A romantic scene between a shirtless man and a woman in a red gown. The man is leaning in to kiss the woman on the cheek. She is wearing a large, ornate red dress with a lace-up back. The background is a dark, textured purple with soft, glowing light spots.

THE  
*Allure*  
OF  
LORD  
DEVLIN

THE BACHELORETTE SERIES

*USA TODAY*  
Bestselling Author

BRONWEN  
EVANS

# *The Allure Of Lord Devlin*

A LOVE VERSUS HONOR REGENCY  
ROMANCE

THE LADY BACHELORETTE SERIES

BOOK THREE

BRONWEN EVANS



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THE ALLURE OF LORD DEVLIN

A Regency Romance

Bronwen Evans

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## *Dedication*

*To Ray my editor and Kendra my writing buddy!*

*In the intricate dance of crafting a Regency Romance, your support has been the guiding waltz that brought my words to life. To my editor, whose keen eye and unwavering dedication breathed elegance and refinement into every chapter, thank you for polishing this tale with such grace.*

*And to my dear friend and fellow romance writer, Kendra, your encouragement, late-night discussions, and unwavering belief in this endeavor have been the heartwarming ballroom where ideas flourished and characters found their voices. Your enthusiasm and camaraderie added depth and richness to the story's tapestry.*

*Together, you've helped weave a world of captivating allure, where love blossoms amidst the etiquette of another era. This book bears not just my name, but the imprint of your invaluable contributions and unwavering support. With deepest gratitude, I dedicate this Regency Romance to you, knowing that your influence graces every page.*

*Forever indebted,*

*Bronnie*

## *Praise for bronwen evans*

**From USA Today Bestselling Author Bronwen Evans, comes a best friend's brother, enemies to lovers romance.**

Unlike her stepmother, Lady Dharma Dexter totally believes in love. She knows all Lord Byron's poems by heart and is waiting for the day when the man of her dreams woos her with sonnets. At her stepmother's bachelorette house party, she can't ignore her best friend's brother, the annoying yet stunningly handsome, Warwick Sneddon, the Marquis of Devlin, a man who is there because he is in desperate need of money. For some reason, he ignores her stepmother and sets his sights on her. Dharma does have a very large dowry, but she is not giving it to any man until he wins her heart. She is not marrying for duty, or for a title. She wants love, and she's sure Devil, as he is known, does not have a heart.

Lord Devlin's father left the family estates in ruins, and Devil, as he is known to his friends, needs to marry quickly, and marry well. Only problem is, his father died with the rumor of traitor hanging over his head. No good family will let him near their daughters. With debtor's prison a real possibility, fate throws him a bone in the guise of his younger sister's friend, the very spoilt Lady Dharma. She's beautiful beyond words, clever, self-assured, and would make him a fine Marchioness—except she demands the one thing he refuses to give—his heart..

## Prologue

Ivy Close, Cornwall – July 1816

She would wear the carpet through if she didn't stop pacing. Dharma wished for the hundredth time that she'd not returned to her stepmother's house-party while this silly house party was in progress.

Ivy Close, once a hunting lodge belonging to Dharma's father, had been left to her stepmother after his passing over eighteen months ago. She knew she'd always be welcome here because Charlotte loved her almost as much as her own mother had even though she was not much older than Dharma herself.

That's why Dharma found it so disagreeable that Charlotte would hold a gathering such as this. The 'find a husband' house party made her skin crawl. Desperate men did not make good husbands, no matter how much you wanted a child. But she couldn't convince her stepmother of that. As she made another turn on the much trampled carpet, she caught her reflection in the mirror.

*Dharma Dexter, you need to interfere.* But how, she kept asking herself over and over as she chewed on her bottom lip?

The men Charlotte had invited to this house party were in attendance so that widowed Charlotte could pick a new husband. Charlotte wanted a child. And she needed a husband to have one. Poor Charlotte didn't have many offers, despite being widowed for almost eighteen months. So her stepmother had come up with this baffling plan to invite men she knew needed to marry wealth to a house party. She'd select a

husband from within these applicants. That's what they were. They were auditioning for the role of husband and father.

Why, oh why, did Lord Devlin have to be in this group of men Charlotte had invited to her 'pick a husband' house party'?

Dharma was best friends with Lord Devlin's sister Rosemary, and she'd never considered him as suitable husband material—until now. Was it because suddenly Charlotte saw a marriage to Lord Devlin as a solution to save his family from financial ruin and to get a handsome husband to father a child?

After a tedious dinner where the men were too eager and her stepmother Lady Charlotte Clayton tried to be gay, Dharma wished she could send the 'money hungry' men who were invading her family's old hunting lodge fleeing. Lord Devlin, most of all. He was the most desperate.

And to her utter shame, she didn't want Charlotte to marry him. What did that make her? Deceitful. It's not as though she wanted to marry him herself—or did she?

No. She would marry for love, not money or position. She'd seen what a marriage without love was like as she watched Charlotte live a lonely life with her father. That was not for her.

So, now she faced a dilemma. The secret Charlotte had revealed to her earlier in the evening swirled in her brain like a tornado. The right man should know. The Duke of Sinclair, Sin to those he called friend, should know. Surely if His Grace needs a wife, and he learns Charlotte is not barren... Even to a young woman, somewhat innocent of the world, Dharma could tell Charlotte fascinated the handsome duke who was not here for Charlotte's money. He had plenty of his own. Throughout dinner, he stared at Charlotte like a lion watching a gazelle. Not sure if he should pounce.

Should she tell him? *By Crickey, Charlotte would kill her.* And could she trust Sinclair not to spread gossip or mock Charlotte for the fact her husband had never gone to her bed?



Her head ached as she processed her options. The one thing she refused to confront was why the idea of the Warwick Sneddon, the Marquis of Devlin learning Charlotte's secret upset her more. Devlin's one hesitation in asking the rich widow to marry him and save his family from destitution was Devlin wanted children. He did have brothers who could provide an heir but it was obvious Devlin would like the chance to have his own child or he would have offered for Charlotte immediately. Like everyone else, Devlin thought Charlotte barren—but Charlotte had just never slept with her husband. Dharma's father had never gone to his new wife's bed, still so in love with Dharma's mother's memory.

That's the sort of love Dharma craved from her marriage. A love so deep it eclipsed time.

Why then did Devlin's face keep creeping into her mind every time she thought of her future husband? Devlin was here to marry for money. He was here because when his father died several years ago with the word traitor hanging over his head, the prospect of finding a wealthy wife to save his family evaporated. Now he was so desperate for money due to his father's scandal, he was prepared to forgo an heir and leave that to his younger brother.

That was not romantic at all.

She'd known Devlin all her life. Why did she care a toss who he married? All he wanted was a rich wife and she would never be just a purse for any man. No her large dowry would go to a man with love for her in his heart. Having watched Charlotte's marriage to her father and compared it to her mother's marriage, Dharma knew it had to be love or nothing. Her parents had so much love it made the household sing with happiness. Her upbringing was like a spring day until her mother's death. But then Charlotte had arrived, and her life was infinitely better for having Charlotte as her stepmother, even if her father never loved his new wife. She owed Charlotte so much. Her stepmother had stayed and endured a white marriage, with no chance of having a child of her own, for Dharma. Charlotte had understood the young Dharma couldn't lose another mother.

That's why Dharma wished she could give Charlotte all she deserved.

Where was Rosemary when she needed her? Rosemary would know what to do—especially about her brother, Lord Devlin.

She would write to Rosemary and—and what then? She couldn't confess in a letter or ask for advice. What if someone else read the missive?

She needed His Grace, the Duke of Sinclair, to fall in love with Charlotte. Damn it, she couldn't hide from the truth. She wanted the Duke of Sinclair to marry Charlotte so her stepmother wouldn't marry Devlin as a last resort.

Drat the man. Why a man so set on marrying for money interested her, she'd never understand. She should despise him, yet... *Lord Devlin was very handsome.*

Her mind whirled with ideas. Sleep would not come, so she decided to fetch a book from the library. Pulling the sash on her robe tight, she slipped into the corridor and stood listening. It must be close to two in the morning and it appeared all were abed.

Having grown up in this hunting lodge, she didn't need a candle to light her way. It was a full moon and light filtered in the many windows lining the corridor. It didn't take her long to descend to the library, and she walked down the first wall looking for something interesting to read.

Dharma had just pulled the first book off the shelf when the noise of the curtain moving in the breeze from the open terrace doors, and the smell of a cheroot had her swinging around. A man sat in a high-back, winged chair by the open doors. The tip of his cheroot glowed as he dragged on the other end.

She slowly straightened, and a shiver of unease slid through her. Who was it? If it was Lord Bann, she could be in trouble. She looked around for something to use for protection.

“Not very clever to be walking around this house in the dead of night—alone.”

Relief washed through her. *Devlin*. “I’m not the guest here.” She walked slowly towards where he sat like a king on his throne.

“There are desperate men under this roof.”

“I have a powerful set of lungs.” She let herself smile, but before her lips curled upwards, *Devlin*’s arm snaked out and pulled her onto his lap, his hand clamping over her mouth.

“Hard to scream now.”

*Dharma* was too shocked to struggle. Shocked at the feel of the masculinity wrapped around her. Shocked at how her body reacted—a shivering arousal. That was enough to see her come to her senses and struggle. *Devlin* released her immediately with a laugh.

“Not so brave after all.”

She moved out of his reach. “I’m not scared of you. You’d never hurt me. *Rosemary* is my best friend. I’ve known you all my life.”

He sat silently staring at her for a moment before uttering, “Ah, honor goes out the window like this wispy smoke, when a man’s desperate.”

He was drunk. She could smell the brandy on his breath. His cravat was hanging loose. His shirt hung open to his waist, and he looked like a man wallowing in a misery not of his making. But gosh, he looked so beautiful. Her heart swelled with the need to help him.

One short sentence could make his misery less. She could tell him *Charlotte*’s secret, but her throat closed until she could barely breathe. She didn’t want *Devlin* marrying *Charlotte*.

Like the flash from a lightning bolt, a vision blinded her.

She wanted to marry *Devlin*.

No. Surely not. He was a man who wanted money. *You have money*. Her dowry was considerable. Her brother *Tobin* would welcome the match. As would *Rosemary*. It could save *Devlin*’s estates and family.

Her mouth would not move, because deep inside, she wanted more.

“You’re exquisite, you know.”

His soft words sent heat through her already on edge body. “That’s the drink talking. Or is it you are changing horses mid race? My stepmother is not to your liking, so the stepdaughter, with the very large dowry, will do instead.”

He rose unsteadily to his feet, putting her aside. “I hope I remember that excellent suggestion in the morning.” And without another look at her, he weaved across the room and out the door. Dharma listened to him stumbling up the stairs.

She slowly moved to close the doors out onto the terrace and stood looking at the moon.

What a mess. She could save him. Rosemary would welcome Dharma marrying her brother. But Dharma would not marry a man who only wanted her dowry.

But even though Charlotte could save Rosemary’s family by marrying Devlin, Dharma would do everything she could to make Sinclair fall in love with Charlotte.

As she made her way back to her bedchamber, she refused to dwell on the reason she preferred Sinclair to marry Charlotte, and she could hear that reason still stumbling up the stairs.

## Chapter One

**L**ondon, 1 February 1817 (6 months later)

Why can't we structure life like a piece of music? Each note led you on a story that surprised you, and yet you understood what the outcome would be. The song would end and leave your senses engaged. It made you feel. Forced you to feel. Let you lose yourself in memories and emotions private to you.

Dharma ran her hands over the ebony and white keys, letting the soothing notes embrace her memories. She loved playing. She loved losing herself in the emotions the sounds produced. Clarity for the emotions swimming within her body. If she could, she'd play all day.

Today she was playing a romantic song by Handel because he had arrived back in town. Her fingers flew over the keys while she silently mouthed the words. A pianist she was, a singer she was not.

The words made her think of Devlin. Everything made her think of Devlin. She'd not seen him since her time spent at his home with Rosemary in December. Her body hummed in time to the music, wanting to see his face, his smile and feel his.... *He was courting her.* And her body hummed with the possibilities. The weekly letters confirmed that. He wanted her to marry him. She had to decide if giving her heart to a man who needed money before all else was wise. And, if she could live, and have her children live, with the fact his family name was tainted with the word traitor. She'd never believed the late Lord Devlin was a traitor. She could stomach the gossip and meanness, but her children would face that too...

Oh, she'd learned something over the cold winter months. He wanted her—in his bed. Every time he'd looked at her, the heat in his eyes almost melted her resolve to wait for more. For his declaration of love.

He could not hide his desire and she was pretty sure she hadn't hidden hers, which made him dangerous. Seduction was a tool men like the Marquis of Devlin used at their will. His many, many paramours could attest to that. But she needed more than passion and desire—she demanded love—regardless of his situation.

Any man she married had to love her.

Comfortable within herself, Dharma knew what she required in a husband. Her parent's marriage was a glowing recommendation for finding the right man. A man who loved her and put his family before all other considerations. Someone she could rely upon. A man strong and protective, but who valued her intelligence and saw her as his equal—a partner to help shoulder the trials life threw at them. But most of all, a man who didn't give a fig about her dowry.

Despite being given a half share in a potentially profitable tin mine in Cornwall by Charlotte, Devlin's financial woes were not settled. Her dowry was still a big prize for him.

Refusing to let thoughts of the conundrum that was Lord Devlin ruin the mood, she closed her eyes and let the music consume her. She let her emotions fly and simply felt the love generated by the music. Finally, the song ended and she slumped exhausted over the keys, only to be startled by a slow clapping coming from the other end of the music room.

“I could watch you play all day. You make the music come alive, almost magical.”

Devlin's voice sent a shiver down her spine. “I didn't mean to disturb you, but I couldn't resist listening as I wait to see your brother. I've missed your playing. You filled the house with warmth when you played during your visit over Christmas.”

Her heart speed up as he prowled toward her with that innate languid grace. Dharma caught her breath, as she always did when he directed his gaze her way. Sharp bones rode high above the austere sweep of his cheeks down to the uncompromising square jaw. His nose was straight, definite, and fit his face perfectly.

His hair, thick, brown, fell in fashionable disarray about his head, making him look as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Large green eyes beneath sweeping brows made her wish she'd been in that bed with him. But it was his mouth that sent heat all over her body. The upper lip was straight, the lower full and sensual. Imaginings flashed through her mind of where he might put them on her body.

She couldn't believe the hunger that hit her from not seeing him for two months. The man was too handsome for her good.

A face as elegantly aristocratic as his powerful and arrogant breeding. Only she quickly remembered his father had tainted all of that. The Devlin name meant nothing. She bristled at the unfairness. Devlin didn't deserve to be tarnished by his father.

"I'd be happy to play for you whenever you so desire." Her breath hitched at the flare of heat in his eyes.

He leaned on the piano. "Play for me now." His voice suited him. Deep, slightly gravelly, as if he didn't speak very often. It was almost a command, and she felt every word.

He unsettled her like no one else could. "Aren't you in a hurry?"

For a moment, his gaze didn't shift from her face, but then his eyes left hers to travel over her body. Like fingers, they touched her everywhere and she couldn't repress a shiver. "I'm never too busy to spend time with you. You play like an angel."

"My mother encouraged me as a young child. Looking back, I believe she did so to take my mind off her illness."

He reached out and cupped her chin. “Was it your mother you thought of while playing?”

She swallowed hard. *No, it was you.* “Yes.”

His smile told her he didn’t believe her. “Funny, I thought you were playing a love song when I entered.”

The infuriating man. She ignored the knowing smile and simply began playing, trying very hard to ignore his overwhelming presence. Thankfully, the music did its trick and soon she lost herself in the notes and simply played as if the world and Lord Devlin had disappeared.

When the music ended, silence rang out. She looked up, wondering if he’d left the room, but he was merely standing next to her at the keyboard, his body still and his eyes focused on her.

Heat flooded her face, and she cleared her throat.

Finally he softly applauded, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips, “Lady Dharma, your mastery of the piano never fails to astound me.”

Dipping her head modestly, “Thank you, my lord. Bach’s compositions are endlessly captivating, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, they are. But I daresay it’s not solely Bach’s genius that held my attention captive. Your playing moves more than just the keys of the piano. It stirs something within me—a melody that resonates far beyond the notes. Your passion, your finesse, it’s truly enchanting.”

“You flatter me, Lord Devlin. I am but a humble enthusiast of music.”

“And yet, in your hands, the piano becomes an instrument of enchantment.” He sat on the piano stool next to her, crowding her sense as heat rolled off his hard body, his gaze unwavering. “I’ve been remiss in expressing my sentiments properly. Our time together during the Christmas festivities was a highlight of the season for me. Your company... it brought warmth to the coldest of winter nights.” He ran his finger over her lips. “I have missed you. Did you miss me too?”



She wanted to jump to her feet and run, but the magnetism of his gaze saw her glued to the piano stool. “A lady does not reveal such things. It is dangerous to her sensibilities.”

“I don’t want you to be sensible. I want you to be captivated.” He leaned closer. “Did you miss my kisses?”

She’d stupidly allowed herself to be kissed under the mistletoe at his home during her visit and she’d paid for that mistake in her dreams every night since. She made a further mistake now by looking into his eyes. Desire swirled, burned within, and panic rose deep within her along with the heat. He was too close.. too dangerous... she had a decision to make that would affect her life and how could she think the situation through when he offered her things her body wanted—desperately.

Her heart wanted more...

His lips kicked up at the ends at her silence. He took her hand, long fingers closing strongly about hers, his thumb stroking the bare skin on her palm. She’d not worn gloves, preferring to play without them. “In case you’ve forgotten, shall I kiss you now to remind you?” His whispered words sent memories to her brain. Her body, on its own accord, pressed closer.

And then her eyes closed on a small moan as he slowly lowered his lips to hers.

Time seemed to halt as she savored the sweetness of the connection, the press of his lips soft yet fervent, a delicate exploration that spoke volumes in its silence. His hand cradled her cheek, thumb caressing the skin with a feather-light touch, while her hand found its place on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath the layers of fine fabric. Hers, on the other hand, was racing. Why did she not affect him in the way just his smile could affect her?

The piano, a silent witness, echoed the melodies of their shared intimacy, its music hung in the air like an echo of their affection. They lingered in the embrace of that kiss, a moment that held the promise of more shared harmonies, more silent conversations in the language of touch and tenderness.

But she knew deep inside, passion and desire did not equal love. It gave her the strength to break the kiss and look away, trying to hide her rapid breathing. His was steady, as if he'd been totally unaffected.

“One day I shall lay you naked on top of a grand piano and play you.” The words so decadent, whispered in her ear, sent her world tilting. She could picture it so easily and God help her, she wanted to experience that. Before she could gather her wits, she heard her brother's voice in the hall.

Devlin rose slowly to his feet, towering over her, and moved round to the other side of the piano. She still could not look at him. Her emotions were too raw.

“You will save me both of the waltzes at Lady Bradshaw's ball tonight.” Once again, his words were a command, and her senses were in no condition to deny his request. She nodded her head, words still stuck in her throat. “Good.” He strode towards the door to meet her brother. “Until this evening. Have a pleasant day.”

Then he was gone, but his scent lingered. She reached up with her fingers and traced her lips, feeling the scorching sensation from his kiss. He was so experienced, and that was unfair.

How was she expected to make such an important decision when he overwhelmed her senses with just a look, a smile, a touch...

Her fingers crashed down on the keys and the jarring notes broke his spell over her.

Philippa, her brother's wife, entered the room. “What's got you looking like you'd like to stab someone?” The teasing note to her voice showed she knew Devlin had been in this room with her.

“Do men even have emotions?” she asked her sister-in-law.

Philippa laughed. “Of course. They simply conceal them more effectively than we do because that is how they were brought up. They have to shoulder more responsibilities than

us and as such feel it weakens them to show emotions.” Philippa sat on the stool with her. “Besides, they usually only hide certain emotions. Other emotions they are rather free with,” and she nudged Dharma in the side.

A blush raced over her cheeks. Passion and desire for men, they seem thrilled to share, that was true.

“I thought it odd the first person Devlin called on upon his return to London was Tobin. I suspect he wanted to see you.” She eyed her sister-in-law dubiously. “Well, he has written to you every week. I’m lucky if I get any missive when your brother is away.”

“It almost seems as if Devlin is trying too hard. I feel I have been very honest about what I expect in a marriage. He only has to share his heart and I’ll say yes. So why is he—” She could hardly say he was trying to seduce her to Philippa.

Philippa patted her hand before she stood. “I think you’ll learn that love is something men fear, and goodness knows why. He has feelings for you, you know that. Give him a chance to open his heart to you. It’s always worth the wait, I assure you.”

Long after Philippa had left the music room, Dharma continued to sit at the piano and play. She’d hoped the music would speak to her, but after an hour, all she knew was that this was not a game and she would move forward with Devlin with caution. She’d hate to lose her heart to him and never have that love returned.

Women feared love too. Or perhaps it was a woman feared unrequited love.

If she fell in love with Devlin and he did not love her... spinsterhood beckoned.

Because she would not marry for anything less.

Finally, she made her way upstairs to have a rest before the long night ahead. Would Devlin exceed her expectations and what would society think of her dancing two waltzes with him?

## Chapter Two

Everyone who was anyone had arrived back in London over the past ten days. Parliament had its first sitting this week. Tonight Lady Bradshaw, one of society's grande dames, held the honor of hosting the inaugural ball of the season.

