. Some were taken in by his promises and invested heavily.'

'Is he a danger, Rawden? Will he spread vile rumours about me, seek to do us harm?'

'I doubt it. Hardy says he has now absconded to the continent, if rumours are to be believed, taking much of Gilbert's money with him, along with his wife.'

'His wife? Harriet has run away with Caville Sharp? You cannot be in earnest.'

'I am sorry to cause you pain, Grace, but Hardy has it on very good authority that there was a connection between them for some months, possibly even before the duel. I would dismiss the tale as mere rumour, for her sake, but as Gilbert is now seeking a divorce, I think we must assume it is true.'

'Poor Harriet.'

‘She was supposed to be your friend, but she handed you back in a heartbeat to a man she decried as a savage, one you had run away from.’

‘You were never that man.’

‘How was she to know, yet she threw you to the wolves to please her dolt of a husband, and possibly, on the urging of Sharp.’

‘Oh, I can scarcely believe it – Harriet and Caville. But do not judge her too harshly. She must have been duped by him. To his equals or betters, Caville was always most charming, I am sure. Harriet was unhappy with Gilbert. No matter past injuries, I cannot rejoice in her fall, Rawden.’

‘That is because you have the kindest of hearts, Grace.’

She raked Rawden’s hair back off his forehead. ‘How else would I have managed to love my savage of a husband?’

‘Indeed. Grace, I have had much time to think these last weeks whilst you have been neglecting me to go out riding.’

‘Thinking about what?’ she said, leaning in to kiss him, but Rawden pushed her back.

‘A man without offspring is a man without a future,’ he said.

She frowned. ‘Whatever can you mean?’

‘I should work on providing one, so I want you in my bed tonight and every night after that so that you may learn the value of obedience.’ He rolled her over onto her back, grimacing from his painful shoulder, and tickled her without mercy. Grace shrieked, but he did not relent. ‘From now on, you will be too tired to ride anything but your husband.’

‘Stop it, Rawden. No, stop!’ she cried, wriggling to get away.

His weight pressed down on her, his knee between her legs, and he panted into her face. ‘I mean it. I want a child in our lives. We will bring it up in love and safety.’ Rawden surged inside her again. ‘I want to make our child, Grace, and I want to start now.’

As he moved inside her, Grace took his face in her hands. 'Yes, Rawden, oh yes.' She considered telling him that his quest for a child might have already borne fruit, but why spoil a delicious afternoon of exquisite lovemaking?

The garden of Oak Park House was bare. Folds of snow blanketed the shrubbery, and the trees were turned to glass. Grace snuggled into her fur-lined coat and blew on her frozen fingers. The air was so crisp and refreshing that it was a joy to be outside. How could she remain indoors when she thought she might burst with happiness? Rawden had fallen asleep soon after their passionate coupling. Still recuperating from his wound, he exhausted easily, and Grace had a pang of conscience about demanding his affections so often. But how could she not when he was such a tender and caring lover. This very afternoon, she had almost been brought to tears by her love for her snarling earl.

A discreet cough had her turning to find Reeves behind her. 'Good afternoon, Lady Voss. Is it not a little cold to be out of doors?'

'No, I find it bracing, and I like the quiet of the snowfall. It is as if the world is hushed and sleeping.'

'If you like. There is certainly a glow to your cheeks if I may be so bold.'

'It is the frosty air.'

'No, you look different. Happy, at peace.'

'I am happy.' Her hand went instinctively to her belly, and Reeves' face froze. Their eyes met. He knew, and no words were needed.

'Does Rawden know you are with child?' he said, his breath turning to mist with the cold.

Did the man miss nothing? There was no hiding now. 'Not yet. I wanted to be sure before I said anything. I did not want to disappoint him if I was mistaken.'

Reeves' harsh face broke into a smile. 'You could never disappoint Rawden.'

'Thank you. But how did you know?'

'A guess, Lady. I have seen that look on a woman's face before, and already, you protect the child. I am heartened by your news, and I will bid you good day and leave you in peace.'

A thought struck Grace. 'What woman?'

'No matter. It was long ago.'

'Do you think Rawden will be pleased about the child?'

'A child will carry on the family name and right the wrongs of the past.'

'I don't think they can ever be righted, and part of Rawden will always hate the burden of his birthright. Even now, I think he tortures himself that he has an inheritance only because Will died.'

Reeves stared out at the park, and to Grace's horror, a tear rolled down his cheek. 'It was never Will's inheritance in the first place,' he said.

'Reeves, what do you mean?' said Grace.

The man turned hard eyes to hers. 'Rawden is no bastard, as far as I know, but Will probably was.'

All the breath left her body. 'That cannot be true. How do you know that?'

'Because Will was mine. He was my son.'

'You mean you and Rawden's mother were....'