Dharma should have been looking forward to the evening. The event was a chance to catch up with friends, and to observe this rarity of beings—men looking for wives. But for once Dharma was unsure of what she wanted, or if she was truthful with herself, who she wanted in her life.

Devlin and Rosemary would be in attendance tonight.

She admired how Devlin had worked hard to ensure that while most good families avoided him, some within the *ton* were more forgiving and issued his family with invites. Lady Bradshaw was one who chose to overlook his father's disgrace.

Ever since Charlotte's marriage to the Duke of Sinclair, Devlin had set his cap at her. She tried to resist the urge, but when she missed him, she couldn't help but pull open her dresser drawer and reread every word of his letters.

While Dharma wanted to believe his interest in her was because of feelings of love, something held her back. Seeing her stepmother trapped in a loveless marriage to her father for many years, Dharma's worst fear was making a mistake and marrying the wrong man. A lifetime was too long to live trapped.

Given her whirling thoughts, she wanted to kick herself. Why had she agreed to accompany Devlin in the second waltz of the evening?

The word dance conjured visions of gliding movement and swirling dresses, but what Dharma saw, or to be exact, felt, was heat, passion, and desire—especially when she was in Devlin’s arms. Was it love or money that saw him so persistent in his pursuit? How did a young lady learn the truth before it’s too late?

He glided her around the ballroom floor with a gentle, but firm, touch. With his sandalwood scent filling her senses to where she almost gave in and leaned close to lick his neck to see what he tasted like. She really needed to find the answers she craved before it became a moot point and she fell in love.

Her only armor was to refuse to fall in love until Devlin admitted his love for her. Heartbreak would be the outcome if she fell first, and he never reciprocated.

During Christmas, her brother Tobin, the Earl of Clayton, pulled her aside to discuss the daunting future that awaited her as the wife of a Marquis from a disgraced family. Even though Lord Devlin didn’t play any part in his father’s traitorous behavior, the family name permanently stained his reputation, which limited Devlin’s marriage prospects. The fact his family had no money didn’t help either.

Tobin suggested she consider her options carefully. Her brother liked Devlin and would not oppose a marriage, but he wanted her to understand what her life would be like. Shunned by many for social invitations. Looked down upon by those who should be below her station. And her children would find life difficult with friends few and far between. Currently, she was the belle of the ball, a diamond of the first water. These titles would vanish the minute she agreed to wed Lord Devlin.

Did she care? *Not when he smiles at me like this.*

“We are causing quite the stir,” Devlin said in her ear as they twirled in the crowd. His voice sent shivers over her skin, the timbre of his tone like a velvet cloth.

“That’s because this is the second waltz you’ve danced with me tonight. You have made your intentions clear—to everyone.”

“I’m sorry for bringing such unwanted attention upon you.”

“No, you’re not.”

He laughed, and the sound curled her toes. “True. I’ve made my intentions clear after your stepmother’s house party. I wish to court you this season with a view to announcing our engagement by the end of the season.”

“So soon? What’s the rush?” Was it his need for money?

“I want you.”

“I’m not to be had for the wanting.”

He looked into her eyes and she could not look away. “Then I shall have to make you want me.”

She gritted her teeth. Don’t let him provoke you. Society is watching. “And because I haven’t discouraged your interest, many mothers with marriageable sons are keeping them well away from me. If I wish to find a husband this season, allowing you to pay a call on me is not an advantage.”

He pulled her closer, which was totally unacceptable and only caused the stares to gather steam. “That doesn’t matter. You can only marry one man, if I recall. That will be me.”

“Arrogance is not the way to win a lady’s heart.” That saw his smile vanish. Why did men fear genuine emotions like love? Time to change the subject. “His Grace and Charlotte look decidedly happy.”

“True. Sin chose well for his second marriage. I’m thrilled for Charlotte.”

She eyed him carefully. “You’re not upset about their marriage ending your chance of wedding her?”

The sparkle was back in his eye. “No. They seem to be a perfect match. I like Charlotte, but only as a friend.”

“That’s interesting. I thought you believed friendship to be a sound basis for marriage.”

He twirled her about until she was dizzy.

“Perhaps I’ve changed my mind. Friendship is important, but I think there needs to be more.” Just when Dharma thought he might talk about love, he added, “Passion and desire are, of course, a requirement.” He followed his words by squeezing her waist where his hand lay.

“How do you know we would share passion and desire?” she asked.

“Oh, my dear, we already do. I can see the vein in your neck pulse every time I smile at you. When I touch you, your eyes flash with heat, and when I hold you in my arms, like I am now, your body thrums with denied yearnings. You cannot hide your body’s response to me.”

Why did he have to be right? She hated he could read her so well. His experience with the opposite sex wasn’t a secret. “Your rakish ways have me at a disadvantage. How do I read you?” She didn’t expect him to answer, and she couldn’t imagine what he would say. Certainly not in the middle of a ballroom.

“If you want to press closer, you’ll feel the evidence of how much I desire you.”

She could have done without that image, because of course now she craved to push closer. The waltz ended and, looking him squarely in the eye, she pressed up against him before sliding round him. If anyone saw her, it would look as if she was simply moving round him to leave the floor.

In a quiet voice, she taunted him. “I’m not interested in the hardness of that part of your anatomy—impressive as it is, I’m sure. I’d prefer to know the secrets of the organ pumping in your chest.”

With that, she allowed him to escort her back to her brother’s side. Was it the heat of the ballroom or the feel of Devlin’s manhood that made her come over faint? But suddenly, all Dharma wanted to do was escape from the

vicious eyes of the *ton*. She glanced around for her friend Rosemary, Devlin's sister, but she was on the dance floor with Lord Hawthorne.

For the first time in her life, she envied Rosemary, the traitor's daughter. Lord Hawthorne's father, the Earl of Whetton, was one of Lord Devlin's most vocal detractors, yet Hawthorne was dancing with Rosemary, ignoring the gossip being spoken behind twittering fans. And he'd denied his father by being attentive all evening. If that wasn't proof that he had proper feelings for Rosemary, Dharma would eat her fan.

Instead, she caught Charlotte's eye. Her stepmother excused herself from where she was talking with two of the *ton's* grande dames and came to her rescue. "It's hot in here, Dharma. Would you accompany me for a stroll on the terrace?"

"That would be very pleasant, thank you." Dharma slipped her arm through Charlotte's and without a backward glance at Devlin, she walked eagerly toward a place where she could finally breathe. Where no one would bother watching her, because Devlin wasn't by her side.

"I gather the *ton's* stares are unsettling you. You could have asked Devlin to wait until later in the season to announce his intentions if you didn't want to be in the spotlight."

"Devlin will do what Devlin wants."

"But did you talk to him before the ball?"

She shook her head.

"I see," and Charlotte's mouth firmed as they strolled down the steps and into the oil-lamp lit garden. She shivered against the cold. Perhaps a stroll should be a short one. The scent of dahlias, mixed with jasmine, filled the frosty air in Lady Bradshaw's beautiful garden.

"Yes, all right. I wanted to see how he would behave in front of society."

Charlotte sighed. "More like you wished to see society's reaction before making your decision. Devlin will always be



an outcast because of his father. If you can't live with that, then set the man free to pursue someone else."

"I'm not encouraging him. He's free to pursue whomever he wants." Why did those words stab at her heart?

"The tin mining business turning a profit has eased his money worries. He's not rich yet, and he needs the mine income to restore his estate. But he's not after your dowry. Can you say that about any other man here?"

Could she? How did you know what's in a man's heart?  
"No other man is pursuing me."

"Fencourt has been eyeing you all evening."

"He's too young to think of marriage." She ignored Charlotte's hump and turned them around to return to the warmth of the ballroom. "How did you know Sin's intentions were honorable?"

Charlotte laughed. "Oh, at the beginning, I knew his intentions were not. He thought I was barren. He wanted me, but not as his wife. However, you and I are in totally different situations. I was a wealthy widow, while you are a young debutante with a reputation to protect, and no money to your name except your dowry, which goes to the husband you select. You do not have the freedom and choices I had."

More's the pity. "At what point did you know he actually loved you?"

"He showed his love for me by being willing to sacrifice everything, including his life and the future of his family, to be with me. A man who will give up everything he believes in is a man in love." Then she turned and took hold of Dharma's hands. "But because I loved Sin right back, I would never have let him give up anything that was important to him. Love is never selfish. It's always selfless."

When Charlotte pulled her in for a hug, she whispered in Dharma's ear, "You'll know you're in love with Devlin when you would do anything to make him happy. Anything to make his life wonderful. You'll know when he's fallen in love with you, when he does the same."

“I have to love him, knowing how society feels about him and how that will change my life?”

“Yes.”

“But what if I fall in love and stand by his side and he doesn’t love me in return? He’s known me since I was a young girl and never looked at me as anything other than Rosemary’s best friend. Why would he choose me, except for my money?”

“At my house party, he finally saw that you have grown into a woman. He saw you as the wonderful young lady you have become. He saw that you’re beautiful and kind and have a generous nature. Look how you have doggedly stood by Rosemary’s side. Never once letting how society viewed Rosemary’s family make you turn your back on her. To Devlin, that is everything. He would do anything for his sister. For someone he loves.”

What would he do for her? What did she want him to do? How could she learn what was in his heart? Charlotte organized a series of amusements at her house party to discover a man’s character. Could she set Devlin some tasks that would reveal his feelings?

“I’ll share one more piece of advice, then I shall leave you to your own counsel,” her stepmother added. “Men guard their feelings tighter than a starving man holds onto his last piece of bread. Be patient. Don’t force him before he’s ready.”

“That’s the problem. I’ll be expected to marry by the end of the season, and if I wait to learn what’s in Devlin’s heart I might miss out—”

“Would you ever want to take second best? Why commit yourself to Devlin if there may be a man you haven’t even considered? Take your time. Does it matter if you take one more season to find your heart’s desire? It’s better to be slow than make a hasty mistake. I know.”

“What if my best prospects find someone else?”

Charlotte scolded. “Then they were not for you if they don’t set their cap at you and fight for your hand. A man who

marries the first debutante he meets is most likely wanting a marriage of convenience.”

“I don’t want a marriage of convenience.” She sighed into the chilly night and shivered. “I regret going to your house party because I never saw Devlin as a potential husband before that week.”

Charlotte pressed a kiss on her cheek. “We never know who fate will throw our way, but sometimes it’s just what we wished for.”

As they re-entered the ballroom, Dharma thought it was easy for her stepmother to say. Fate had given her everything she desired. Would fate be as kind to her?

No sooner had they entered than Sin was at Charlotte’s side. “I think it’s time to retire for the evening, my love. We don’t want you overtired.”

Dharma’s head snapped up, and her mouth dropped open. “Are you with”—

“Say nothing. I don’t want everyone to know yet.”

Dharma hugged her stepmother so tightly, and tears welled in her eyes. Charlotte had wanted this for so long. She whispered in her ear, “I think this is the most wonderful news I’ve ever heard.”

“Like I said, fate gave me everything I’d dreamed of and more. Think with your heart *and* your head, and the same will happen for you.”

On those fateful words, she looked up to see Devlin by her side in the company of her brother Tobin. They were relaxed and holding a conversation with Tobin’s wife, Lady Philippa. Another signal that her brother did not mind Devlin courting her. *And* didn’t the *ton* notice.

Before she spoke to him, a discreet cough had her looking up into the handsome face of Lord Fencourt. A young man who had made a point of dancing with her at each ball. She liked the amenable Viscount and, given his family had more money than almost anyone else in England, she knew he was not after her money.

“Sorry to interrupt, Lady Dharma, but you promised me the last dance of the night.”

She smiled at him while she noted Devlin stood frowning at her with arms folded across his enormous expanse of chest. She let Fencourt lead her onto the dance floor. It was a quadrille, so they wouldn't be able to converse properly.

When the dance ended, they were on the opposite side of the ballroom from where her brother waited to escort her home.

While slipping her arm through his, she allowed Fencourt to amble around the outside of the dance floor. “It seems an age since I saw you last,” he said. “I have missed you. And now it appears I have a rival for your affections.”

She glanced toward Devlin, who stood with hands on hips, glaring at them. Ignoring the way her heart flipped in her chest at the look of possessiveness in Devlin's eyes, she replied, “My affections have yet to find a permanent home.”

“I am ecstatic to hear that news. Would it be too much to presume you would be free for a turn in the square tomorrow? Weather permitting, of course.”

Trying not to think of Devlin, she said, “That would be lovely. Shall we say two?”

Just then, a commotion in the crowd gained their attention.

The opulent ballroom, all eyes turned toward where Lord Devlin stood with her brother, and whispers rippled through the crowd. Lord Campbell, a proud and arrogant nobleman, stood in a small group of gentlemen, including Lord Whetton.

Lord Campbell, with a sneer on his face, spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“Ah, Lord Devlin, I have not seen you in society for some time. It seems the traitor's son has graced us with his presence. Tell me, do you come to the ball in search of more secrets to sell to foreign powers? Or is it merely a wealthy wife from those families desperate for a title,” and he made the mistake of looking directly at her.

Her hand came up to cover her mouth, and only Lord Fencourt's hand on her arm stopped her from rushing to Devlin's defense. She could see Lord Devlin's fists tightening at his sides.

Lord Campbell, a few years older than Devlin, had lost a brother at the battle of Waterloo and hated the Devlin name with a passion all consuming. Devlin and Campbell had had previous run-ins. Why did he have to attend tonight?

"You do well to mind your tongue, Lord Campbell."

"Or what?" and Lord Campbell moved closer.

Her brother, sensing the rising tension, stepped between them. "Gentlemen, this is neither the time nor the place for such confrontations. Lord Campbell, apologize at once."

"For what? Speaking the truth?" Lord Campbell, undeterred, smirked at Lord Devlin. "I should not have to tolerate the presence of a traitor's son."

"Then I suggest you leave," Devlin responded, his voice low and hard.

"Me leave? Why you..."

She knew what was coming and hoped Tobin would stop it, but Lord Devlin's eyes narrowed, his resolve clear and to her horror Devlin uttered, "If you find my presence insulting, perhaps we need to settle this permanently. Say a duel at dawn? Would that satisfy your honor, Campbell?"

"Very well, Devlin. I accept your challenge. Dawn it shall be."

The crowd gasped, the challenge echoing throughout the ballroom. Lord Clayton, caught between the two, looked at Lord Devlin with concern.

"Devlin, you don't have to do this."

"No, Clayton. It's time to teach everyone that the Devlin name is honorable." Lord Campbell's smug expression faltered as he realized the gravity of the situation. He issued

and Campbell accepted the challenge, and a duel at dawn would decide their fate. “Will you be my second?”

“Of course.” Clayton addressed Campbell. “Send your second to my house later tonight to make the arrangements.

With that, Lord Campbell and his friends decamped from the ballroom and the twittering behind fans and hands begun. Everyone focused their attention on Lord Devlin and her brother, but for her, the evening was ruined. She hadn’t minded making Devlin a tad jealous, but she would never wish him to face death like his father had. She had to get her brother to stop such ridiculousness.

As they reached her brother’s side, Devlin moved to stand beside her. Fencourt offered his greeting, “A most unfortunate occurrence, Lord Devlin. I’m sure no one here would think any less of you if you debunk, given what happened to your father.”

Devlin’s withering gaze said it all. Fencourt seemed to stammer and stutter for one moment before bowing over her hand and taking his leave. “Until tomorrow, Lady Dharma. I will hold you in my thoughts.”

“He seems smitten,” Tobin uttered out loud, and she wanted the floor to open beneath her.

“He’s but a boy,” Devlin said in disdain.

“True. He is a tad young to be seriously looking for a wife, but he is from an exceptional family with money.” Was that a dig at Devlin?

“You know nothing about him. He could have habits not appropriate in any husband.”

“That’s easy enough to find out,” her brother replied, his tone obviously showing he was trying to get a rise out of Devlin.

Dharma hit her brother’s arm with her fan. “Would you two stop it? We have more important things to discuss than who may wish to court me. Devlin, you must call off this egotistical display of idiocy.”

Before she could hear what Devlin had opened his mouth to say, Rosemary arrived back from... a stroll...on the arm of Lord Hawthorne. She hid her smile. Rosemary looked beautiful with a flush of color on her face..

“Good evening, Lord Devlin,” Hawthorne said, and then nodded at Clayton. “As Lady Devlin is not present this evening, may I enquire as to if I may call on Lady Rosemary tomorrow?”

Devlin looked the young man up and down. “Does your father know you’re paying court to my sister?” How odd, Dharma thought when she heard Rosemary’s indrawn breath, and noted the tension in Devlin’s jaw.

She watched as Hawthorne drew himself up to his full height and thought it wonderful that he was prepared to stand up to Lord Devlin. “I keep my counsel, as do you, I’m sure.”

Devlin studied him for a few seconds, getting the measure of the young man who appeared to be staking a claim to Rosemary, before finally nodding. “If my sister has no objection, then neither do I.”

With that, Hawthorne pressed a kiss to Rosemary’s knuckles and withdrew. Rosemary pulled her aside and gushed, “Isn’t he wonderful?”

“Well, his lordship obviously likes you. He didn’t bat an eyelid at Devlin’s presumption that he wished to court you.”

Rosemary’s mouth dropped open. “He didn’t, did he?” She twirled on the spot. “He’s wonderful. Charming. Handsome. And the first man to show any interest in the traitor’s daughter.”

“It would appear he does not care about the scandal surrounding your name. I think I like him for that alone. And did you see the way he did not back down from your brother’s thunderous stare?”

Rosemary’s smile faded. “Lord Whetton will not like his son’s choice in courting me.”

“Then Hawthorne must have feelings for you if he is prepared to vex his father.” He was the first man brave enough

to take an interest in her. “Now explain to your brother how dueling with Lord Campbell could put all of this in jeopardy.”

Rosemary swung round to face her brother with eyes wide and frightened. “A duel? Please, dear God, no. I can’t lose you too.”

Dharma wanted to slap herself. How inconsiderate. Her father had been killed in a duel. “I’m sure Lord Devlin will not be so stupid as to go through with it, like...”

His eyebrow rose. “Like my father? Well, I certainly will not stand there and simply let him take a shot at me without defending myself.”

She was about to argue when Philippa, her sister-in-law, took both the ladies by the arm and drew them away. “This is men’s business. Besides, we are making quite the scene and I think there has been enough fodder for gossips delivered tonight, don’t you?”

She was about to state that Devlin could be killed, but when she saw Rosemary’s pale face, she decided to remain silent.

They made their way out to their carriages.

Dharma had a wonderful idea to take Rosemary’s mind off the duel. “Why don’t you ask Hawthorne to take you for a stroll tomorrow at two? You could walk to my house and Fencourt and I could join you.” That way, she would not have to talk with Fencourt alone.

“Fencourt? He is keen?” Rosemary smiled. “Perhaps we could have a double spring wedding next year. That would be wonderful.”

She pressed a kiss to Rosemary’s cheek. “Devlin will be all right, I know it. Tobin will ensure he comes back alive.”

Rosemary looked over her shoulder to where her brother stood talking to Lord Clayton. “I can’t lose him too. Harry and George haven’t gotten over losing father. If they lost their big brother in the same manner... I don’t know what Harry would do... As for mother. Oh, God. How will I tell her?”



She hugged her friend tightly. “Perhaps, don’t tell her until it’s over. No point worrying her for nothing.” When her mother died, Rosemary’s mother was her rock. She got her through the pain and loss until Charlotte came into her life. She wanted to protect Lady Devlin in return.

“You are such a good friend,” Rosemary sniffed.

“Nothing would ever come between our friendship. I’ll come over to your house first thing. Try to get some sleep. I’m sure Tobin will work something out.”

“Good night, my dear friend.”

Dharma replied before she entered the carriage. “Try not to think on it. Hawthorne will call tomorrow afternoon and you need to look radiant.” But she knew, like her, Rosemary would never sleep until they learned Devlin was safe and unharmed. Men. She could throttle them sometimes.

She sat on the squab, pulling the surrounding rugs against the chilly night, and wished Tobin would hurry. Suddenly, there was a knock on the carriage window. She slid the window down to see Devlin standing there, and Tobin and Philippa still talking to their hostess in the foyer.

“Your brother has agreed you will join me in my box at the opera tomorrow night, or should I say this evening, since it’s actually already the next day.”

“Don’t you mean if you are still alive?” she snapped. “Call off this silly duel. You have nothing to prove.”

“Lord Campbell ensured every person in the ballroom heard him. How could I let that stand? My father was not a traitor and one day I’ll prove that. But until I do, I will vigorously defend his and my family’s honor.”

She must admit that she would likely do the same. Yet, the panic inside of her grew. Annoyance coursed through her veins. “You cannot change what happened to your father.”

“But I can clear him and make life easier and happier for Rosemary, my brothers and mother.”

Dharma wished she didn't respect him so much. He was sacrificing a lot for his family.

"You didn't answer my question. Will you join me at the opera?"

She hoped he lived through the duel, and her anger made her snap, "I may have made other plans." *You arrogant arse!*

"Have you?"

"Well, no." *Damn it.*

He smiled. "Then I will see you later this evening. Tell that young pup he won't win your hand." Then he was gone with only his dizzying masculine sandalwood scent filling the space. She hated that she took a deep breath and prayed for God to protect him. Worse still, she hated that the only thing she was looking forward to today was the opera, not the walk with a certain 'young pup'.

## *Chapter Three*

“If you get wounded, the extreme cold will likely make you unable to feel it.”

Clayton’s words were of little comfort on this chilly dawn morning in a private corner of Kenwood, Hampstead.

“The mist will make it damn near impossible for Campbell to see me. I doubt either of us will be in danger of being wounded, thank God.”

When Lord Campbell arrived on the field with his second, Lord Carthors, and the obligatory surgeon, Devlin simply wanted the whole damn charade over with. He picked the pistol closest to him and moved to his mark.

The count of twenty paces began, and he once more thought about his father and all the family had lost. He wasn’t about to let Lord Campbell slander his father’s name again. As they counted out the twenty paces, he tried one last attempt to halt this nonsense. “Apologize and I shall decamp.”

“Bugger off, Devlin. Like father, like son, I should think. A fitting way to die.”

Anger burned in the pit of his stomach and he was determined that he would not die tonight. He could not let his father down. He’d yet to uncover the man, or men, who’d framed his father. Devlin was determined not to rest until he accomplished that goal. No matter what he had to sacrifice.

“Gentlemen, on my mark, you may fire.”

Devlin didn’t care that the swirling fog was so thick he could barely see his opponent. A man of his reputation—the

traitor's son—had been here before. The aim of this charade was never to kill. He closed his eyes and pointed his pistol wide of Campbell and fired. Both shots filled the still, misty air.

However, almost immediately, Devlin heard another shot and felt a bullet whisk past his head. He tucked and rolled toward his left. "Who has no honor now? That was a second shot, you bastard," he called to where he heard Campbell and his second.

The two men raced over. "That second shot was not from me. It came from the trees over yonder. It would appear someone less honorable than myself also wants you dead."

A shiver of foreboding entered his being. He hastily looked at Tobin, who had also raced to his side.

"My satisfaction has been met. I bid you a good day, Lord Devlin." As the two men walked off, Devlin's mind tried to process the fact a second person had shot at him. It could only mean one thing. His blood quickened, and he swept the surrounding area. The trees provided brilliant cover.

His inquiries were obviously making headway, and it's likely one of the Bow Street runners he'd employed had perhaps found something. He had received a missive from a runner in Scotland who thought he was closing in on someone who could help.

"We need to get you in the carriage and home," Tobin suggested. Devlin stared at Tobin. "It's not safe. I can't see a thing. Whoever shot you could still be in the area, waiting for another opportunity."

Instead of running, Devlin made straight for the trees from where the shot had come, Tobin hurrying after him.

Someone had trampled the ground around the trees and left a cheroot on the ground. Devlin picked it up. It was still warm. "Whoever was here is long gone."

"What does this mean?" his friend asked.

"It means I am finally on the right trail of my father's betrayer." His hands clenched into fists and he thumped the

tree. "I will avenge him."

"Not if you're dead," His friend growled low in this throat. "Listen, you need to take this threat seriously. No going out on your own. Make sure you're armed at all times." He glanced over his shoulder. "The villain will not challenge you to a duel at twenty paces. He'll hide in the shadows and strike like a slimy-snake"

Devlin silently agreed as he made his way toward his carriage. As he sat back on the squab a blanket over his knees, determination and hope filled his soul. He wiped his brow. He was close. So close. He'd send word to his men in Scotland at once. He wanted to know every detail of all they had learned.

He hung his head and tried to calm his racing heart by taking deep breaths. If he could unmask the real traitor, his life would be restored and he could... what could he do and what did he want to do?

An image of a stunning, fair-haired beauty whose eyes flashed like brilliant diamonds when provoked filled his head.

He smiled.

He'd always sworn he'd never marry until his father's name had been cleared, but money saw that vow fall off an enormous cliff. The tin mine had slightly eased the family money situation, but he still needed to marry well.

He couldn't wait for the opera tonight.

Dharma's dowry would help him and if he could give her a title and name untarnished by treason, that would be a fair trade. He would not need to feel guilty at the knowledge his heart was so badly shredded he might never love again.



Devlin refused to look at his pocket-watch for a third time. Where the hell was Clayton? If they didn't arrive soon, he'd have no chance to talk to Dharma before the Opera began. He hoped society would view him more favorably if they saw Lord Clayton and his family in his box at the Theatre Royal,

which he hadn't been able to afford for several seasons. He'd spent the last eight years cultivating an unblemished reputation and many of the *ton* had begrudgingly accepted he was not like his father.

Everyone except Lord Whetton.

And since young Hawthorne, Whetton's heir, seemed to have set his sights on Rosemary, Devlin needed to restore their family name or at least show he was nothing like his late father, if Rosemary was to marry well.

He'd already grilled Rosemary regarding the couple's stroll this afternoon. He'd been livid with jealousy when he heard Fencourt and Dharma had joined them. How had Dharma reacted to Fencourt? Rosemary's impression was that Fencourt could be a contender for Dharma's hand. His sister was loving his predicament a tad too much for his liking.

"Do stop pacing," his mother gushed. "You're making me quite dizzy."

He ignored his mother, but stopped pacing. He took a seat next to Rosemary. "Will Hawthorne be joining us?"

"I'm hoping so. He said he was attending." But he could see the doubt in Rosemary's eyes. Was Hawthorne the man she thought he was?

"I've found Hawthorne to be a gentleman. If he said he would be here, he will be."

She sighed. "But I believe his father is attending too. I don't want to put him in the position of making a scene. I certainly don't want the *ton's* attention on me."

She'd had too much of that in her young life, and none of it was good. He looked toward the entrance to his box once again.

"She is coming. I've never seen you this anxious about any young lady. You really do like her."

He looked at his sister. "I do."

"Then tell her. Or better yet, show her how you feel."

He scoffed. “And how do I do that? She has little reason to trust a man in my position.”

“You know how mixed up she is about marriage and love. She watched her stepmother, a woman she admires, live a sad and lonely life because she married a man who did not love her. Yet, she admired how her father’s love for her mother stopped him from being with Charlotte. She is a woman who knows what she wants from a marriage. Do you?”

He didn’t want to face that question. Did he even want to marry? Could he even bear the thought of bringing children into the world, considering how his family is treated? He wanted to dedicate his life to clearing his father’s name so his second eldest brother could provide an heir and live a better life.

But that could happen sooner than he thought.

He had brothers, so an heir was not imperative. Money was still an issue, and marrying a wealthy woman would help him greatly. If he cleared his father of treason, his brothers could marry well. He shook his head to clear his confusion. What the hell did he want? Or who did he want?

Too restless to stay seated, he left the box and joined the crowd in the corridor. It was quite the crush. The vestibule was full of well-dressed people milling around in their finery. How he was supposed to see her in this crush... He needn’t have worried. Like a hound smelling a fox, his body tightened. There she was. Clayton and his entourage, who included Hawthorne, were halfway up the stairs, but Devlin only saw one person. His gaze riveted on the beauty ascending the staircase. A gown of lavender velvet encased her perfect womanly curves. She had fair hair piled on her head and held in place with diamond-encrusted combs that glittered in the candlelight. However, every male eye focused on her bountiful décolletage prominently displayed.. He wanted to rush down and throw her coat about her shoulders. What the hell did she think she was wearing?

Devlin wanted to move, but his feet had other ideas. He could not remove his gaze from the ivory flesh that swelled

above the material of her bodice, the entire upper curves exposed. He bit back a groan. She was sending him a message, and it was very clear. He would have to fight to win her hand in marriage, and he knew what the price of victory would be. She wanted his heart. And soul.

But he didn't know if he could give her what she wanted. When rumors about his father's treason spread, his fiancé, Lady Marigold Sumner, ended their engagement, even though he loved her and thought she loved him back. And it wasn't because of pressure from her father. Her father had been his father's closest friend, and he'd stood by the late Lord Devlin, defending and denying the rumors. No, the woman who'd professed her love for him didn't love him at all. At the first sign of scandal, she'd fled.

His heart had broken and his faith in love fled. Then it shattered at his father's death. At not quite twenty-two years of age, he was left to pick up a family in ruins, both in reputation and financially. His mother's grief was hard to bear, and he had no way of offering her comfort. As for Rosemary, her life changed overnight. Her friends deserted her, all except Dharma. Even being so young, his sister had understood what that meant to her dreams of marriage.

Over the years, he'd tried to find who had started the rumors and what proof they had, but he'd failed—and his family paid the price.

He couldn't move on with his life, with his failure hanging over him and his family

Recently, a glimmer of hope had sprouted in his soul. He had the tin mine and if he married Dharma he'd have money, but most of all he'd have—her. A woman who challenged him on every level. A woman who excited him, and who made him think that love just might be possible.

But he was not a selfish person. Was it fair to pursue her, given he would continue to spend his life hunting for the person who framed and ultimately led to the death of his father? He would never stop his hunt.



Clayton greeted him. “Devlin, well met. There is quite the crush tonight. Will many others be joining us in the box?”

“Good evening, Lady Philippa. You look lovely tonight. And Lady Dharma, always a pleasure. Hawthorne, nice to have you join us.” He answered Clayton as they entered the box. “Few. My mother and Rosemary are in attendance. Sin and Charlotte.”

Clayton’s eyebrow raised. “It’s quite the coup to have society see Hawthorne in your box. It also shows the young man is not playing games.”

As Dharma made to move past him, he whispered for her ears alone, “I’m sure society will watch my box. My lady, I imagine society will pay more attention to your beauty this evening than to the stage. I know I will.”

“Attention is what you are seeking, is it not? You want to show society that my brother is comfortable with a match. Or is it Rosemary and Hawthorne?” With that, she brushed past him and took the seat next to Rosemary and immediately their heads came together in giggling whispers. He hated how Hawthorne seemed to be included in their chatter.

How could he be jealous of his sister? But he wished Dharma would relax in his presence instead of constantly trying to look at the meaning behind any gesture he made or words he uttered. She didn’t trust him, and he did not know how to earn her trust.

He wondered if he’d ever understand women. As the Opera started, he tried desperately to be drawn into the music. His gaze idly rested on the stage, where the soprano sung her heart out, but he was really only half listening. He sat watching Dharma rather than the stage. He worried that society could feel his discomfort. Although he knew in his bones Dharma was the right woman for him, the niggle of relief floating there at the thought of her dowry made a mockery of anything he might be feeling for her. Guilt suffocated. Guilt similar to that he felt on failing his father, and guilt that marriage to Dharma would save him, but not her.

Her fan waved in languid sweeps against the closeness of the room. Tendrils of silky, pale gold hair brushed her slender neck and her delicate face was flushed from the heat. She was one of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and he wondered why it had taken him until Charlotte's house party to notice that. If only he'd pursued her prior to attending Charlotte's silly house party. Perhaps then she'd be less suspicious.

*Probably because you weren't thinking of taking a wife other than for money and Charlotte was your goal.*

And therein lay the problem. He'd pursued her stepmother like the other mercenary men looking for a rich wife. He prayed it had not ruined any chance he might have in winning Dharma's hand in marriage.

He heard his sister say to Dharma, "The soprano is spectacular, isn't she?" However, he didn't hear her response. Instead, he was captivated by her dark blue eyes framed by long lashes, which were still focused on the performance.

What he wanted to shout to all who'd listen was, *you're spectacular!* What was breathtaking was the graceful curve of Dharma's bared shoulders and the flawless perfection of her skin, not to mention the alluring pink pout of her mouth, the darker color of her brows a contrast to the luster of her fair hair...

God, he was in trouble.

He wanted her. But desire was not love. There's the rub.

He forced his attention back to the stage. Or at least he tried.

There was no intermission tonight. This was the late showing. He turned to Lord Clayton. "Would you like to return to my townhouse for a drink and sustenance?" How desperate was that?

Lady Philippa took pity on him, realizing he'd had no time to talk with Dharma. "That would be lovely, thank you."

As they made to leave the box, Devlin extended the invitation to the young man by Rosemary's side, to join them

at Devlin House and ask if he'd like to accompany them in Devlin's carriage. His reward was Rosemary's grateful smile.

"I'd be honored, my lord. However, I have my carriage. Perhaps Lady Rosemary and her mother would allow me to escort them home."

"That's so kind of you, young man. We'd love that." Lady Devlin decided for him. Hawthorne gave Rosemary his arm and the happy party took their leave of his box.

The jostling crowd appeared merry, and although the exodus was chaotic, Devlin ensured he had Lady Dharma on his arm. All was proceeding as planned until they arrived on the bottom floor and were about to exit onto the street to find their carriages. Lord Clayton had just stepped outside when a voice sounded near Devlin's ear.

"Hawthorne. A word."

It was Lord Whetton.

"Good evening, father. I hope you enjoyed the opera. I'm escorting Lady Dharma and her mother home."

Whetton didn't acknowledge Devlin. "I need you at home. Now."

Hawthorne's face reddened and his jaw grew taut. "I shall be home shortly," and he made to move around his father.

Whetton grabbed his arm. "Do not disobey me, boy."

Hawthorne shook his arm free of his father's hold. "Father, you are creating a scene. I will see you at home later." The young man moved determinedly to the door with an anxious Rosemary on his arm and a beaming Lady Devlin.

Whetton stepped in front of Devlin. "I will see my son disowned before I let him marry your sister."

Dharma must have felt the tension in Devlin's body because she stepped between the two men. "Lord Whetton." She placed her hand on his arm and sweetly said, "Please don't ruin a magical night for me. Besides, I hate being the subject of gossip. Don't you?"

Whetton looked around. "This is not over, Devlin. I won't allow a match. I warn you now."

"I think that is up to your son and my sister to decide." Dharma squeezed his arm as if to say, don't antagonize the man.

Whetton raised his fist and shook it in Devlin's face and Devlin was about to retaliate when Clayton arrived. "Whetton, stop all this barking, for goodness' sake. I won't have this behavior around my sister." Dharma smiled sweetly at Whetton once more, which calmed him.

"I shall talk to my son." He turned tail and stalked off with all of society watching.

Devlin looked at Dharma, who was trying to ignore the staring. "I apologize for putting you in the middle of that. If you would prefer to go home, I'll ask Clayton to take you."

"You think a belligerent man like Whetton would injure me? Rosemary and I took worse verbal poison from the young ladies last season. It was nothing and will certainly not ruin my night. What angers me most is it has probably ruined Rosemary's."

With that she began walking towards Clayton's carriage with her head held high and he'd never admired her more.

She was quite the woman, and a woman who deserved the best in life.

He certainly wasn't the best, hell he was hardly second best. What could he offer her?

He handed her into Clayton's carriage. Her brother said, "I'm looking forward to that drink and to shake Hawthorne's hand. I like that he stood up to his father. The man's a bore and a bully."

Devlin sat in his empty carriage for the ride home, thinking about Hawthorne. Was it worth the trouble to continue to support this match with Whetton so opposed? Rosemary could end up being hurt? He rubbed his eyes. The weight of his father's stigma wore him down. He'd pushed it aside for the past few years, but with Rosemary's come out and his brothers

looking at him to save the family by marrying money, the guilt ate him up inside until his stomach crawled, because he'd failed in clearing his father's name.

He lay his head back on the squab and closed his eyes. He'd told himself many, many times that there was no point continuing looking for the truth, because he had hit a completely dead end. No leads, no clues and absolutely no idea how to progress his search. So what was the point in dreaming of clearing his father's name and restoring the Devlin family honor and winning the heart of a fair maid? *Perhaps to save your life if the shot at the duel was anything to go by.* Yet, why would she even consider him? What could he offer?

A life of whispers and gossip and stained reputations.

And their children? How would their children fare?

When he arrived back at his house and entered the drawing room, his eyes found her across the room without trying. Her beauty drew his eye, but it was her smile that stole his breath. She was busy talking to Rosemary and Hawthorne, and he bit back his frustration.

He wanted to talk to her. Tomorrow night was the Valentine's Day ball at Lady Elwood's mansion in the square. For once, he'd been invited. Devlin wanted to ask if he could escort her to the Valentine's Day ball. If she agreed, he'd know he still had a chance to win her hand in marriage. If she refused...

Like the weak-willed man he was, he'd simply keep trying.

"Devlin, come talk to your mother."

He stood torn, wanting to ignore her request and make his way to Dharma's side, but when his mother patted the seat next to her, he could do nothing other than go to her.

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you for a very enjoyable evening. It was nice to get out of the house and not have society sniggering at me."

"They are still sniggering, mother, just silently because they know I've done nothing to further besmirch the Devlin

name, yet I could not prove father was not a traitor.”

“But you are slowly restoring our finances. That’s quite the achievement and when you marry, we should have no more money troubles.” At his silence, she asked, “The mine is productive?”

He had been gifted the mine. It clawed deep in his guts, knowing he’d taken charity from his friends. Charlotte had sold the mine to him for a pound, and then Sin had come on as a partner to invest in the machinery they needed to mine the land. Plus, Sin still refused to take any share of the profit until Devlin had cleared his debts.

It fueled his determination to clear his father’s name, thus vindicating those who had placed so much faith and trust in him. But his pride was taking a beating. Then to hear his mother talk about marrying for money...

“The mine is more than I’d hoped for.”

“But you think it’s charity?” He sighed and hung his head. “Everyone in life needs help sometimes. Look at your father. If he’d let those of us close to him help, he might have lived a good life. Don’t let pride blind you to those who love and support you. We need each other. Do you think Sin would stand back and let you lose everything? Would you let him, if the situation were reversed?”

“I would help him. It’s still hard to accept such help, and now you are pushing me to marry Lady Dharma for her dowry.”

“Oh, no. Not for her dowry. Her dowry is the bonus. Marrying Dharma is for you. She’s the woman you need by your side and I think, if you’d let go of the past, you’d see that.”

“Please don’t interfere, mother.”

“I’m just trying to help. Any progress there? I heard Fencourt is sniffing around Dharma. She is a beauty, I’ll give you that. Which means, as the daughter of an Earl with a large dowry, she’ll have many admirers. Don’t wait too long.”

He wasn't about to tell his mother she was not ready to hear his proposal. "So, what do I offer? She already thinks I'm interested because of her dowry."

"So, prove her wrong by giving her the one thing all women want. Your heart. Don't let what happened with Marigold Sumner keep you from giving all of yourself. You're a fine man, and any young lady would be lucky to have you as a husband."

"You have to say that. You're my mother."

"True. But I've watched you turn into a fine young man who has wasted too much of his life chasing after your father's ghost. How do you ever prove a lie? Give it up, my son. Live your life. That's what your father would have wanted. He would be proud of you."

He'd told himself that so often, but someone had to have started the rumor. Someone had to be pointing to his father to protect themselves. It had cost his father his life. The family was facing an ongoing scandal, so his father sacrificed himself by letting himself be shot. But it had not saved them, anyway. Society never forgets, and certainly never forgives, it would appear.

His mother sighed and patted his hand. "Rosemary and Hawthorne make a lovely couple and it is an excellent match. However, his father will oppose it. What if he cuts him off? We cannot afford to carry Hawthorne until he comes into his title and lands."

His mother was correct. It was the biggest concern. Would Hawthorne be prepared to alienate his father, and if it was true love and he did, it would mean another couple to house and feed. Thank God for his tin mine.

But it would also mean he needed to marry for money. Just what Dharma accused him of.

"It's too early to say what will happen, mother. I'm just worried Rosemary will get hurt."

"I have hope. Tonight was a sign Hawthorne has a backbone and honor."

“Honor is sometimes not enough, mother.” If it was, his family would have been forgiven by now.

Before he could gather himself, his mother called across to Dharma. “Come converse with me, my girl. I want to hear all about how our new duchess is faring.”

Could his mother be more obvious? In one command, she’d made it possible for Hawthorne and Rosemary to have a private conversation and she’d brought Dharma to his side. Now was his chance...

Once Dharma had settled in the chair next to his mother, she asked with a sly smile, “I heard Her Grace has been a little unwell, especially in the morning.”

Devlin frowned at his mother, wondering what on earth she was saying.

Dharma’s smile lit up her face. She leaned forward. “It’s not my place to share any news.” And then she winked.

Lady Devlin clapped her hands and gave a small cry of joy. “Oh, that is wonderful. I’m so happy for Charlotte. She deserves to be happy.”

“Oh, His Grace makes her very happy.”

“Now we just need to find a man that can make you as happy as your stepmother,” and Lady Devlin looked meaningfully at him.

He cleared his throat, and he sent his mother a pointed look. He turned to Dharma. “Thank you for your help with Lord Whetton this evening.”

“My pleasure, the odious little man. Lord Hawthorne must take after his mother.”

“Oh, he does,” exclaimed Lady Devlin. “If you’ll excuse me, I want to have a word with the fine young man,” she said and rose and moved across the room to her daughter and her beau.

“That was nicely done by your mother.”



“She can be very determined in her quest for grandchildren.” Devlin smiled at her.

“I wondered if you even wanted children.”

Dharma was referring to his pursuit of Charlotte, who everyone assumed was barren. “I do want children.”

“I hear a note of hesitation.”

He nodded. “I had hoped to clear my father’s name before I had children, hell before I married.”

Dharma nodded. “I understand, but if I were you, I wouldn’t let society have the satisfaction of stopping me from building the life I wanted to live.” She suddenly looked into his eyes. “Or is it you can’t let go of the past?”

He drew in a deep breath and tried to ignore the racing of his heart. “Someone is responsible for the death of my father and the ruination of my family. Would you let it go?”

She sat back and sighed. “No. Probably not.” She looked across at Rosemary. “Especially if I were thinking of my family. If the focus is on clearing your father’s name, why have you not seriously looked for a wife before Charlotte’s house party?”