'Lovers, yes, for a time. I can see by your face you have a hard time imagining it. We were both stuck at Marshgrave, abandoned, lonely, without hope. I tried to shield her and Rawden from the worst of the earl's cruelties, but I did not always succeed. It is my unending shame. Agatha and I became close, an unlikely friendship developed, and then one day, it tipped into more.'

‘She was in love with you?’

Reeves gave a bitter laugh. ‘Who can say?’ he replied. ‘For my part, I loved her to distraction, and yet, all I did was drive her back into the Earl’s bed. I saw how wounded she was, sold in marriage to a man whose heart was a block of ice and her so lively, with such a lust for life. It was a death sentence to her spirit. I will never understand why she came to like me, but I never fooled myself that it was love on her part, more a means of avenging herself on her husband.’

‘But that does not sound like the sort of woman Rawden describes.’

‘He has a child’s memory of her, but while Agatha was a loving mother devoted to her sons, she was no soft little kitten like you. Her great beauty was a weapon. She used people, married for money and position, and did not even bother with any pretence of affection for her husband. Agatha craved attention relentlessly. I think she lay with me to spite her husband, but she worried that she might get with child, and how could she explain that away, having avoided her husband’s bed for so long?’

‘And how did she manage it?’

‘She talked the Earl into holding a grand ball at Marshgrave. She could be very conniving at getting her own way. They came together for a few weeks, and that was enough. I was banished to her house in London during that time, sworn to secrecy. And I kept my mouth shut out of loyalty all these years, for why taint her memory with more scandal?’

‘So Will might have been your child, yet he grew up as another man’s son. That must have been torture for you.’

‘He was most certainly mine. I could see it in his eyes as he got older. And Will had everything he could ever want – wealth, safety, a father who took pride in him. I got to see him now and then when I visited Marshgrave. He grew to be a fine lad, did he not? But he was the fruit of a quick and sordid tryst, nothing more. I had no wish to be a father to him, and so I grieved his death as I would a stranger’s.’

The tears in his eyes belied his words.

‘I do not believe your indifference, Reeves. And why are you telling me? Do you want me to tell Rawden?’

‘No,’ he said, most violently. ‘What would it serve to tarnish his mother’s memory along with Will’s? I don’t exactly know why I have told you. But I have carried this secret, and my guilt, like a stone in my heart for all these years, and it is a relief to finally set that burden down to someone with a kind heart.’

‘Yes, but now you have handed that burden it to me.’

‘In that, I am unkind, I know. But I think you can bear it. And Lady, you also have a burden of guilt over Will that you must set down. You think you do not deserve this happiness you have with Rawden, but you are wrong. You have given him what he has always needed – affection, a family and a future. I thank God that you came into his life. Think of this day as a fresh start for all of us.’

‘Reeves, I don’t know what to say, I....’

‘Then best say nothing, Lady, about any of this.’ He nodded goodbye and walked away, leaving Grace in shock. She took a few deep breaths, so cold, they made her throat ache. Such a tangle of secrets and lies lay at the heart of the Voss family. How could she possibly unpick it, and should she even try? She dearly wished Reeves had not told her the truth, for it changed nothing. What did she care if Rawden was the legitimate Earl of Harston? She would love him if he was a pauper. And Will might not be illegitimate. Only his mother, Agatha, could have known that for sure. And if Rawden found out, then all those years of torturing himself for his illegitimacy would have been for nothing.

‘Oh, damn this secret,’ she said aloud.

‘What secret?’

Rawden stood behind her, wearing a frown.

Grace almost blurted it all out, but then a certainty came over her. Rawden was her love, her whole life, and he must be protected from the past just as he had protected her from her

Uncle Charles, Caville Sharp, and a future of poverty and desolation. A surge of fierce love filled her, and she flung her arms about him and kissed him for all she was worth.

‘It is just a small secret,’ she said. ‘But it will grow soon enough.’ Grace took his hand and placed it on her belly. His eyes widened, and an incredulous smile lit up his face.

‘You mean....?’

‘Yes. Oh yes, Rawden.’ Her heart clenched at the tears in his eyes, and Grace was so overcome with her feelings that she could only throw her arms around him and hold him close. His cheeks were icy cold, and his grip almost crushed the life out of her.

‘This is wondrous news, my love,’ he cried.

‘I know. I love you, Rawden and soon, we will be three instead of two. It will be like a fresh start.’



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tessa Murran grew up in the United Kingdom but currently lives a sun-soaked life at the edge of the Australian bush.

She loves to conjure up dark-hearted romances, and so her books are not soft, gentle romances. Tessa writes high-stakes love stories with an edge, and strives to live up to her motto of 'wild and passionate historical romance.'

The characters in her books are not perfect by any means. They are often willful, greedy, stubborn and lusty. But they have hearts that beat for love and souls that strive to rise above their trials.