Clearing his father of treason was his priority. But restoring their financial situation came a close second. The idea of having to marry was terrifying for many reasons. Protecting his heart made a marriage of convenience more attractive, however Marigold’s desertion destroyed his confidence. What did he offer any woman? A title, true, but his family was virtually penniless and tarnished by treason. “The hunt for my father’s betrayers took up much of my time, I will admit.”

“And have you learned anything over the years that can help you move on?”

He shuffled in his seat. “I don’t think I’ll ever move on until I learn the truth.”

“What if you never learn the truth, or you don’t like the truth you find?”

He looked at Rosemary. “At least I’ll know. If Rosemary marries well, it will hardly matter anymore.”

“So, it is Rosemary who is driving you? This is why you waste your life hunting for a truth that won’t put anything right.” She leaned forward. “It won’t bring back the years you have wasted hunting those responsible for your father’s ruination, and it won’t bring your father back.”

“You don’t understand. I will know. My mother will know. Someone killed my father. I won’t rest until he’s avenged.”

“Your father wouldn’t want that, and I’m very sure your sister and mother don’t either. They wouldn’t want to put you in danger. I can’t see those who did this sitting back and letting you unravel all they have hidden.”

She was right. Before today, no one had taken a shot at him, or harmed him, even though he was looking for the truth. That’s how he knew he was not even close to uncovering anything. However, the duel this morning and the second shot at him changed everything. He did not wish to alarm Dharma, so he tried to change the subject.

“Would you let me escort you to the Valentine’s Day ball tomorrow night?”

Her eyes widened. She knew what he was asking of her. If she arrived in his carriage, it would indicate she was accepting his suit.

“I have feelings for you, Dharma. You’re the only woman I’d consider marrying now that I have a choice.”

“But you don’t love me?” She sounded sad. “You know what I want. I want what my parents had. What I know your parents had, too. Could you come to love me?”

He owed her the truth. “I loved once before, and it was a disaster. I’m not sure if my heart is whole enough ever to love. It’s battered and bruised from everything life has thrown at me.”

“But bruises fade away. And I know you can love. You love your family, your sister, brothers and mother.”

He wanted to scream that not all wounds heal properly. He didn't, or couldn't, promise something he didn't really want to do. Love was false. He'd experienced that. Besides, if he fell in love with Dharma, would he try as hard to clear his father of treason?

The night his father had died in the duel, he'd told Devlin to denounce him to society. He wanted Devlin to say his father was guilty. He wanted Devlin to shun him and take society's side. He wanted Devlin to lie.

All to save his family.

He'd sworn to his father he would never do that, and he'd never stop trying to clear his father of these lies. To this day, Devlin wondered if that's why his father allowed himself to be killed. He was trying to stop Devlin from becoming embroiled in the treason. Devlin's gut churned as it always did, thinking of his father's death. It was his fault. He should have foreseen his father's thoughts and accompanied him to the duel. Instead, he'd galloped off to see Marigold, to reassure her and ask for her support.

What he'd got was her betrayal, and when he returned home, he learned what his father had done. He willingly positioned himself in front of a bullet and allowed it to kill him.

Nothing was more important than avenging his father and clearing the Devlin name—not even Dharma. It couldn't be. He couldn't let it be. This was his fault. If he'd just stayed with his father... but he'd put love first. Never again.

“At the moment, my admiration,” he leaned forward and ran his finger down her cheek, “and my desire for you is all I can offer. Anything else? I cannot or will not promise.”

## *Chapter Four*

**A**t least he was honest. Dharma knew he'd loved once before and it had ended in disaster. Lady Marigold Sumner.

She'd learned about Marigold one afternoon two years ago, when she was walking in the park with Rosemary, and they'd spied Lord Devlin in a parked chaise feeding strawberries to a dark-haired exotic, Spanish looking woman.

Dharma watched enthralled as he'd leaned in and licked a drop of juice from the corner of her mouth before, to her surprise, the woman let him slip his tongue right in her mouth. The kiss looked decadent, and she remembered her whole body heating.

The two young girls had gasped in unison before turning and scurrying in the opposite direction. Rosemary had informed her the woman was his latest mistress. A modiste her mother used.

"Why is it your brother has never married?" she'd asked. "He's attractive in his own way," she'd reluctantly admitted.

"He had his heart broken by a young lady called Marigold Sumner. She broke off their engagement when father was accused of treason."

"But that was a few years ago now."

Rosemary's smile faded. "I heard him tell Tobin he'd never love again. The pain wasn't worth it."

Dharma drew her mind back to the present as Devlin repeated, "I cannot promise anything else. Do you

understand?”

She understood. She understood he'd built a fortress around his heart and it would take a special woman to tear it down. Was she special enough? Obviously not, given that until six months ago, he'd barely acknowledge she existed.

“It appears we are at a stalemate. If you could promise to open up and let me in, I would consider letting you court me.” She wanted to try to understand the man behind this façade. The confident face he showed the world hid a myriad of uncertainty and pain, she was sure.

“Let you in?”

“You know, share your thoughts, your dreams, and plans for the future. You must have some?” *Can a man's face go any paler?*

“Clearing my father's name is top of mind.”

“But what do you want when you achieve that?”

“I haven't thought that far ahead. The task of clearing my father's name may take me a lifetime.”

So this is what she was up against. An all-consuming need to clear his father. “You are a contradiction. Why marry at all then? You have brothers who can marry and beget an heir. Your tin mine is providing funds, isn't it?”

He took her tiny hand in his rather large one. “The answer is simple. I don't want you to marry anyone else. I know that's not fair, but that's how I feel.”

She smiled at the possessiveness in his tone. Something must be driving those feelings, because he'd barely noticed her before Charlotte's house party. Something changed between them over that week. It was as if he suddenly noticed she'd grown up.

A spark of hope flared in her chest. What had Charlotte said about not pushing? But she couldn't resist. “Why shouldn't I marry someone else?”

He let her hand go and her warm feeling dissipated. He ran his fingers through his hair and uttered, “I don't know why. I

just know I need to make you mine.”

His admission of those feelings was a start. Listening to him talk about his father told her one thing. He wasn't marrying her for money. If he wanted her money, he would not have shared these confidences, because he had honorably warned her that his heart, at this point in time, was not his to give. Could she risk her heart in return? The reward if he came to love her would be worth the risk.

“Then yes, I will agree to accompany you to the Valentine's Day ball.”

“You understand what that will signal to all there? That you are seriously considering my suit?”

“I do. So don't let me down. I want a chance to see if the feelings I have for you are real. I want the chance to see if you could ever open your heart to me. So, don't take this honor I have bestowed for granted. Or I will never marry you.”

Once again, he took her hand in his and pressed his lips to her knuckles. A flare of heat swept through her body, and she wished those lips would kiss her. When she let her eyes travel to meet his, she blushed. He understood her want to be kissed, and he reveled in his power until she added, “There is one other condition.” His eyes narrowed. “Every day you will share one confidence with me.” At his raised eyebrow, she continued. “You will share with me something personal about your past, or something you are looking forward to in the future. I want to know you better before I tie my life up with yours.”

He nodded slowly. “That sounds reasonable. But I want you to return the favor.”

She smiled. “I can do that.”

“Good. I've already shared tonight. Now it's your turn.” Without letting her reply, he asked, “Were you ever serious about letting Fencourt court you this season?”

She inwardly smiled. He was jealous. Jealousy was a mixed emotion. It could be born from many causes, one of which was tender feelings, not just ownership. She doubted

Devlin wanted to own her. It wasn't in his nature. So, her heart did a jig in her chest because his jealousy was most likely from genuine feelings for her.

“No. He is far too young to know his mind on marriage. Besides, I like him, but he does not stir me as much as a simple smile from you does.” She was rewarded for her honesty. Devlin's eyes flamed with heat and his gaze fell to her lips. Who wanted to kiss whom now?

“I'll collect you tomorrow night. I shall have Rosemary and Mother with me as a chaperon.” Before she could reply, Hawthorne was standing to take his leave. Devlin joined him and she could not hear what was discussed, but the two men shook hands.

She smiled over at Rosemary, but her friend only had eyes for Hawthorne. She hoped the young man wouldn't hurt Rosemary. Then it suddenly occurred to her that perhaps her friend thought that about Dharma and her brother.

Why was love such a risk? Probably because a love lost leads to pain, and because it involved trust, and trust was fragile. So easily broken and so difficult to restore.

Did she trust Devlin? The man perhaps, but his heart no.

Philippa took Devlin's chair. “That seemed quite the conversation.”

“Marriage is a serious business.”

“Should it be?” At Dharma's blank look, Philippa continued. “I knew I wanted to marry your brother the moment I met him. One smile and he owned my heart.”

“A smile can hide many faults.”

She laughed. “So true. Your brother's annoying habit of finishing sentences for everyone.” Then her smile faded. “He might have owned my heart, but I made sure we would suit each other before I married him. I'm not foolish, and neither are you. I like that you're taking your time. Seeing how society views this arrangement. But ultimately, if the relationship is right for you, nothing else should matter. Not

what Tobin thinks, not what Devlin thinks, and certainly not what society thinks.”

“It will be what I think.”

Philippa nodded. “Good. Now it’s time we took our leave. We have the Valentine’s Ball tomorrow and it will be a very late night. You’ll want to look and feel your best to face the *ton*.”

“How did you know I was going with Devlin?”

“What else would you two be talking about so earnestly?”

“You don’t think it’s too rash?”

“No. I think it’s sensible. You’ll learn if you can love him enough to forgo society’s adoration, which I’m pretty sure you’ll lose by marrying him.”

“Tobin has made that perfectly clear.”

“You still seemed troubled by that.”

She shook her head. “Not at all. It’s just sad that Devlin will spend his life looking for answers that perhaps are not there.”

Philippa leaned forward and took her hand. “Then you’ll have to give him something else to focus on. Love, children, a home.”

That sounded so easy. But how did she compete with the ghost of his father and restoring a family’s honor?



Dharma took it as a good sign that she wasn’t at all nervous, standing with her arm through Devlin’s in the receiving line. The whispers behind the twittering fans had begun the minute Devlin had handed her down from his carriage with his mother and sister. Why bother being announced when everyone knew they were there?

“The most honorable the Marquis of Devlin and the Lady Rosa Devlin, the Lady Rosemary Sneddon and the Lady



Dharma Dexter.”

You could have heard a pin drop for a few moments before a hurricane of whispers erupted. She felt the muscles in Devlin’s arm tense, so she gently squeezed and walked down the stairs with her head held high and a smile on her lips.

Her brother, and Charlotte and Sin greeted them at the bottom and it would appear that appeased the affronted crowd. “At least you didn’t trip down the stairs,” Charlotte whispered as they made their way through the ballroom, nodding and smiling at those who were secretly gossiping about her arriving on Lord Devlin’s arm.

Devlin was chatting with Sin as if he didn’t notice all eyes were upon him. She ignored the crowd and linked arms with Charlotte.

“I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. Besides, it would appear curiosity has replaced the shock. I suspect the gentlemen, and maybe some ladies, will place wagers on an engagement before the season ends.”

“I’ll take that wager,” Charlotte stated. “I think you’ll be happy with Devlin. He’s a good man. He’s also good for you. I’ve never seen you so content with life since my house party. Admit it. He interests you. It’s more than just the fact he’s one of the most handsome men in England, isn’t it?”

Was it? She looked over her shoulder, and as usual, one look at his face sent her body into a sensual fever. He stirred something primal in her. But Charlotte was right. It wasn’t just his looks. He noted her stare and smiled. Her heart flipped in her chest. These past few months, she’d learnt more about the man and she liked what she’d learnt.

His family story tugged at her innate sense of fairness. The unfairness of his situation rankled. She admired the fact his family meant everything to him. That he held back on living his life to help clear his father so his family would no longer suffer. He put their happiness ahead of his own. Selfless. He was selfless. She admired him immensely.

She dragged her gaze back to her stepmother. “The man underneath is very appealing.”

Charlotte giggled. Just then, the first waltz was called and Devlin bowed over her hand. “My dance, my lady.”

He led her onto the floor and the heat in his eyes made her forget the stares and whispers. She found it difficult to focus on her steps. The feel of his arms about her sent images racing through her head. She’d love to see him naked. The image of him sitting with his shirt hanging open in the library at Ivy Close filled her head, and she almost missed a step. She moved closer to him as he twirled her around the floor. His powerful thighs were solid through the thin silk of her dress. For one moment she thought she’d felt something else solid pushing against her stomach when they briefly brushed each other.

She looked up at him and smiled.

“If you keep looking at me like that, and pushing closer, we really will give the crowd a scandalous show and you’ll have no choice but to marry me.”

His husky voice had the opposite effect of his warning. It made her disregard safety and move even closer.

He frowned down at her. “You’re not playing fair.”

“I might not be playing.”

His jaw grew taut, and he twirled her harder and faster. They ended up at the back of the room and he danced her through the door into a darkened corridor. “When you play with fire... Well, I’m burning to taste you.”

Excitement and nerves jangled as he led her down the corridor. With one quick look up and down, he opened a door and pulled her inside, closing and locking it after him and pushing her up against the door. His mouth took hers in a smoldering kiss before she could blink and her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer. He tasted of—forever. She was so stupid for not recognizing the fact that he was the man she wanted, and she would do everything in her power to make him fall in love with her. The fact he wanted her as his

wife spoke volumes. He might not be in love, but he felt something for her.

Slowly, as if giving her time to stop him, he slid his hands up under her gown, pushing her skirts up as he went. She groaned when he stopped their kiss, but then he dropped to his knees and his lips found the inside of her thigh. She could barely stay upright. Her breath came in small, rapid pants.

“You do not know the taste I crave.”

The sensuous path he made up the inside of her leg spoke of pleasure beyond imagining. This was so wicked, but at the same time, she could not deny the excitement skimming through her. She trusted this man. She trusted him to show her about passion and to make her life wonderful, and after tonight, she'd trust him with her heart. She would show him he had nothing to fear. His heart would be safe in her small hands.

He would marry her and they would have the most perfect life.

“We don't have enough time for what I'd really love to do to you, with you, but I can't wait to taste you.” His voice was intoxicatingly sensuous.

“I surrender to your skills, my lord.”

Desire played over her skin in ascending ripples of response. When she looked into eyes darker than the emeralds around her neck, her legs parted of their own accord, allowing him greater access. His groan only inflamed her passion.

He used his hands to part her even further until she felt open and exposed. He kissed higher up the inside of her leg, his lips setting her on fire. A soft moan escaped, and she didn't care.

“You may be honorable, but you're also wicked...” Dharma gasped into the confines of the rapidly heating room.

“If you marry me, we can be wicked together every day.”

She could feel how wet he was making her, and his hands hadn't even touched her yet. When the touch of his fingers

finally came, the beguiling strokes raised a throbbing need inside her that built and grew until her legs shook.

His tongue traced a molten path closer to the apex between her thighs, leaving a cool trail behind; elsewhere her skin was hot with feverish need. His unhurried movements fed her impatience. She let out another enraptured moan as his tongue swept closer to the part of her that desperately wanted his attention.

Just as she felt his warm breath at her core, he suddenly drew back. She looked down. Her skirts were around her waist, and she couldn't see what he was looking at. But the cool air told her he was enthralled at the sight of her feminine flesh, naked to his possessive gaze. He reached out and ran a finger over her glistening womanhood and then raised his wet finger to his mouth. She could see it covered in her juices. He sucked it and licked his lips.

“Can you imagine letting any other man take such liberties?” He didn't hide the hint of smug male satisfaction in his voice.

She could barely shake her head.

She should have felt ashamed, but she didn't. She'd never experienced her feminine sexuality before; yet, he only had to look at her and she grew wet, but wet for him alone. It was as if her body knew who this man was to her.

She spread her legs wider, biting her lip to stop herself from begging him to continue kissing her.

Finally, after one more lingering look, he leaned forward and touched her with his tongue, just lightly caressing her. Her body recognized the sensation and she pushed her hips forward, begging for more.

His hands encircled her buttocks, pulling her down and then upward to give his mouth better access. Devlin knew exactly where and how to touch her to prolong her pleasure. She'd never ever felt anything like it and she was sure she was about to faint from the heightened sensations sweeping over

her. She held herself up by pushing her palms flat against the door at her back, hoping her knees didn't give out.

Her breathing grew ragged. She no longer cared whether anyone found them. She wriggled closer, urging him on. His tongue stabbed deep within her, making her shudder. Her head fell and hit the wood of the sturdy door at her back. Her flesh seemed to burn; a heat was consuming her from the inside.

It was almost too much to endure, yet she prayed he'd never stop. Her eyes widened in anticipation of what was yet to come; then she closed them tightly as her climax ripped through her. His tongue lapped at her, making it last, drawing out each shuddering sensation until, if he had not risen and gripped her waist, she would have slipped to the floor so satiated that she couldn't move.

Before she could gather herself together, he tipped her head up and took her mouth in a deep, searching kiss. His tongue swept in so she could taste herself on his lips. Her arms crept around his neck and he pulled her in close to him. He lifted her into his arms and stumbled to a chair near a low burning fire. He continued to kiss her as if he'd die without her. Dharma cuddled against his hard chest, sitting in his lap, wishing they could stay like this all night.

Finally, Devlin took pity on her, and while he stopped kissing her lips, he couldn't quite remove them from her silky skin as he kissed down her neck. He just couldn't seem to get enough of her. His cock throbbed in his breeches, but he didn't care. By the end of the year, she would be his wife and he could make love to her whenever he wanted. She would never have allowed him such liberties if she had not already decided to marry him. That thought scared and thrilled him. He could not fathom why?

“How many women have you brought into this room?” At his surprised look, she added, “You knew exactly where it was and that the door latch was locked from the inside.”

## *Chapter Five*

“Not the question I was expecting,” he dryly replied.

“You promised to share. This is my question for today.”

“I won’t lie. I have brought a few women to this room, but none of them were you.” A smile broke over her lips. “And you’re the first woman I have brought to this room intending to marry. I hope you know I would never dishonor a young, virginal miss.”

She cupped his cheek. “Honor is your middle name.”

“Now it’s my turn to ask a question.” He felt her tense in his arms. Annoyance hit. He wasn’t about to ask her to marry him again, but the idea she didn’t want him to after what they had just shared irked him. “What do you think of Hawthorne’s attention to Rosemary?”

She relaxed in his arms and nodded her head. “It is a tad worrying, is it not? Lord Whetton is so against the match, yet I feel Hawthorne’s admiration for Rosemary is genuine. I suppose you are concerned at how far Whetton will go to prevent a match and if Hawthorne will stand by his convictions or bow to his father’s will?”

“What do you think Hawthorne will do?”

“I think, if he loves Rosemary, he will stand by her. If you truly love someone, you’d do anything to protect them. Doesn’t love conquer all?”

“I wouldn’t know.” He understood Marigold had obviously not loved him. What he still tried to understand was whether

he had really loved her, or if he had simply wanted a shoulder to lean on, someone to console him regarding the situation his father found himself in.

He'd never had that shoulder. His father died and he was left to pick up the pieces of their ruined lives.

Dharma merely said, "I just hope Lord Whetton sees the depth of his son's conviction and decides not to interfere."

"I doubt that. It's as if my father's treason was a personal affront to the man." Whetton had been one of his father's closest friends and Whetton took his betrayal of the country and all they stood for personally. He didn't even try to believe his father was innocent.

"Or Whetton has something to hide." That thought had crossed Devlin's mind, too. "We should get back. People will talk about our absence," Dharma said as she pushed out of his arms and stood to straighten her skirts.

"If a scandal erupts from our behavior tonight, we will have to announce our engagement. I won't have my family's honor tarnished further."

"Perhaps you should have made that clear before dragging me in here."

"You didn't need to be dragged." He wished he could take the words back the minute he spoke them, but any dig at his honor set him off.

He looked at her reddening face and made to reach out, but she surprised him by saying, "I deserved that. My apologies. You are right. I wanted to be alone with you."

He pulled her into his arms, hugging her tight. "Thank you. I admire your honesty. It's a highly addictive quality." He was realizing how lucky he was to have the chance to make Dharma his wife. She excited him like no other woman did. She was beautiful, clever and now he could add honest. Let's not forget her dowry, even though he wished he could. Her money was at the bottom of his list of reasons Dharma was right for him. Perhaps his luck was turning.

“If you leave the room, turn left, go to the end of the corridor, and then go up the first set of stairs, you’ll reach the back entrance to the ladies’ retiring room. Slip in there and then make sure you walk out with another lady who can vouch to have seen you in there.”

“I can see you have done this many times indeed.”

He ignored her comment. “I’ll stay here until I finish a glass of brandy. Then I’ll ensure I’m seen entering the ballroom from the terrace,” and he nodded at the doors to the outside at the end of the study.

He kissed her once more, then checked the corridor was empty. As she slipped past him, he whispered, “Save the last dance for me.”

The brandy couldn’t dilute the taste of her. It was something he could get addicted to and he would never let any man touch her the way he had. She would be his wife, and after tonight, she knew the truth of that. She would never have let him touch her so intimately if she was not seriously looking to join her life with his.

He smiled into the bottom of the empty glass. Life would be perfect if only he could expose his father’s nemesis. He was about to rejoin the ball when there was a knock at the study door and his man of business, Mr. Brown, entered.

“So sorry to disturb, my lord, but an urgent missive arrived.” Why would Mr. Brown think he needed to read the note this very minute, at a ball? He was about to ask him just that question when Mr. Brown thrust the note into his hand. “They said it was urgent. Immediate urgent. It’s arrived from Scotland.”

With his hands shaking like a leaf in a gale, he tore the seal open. Had the Bow Street Runners he’d dispersed to the four corners of this country finally found something?

*Lord Devlin*



*I was right in my hunch that Mr. McTavish might provide answers. However, his widow will only speak with you and swears she has information that could lead to clearing your father's name.*

*Do not reveal this news to anyone. The lady is fearful for her life should those responsible suspect she is talking to you. Try to leave London without fanfare and make it look as if you are not heading north.*

*I've arranged for two of my best men to accompany you for your safety. They will meet you at Hunters Hill, west of London. They should arrive there about the same time as you, as long as you leave London as soon as you receive this missive.*

*God speed.*

*Yours Timothy Dirkin*

*Bow Street Runner*

Devlin sunk into the chair nearest him. He was right. His enemy must have learned of the men in Scotland. He'd have to be careful. They had already tried to kill him once already.

"Is there are reply, my lord?"

He'd forgotten Mr. Brown was there. "No reply. I'll see you at home."

"Very good, my lord."

He sat fingering the note in his hand and tried not to let his hopes rise. But this was the first truly important turning point in the ten long years of his search. Never had he been told that someone had something to say that could lead to his father being cleared of treason.

Ten years of having men refuse to have a drink with him. Ten years of the cut direct. Ten years of his mother being ostracized and left to grieve alone. Ten years of his sister being treated like a leper with a refusal to be presented at court. His family had paid too high a price for the villain not to be revealed and punished.

Was this widow his salvation? *Don't get ahead of yourself.* The immediate problem is how to leave London without being noticed? He began pacing the room, trying to come up with a plan. He couldn't very well say his goodbyes to Dharma or anyone at the ball, because they would make a fuss and want to know where he was going alerting his enemy. He would have to slip away.

Dharma would be upset. He'd promised her the last dance. Could he send her a note to explain? But what if someone else saw or she spoke of his leaving to someone else? He didn't want to say to anyone why he was leaving until he had time to talk safely to this Mrs. McTavish.

A chill gripped him. The closer he got to the truth, the more dangerous the journey became.

Easier to leave and leave quickly and explain once he returned. With his decision made, he left the study and the ball, hoping he could make it to Hunter's Hill by first light.



To Dharma's relief, no one seemed to notice anything astray as she rejoined the crowded ballroom. She stood on her toes to see over the throng and found Charlotte and her brother deep in conversation with Tobin. She hugged herself, looking forward to the next dance with Devlin, to be held in his arms.

Dharma never got the chance to have the last dance with Devlin because he never returned to the ballroom.

What she became was the laughingstock of the season. The traitor had announced his interest in making her his wife, seemingly got her agreement as she'd allowed him to escort her with his family to the ball, and then he'd deserted her, leaving her brother to see her home.

What had she done to set the traitor running? It must have been something terrible.

No other man looking for a wife would touch her now. Why had Lord Devlin left her at the ball? What could she have

possibly done?

She'd done nothing but given her trust to the wrong man. He'd damaged her reputation.

But that didn't matter to Dharma. What mattered was she'd trusted him. She'd let him...

And he'd deserted her without a word.

## Chapter Six

**L**ondon – Beginning of May 1817 (3 months later)

Dharma fingered the ducal invitation and sighed. She was dreading this dinner for one reason—Lord Devlin was on the guest list. The Duke of Sinclair and his duchess, Charlotte, were holding an intimate dinner party for thirty of their closest friends. Of course, they invited her brother Tobin and his wife, along with Dharma. After all, Charlotte had been their stepmother for many years before marrying His Grace in August last year.

Lady Rosemary Sneddon, her best friend, had sent her a note an hour ago, stating she'd be at the dinner with her brother. Warwick Sneddon, the Marquis of Devlin, was His Grace's best friend. Of course, they would invite him. Dharma gritted her teeth. He was the last person she wished to see tonight in such close company. Three months ago Devlin had made a fool of her.

Dharma was just at the stage where she thought perhaps Devlin's motives for courting her were not solely about money, when Devlin deserted her at Lady Elwood's Valentine's Day ball and made her the laughingstock of the *ton*.

He'd up and left without a word to her about where he was going and why. All Rosemary knew was he'd travelled to Scotland.

To make matters worse, throughout the months he was away, he'd not written to her once. It seemed like she had been completely forgotten. And the vicious *ton* noticed.

She might have been able to forgive such a slight if, when he returned to town, he explained his absence. However, Devlin rubbed salt into her wounds, and made her the talk of society by arriving home with a rich Scottish widow on his arm.

A rich, beautiful Scottish widow on his arm.

And he'd been back a week and still not called on her.

Even Rosemary was aghast at his behavior, and tonight the two young ladies were looking forward to making Lord Devlin watch her interact with the young, handsome, and rich, Lord Fencourt. The girls had decided, even though quite young, Fencourt could make Dharma a good husband. He had a poet's heart. He came from a wealthy family, so was not after her dowry, and he seemed besotted with Dharma. It appeared he was not one to want to sow his wild oats, but was seriously looking for a wife. Lord Fencourt did not blame her for Devlin's desertion.

What burned in Dharma's gut was that Rosemary revealed Devlin was bringing Mrs. Fiona McTavish to the dinner tonight. Two nights ago, people saw him at the Opera with the beautiful, young widow accompanying him. Rumor was they were lovers, and he was seriously considering marriage.

Dharma rubbed her chest. Why did she care? A tin mine meant Devlin's driving need to marry for money had diminished somewhat. He still needed money, but the possibility of deriving income long term had pacified his creditors—for now. The fact His Grace had invested helped. Devlin's creditors gave him more time to pay off his late father's debts.

His callous behavior made her question his motives once again. Did Devlin want her money all along? He'd proved her right by disappearing from her life, only to reappear in London with Fiona McTavish. His conduct showed how he held her in little regard. If he'd loved her, he'd have no need for Fiona McTavish or her money.

Fool. She'd almost believed Devlin when he said he wasn't interested in her money, but as soon as he didn't need

it, he disappeared—without a word.

Her pride would not let her believe his desertion. She'd thought he'd come for her. Lord Devlin was supposed to fight for her. After what they'd shared in Lady Elwood's study, he'd promised his hand in marriage. But then he'd simply left. What did that mean? He was the worst rake of all to take such liberties and then disappear. His desertion battered her pride and heart to her dismay. Her heart deserved a more worthy target.

Although she admitted he'd never spoken of love. Did he love this Mrs. McTavish?

He most definitely was not supposed to take a lover, or bring said woman to a dinner party with Dharma's family and friends.

Dharma crushed Rosemary's note in her hand. Well, she was not sitting and moping over a man who thought so little of her. Especially as there were plenty of handsome gentlemen if she could get over the scandal of Devlin's desertion. Those that seemed interested were those who thought she was an easy mark. That Devlin had taken what he wanted and left her. She had used her fist on more than one occasion to show these men they were very wrong.

To say Dharma would give him the cut direct was an understatement. No man who was really in love, or even held a small regard for her, would treat a woman this way. So, tonight, she'd make it very clear she was not interested in Warwick Sneddon, the Marquis of Devlin.

She didn't know who she was trying to convince. Already her body hummed at the idea of seeing him again. She'd spent hours over her dress and hair.

She twirled in front of the mirror and knew she looked stunning. Would Devlin notice? And would he even care?



An hour later, when Dharma walked into the Duke of Sinclair's house, she used the word stunning again. She'd forgotten how over-powering His Grace's house was. Crystal chandeliers, gilt-framed mirrors, and marble floors polished so shiny that you could see yourself reflected on the floor. As she walked up the sweeping staircase, columns covered with gilt, inlaid with rare woods, she took comfort in the fact she shone as bright as the candelabras lining the walls. She'd covered her neck, wrists and ears in diamonds and emeralds. She wasn't sure what message she hoped to send to Devlin from this vulgar display of wealth, but it bolstered her confidence to face him.

It wasn't until she walked into His Grace's drawing room with her brother and sister-in-law and saw Mrs. McTavish on Devlin's arm that her confidence faded like daylight before night.

The woman dazzled brighter than the light glittering across Dharma's diamonds. Fiona McTavish was beautiful beyond mere mortals. A living Helen of Troy—only with flaming red hair.

She wanted to look away from the couple, but Devlin's eyes burned through her. He captured her with his hypnotizing stare, and she could not turn away as much as she wanted to. Devlin stared at her until she wondered if her face had dirt on it. Even Mrs. McTavish noticed as she leaned in and whispered something in Devlin's ear and still his gaze didn't waver from her person. It was as if he'd not seen her in years.

It was Lord Fencourt arriving at her side that broke the moment.

"Lady Dharma, you are a vision of beauty that could capture a man's soul." Lord Fencourt bowed over her hand, and before he could reply, Tobin interrupted.

"Fencourt, will your horse be at Tattersall's tomorrow? I'm interested in purchasing the stallion for my breeding programme."

Fencourt smiled weakly at Dharma, as if apologizing for Tobin's rude interruption. "I believe Zeus will be there." Then

he turned back to Dharma and asked, “Perhaps Lady Dharma might accompany me for a ride in the park tomorrow. I’ll need fresh air by then. Weather permitting, of course.”

Tobin beamed at Fencourt. “I’m sure my sister would be pleased to accept.”

*Then why don't you let me answer him?* She bit her tongue and smiled and nodded. She didn’t want Lord Devlin to note anything amiss. Besides, wasn’t this Rosemary and her plan all along? Lord Fencourt was on her list of marriageable young bucks. She wanted to get to know more about the man. One thing she already knew was he loved poetry. At Lady Barque’s ball he’d quoted a Robert Burns poem, Red, Red Rose, that always made her heart thump in her chest.

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in luvè am I;  
And I will luvè thee still, my dear,  
Till a’ the seas gang dry.

“I shall look forward to the outing and I’m happy to wrap up against the cold. Shall we say one in the afternoon? If you’ll excuse me, I must greet my stepmother and His Grace.”

Fencourt held out his arm. “Allow me to escort you.”

She slipped her hand over his arm and couldn’t help sneak a glance across at Devlin.

He was still staring at her and his eyes narrowed as he watched Fencourt escort her towards her stepmother.

“Dharma, my dear girl, how lovely to see you,” said Charlotte, sweeping her into a tight embrace. “You look well. I hear the season is going well for you and Lady Rosemary.” Charlotte took a breath, giving Dharma a chance to offer introductions.



“Have you had the pleasure of meeting Viscount Fencourt? His father is the Earl of Longton.”

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure, Your Grace.” Fencourt bent low over her hand. “But I have met your husband, the Duke of Sinclair, of course.”

Charlotte looked the young man up and down and then cast her eyes towards Devlin. “If you wouldn’t mind, Lord Fencourt, I haven’t seen my step-daughter for a few days and I’d like a private word before we go into dinner.” Thankfully, Lord Battling was nearby, talking with Lord Hawthorne, who never appeared to be far from Rosemary’s side these past few months. “James, have you met Lord Fencourt?” and just like that, they moved Dharma towards the fire where Lady Battling, Charlotte’s best friend Flora, sat talking with Rosemary.

Charlotte pulled her down onto the settee next to her.

“Flora, it’s so lovely to see you,” Dharma said, “and Rosemary, you look a picture tonight.”

Flora replied, “And you look as pretty as an angel, Dharma. The season is agreeing with you? The young man Charlotte shooed away is certainly very handsome.”

“He’s Longton’s heir, Fencourt,” Charlotte responded before Dharma could. Charlotte swung toward Rosemary. “What I’d like to know is who is the lady on your brother’s arm?”

Rosemary pulled a face. “Mrs. McTavish. I have no idea how she came to meet my brother, but she is staying with us.” Rosemary threw a glance at Dharma. “Her husband was apparently a friend of Devlin’s, but I can’t remember meeting a Mr. McTavish.”

Charlotte and Flora shared a look. “Sin said that Devlin had to travel to Scotland on personal business.”

“It would appear the business was very personal,” Dharma said, somewhat snarkily. “She’s rich.”

“Now, now, that’s uncalled for,” Charlotte scolded.

Rosemary shrugged. “Rich doesn’t make her right for my brother.” She leaned forward. “I think it has something to do with our father. Mother told me yesterday that Devlin received a note at Lady Elwood’s, from the man he has still working on father’s account. He found a lead in Scotland from a widowed Mrs. McTavish. That’s when he dashed to Scotland. I never dreamed he’d return with her.”

Dharma turned to stare at Devlin. If this was about clearing his father’s name, she could hardly hold it against him that he’d left with no word. But she couldn’t forgive his silence since.

She understood what it would mean to clear his late father of his rumored treason. For a start, Whetton would have no objection to Rosemary as a potential daughter-in-law, and society would no longer shun her. They could even present her to the Queen. “Perhaps Mrs. McTavish knew something about that grain shipment that was destroyed? It was supposed to have fed the army and the government is sure it was deliberately targeted by Napoleon’s spies from information that could only have come from the inner War Cabinet, of which the late Lord Devlin was a key member.”

Flora patted Rosemary’s hand. “We know your father would never have sold this information to our country’s enemy, no matter how much money they offered him. It has to be someone else. Besides, where did the money go?”

“That’s what Devlin has been trying to uncover for the past few years. It eats Devlin up that he doesn’t know if our father was a traitor. As for me,” Rosemary shivered, “I don’t want to know. What if he was? But without a lead or any proof ... If this was a lead, then I cannot blame him for racing off.” Rosemary smiled across at her brother as she spoke the last few words.

Dharma merely sat and considered what she had learned. She looked at the handsome couple in a different light. What was Mrs. McTavish doing staying with Devlin? Was it because she was helping him find this traitor, or was there more to their relationship? “Did he say anything to Sinclair?”

Charlotte shrugged. "If he did, my husband hasn't shared the confidence with me. But I can ask."

"Would you?" Dharma pleaded.

Rosemary gave her a knowing smile. "Why is it so important you learn about Mrs. McTavish?" When Dharma said nothing, Rosemary added, "Give Devlin the benefit of the doubt. I'd love for you to become my sister-in-law. I know he has feelings for you, but I wonder if he'll ever marry with the word traitor hanging over our family honor. Now that our money troubles are resolved, he is even more determined to clear father's name.

Dharma didn't respond to her friend's words. She didn't know what to say. He'd hurt her by leaving without a word. That callousness was hard to overlook. Would she be made to look the fool again? Would she miss out on marriage to another wonderful man? She stared at Fencourt and tried not to compare.

Fencourt was just as handsome, but lacked the rugged masculinity of the older Lord Devlin. She didn't become overwhelmed with attraction or tongue-tied when in Fencourt's company, but Devlin could tie her up in knots. She could never picture letting Fencourt touch her the way Devlin had.

Charlotte stood. "I should mingle with our guests. Dharma, please come to luncheon tomorrow. We have much to catch up on and I'll ask Sinclair about Lord Devlin's trip up north."

With that, she left the three ladies and circulated through her guests.

Flora smiled at Dharma. "Lord Devlin is a fine man. You could do a lot worse than a man who has put his family before himself for so many years. Sometimes, it's the quiet more reserved men who are really what our hearts need."

Flora would say that. Her second husband, Lord Battling, had waited patiently for her to see him as something other than just her dead husband's best friend. Now they were married and completely happy.

Before Dharma could reply, a shadow fell over her. It was Devlin. She didn't need to look to know. Her body recognized him, almost like an animal sensing danger. This man could break her heart and cause her pain. He'd already hurt her. She'd been so confused when he suddenly left with no word, sure he had not wanted her.

“Lady Dharma, may I have a word?”

She sat up straighter because he took the chair vacated by Charlotte without waiting for her reply.

She looked at Flora, and Rosemary and the two ladies left to circulate.

“You look exquisite this evening,” his soft words found their mark and her heart beat faster. “Or maybe seeing you in the flesh is infinitely preferable to fantasizing about you in my dreams.”

She took a deep breath, trying not to fall under his spell. He looked so handsome tonight in his navy jacket and crisp white shirt and cravat. It made his light-brown locks glow golden in the candlelight and the green in his eyes appear darker than the emeralds she wore at her neck. His face drew women's stares, even happily married ones. In a way, she should be thanking his father for the scandal surrounding the Devlin name, or else she'd be struggling to shoo the young debutantes away from him.

But then she glimpsed Mrs. McTavish from the corner of her eye. Was she interested in Devlin, other than whatever business she shared with him? That thought made her speak rather sharply. “I hope your trip to Scotland was productive, however a note to tell me of your plans would have been nice.” She thought it best to show him he couldn't waltz back here and she'd be happy to see him. She expected more from a man who was courting her because he was—supposedly—desperate to marry her. Was he?

“I meant to call on you to apologize for my abrupt departure, but I've been a tad busy with the tin mine and other business since my return.”

Keep the green-eyed monster at bay. Don't say it... "So busy you have a guest in tow." If he smiles...

He surprised her by not smiling. He simply leaned forward and took her gloved hand in his very large one. "That is what I wished to talk to you about, but I was not at liberty to do so. My business with Mrs. McTavish is not what you think."

She wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but why had he brought her here to London? "I don't know what to think because you haven't kept me informed. You disappear at the Elwood ball, making me a laughingstock, and then don't write. Then you arrive back with a beautiful rich widow, who you move into your home."

"It's totally respectable. My mother and sister are in residence."

"It would be, except you escorted her to the opera and to a dressmaker before visiting with me. The *ton* is slavering with curiosity." And she suspected the *ton* was snickering behind her back.

"I am sorry for that."

Was his apology enough? A lady had her pride. Only now her pride was being trampled on by the *ton's* snickering. "In a way, I'm grateful our first meeting is tonight with only a handful of people to watch us like hawks, but I suspect the news of us both being at this dinner, with Mrs. McTavish, will be the talk of the town tomorrow." She kept smiling the whole time she talked with him for those watching. It wouldn't do to have society thinking she was upset.

"Please, will you let me call on you tomorrow so I may explain the situation fully?"

The time had come to make her decision. She could say no and simply walk away from the idea of Devlin as a potential husband and find another. Or she could say yes and perhaps get her heart broken. Or, and she hated to admit this to herself, she could end up with the man of her dreams. Would he live up to her fantasy of a man who loved her above all else? His behavior so far didn't make that seem likely.

He waited for her answer, and she almost got lost watching as the emotions played across his expressive face.

“Yes,” she finally said. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. I have a luncheon with Charlotte and then a ride in the park with Lord Fencourt at one.”

There was a moment of silence.

She stood. “I will hear what you have to say tomorrow. Goodnight, Lord Devlin.”

“Thank you. However,” he looked about the drawing room and, like her, noticed several stares. “Perhaps I could introduce you to Mrs. McTavish?”

Really? At his raised eyebrow, she understood. Show everyone she was happy to meet his house guest, and that she didn’t care. *But you do care.* She placed her hand on his arm and let him guide her over to where the lady stood surrounded by male guests. And to her annoyance, Fencourt seemed to be most enraptured.

Her heart raced with anxiety. She would give Devlin a chance. Hear him out before deciding about their relationship—or lack thereof.

He looked at her with uncertainty in his eyes, as if he was worried that she might suddenly pull away from him and walk out of the room. But she refused to let the gossiping members of society get the best of her. Instead, she gave him a warm smile and turned her attention to Mrs. McTavish. Devlin made the introductions.

“It’s lovely to meet you. I do hope your journey to London wasn’t too tiring,” said Dharma, bowing her head in greeting. Louder, she said, “I’ve heard so much about you from Lord Devlin.”

Mrs. McTavish smiled broadly back at her, clearly delighted by this introduction into high society. “The pleasure is all mine,” she replied, with a curtsy. “I’ve had a few days to recover from my journey. Plus, they have made me to feel so welcome. I hope we can become firm friends?”

“I hope so too,” Dharma replied, without adding, as long as you have no designs on Lord Devlin.

She stepped back, ready to avoid further scrutiny by returning to the safety of Flora and Rosemary’s conversation, though now it would be laden with knowing glances as they tried to figure out what she thought of Devlin’s house guest. However, before she could leave the lady’s side, the butler announced dinner was served. Thankfully, Fencourt turned to her and offered his arm. She gladly took it and made her way into dinner.

Devlin may have no romantic feelings for Mrs. McTavish, but Dharma caught the smile she gave Devlin as he offered to escort her into dinner. It wasn’t the smile of a woman who wanted to remain purely friends. But then, Dharma couldn’t blame her. He was a handsome man, and a Marquis was a catch for a woman like Mrs. McTavish. It made Dharma wish she hadn’t spent the past months playing games with him. She’d kept Devlin at arm’s length. She didn’t trust his motives for wishing to marry her. Did he simply want a convenient wife? His friend’s sister. A wealthy lady of quality? Or did he want her and her alone? How did you trust a man with limited options? If she knew the answer to that, she’d probably have married him already.

All he had to do was show her how much she meant to him, and for the past three months, he’d not even bothered to write. That spoke louder than words.

He’d not missed her.

So how deep could his feelings be?

She would have to see what he said tomorrow.



Devlin sipped his port while the men sat around the dining table after dinner. Their conversation turned to business as they discussed contracts and shares. He let the talk roll over him, thinking about what had transpired during his trip to Scotland. The information he’d uncovered had given him an

idea of how he could clear his father's name, but he couldn't discuss it in front of everyone. He needed a private audience with Sinclair. Clearing his father's name was what he'd been waiting for his entire life—solid proof that those in power had framed his father for treason.