So if you want a wild ride of romance and adventure, with a healthy dose of steamy passion thrown in, buckle up and take a journey back to the turbulent past.

Tessa sincerely hopes you enjoyed **Rawden's Duty, Book One of her Regency Blades Series**.

To find out more about Tessa's books, check out www.tessamurran.com or X @tessamurran.

Don't forget to subscribe if you want to get exclusives and updates, and please leave a review if you have a few moments, as Tessa loves connecting with her readers.

ALSO BY TESSA MURRAN

SEDUCTIVE SCOTS SERIES

Won By The Highlander – Book 1 © 2021 Tessa Murran

Orla Gordon has no desire to saddle herself with a husband. But her parents are keen to be rid of her, so they devise a horse race, and the prize - Orla's hand in marriage and a plum piece of land.

Enter Wolfric Munro, who is by no means a gentleman. As the black sheep of his clan, Wolfric enjoys a reputation as a brawler, degenerate and dark seducer. He is also an excellent rider.

Determined to scupper her parents' plan, Orla devises a scheme of her own. But if the race doesn't go her way, she will end up in the hands of black-hearted brute of a Highlander, Wolfric Munro. Worse still, while he proclaims he only wants her for the land, Wolfric insists he will claim his marital rights – and he doesn't just mean the land.

But as Orla grapples with the prospect of sharing the bed of a savage Scot with dark desires and looks to weaken the strongest of knees, she is courted by a more dangerous suitor who wears the regimentals of the English army.

Bought By The Highlander – Book 2 © 2022 Tessa Murran

Callum Ross is a quiet, brooding man, resigned to his lonely existence as Laird of Raigmoor Castle. But he is awestruck when he meets beautiful Tara Hennaut on the road to Inverness.

He hopes that coming to her aid will buy him some notice from the well-bred young woman. Unfortunately, she is English and barely notices him in a throng of eager admirers. When Callum's hopeless infatuation leads him to throw his heart at Tara's feet, he is met with rejection and bitter humiliation.

However, when an abrupt change of fortune leaves Tara at his mercy, Callum can take what he wants. A handful of coin buys him a bride, but as they say...be careful what you wish for.

Freed By The Highlander – Book 3 © 2023 Tessa Murran

Bryce Cullan must marry or lose his inheritance. He may have charm to spare, but what respectable lass would want a young Scot with a reputation for carousing, drinking, whoring and gambling? Then one day, Bryce stumbles across Maren McEwen, who is anything but respectable. In fact, she may be worse than him, for Bryce finds her in jail awaiting a terrible fate.

Maren may not be bride material, but they agree on a scandalous bargain. He will come to her aid if she agrees to a pretend marriage. Soon, Bryce is rueing the day he proposed marriage, for he has a wildcat by the tail, and she does not intend to be held for long.

HIGHLAND TEMPTRESS SERIES

Esme's Warrior Laird – Book 1 © 2021 Tessa Murran

Esme Govan is burdened by a wanton temperament and a past folly she is trying hard to live down. When that folly returns from war, in the shape of her stepbrother Slaine, old passions ignite. With him comes Bastian MacNeil, a sword-for-hire as dark as Lucifer himself.

One winter's night, Slaine's twisted devotion takes a sinister turn, leaving Esme and her sisters Cara and Sorcha, cast out of Clan Govan and separated. Esme swears to find her family, and only one man who can help her- brutishly handsome Bastian MacNeil.

Cara's Vengeful Scot – Book 2 © 2021 Tessa Murran

Cara Govan once fell in love with an enemy's son, but family loyalty forced her to forsake him. Years later, helpless and cast off by her clan, Cara ends up at the mercy of the man whose heart she once broke- fierce scrapper, Finnan Rawley.

While Cara might have temporary safety and a roof over her head in the grim Rawley stronghold, her old lover is not in the mood to forgive and forget. And if his resentment wasn't enough to contend with, Finnan Rawley, a man she never stopped loving, is about to take a bride.

Sorcha's Dark Captor – Book 3 © 2022 Tessa Murran

Sorcha Govan wakes in a snowy ditch surrounded by the howl of wolves. Lost and alone, with no idea who she is, she stumbles into the clutches of rough men who sell her into servitude. Sorcha is terrified of the hard-faced old man and his hooded companion who buy her and drag her north. But fate has something worse in store for Sorcha when she reaches dismal Knockhell Castle, home of cruel Laird, Balloch Roth.

What kind of horror lurks in the lonely tower, deep inside the ancient forest bearing down on his keep? Strange howls of anguish rend the night, and Sorcha soon finds herself sacrificed to a wrathful beast of a man – Lucan Roth.

BANNERMAN BROTHERS SERIES

Seaton's Choice - Book 1 © 2020 Tessa Murran

Seaton Bannerman is a dark-hearted bastard, or so decent folk say. He lives a loveless existence at Darkcliffe Manor, in the Scottish Marches. When his father offers sanctuary to a desperate orphan, his world is turned upside down. Brenna Curwen is everything he should not want, soft, gentle, unsuited to life at the edge of lawlessness. He tells himself he doesn't need another soul to protect until he notices that Brenna has hair like spun gold and amber eyes that see into his soul. But then along comes a rival aiming to seduce Brenna, and he is every bit as ruthless as Seaton.

Ronan's Healing - Book 2 © 2020 Tessa Murran

Ronan Bannerman falls hard for the daughter of a rich and powerful Laird, but his bastardy and his father's notoriety stand in his way. When his proposal of marriage offends the wrong people, he ends up fighting for his life in a frigid Scottish winter.

Salvation comes in the form of Isla Gillies, an outcast who is as wild as the bleak woods to which she has been banished. She is brave and darkly beautiful, but she might also be a witch. When a betrayal leaves the lass in fear for her life, what can Ronan do but vow to keep her safe? But is that his only motive for keeping her close?

Caolan's Challenge – Book 3 © 2021 Tessa Murran

Caolan Bannerman is the bastard son of a disreputable laird. When a high-born lass sparks desire in him, he ends up humiliated, and vows never to feel the agony of youthful infatuation again. Years later, a death raises him up, and Caolan must wed to retain his newfound power. Luckily for him, a man who once despised him has daughters to marry off, and one is the lass responsible for Caolan's humiliation – blonde temptress Sybilla Munro. It's time to even the score, but Caolan ends up with more than he can handle in a lass as cunning as she is comely and with a grudge to equal his.

HIGHLAND WARLORDS SERIES

The Laird's Bastard Daughter - Book 1 © 2019 Tessa Murran

Cormac Buchanan is over six foot of muscle and ferocity, a supreme warrior who has spent years fighting for Robert the Bruce. Cormac is also battling his clan's sworn enemy, the Gowans, so he is horrified at his king's command to unite with Clan Gowan through marriage. With looks that that would stir any man's blood, his unwanted bride, Ravenna, wakes a savage need in him. Shame he can't trust her, nor can he ever look favourably on any Gowan, after what they took from him.

The Highlander's War Prize - Book 2 © 2019 Tessa Murran

This is a high stakes, adult romance, and there may be triggers for some people.

When a Scots hoard besieges her betrothed's castle on the eve of her wedding, Giselle de Villers falls prey to vicious predator, Banan MacGregor. Salvation comes in the shape of Lyall Buchanan, who wins her as his war prize and takes her for ransom. Giselle has to suffer the protection of a handsome but savage Scot who is more of a man than anyone she has ever met. Soon, Giselle is in danger of losing not only her freedom but also her virtue and her heart. As she tries to resist Lyall's practised seduction, Banan's urge to possess her grows to murderous proportions.

The Pirate Laird's Hostage – Book 3 © 2020 Tessa Murran

William Bain rules a ruthless clan on the Isle of Skye. Quick-tempered, with a rugged charm, he loves warring and women in equal measure. He has no need for love until Morna Buchanan falls under his power. She once saved him from execution as a traitor and, now that he has rescued her from dire peril, he would repay that debt. Will pledges to keep Morna safe from those who would destroy her, but is she safe from him, and from the desire that stirs in him when he looks upon her?

HIGHLAND WOLF SERIES

The Black Wolf's Captive - Book 1 © 2018 Tessa Murran

A brutal clan war brings upheaval into Ailsa MacLeod's world, and she finds herself humiliated and at the mercy of wild and handsome Duncan Campbell, who would bend her to his will and claim her for his own. Ailsa must pretend to submit to him as she fights to win her freedom. But can her growing attraction to him be conquered or does danger still lurk where she least expects it?

The Lone Wolf's Bride - Book 2 © 2018 Tessa Murran

Ilene Campbell has the world at her feet. But when her hopes for the future are cruelly dashed and her heart broken, she has no choice but to seek the protection of her fearsome adopted brother Murray. He wants her, but can she ever find happiness with him, especially as an awful betrayal opens up a gulf between them. Ilene must earn his trust if she is ever to bind this hard, uncompromising highlander to her forever.

The Dark Wolf's Deliverance - Book 3 © 2019 Tessa Murran

Kenna Moncur longs to escape her life at remote Sgathach Dun Castle where few folk venture close, wary of rumours that an evil spirit lurks within its walls. When Conall Campbell ends up a prisoner in her father's dungeon, Kenna takes pity on him, trying to keep him alive while dark forces move against his clan. Does he return the feelings she starts to have for him, or is he just using her to escape Sgathach Dun's horrors? If she frees Conall, will it be the start of a new life or will an old curse stalking the Moncur family bring her new love crashing down?