The ladies had retired to the drawing room and Devlin furrowed his brow as he thought of Fiona. She was taking her first steps into London society, and he hoped she was doing well. He wondered how much she would reveal if anyone asked why she was in London. The fewer people who knew, the better it would be for everyone involved.

Devlin's heart rate quickened as he thought of the secrets Fiona carried. She was wrapped in a veil of mystery, and whenever he looked into her eyes, he saw both fear and determination. Why did she want to help him so much? He shifted nervously in his chair. The first night at the coaching inn on their journey south, when she'd slipped into his room, he'd made it very clear he was not interested in her romantically.

Had she taken that answer seriously? He hoped so, or things could get very awkward. Fiona thought he needed money. He was, but not that desperate.

Devlin had stressed he was only interested in what her late husband knew of the selling of war cabinet secrets.

He dreaded to think about what Fiona might say to Dharma. Having her stay with him was dangerous to his tentative budding relationship with Dharma, but bringing Fiona to London was the only option, given his trip to Scotland had now put her in danger. Plus, Fiona knew more than she was revealing. He was sure of it.

“Lost in thought, Lord Devlin,” Sin asked.

“Woman troubles more like,” said one of Sin's guests, Lord Shrewsbury. “Who exactly are you courting? Lady Dharma or this beautiful young widow, Mrs. McTavish? Or perhaps you are being too bold and one is your mistress?”



Devlin's hands balled into fists. This is why he could never marry Dharma until he'd cleared his father of treason. Men thought they could talk down to him. Her association with him would forever tarnish her. He, along with all of society, knew she could do much better than a poor traitor's son.

He turned to Shrewsbury with a look of icy fury. How dare this pompous, arrogant man speak so cruelly about a woman under his protection? And malign Dharma so. As if he'd court his friend's sister while his mistress lived in his house.

"Apologize immediately. How dare you question my honor and that of the ladies," he said through gritted teeth. "I'm more than happy to meet you on the dueling field to teach you some manners."

"Do as the man says," Tobin, Dharma's brother, said as he stood to his feet. "Or else there may be two of us requesting your presence on the dueling field."

Shrewsbury immediately apologized. "My apologies. I meant nothing by it. I'm merely jealous."

Tobin retook his seat, and the room stayed silent until Lord Fencourt spoke. "Mrs. McTavish is a lovely lady. I hear her husband knew your father?"

Devlin slowly turned to face the young pup, who appeared to be interested in Dharma. He hated how his gut tightened at the idea of Dharma spending any time with the young Lord Fencourt. "Who told you that?" He'd warned Fiona not to say anything. How had he learned that Fiona's husband knew his father?

Fencourt stammered nervously as he looked up at Devlin, his pale face flushing pink under the older man's scrutiny. Despite his nervousness and fear of being caught lying, "Well..." Fencourt began hesitantly, licking his lips nervously and struggling to find the words that would explain away this sudden interest in how Fiona knew Devlin. "I'm sure she mentioned it to me."

Devlin raised a skeptical eyebrow but could hardly refute his statement. Not until he'd checked with Fiona. But

something about Fencourt's demeanor made him wonder. Fencourt's father, Lord Longton, was in the War Cabinet with his father. Given what he'd learned from her, everyone in that cabinet was under suspicion. He needed to warn Fiona to watch what she said, and to whom.

"Gentlemen, shall we rejoin the ladies?" And His Grace led the men from the room.

Upon entering the drawing room, Devlin took one look at Fiona and decided they should leave. Neither of them had gotten over the rigors of their swift return to London and he wanted no more questions asked.

"Mrs. McTavish and Rosemary, I'm sorry, but I feel it's time to leave. Mrs. McTavish is still tired from her journey and it's late."

Fiona flashed him a grateful smile.

He turned to Dharma. "Lady Dharma, I shall call on you tomorrow morning." She nodded her head to acquiesce and waved goodbye to Rosemary. Devlin had to force himself to follow the ladies from the room as Lord Fencourt made a beeline to Dharma's side. His temper flared as he noted the warm smile she gave the young man. Devlin's heart sank. He had a lot of ground to make up in the romance stakes. As he walked the ladies to his carriage, he wondered if a romance right now was the smartest move.

Danger was racing at him.

And it didn't help that he knew it was all his fault. But he'd wanted to protect Dharma. If this unraveled the way he thought, anyone close to him would be in danger, too.

Tomorrow he would ask to postpone their courtship. He couldn't explain why without rumors spreading.

His jaw clenched at the thought of how hurt and torn she would be at his calling off his suit.

## Chapter Seven

The next day Dharma dressed with care for her meeting with Devlin, choosing a gown of pale pink that made her feel feminine and pretty. Alice, her elderly lady's maid, styled Dharma's hair into soft curls that framed her face, and applied a bit of color to her cheeks to hide the faint smudges of fatigue. She'd not slept last night, nerves strumming, wondering what Devlin would reveal at their meeting. Was he here to profess his love? Or to ask for a second chance?

"What will you do if he offers for you?" Alice asked, standing back and admiring her work. "You look beautiful enough to turn any man's head. He'll be down on one knee as soon as he enters the room."

"Don't be so sure. I don't know what I'll do if he offers," Dharma answered honestly. "His lack of contact over the past three months doesn't sit well with me. I understand now why he had to leave, but still... He could've sent me a note at least." She sat back, gazing out the window at the streets. "And then there is the beautiful widow. Mrs. McTavish is a puzzle. Why is she with him and why has he put her up in his house?"

"Don't let your pride cloud your judgement. Don't listen to the venom that is spewed from within the *ton*. Give him a chance to explain. Then you will need to decide if you trust him."

Alice was right; she owed it to Devlin to hear him out. But trust... What had he said to her in Cornwall all those months ago? A desperate man was dangerous... Was he still desperate?

She did not know what she would do if Devlin proposed. She'd considered the possibility carefully in the past week and found that she'd given the idea careful consideration only because she feared no other man would live up to Devlin's appeal. But she'd promised herself only love would see her tie her life to any man's. She wanted a love like her parents. Having watched Charlotte's disastrous marriage to her father, Dharma was wise to the fact a marriage was for life. And unlike Charlotte, who married Dharma's elder father, Devlin was a man in his prime. She might end up stuck in a loveless marriage for years.

She frowned, her hand fisting in her lap. However, if he sought an audience merely to apologize and to express his wish to court her again, then she would agree. She wanted to see if Devlin's feelings could develop into love. She was brave enough to admit he stirred and challenged her more than any other man she'd met. However, she would tell him she would also allow others to court her, too. It always paid to have a backup and Fencourt intrigued her. He was rather young to be so serious in his declaration of affection for her. Why was he looking to marry so young? His family didn't need the money. So his feelings must be genuine.

Mrs. McTavish had revealed little when they had talked after dinner last night. She'd merely said she was visiting London for a short time and would soon return north. She wouldn't be drawn on how she knew Lord Devlin, merely saying it was through mutual friends.

It was nearing the time Devlin said he'd call, so Dharma made her way to the drawing room. She'd always known this house as home, and this room in particular. She loved that Philippa, Tobin's wife, had not touched the room since Tobin became the Earl. The room was exactly as her mother had left it. Lavish with gold leaf and red velvet wallpaper. Framed family portraits hung on the walls, the men in their powdered wigs, the women in their silks and satins.

The furniture suited the elegance of the space. Deep red leather chairs, gold trimmings and elaborate scripts carved into

the mahogany table. The windows let in the light of a bright spring day, lifting her mood.

They decorated the parquet floor with thick rugs woven into intricate patterns. The chandeliers were brighter than the sun, and their gleam bounced off the gilded frames of the oil paintings hanging on the walls. The servants had already organized the tea service of silver, and the porcelain cups were white as the driven snow.

Everything looked ready. On a deep breath to steady her skittering nerves, Dharma took the chair near the window. It allowed her to see both the street to note Devlin's arrival, while also facing the door for his entrance.

She thought he'd arrive on horseback, or in a carriage, but he arrived on foot. It was only a short walk between her house and Devlin's townhouse. Perhaps he walked because of the gigantic bouquet he carried with him. She relaxed in her chair, a smile on her face.

The smile fled when Lord Devlin entered the room, looking like a man who was facing the guillotine. In an instance, the idea he was here to propose disappeared. Why was he here?

She put on a brave face. "Are those for me?" She rose and gathered them. She sniffed the roses, the scent of them her favorite. "They are beautiful." A servant arrived to collect the flowers. "Can you put them in my bedchamber? Thank you."

"There is always a fragrant scent of roses around you, so whenever I see them, I think of you."

Roses were her favorite. She wore a few different rose-based fragrances. "Please, won't you sit? I persuaded Tobin to allow us to talk unchaperoned, but the door must remain open." Devlin waited for her to take her seat before he sat on the settee opposite her. He sat up rigid as if he couldn't relax and it made her nervous. "Would you like tea, or perhaps something stronger?"

He licked his lips and stared at the decanters on the side-table across the room. "Perhaps I could pour myself a brandy,"

and he moved to do so while Dharma poured herself a cup of tea.

Once he re-sat and had taken a rather large gulp of his fortifying drink, he said, "I don't know where to begin."

"Perhaps at the beginning."

He nodded. "Of course." He ran a hand through his hair, dislodging the curls so it made him look as if he'd just risen from his bed. She swallowed hard. "When my father died, I tried for many, many years to ascertain the truth about the rumors circulating."

She interrupted. "I don't believe your father was a traitor."

"Thank you. Neither did I. But my search proved fruitless. So when it became clear the estates were in trouble, I had to switch my energies into saving my family. Now that I have financial matters more under control, I thought about starting the hunt to clear my father's name once more.

"The first lead I've ever had came three months ago through Mrs. McTavish. She was going through her late husband's things and found a journal in a secret compartment in his desk. It was a ledger of money and shipping schedules from the war cabinet. It held no names, merely initials, but what it had is one passage about my father."

She leaned forward, captivated by his tale.

"It was just one line. *Frame Lord Devlin.*"

"That's good. It proves what you believed all along. That your father was innocent."

Devlin took another drink. "When I received word from Mrs. McTavish, I was skeptical. Her husband was one of the clerks for the secretary to the war minister, but none of the initials match anyone else in the cabinet. I thought maybe it had been McTavish himself, but the Scot couldn't have organized this on his own. He was most definitely a party to the treason, but someone far higher up was the leader."

"Why did she bring this to your attention if it implicates her husband?"

Devlin shrugged. “That is why I’m keeping Mrs. McTavish close. I do not know what she is about. She must know that I’m not in a strong financial position to buy any knowledge and she has her own money from her husband’s family. They were very well off merchants, I’m led to believe.”

Dharma had a good idea of what she was about. She thought helping Devlin might just help her into his life—perhaps she was after a title. “It still doesn’t explain why you didn’t keep in touch, or why you ignored me on your return to London.”

He sat his glass down and leaned forward. “Given these developments, I don’t feel it’s the right time to be looking at courting any woman.”

Thank goodness she was sitting down. It was a battle to keep the desolation from her face. This is not what she expected. “I see.” She didn’t, really.

“My foray into my father’s past will not go unnoticed. Whoever framed my father will not want old secrets revealed.”

She bit her bottom lip. “Are you saying you will be in danger?”

“Not just me.” He looked her in the eye. “Anyone who is close to me could be in danger. Or become a target to ensure I don’t look too deeply into the past. If it’s known we are courting, you could be in grave danger.”

“Is that why you didn’t write to me?”

He nodded. “My father underestimated his enemies. I shall not.”

She sat in silence, her mind whirling with the implications of all Devlin had revealed. He, too, seemed at a loss for words.

Finally, she gathered the courage to ask, “So, where does that leave us?”

He put down his glass and rose to his feet, his face an expression of hopelessness. “It means I shall bow out of your life.”

“For now, or until you find the villain?” She held her breath.

“I have no idea how long this will take. I won’t ask you to wait for me. That would not be fair.” Before she could refute his words, Devlin added, “I’m sorry.” Without waiting for a reply, he stood and strode from the room, taking her fragile heart with him.

With a tear running down her cheek, she watched him walk up the street without a backward glance. *Why couldn’t he love me enough?* If he’d just told her he loved her, she would wait for him.

Yet she could not fault him for his sacrifice. It was years since his father died a traitor, and he’d found no answers. How long would it take him to achieve his goal? Forever? Or they could kill him? Is this why he’d set her free?

Yes, society would look down upon her for marrying the son of a traitor. However, she refused to let society sway her heart. If she fell in love with a man, she’d not care about any scandal.

She angrily brushed the tears off her face and turned away from the window. Everything was ruined. How could she see what was in Devlin’s heart when he didn’t want to court her? Dharma would not be able to get near him, and that left the field open for the likes of Mrs. McTavish.

A strong cup of tea, perhaps with a splash of brandy, was needed while she considered what to do. What did she want to do? Should she move on and look elsewhere? Could she get over her feelings for Devlin?

How could she make a man like Devlin change his mind?

Just then she heard light footsteps racing up the stairs, and then Rosemary flounced into the room. “Well, did he propose?”

She shook her head. “Quite the opposite. He’s walking away from our courtship.”

Rosemary’s hands rose to her hips. “I knew it. Did he say it was for your own good? That it might get dangerous?” She



plonked down in a chair and added, “He’s told me I have to take Mr. Drury with me wherever I go.”

“He’s probably right about you being in danger, should the wrong people think he is getting too close.”

Rosemary’s eyes welled with tears. “I have just met a wonderful man. Hawthorne can protect me. But Devlin wants to send me to the country where I’ll be safe. How can Hawthorne court me if I’m in the country? It’s so unfair. Blow Mrs. McTavish.”

“Hawthorne will wait for you and if he doesn’t—then he’s not the man we think he is.”

Rosemary’s face flushed with color. “I’m the traitor’s daughter. If I leave, Whetton could twist Hawthorne’s mind.”

“I don’t think Hawthorne likes his father very much.”

You’d think an earl would be happy his son was interested in marrying a marquis’s daughter.

“Will he stand up for you against his father?”

Rosemary shrugged. “I don’t know. But so far, he seems determined to keep seeing me. I wish I could help Devlin clear our father’s name. Then everything in my life would change for the better.”

Dharma leaned forward. “Why don’t we?”

Rosemary’s mouth curved up in a smile. “Are you suggesting we do our own investigation?”

“Who on earth would think two young debutantes could ever piece something like this together?”

Rosemary’s smile vanished. “They say my father consorted with spies and traitors. That my family was involved in some sort of treasonous plot against the crown. Maybe they think I could be too?”

“But that’s ridiculous. You were too young! No one believes that of you. Or even Devlin, come to think of it. Your family is merely tarred with your father’s brush.”

The ladies sat in silence, contemplating the fate of their lives and how the late Lord Devlin hung over their futures. Dharma sighed. "I wish it would all stop. We need to uncover whoever is behind this so we can clear your family name once and for all."

"So, you have feelings for my brother? I was wondering, given how much time you spend in Lord Fencourt's company."

"It was your brother who left me. Now he's walked away. I'm not sure that's a sign of great affection, because he did it so easily."

"He's scared for your safety. I think he's walked away because he cares deeply indeed. That's why we have to help him. I know my brother. He'll not rest until he uncovers the truth and if that takes a lifetime, he'll let it, because he has two younger brothers to produce an heir."

Dharma wondered how long she would wait for a man like Devlin. She didn't have a lifetime. She wanted a family and children. If she waited too long, she'd be on the shelf. "I want a chance to see if what is budding in my heart is true love. Until I can see what is real with Devlin, I'm not free to give my heart to another."

With a determined glint in her eye, Rosemary wiped away a stray tear and sat up straight. "Let's get started then. We have a traitor to find, or at least point Devlin in the right direction."

"I also want your help in monitoring Mrs. McTavish. I don't trust her."

Rosemary nodded. "Me either. Where should we start?"

"Let's start at the beginning and work forwards. What do you remember of the night your father died?"

While Rosemary thought, Dharma rose and pulled the bell. They'd need more tea. "I haven't got long. I'm due at Charlotte's for lunch and then Fencourt is picking me up from His Grace's house at one for a walk in the square."

"I too will take a stroll with Hawthorne this afternoon."

They poured fresh tea and treated themselves to a scone.

“I was only eleven when my father died. He came to my bedchamber that night, which was unusual. He kissed me good night and told me not to believe anything I may hear about him, and he gave me a jewelry box and told me not to lose it, as it contained a treasure I had to keep safe. When I opened the box the next morning, it held a beautiful pair of diamond earrings.”

“Can you describe the box?”

Rosemary shrugged. “It’s quite large. It’s a golden box with two columns of embedded jewels in a zig-zag pattern in its lid. The sides are lined with columns of jewels in a spiral pattern, each column dropping into the next, forming a floral pattern. The lid is decorated with a Greek goddess in gilded relief, her hair tied in an array of curls, her eyes shut in an appearance of repose.”

Her heart beat faster. She bit her bottom lip and then asked, “Is the goddess’s gown green and black?”

“Yes, it is. Have I shown it to you?”

“No, but my mother had a box very similar. Did you find the secret compartment in the bottom?”

Rosemary frowned. “What secret compartment? Does my box have a secret compartment? Maybe father put something in there. That might be the treasure to keep safe.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I think we should check the jewelry box. I’ll come to your house after our walk. I think your father gave that box to you for a reason.”

Rosemary stood and paced the room. “Why didn’t he give it to Devlin?”

That’s what Dharma wanted to know. Was it to protect him? “Perhaps he thought Devlin wasn’t ready to confront the villains. He was only just coming into manhood.”

Rosemary stopped pacing and turned to face Dharma, her face a mass of agony. “Then I’ve let father down. I should

have thought to look more closely at the box long ago. Or I should have given it to Devlin.”

“You were too young to understand anything about what your father was up to.” Dharma rose and approached her friend. She laid her hand on Rosemary’s arm. “The box may contain nothing. We are perhaps just being fanciful. Promise me you’ll wait for me before you open the box.”

Rosemary hesitated a fraction before nodding. “After our walk and before we head to the opera.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten about the opera.”

“You invited me to accompany you in Their Graces’ box.” When Dharma raised her eyebrow. “I told Hawthorne I would be attending.”

“Who am I to stand in the way of love?” She smiled. “Will Devlin let you out of the house?”

“I’ll sneak out if I have to.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” She looked at the clock on the mantle. “I’m sorry, but I’m due at Charlotte’s. I shall see you soon and if not, I shall get Lord Fencourt to drop me at your townhouse. Then we shall look at the box.”

“It’s going to be so hard not to look for the secret compartment, but I will wait until you arrive. I’ll entertain Mrs. McTavish instead and see what I can learn.” Rosemary pressed a kiss to her cheek and was gone.

Alice was waiting for her in the foyer with her cape and soon they set off down the street to the Duke of Sinclair’s residence. At least Sin hadn’t deserted his friend. It was the one thing that kept the *ton* from cutting Devlin direct.

On the walk to Charlotte’s, Dharma considered how much to reveal to her stepmother about the situation with Devlin. While Charlotte was keen for Dharma to marry Devlin to help with his financial situation, she also wanted Dharma to be happy. Charlotte genuinely thought Devlin would make Dharma a fine husband. Would he? And the likelihood of that happening anytime soon was anyone’s guess.

She would not let Rosemary down. She would help her friend gather information for Devlin. Dharma wanted to free Devlin from the burden he'd carried all these years. It is a heavy yoke to carry, to be a Marquis but still face society's scorn. Devlin shouldered the consequences for his mother and Rosemary. Devlin would want to see Rosemary make a fine match. Something that had evaded her so far because of her father. Then there were his brothers. Harry was in India, fighting for Britain. Risking his life to prove he was nothing like his late father. The other, George, was a lost soul. Touring the world trying to find meaning to it all.

It was going to be a long afternoon because all Dharma wanted to do was open the secret compartment in Rosemary's jewelry box.

## Chapter Eight

If Devlin were a bird, his feathers would truly be ruffled. He'd indulged Fiona since they'd arrived a week ago and still she'd revealed no more. What was she waiting for? He could guess. She was watching and analyzing his life. It was the main reason he'd broken off his understanding with Dharma. He didn't trust the beautiful Scottish widow any more than he'd trust a rabid fox.

She wanted something from him, and he could guess what it was. What he didn't know was if he could give her what she wanted.

He could tell Fiona was also getting impatient. She'd expected him to demand information from her, but he'd stayed silent. He could play her game. He'd learned patience over the past ten years, but even his patience was drawing thin. He wasn't about to let her know that. He would wait for Fiona to reveal her hand.

This afternoon, on a crisp but sunny spring day, he was taking Fiona for a walk in Hyde park. Lord Hawthorne had already collected Rosemary for their outing. He liked the young man, solely because he was the only man brave enough to thumb his nose at the *ton* and show attention to Rosemary. Devlin had talked to the Viscount, and Hawthorne appeared to be motivated by a genuine desire for Rosemary. And he'd never seen his sister so happy. He spotted their carriage up ahead, stopped next to... it was bloody Fencourt, and he was here with Dharma. Devlin thought Dharma had specified a walk in the square, not a ride in the park for all to see.

Well, she'd not wasted any time in moving on.

“You seem happy to see Rosemary being courted by Lord Hawthorne. It must be hard for her, given what they say about your father.”

Count to ten... “I don’t like to see her suffer because of my father’s rumored treason. Hence why I wish to discover the evidence against those who framed him.” *Which is why you are here and I’m allowing you to stay in my home*, he wanted to add.

“I understand Lord Whetton is not well pleased that his son has set his sights on Rosemary. Will the young man stand up to his father?”

That is what Devlin wished to know. “Only time will tell. Or with your help, I can prove my father innocent and there would be no objection then. The one thing I made certain of as my finances crumbled was that Rosemary’s dowry remained untouched.”

Fiona nodded. “You have much riding on the information I can give you.”

Was this it? Was she about to ask for what she wanted? A part of him dreaded the request, while the other part just wanted this over with.

He pushed for her to reveal the price he must pay. “You know I’d be in your debt if you helped me.”

“The trouble is, I’ve heard you are in debt. You have very little to offer me. I however, have something to help your family besides just money.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Oh, I think you know.” Her mouth set in an evil smile. “You have one thing I want. A title.”

Only by biting the inside of his cheek did he stop himself from reacting. He’d prayed she’d not go that far—marriage.

“You are too bold. I have assets. A share in my tin mine would add to your wealth. Plus, if you help me, I could aid in opening doors to society. You could find an excellent match.”

“Perhaps I dream bigger than you.” She pointed to the carriage up ahead, carrying Dharma and Lord Fencourt. “Since you don’t seem to have an arrangement with any young lady, it would appear I can ask for what I want. I endured a loveless marriage to an aging man and I deserve joy in my life. I have brought you information to aid you in clearing your father. I can deliver your family money, and so much more, but there is a price to pay for that information. The title of marchioness would suit me rather well.” She moved closer and stroked a hand down his chest. “As would having a handsome, virile husband. Just think how beautiful our children would be.” She moved her hand lower, shielding her movements with her cape. “Come, now. Bedding me would not be a hardship.”

To his mortification, his cock reacted to her clever fingers. He quickly took a step back and looked up to see Fencourt’s carriage bearing down on them.

“Lord Devlin and Mrs. McTavish, good day to you. It appears summer is on the way. The weather has held all week.”

Before Devlin could answer, Fiona stepped forward to pet the horse’s nose. “Is that Lady Dharma I see with you, Lord Fencourt? You make such a handsome couple.”

“It’s only a ride in the park, Mrs. McTavish. Nothing more,” Dharma added.

Devlin could not take his eyes off Dharma. She looked as pretty as a picture in her bonnet covered with blue flowers that matched the color of her eyes. She smiled at him and his heart clenched in his chest. He could not have her unless he cleared his father’s name. Yet it would seem that to do so, he’d have to marry another and lose Dharma forever.

He wanted Dharma as his wife. To bear his children.

But marrying Fiona would save Rosemary and the rest of his family. His father would no longer be vilified.

Choice was agony. His future didn’t matter. What mattered was his family, and he owed this to his father.



He looked away. He could not bear to look at her, knowing what he had to do.

“Come now. Lord Fencourt looks positively enamored, my dear. And he’s blushing. He looks at you, dear girl, the way Lord Devlin looks at me. Go on, tell them the good news,” Fiona insisted.

The ground tipped and rolled beneath his feet. His mind wanted to scream at Fiona that he’d never give her what the conniving witch wanted, but one look at her triumphant face and all hope of his life becoming his own died. The silence lengthened, and he glanced at Dharma and saw the light of hope dim in her eyes.

“I am courting this lovely lady.” His eyes never left Dharma’s face as he said the dreaded words. *Please don’t believe me.* He would clear his father before he had to marry this woman, because the lady he wanted for his wife sat mere feet away, looking at him as if her world had ended.

The lengthening silence was broken when Fencourt uttered, “Oh, congratulations, My Lord and Mrs. McTavish. Splendid news, isn’t it Lady Dharma?”

“Yes. Wonderful. Your mother will be pleased. She was hoping you would wed this season.”

“I do love the excitement of courting, don’t you, Lady Dharma.” Fiona pointedly stared at Fencourt. “I suspect you’ll have exciting news of your own this season, too.”

Fencourt said nothing, but he cast a quick look at Dharma.

Dharma laughed, and Devlin knew it was her fake or annoyed laugh. “A lady likes to keep her thoughts to herself on such matters.” She smiled at Lord Fencourt and Devlin wanted to punch the young buck’s smug face. “Besides, a lady must consider her choice carefully. We only get to make it once.”

“Unless you are a widow.” Fiona added. “But I agree. Choosing the right husband is everything to a woman.” And she moved closer to Devin’s side. “I know my next choice will

be a mutually beneficial arrangement. Don't you agree, Lord Devlin?"

"You don't believe in love and romance?" Fencourt asked with a smile. "Lord Bryon seems to find much to recommend."

"Love is for those foolish enough to place it above status and security."

Dharma's face burned as she looked at Devlin as if to say, 'you'll marry her?' "I think the world would be a desolate place without love. Love for your children, your friends, your parents, your husband."

Fiona moved closer to him. "I'm understanding just how sustaining love can be."

Devlin wanted to shake her off him. She had about as much warmth as a reptile.

Fencourt urged the horses on, and he watched until Dharma was out of sight. Then he focused all his rage and disappointment on Fiona. "That was uncalled for. I haven't even talked to my mother or sister about this situation. Or agreed to a marriage."

Fiona's gloves came off. The venom in her voice and the hatred in her eyes burst forth. "I'm not stupid. You look at Lady Dharma as if you want to consume her. The sooner you understand that a marriage with her will never happen, the better. What you do with her once we marry is not my concern."

He moved to tower over her. "I too am not stupid. There will be no wedding until I clear my father's name."

She poked his chest with her finger. "Then I want a marriage contract in writing, that details we wed if the information I share with you leads to that result."

Devlin stood facing the abyss and wished he had more time, but he didn't. Rosemary had already had a season with no interest. This season, Hawthorne appeared, but Devlin was worried about this father and the life the pair would have if Hawthorne denied his father. If Devlin proved his father

innocent, Rosemary would have a happy life. A life she deserved, given how terrible most of it had been over the past ten years. His brothers could come home and life would return to normal.

For him, there would never be a normal if he married this woman.

“I shall get my lawyers to draft up a contract,” he replied, and turned to walk away, but she grabbed his arm.

“And you will announce an engagement in the Times?”

His hands curled into fists at his side. “When my father is cleared. Not before. We need to go back home now so I can inform my mother and family before the gossip spreads.”



Dharma wished she'd not asked Fencourt to drop her at Devlin's townhouse. She wanted to be anywhere but here. She prayed Devlin and his newly betrothed would remain out until she could leave. She couldn't face him and she'd want to scratch Fiona's eyes out if they came face to face.

She'd known Devlin most of her life and she could tell this 'marriage' was not to Devlin's liking. It was even more imperative that they find information to clear Rosemary's father, because now it would also free Devlin. He would not marry Fiona if she could help it.

*He was supposed to marry me!* A bit late to realize that now. So much wasted time and opportunity.

She asked Alice to wait for her in the kitchen and have a cup of tea to get warm. Then she raced upstairs to Rosemary's room. She burst in without knocking and threw herself on Rosemary's bed and let the tears come.

“Whatever is the matter?” Rosemary asked, rushing to her side.

“Your brother just told me he has asked Mrs. McTavish to marry him.”

Rosemary gasped. “I don’t believe it. He doesn’t even appear to like her much. I knew that woman was up to something, but this...”

“She has what Devlin wants. Information. And money.” Dharma sat up and dried her eyes. “We have to solve this before he sells his soul to that...to that... Jezebel.”

“But he wants you.”

Dharma could tell Rosemary truly believed that her brother had feelings for her, but how deep did those feelings go? “Does he? Then why has he not said so?”

“We have to stop this. I was looking forward to you becoming my sister-in-law. We would visit all the time and especially on the holidays. Our children would grow up together. This bloody woman is ruining everything.”

Rosemary stomped off to fetch the jewelry box and sat it on the bed between them. She ran her hands over the box. “I’ve always loved it because father gave it to me. It surprised me he came to my room that night, because he normally kissed me goodnight after dinner and nanny put me to bed and mother would come and read to me alone. However, when he was killed in the duel that very night, I couldn’t help but wonder if he knew I would never see him again.

Lord Devlin let a man shoot him without putting up a fight. Rosemary was right, his visit was likely a goodbye farewell. The Marquis knew he was not coming home from the duel over his honor.

Dharma’s heart clenched at the idea of Lord Devlin’s desperation. He thought dying would help his family, but in reality, it made everything worse. His family, never learning the truth, kept the scandal alive. Everyone took sides. That is why Devlin couldn’t let it rest. The shadow hanging over his family would never drift away.

Rosemary looked up from her private memories. “My hands are shaking. How do I open the secret compartment?”

She showed her friend how to open the little latch hidden inside the left corner, but sat back as Rosemary pulled the

latch and the bottom slid back. She watched Rosemary's face closely. Her shaking hand reached in and drew out a folded piece of parchment. She looked up at Dharma with her lip between her teeth. With a nod of Dharma's head, Rosemary unfolded the delicately faded parchment. She had to go slowly in case she ripped it. Finally, she had the document in one piece and she lay it on the bed, pressing out the wrinkles with her palm. The markings on the delicate faded parchment were still readable.

Dharma leaned closer. No, she wasn't mistaken. The delicate inked words on the page clearly showed that they were not written in English. "What language is it?"

Rosemary shook her head. "I do not know. It's not French. Is it Latin?"

"I don't think so." Dharma picked up the parchment and studied it. "Could it be Russian? I know a bit of Latin and I don't recognize any of the words. Hold on." She brought the paper closer to her face. "Is that word Longton?" She handed the note to Rosemary.

Her friend squinted to make out the faint markings. "It could be." Rosemary lifted her head. "Why is his name on this document, and what does the rest of the writing say?" She jumped off the bed. "We have to give it to Devlin."

"Wait." Rosemary turned and looked at her questionably. "Do you trust Mrs. McTavish? If we give this to Devlin, will she see it? Is she really on Devlin's side? What would she do if she knew we had this? I think we need to be on our guard."

Rosemary sat down. "But we need to learn what this missive says. It must be important because father hid it."

"Let us not make any hasty decisions. Why didn't your father simply reveal this document to clear his name? There must be more to this. We need to learn who we can trust. Perhaps I should hold this note at my house in case Mrs. McTavish goes hunting through your things. She might know of this letter's existence. Is that why she insisted on accompanying Devlin to London and staying in this house?"

Rosemary ran a hand over her face. “This is getting far too complicated. I feel I need to tell Devlin. If anything, it could stop him from announcing this ridiculous engagement.”

They sat there, both of them looking at the parchment and not sure what to do. Finally Dharma said, “Let’s tell Devlin, but not here. Not in this house where there are prying eyes and big ears.”

Before Rosemary could reply, they heard Betty’s voice and footsteps outside the door. Dharma, who was still holding the note, quickly folded it and shoved it between her breasts inside her corset. Just in time, because Betty knocked and entered, closing the door behind her.

“That Scottish woman is most odd, Lady Rosemary. She was standing outside your room when I said I’d announce her. She declined and walked away.” Betty kept walking as she talked and disappeared into the bathing chamber.

“See, I told you. She is spying on me.” Rosemary wrung her hands. “I need to tell Devlin.”

“I agree. He needs to be warned, and I will keep this missive at my house. Mrs. McTavish cannot gain entrance there.”

“I’m scared. She’s in our house. Perhaps Devlin is right. I should go to our country estate.”

Rosemary hugged her friend. “You are not leaving until you see where this promising romance with Hawthorne might go. Why don’t you come and stay with me? Tobin won’t mind, and I’m pretty sure Devlin will agree.”

Rosemary called for Betty. “Can you pack my trunks? Two weeks’ worth of clothes please, and organize for them to be delivered to Lord Clayton’s townhouse. You’ll need to come too.”

While they waited for Betty to organize the trunks, Dharma paced the room. “If Longton was involved, I’m in the best position to investigate. His son is paying court to me. Perhaps I could find out more about his father’s activities all

those years ago. Did he know the late Lord Devlin? Were they enemies?”

“That sounds dangerous to me. I really think we should let Devlin know—”

“Know what?”

Devlin stood in the doorway. The banging of the trunks had covered his arrival. Rosemary leapt to her feet and raced across the room to drag Devlin inside. She poked her head into the hall and looked up and down before closing the door behind them. She swung round to face her very confused brother.

He saw the trunks being packed. “Good. You’ve decided to go home.”

“Not exactly. I’m going to stay with Dharma for a few weeks. Lord Clayton is in residence, so there is no need to worry.” As his lips firmed, Rosemary added, “I don’t want to be under the same roof as Mrs. McTavish. There is something off about her. She was lingering outside my door mere moments ago. What is she doing here? And now I hear you’re engaged to be married?”

Devlin’s cheeks took on a bit of color. “I need information from her.”

Rosemary looked at Dharma and said, “You may not need her as much as you think. I found something. Show him.”

Dharma turned away and reached into her corset. She hesitated before turning round. Would this put Devlin’s life in danger? Would it not be better to let her investigate, as perhaps they would not be watching her?

She held out the parchment to Devlin, who slowly reached out his hand and took it. Rosemary came and stood next to her and held her hand as Devlin slowly read the note.

“Can you recognize the language?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“It’s not Latin. Is it Russian?”

“I don’t recognize the language. It might be in code,” he replied. “Where did you find it?”

Rosemary explained about her father’s night visit and the jewelry box. Devlin hugged Rosemary as her voice choked with emotion. “I’m so sorry I didn’t find it sooner.”

“You’re not to blame you were so young. And I have it now.”

Dharma stepped forward. “What will you do with the note? Did you recognize the name?”

Damn it. She was too clever. He’d hoped they hadn’t noticed. “Please forget you ever saw this note.”

She grabbed his arm, and the jolt of awareness almost sent him to his knees. “It’s Longton, Devlin. He’s Fencourt’s father. I could—”

“No,” and he pulled her round to face him. “You will not put yourself in danger or get involved in my family’s business.” He loosened his grip on her arms. Hell, the thought of something happening to Dharma because of him or his family’s treason... That’s why he’d walked away and would not court her. First, marrying into his family would subject her to scorn. Second, she would put herself in danger. And here she was, wanting to walk right into it.

“I’ll inform Clayton about the situation and put a guard on both of you. Yes, Rosemary, I think it’s a good idea that you stay with Dharma for a while.” He didn’t trust Fiona, either. “In fact,” he continued, handing the note back to Dharma, wishing he could tuck it back into her corset himself. “It would be safer if this note did not remain in my home. I’ll talk to your brother and Sinclair about it and see what they think.”

He watched with envy as she placed it back next to her bosom. “I’ll ensure it stays well hidden.”

“And you will not talk to Fencourt?”

Narrowing her eyes was not a good sign. “I’ll talk to him, but not about this matter. Is that what you mean? Or do you not wish me to talk to him at all?”



*Blast.* He bloody well didn't want her to talk to him at all, and she knew it. "You know very well what I mean." She continued to stare at him through narrowed eyes while he ensured the green poison in his veins remained hidden.

She knew how to stir his temper. He didn't want her talking to Fencourt. He didn't want her talking to any men, especially men looking for a beauty to marry. He needed more time. Time to earn the right to offer for a lady of her social standing. Yet he had no right to ask her to wait for him because, hell, it had taken ten years already, but he could feel how close he was now.

Except for Fiona McTavish. He'd been a fool to think her a mere woman who wanted to help him. Never in his wildest imaginings did he think she'd have the nerve to demand marriage.

How ironic that he had a way to clear his father, but the cost would be the freedom he so craved. Freedom to marry the woman he desired more than his next breath.

"I'll escort you both to Clayton House. I want to talk to your brother. Clayton needs to be told what is afoot so he can take appropriate steps to ensure your safety. I shall return in an hour to walk you home. Be ready." With that, he left them to their packing.

As he stepped into the corridor, he thought he glimpsed a dress fleeing around the corner of the corridor. His fists clenched at his side. He set off to hunt for his ally or foe. He hadn't decided which Fiona was just yet. She may well want to help him. Or she could be working with their enemy, but then why bring her husband's journal to his notice? That meant she was now in danger. He had to protect her and he prayed the cost would not be too high.

He found her in the drawing room with his mother. At a later time, he'd ask his mother when she'd arrived in the room, but for now, he needed to talk to her alone.

"Mother dear, may I borrow our guest? I thought I'd show her the rest of the house. It's so easy to get lost."

“Now, now, Warwick. Don’t misbehave in the shadows. I am responsible for the lady’s reputation while she is under this roof.”

There’d be no chance of him touching a hair on her head. “Of course, mother.” Turning to Fiona, he added, “Do you need a shawl? The upper floors can be cold, as we don’t keep fires lit.”

She gave him a seductive smile. “I’m sure I’ll be warm enough with your arm to cling to.”

His mother merely chuckled. What had Fiona been saying to his mother? He bit back a comment and held out his arm. He listened to her prattle on about how lovely his home was until they were in the portrait gallery. Seeing his father’s face gave him courage. Then he turned her into his arms.

“I thank you for your offer of help to clear my father’s name. You reaching out to me was like an angel descending from heaven.”

She placed her hand on his chest. “I had to do what was right.”

*Right for you, more like. You think I’m an easy mark.* “Of course.” And he plucked her hand off his chest and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “However, it means you could be in danger. Therefore, I fear it’s unwise to announce a betrothal just yet. I have no doubt that the man, or men, we are hunting are very dangerous. They could only be high in the government to have the ability to frame my father. If something should happen to you...”

She eyed him like a spitting snake. She could strike at will if she wanted. “But what if something should happen to you? Where would I be then?”

“I have added you to my will. You’ll receive a share of the tin mine’s profits for your lifetime.” Then they will revert to his family, but he would not clarify that.

“How much of a share?”

Christ. The witch was greedy. Not even a thank you. “Ten percent, which will be around five-thousand-pounds a year.

Added to your wealth, that is more than enough to ensure the title you want should be easy for you to procure.” A very significant income and one his family could have done with, but he’d clear his father’s name at any cost.

His words pacified her. She detangled herself from his arm and walked to stand, looking up at his father. “He was a handsome man, and I see your mother was a great beauty, too. She must have had many suitors.”

It wasn’t what she said. He was sure his mother, being the daughter of a duke with a very large dowry, had many suitors, but his mother always said she fell in love with his father as soon as she met him. “I’m sure she did.”

She turned to face him. “After honor and state, follow envy and hate. Isn’t that the saying?”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you inferring? That one of my mother’s discarded suitors did this to my father?”

She simply shrugged and moved on towards his grandfather’s portrait. “If I were you, I would not underestimate envy. It motivates men—and women.”

Was that a warning about Dharma and his agreement to wed Fiona? Or was there some merit in what she was saying? Was she delivering another clue? He had always wondered why the villain had selected his father. Could jealousy be the reason?

Had Longton been one of the men courting his mother? And would he have born a grudge at losing her, a duke’s daughter? If he recalled, Longton, a mere earl, had been very attentive after his father’s death. He’d even supported the idea that his father had been framed. That’s why Devlin had never considered him as a suspect, even though he had been in the war cabinet too. And he’d sometimes gone to him for advice. His hands curled into fists at his side.

How could he be such a trusting fool? Had Longton hated the fact his father had stopped his social climb by marrying his mother? Well, he would trust no one again. Not until they’d earned it.

Devlin took his anger at his gullibility out on Fiona. “Is this how it’s going to be? You feeding me pieces of what you know to keep me dangling.”

“I’ve had to look out for myself all my life. I’m doing that now. You don’t trust me and I don’t trust you to honor your word to marry me. After all, your family name is not the greatest.”

Fury hit like a bullet. “If you don’t end up my marchioness, it will be through something you do. I am a man of my word.”

“That’s good to know. And remember, as your wife, it will be in my best interest to clear your father, too.” With that, she sauntered off down the room.

He glanced at his pocket watch. He needed to escort the ladies to Lord Clayton’s. Without another word, he left Fiona to her wanderings and hoped like hell his sacrifice would be worth it.

## *Chapter Nine*

**H**is meeting with Clayton went well. Lord Clayton offered any help he could in the hunt for his father's betrayers. But Clayton understood the danger the search would ignite, and he agreed for Rosemary to stay with them and he'd organize men to watch them.

"Should we tell Hawthorne?" Clayton's question was pertinent. He might be in danger if caught alone with Rosemary.

"I'm not sure if we should trust him. Whetton wasn't in the war cabinet, but he's friends with those who were."

"If I know women, Rosemary's likely to tell him and she might not fully understand the situation." Clayton raised his eyebrow.

Devlin's gut churned. "You're right. He's coming to take her for a drive this afternoon. Let's talk to him then."

"How is your mother taking this?"

"She's furious." Devlin stood and paced the room. "She's angry that I agreed to a marriage with Fiona, but without her, I'd be nowhere."

"You could simply forget this course of action and get on with your life."

He spun to face Tobin. "Would you?"

Tobin didn't even hesitate. "No, I'd be doing everything to clear my father. But marriage—hell. I know you want to marry Dharma, and now I understand why you walked away from her in the manner you did. You're protecting her. I can hardly

fault you for that. But marriage to a woman like Mrs. McTavish? It makes my skin crawl.”

He ignored the fact his skin crawled at the idea, too. “Fiona has already given me a clue. She insinuated that they picked my father as the person to frame because of my mother. A jealous suitor. Longton’s name is on that parchment. It can’t be a coincidence. He was one of her suitors.”

“Knowing the guilty party won’t be enough. You need proof and it’s been over ten years. A confession would be handy. Any idea how to get Longton to confess in front of an audience?” Tobin joked.

“So you think jealousy could be the reason they selected my father to be framed? I’d always wondered why him. He wasn’t rich enough to blackmail, and he was liked by everyone.”

“Except Longton. You need to ask your mother about Longton.”

He stopped pacing. “I do. Before I go, would you mind if I have a private word with Dharma?”

Tobin stood. “I was just going to find my wife. I’ll send Dharma to my study. Behave. If you’re marrying Fiona McTavish, don’t ruin my sister’s reputation and her chance to find a good match.”

Was it hot in Tobin’s study? Devlin could feel a track of sweat slide down his back. What did he want to say to Dharma besides warning her this was not a game? She’d seen Longton’s name, and he just knew she’d talk to Fencourt. He had to dissuade her.

The scent of roses drifted into the study just in time for him to gather his composure as she entered the room.

She closed the door behind her and, for one moment, he remembered the taste of her on his lips and the sound of her exquisite cries of passion. It almost unmanned him.

She took a chair next to Tobin’s desk and crossed her arms. “I gather you’ve told my brother everything, or else he’d never let me be alone in this room with you.”

“He needed to know the danger that Rosemary and you are in if she is staying here, and then there was what to reveal to Hawthorne.”

“And now it’s what to do with me.”

He almost smiled. “I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“I’m not in any danger because society will have heard of your engagement. They will know I’m not important to you anymore, if I ever was.” He couldn’t ignore the hurt in her voice. “So, the only danger I may be in is because of my proximity to Rosemary.”

“I have convinced Fiona that to announce an engagement would put her in danger. She wasn’t happy, but she isn’t stupid. But Fencourt could talk. You know this situation with Mrs. McTavish is not of my making. You can’t imagine I’d welcome such a match.”

She looked him up and down for a moment. “You are ridiculous. Of course, this is of your making. You can tell her no and offer money instead.”

“I did.”

Her mouth dropped open. “She’s blackmailing you into marriage and you are going to let her?”

“If marriage to her clears my father, then I have no choice.”

“She has money too, if that rumor is to be believed.”

Oh, she was mad at him, because that was a low blow. “Some things are worth more than money.”

She huffed out loud. “You stubborn man. You’re sacrificing everything for something that happened in the past. What about your happiness? What about mine...”

“Life rarely gives us what we want. Or need.” He got down on his knees in front of her. “If I could clear my father any other way, I would, but it’s been ten years. Ten years and this is the first actual glimpse of ascertaining what happened and who framed him.”

She cupped his cheek with her hand. “Am I so easy to give up? I will have to marry. How can you stand knowing you’ll have to share your life with her? Can’t you simply walk away at the end? Can’t you pretend?”

“Honor is all I have. Sometimes I laugh, and sometimes I cry, but I refuse to lie. I won’t lie to you. Lies eat you up, helping no one. I prefer to use laughter and tears as my way of getting through life with my honor intact. That’s how I cope with doing what must be done regardless of whether I like it, or whether it’s what I would choose if I were free to do so. Without honor, a man has nothing.”

He wanted to scream that she was all he wanted, but that wouldn’t be unfair. She needed to move on with her life and forget him. Just not with Fencourt. If his father was involved, then she would be on the wrong side of society once he proved Longton’s dishonesty. Something he’d been trying to protect her from.

“Then why did you want to see me? Did you hope I’d talk you out of this self-sacrifice? If I thought I could, I would. Or was it to hurt me further by showing that you choose honor before love?”

He wiped a tear off her face. “I told you I don’t know what love looks like.”

“True, and I have run out of time to show you that you are wrong. So, why did you want to talk to me?”

He couldn’t bear the pain in her eyes, so he rose to his feet and moved to look out the window. He checked the street. It was empty except for the man he’d placed on the corner to keep watch. He turned back to face her. “I want to impress upon you how important it is that you don’t get involved. Whoever the villain is, and it may be more than one, they are dangerous. This is not a game. You saw the name Longton. Fencourt cannot be trusted. And it may be better if you discourage any interest this season. We do not know who to trust.” He swallowed hard and added, “Besides, if Longton is involved and you let Fencourt court you, his association could tarnish your reputation.”



She jumped to her feet. “That is not fair. You cannot expect me to stop looking for someone to have in my life. I want a husband, a family, a home. You cannot take that from me because you put honor above all else. You can dictate who I talk to when you get down on bended knee and profess your love to me. If you cannot do that, then you have no further say in my life.”

She didn’t even wait for his reply. She turned and fled the room.

He had to grip the back of the chair to stop himself from dashing after her, but she spoke the truth. He had relinquished all hold on her and what was left of his heart fractured. The past few days had taught him something. He knew how to love. He loved his family, and this was for them. His sacrifice was so his family could live the life he wanted for them. The life they deserved.

Rosemary could marry Hawthorne. His brothers would stop trying to prove to the world how upstanding they were and come home where they would be safe, and his mother could take her place in society once more.

As he took his leave, he wondered if one day Dharma, when she had children and a family of her own, would realize and understand he had no choice.



“What did he want?” Dharma loved how Rosemary’s voice conveyed such hope.

She shook her head at her friend and tried to stop tears from welling as she flopped down on the bed in Rosemary’s bedchamber. “He came to warn me to stay out of his affairs.”

“So he hasn’t changed his mind? My brother is a stubborn fool.” Rosemary looked at Dharma while sitting at her dresser, adding the finishing touches for her ride with Hawthorne. “So, what are we going to do? Tobin has the parchment and is trying to decipher it. Fencourt is our only avenue if we want to help Devlin before he makes the worst mistake of his life.”

Dharma replied, "He's already decided. He's given his word to marry her. He won't renege."

"Then let's hope she had some part to play in all of this, which allows him to renege."

Dharma swiftly sat up. "He forbade me to talk with Fencourt, but he didn't say I couldn't talk to Mrs. McTavish."

"Oh, no, that's not a good idea. She's not a nice person, and she could be dangerous. Besides, why would she confide in you? She knows how Devlin feels about you. She won't want to help you."

Rosemary was right. Blast it. "If she's involved in this, I bet she has someone in London to help her. Someone she's not told Devlin about. We should spy on her."

"How would we do that?" Rosemary asked as she stood and looked at herself in the cheval mirror, giving a little twirl.

"You look lovely. Hawthorne won't be able to take his eyes off you. We could invite her on some outings and see if anyone follows, or if she slips away for a moment to talk with anyone."

Rosemary got this dreamy look in her eyes at her mention of Hawthorne. "Why don't we organize an outing to Montague House? The museum has many places that Mrs. McTavish could orchestrate a secret meeting, or at least slip away from us and meet someone in secret."

"Sometimes I could kiss you. That's a wonderful idea. It will give us a chance to learn more about her. But Tobin will insist we take someone with us."

Rosemary clapped her hands. "Let's ask Hawthorne and Fencourt to accompany us. Then we can watch how Fencourt interacts with her. If she knows Longton, then she might know his son. Perhaps they aren't clever enough to spend the afternoon with us without letting something slip. If we can see a link between them, then Devlin would have something to use to see that his honor would not be at stake if he backs out of their arrangement."

"Your brother will not like Fencourt's involvement."

“He doesn’t have to know.”

Dharma scrambled off Rosemary’s bed. “Go. Have a lovely afternoon. I’ll send a note to Montague House to acquire tickets for tomorrow afternoon. Then I’ll send an invitation to Mrs. McTavish, inviting her to join us. I know Devlin is busy. Tobin mentioned they were off to Tattersalls. He wants Devlin’s opinion regarding Fencourt’s stallion.”

“But didn’t he also want Fencourt there too?”

“Leave Fencourt to me. He’ll join us, I’m sure.”

“This is so exciting.”

“The ride with Hawthorne, or us becoming spies?”

Rosemary laughed gaily as she headed to the door. “I want to say us becoming spies, but Hawthorne’s lips are so delicious.” With that, she flounced out the door.

Dharma ran her fingers over her lips, remembering Devlin’s kisses. His were delicious too.

She returned to her room and drew out some writing paper. She wasn’t about to let a woman like Mrs. McTavish have everything her way. It’s time Dharma did one thing she was very good at. Sticking up for her friend. That’s what Devlin was—he was a very good friend.

She wanted to make things right. Devlin may not love her, he may not even choose to marry her if he was free, all right, yes, he would. She wanted him to have the choice for a change. Too long he’d lived for duty and for his family.

As she wrote to the museum, she kept repeating in her head she wasn’t doing this for her. She wasn’t being selfish. She was doing this for him, not for her.

Only it so was for her.

She knew who she wanted, and she wanted Devlin.

She would not let him walk away without a fight.

## Chapter Ten

Montague House was still thrilling, no matter how many times Dharma visited. To her surprise, she was having the most pleasant of days. Lord Fencourt was very entertaining in his knowledge of the exhibits, and Mrs. McTavish seemed genuine in her pleasure at visiting the museum.

“Thank you for the kind invitation. I wondered if we would be friends. They led me to believe you were looking at a marriage with Lord Devlin.”

Straight to the point, no finesse. Oh, Fiona knew they had been courting. “You know how these things are. Lord Devlin is more like a brother to me.” *Oh, I can lie well.* “I had considered Lord Devlin as a potential husband, but mainly to help my best friend’s financial situation. Now that Lord Devlin has his tin mine, that is not such an issue.”

Fiona looked at Rosemary walking arm and arm with Hawthorne. “Plus, your friend looks as though she will have an offer of marriage herself this season.”

The Scottish widow was not to realize the friend she was talking about was Devlin. “I do hope so. They make a lovely couple and it’s a love match. I don’t think there are enough of those amongst the *ton*.

“Is that what you hope for? A love match?”

“Why not?” She smiled at Fencourt, who was exclaiming over some Roman coins in the glass case behind them.

“Fencourt certainly looks like a man in love,” Fiona said as she slipped her arm through Dharma’s as if they were best friends.

“That is not for me to say. I’m not in any rush to be married. I want to take my time and be assured of my choice. Once chosen, I have to live with that choice.”

“You’re so young, or is it privileged? For some women, a bad husband is better than no husband at all.”

What could she say to that? How often had she seen the women of her class bartered for family wealth or alignment? She suspected a woman with no financial means would have to marry a man in order to survive unless she could find employment. A woman like Fiona, a beauty, would easily find a husband. Had she been in desperate financial straits? Is that why she married her husband? Was a man you didn’t love preferable to a life fighting on the streets for survival? She’d driven through the streets of London. She knew what it was like for those without money or security.

Before she could reply, Fiona asked, “You obviously know Lord Devlin well. Is he a man of honor?”

So this is what Fiona wanted, and why she’d come to the museum with them. She wanted to learn if Devlin would stand by his offer. “He is indeed. The rumor surrounding his father has made Devlin the most honorable man in England as he’s tried to rebuild the Devlin name. Why do you ask?”

She laughed gaily. “No reason. I’m simply wishing to learn more about the man I shall marry.”

“He is a kind man. A man who always thinks of others. He has sacrificed much in the pursuit to clear his father’s name, so if you are here to help in that endeavor, he will feel like he owes you for the rest of his life. Clearing his father’s name is his life’s goal. Nothing or no-one gets in the way of that. It’s one reason I don’t wish to marry him.”

“You don’t wish to see his family name restored?”

She stopped walking and waited for the others to catch up. “I think he’s wasting his life in the past. He should think of

building a brighter future.”

“No wonder he decided you were not the right lady to become his marchioness.”

That stung. Stung a lot, but Dharma didn’t let her anger show. “You’re probably right. You must have made quite the impression on him to see him offer for you so soon.”

Fiona leaned close as the others drew near. “We are very compatible, in all ways. Especially in the boudoir.”

Rage tore through her and it took an almighty effort not to slap her knowing face. “You are shocking,” she teased, and said no more, simply turning to greet Rosemary. *I should be on the stage.*

They wandered further through the house until Fiona said she needed the retiring room. Rosemary and Dharma looked at each other. “Shall I show you?” Rosemary offered.

“No.” The short, sharp word even had Fencourt’s eyebrow rising. “That is, I can find it on my own. Just directions, please.”

Rosemary told her and added, “We will wait for you at the end of the gallery.”

They watched her walk away, and then Hawthorne whispered something in Rosemary’s ear before saying, “I’ll organize some refreshments to be served in the dining room before we go. Rosemary, would you like to join me?”

“Of course.”

Dharma wished it could be her going to spy on Fiona, but it was probably good that Rosemary went with Hawthorne.

Fencourt said, “Shall we continue on? Don’t you find this collection fascinating?”

She turned her attention to Lord Fencourt. “I can see that history fascinates you. Have you plans to travel? I think you’d love to visit Greece.”

His entire face lit up. “I’d love to travel. I had planned to travel to the Mediterranean this year but…” His words trailed

out before he recovered to say, “Until I found something, or should I say someone, that captured my interest more.” He was implying he had put off traveling to court her, but that wasn’t what he was really going to say. She could see it in his eyes.

She ignored his remark. She didn’t really want to encourage him in his pursuit because she could never marry him. He wasn’t marriage material for many reasons. The number one reason was he wasn’t Devlin. But she also wanted to talk to him about his father, Lord Longton. “What did your father think of you wanting to travel?”

There was a slight hesitation. “He didn’t want me to go. He wants me to take over more of the estate responsibilities.”

She studied him. That statement was true. He wasn’t lying. “Your family has extensive estates. Do you enjoy running the family holdings?”

“I had hoped to delay for a few years yet, and travel, but father saw differently. He has me giving over most of my time to the role, but duty calls. I must buckle down and learn how to run our ‘extensive’ estates.”

She moved closer to the large windows overlooking the gardens, deciding to push for more. “Is that why society thinks you’ll be taking a wife this season? Even though you are still so young?”

His face colored as if he didn’t wish to reply to such a personal question. “Sometimes one finds something precious when one is not specifically looking for it.”

Fencourt sounded so sincere she couldn’t hide her smile. She turned to the window and spied a man standing in the shadows by the rear gate to the stables. She was just about to turn away when a flash of bright blue caught her eye. Fiona stepped into the sunlight and Dharma drew back in case she looked up and spotted her watching.

The two of them stood talking for a few moments before Fiona took a quick glance around and headed back inside.

Dharma stepped back to the window to watch the man as he casually strolled across the manicured lawns. She took in every detail of the man Fiona had met with. He was not a peer. His clothes spoke of someone from the lower classes. He also had red hair, the same color as Fiona's. Probably Scottish, given his coloring. A brother or relative, perhaps?

She wished Hawthorne was here so he could leave and follow the man, but the stranger would be long gone by the time Hawthorne returned. She couldn't ask Fencourt to aid her, given his father was a suspect. It would have to wait until another day.

"Lord Fencourt, can you tell me more about this statue?" She led him away from the window, so Fiona would suspect no one had noticed her meeting.

Fiona returned before the other couple, and soon they were downstairs drinking tea.

Fencourt said, "I hope you and Lord Devlin will attend my mother's ball she's holding in two nights' time. Mother told me this morning that you and Lady Rosemary had already accepted. Hawthorne, I suspect you'll be coming too."

Fiona seemed startled for a moment, unsure of what her position allowed her to do. Rosemary said, "I'm sure my brother has simply forgotten to respond, what with only just recently returning from Scotland. It would be a lovely event to introduce you to society. Please say you'll talk Lord Devlin into attending."

Dharma wanted to laugh at the look on Fiona's face. The woman obviously didn't know how to talk Devlin into attending a ball or responding to invitations. Devlin wouldn't be keen to escort her around town. For the first time, Dharma felt sorry for Fiona. The Scottish widow said, "I shall seek Lord Devlin and the invitation when I get home. I'm sure we'd love to attend."

"We must all get new gowns," Rosemary suggested. "Let's go to Madam Flare's tomorrow morning."

Hawthorne laughed. "Any excuse for a new gown?"



“That would be perfect,” said Fiona. “I want to look my best, as I suspect I will come under scrutiny.”

They walked back towards the carriage and Rosemary linked her arm with Fiona’s. “I know what it’s like to be the talk of the *ton*. I was lucky to have Dharma by my side. You’ll have both of us with you.”

Hawthorne stepped forward and said to Rosemary, “And now you have me.” All three ladies sighed.

Dharma felt her heart flood with warmth. Oh, to have a man so in love with her, like Hawthorne was with Rosemary.

Fencourt escorted Mrs. McTavish home while Hawthorne accompanied Rosemary and Dharma. “I hope I didn’t lay it on too thick with Fiona. I want her to think we are her friends, not her enemy.”

“I thought you behaved perfectly. A touch of truth will always sway those unsure,” Hawthorne said. “I’m mad that we didn’t find her. She definitely wasn’t in the retiring room when Rosemary checked.”

“She met with a red-haired man in the garden. I spied them from the window at the end of the gallery. She obviously did not know where we would be on our journey through Montague House.” Hawthorne teared his gaze from Rosemary’s at her words. “By the way, he’s not gentry.”

“Would you recognize him again?”

She nodded at Hawthorne’s question. “I think I could sketch him, too.”

As soon as she got home, the three of them sat in the drawing room while Dharma drew the man’s image.

Hawthorne took it and began pacing the room. “What are you thinking?” Rosemary asked him.

“I think we need to show this to Devlin, Tobin and His Grace, but how to do so without alerting Fiona? I wouldn’t want her to find the parchment, so I can’t give it to Devlin to keep.”

“Tobin could invite you all here for a meeting tomorrow while we take Fiona to the dressmakers.” Dharma knew her brother would want to be involved.

“Tobin could invite who?” came a voice from the door as Philippa and Tobin arrived home.

Hawthorne explained what had happened.

Tobin turned to Dharma. “I hope you aren’t purposely getting involved. I warned you to stay out of this. The situation is dangerous, and we have enough to worry about just keeping Devlin alive.”

Blood was supposed to be warm, wasn’t it? Why did she feel so cold? “It was merely a visit to the museum, and we had Fencourt and Hawthorne with us. Devlin is safe, isn’t he? You are all helping him?”

“As safe as he can be.” Tobin took her sketch, obviously not willing to discuss more. “I’ll send a note to Sin and Devlin to meet us here tomorrow morning after you ladies visit the modiste. Philippa will go with the ladies. You can ensure they do nothing silly.”

Philippa merely winked at Dharma. Sometimes her brother forgot she was old enough to make her own decisions. He was a tad over-protective.

“Hawthorne, would you like to stay for dinner? A night in for a change is a blessing. I’m fairly tired from all the social activities.”

Rosemary’s eyes lit up at Tobin’s offer.

“That would be a perfect end to a lovely day, thank you. We have an early start tomorrow.”

Dharma asked, “Have you had any luck translating the parchment from the jewelry box?”

Tobin shook his head. “His Grace’s man of business is coming tomorrow. Sinclair says he speaks multiple languages and helped with coding in the war. So we are hoping he can decipher the document.”

“And what of Longton?” Hawthorne asked. Dharma kept her own counsel about what Fencourt had revealed to her this afternoon. That he’d really wanted to be on the continent this season, but his father didn’t wish him to travel. Was it to keep an eye on her since Devlin was courting her? Surely that was no longer necessary, since Mrs. McTavish would now be more of a threat than Dharma? Unless... was Fiona in league with Longton? Should she tell the men?

“Devlin has asked me not to do anything about Longton just yet. We need to learn more before approaching him. Approach too soon without enough information, and it will alert him to the situation and we may never get the proof Devlin needs.”

After dinner, when the women retired to the drawing room, Philippa waited for them to be seated before asking, “I assume you are monitoring Mrs. McTavish with a view of stopping this ridiculous marriage.” When Rosemary and Dharma did not reply, she added, “If she helps him clear his father, he will go through with the marriage.”

Rosemary thumped the arm of her chair. “We know that. That is why we have to prove Mrs. McTavish is involved somehow.”

“I see. And what if she is not? We need to solve this without her help.”

Dharma’s heart jumped into her throat, and fear sent shivers over her skin. “The decision will still lie with Lord Devlin, and you know how honorable he is. He gave his word.”

“No.” Rosemary exclaimed. “I can’t let my brother sacrifice so much.”

Dharma patted her friend’s hand. “Mrs. McTavish is most definitely up to something. There is something she is not telling Devlin. We just have to learn what that is.”

Philippa sat back on the settee. “I shall have a lovely conversation with her at the modiste’s. In particular, I shall ask about her family. Does she have any brothers, for instance? If

not, then perhaps the man she met is a lover? If we can prove she's having an affair behind Devlin's back, it just might bring him to his senses."



The following afternoon, Philippa and Dharma tried to hide their shock as they entered the dressmakers just off Bond Street.

The Modiste's shop was a haven of elegance, adorned with sumptuous silks and satins in every hue, where ladies of the *ton* gathered to consult the latest fashions and seek the guidance of Madame Camille, the renowned dressmaker. On this particular afternoon, the shop was abuzz with activity as ladies perused the array of fabrics and, to Dharma's horror, sitting to the side, lounging on the chaise longue looking like a duck out of water, was Lord Devlin.

He'd joined their visit. Likely to stop the ladies from their aim of cross-examining Fiona.

The hard, steely gaze he leveled at Dharma as she entered portrayed how he felt about them trying to get close to Fiona.

However, Fiona was enjoying her visit, gazing at a collection of extravagant bonnets and chatting to Madame Camille.

Rosemary was doing her best to ignore her brother's glare by examining a collection of lace trimmings.

"Come stand in front of the cheval mirror and you'll see the bonnet suits you well," Camille urged the Scottish woman.

Fiona was happy to regard herself in a full-length mirror while trying on a midnight blue silk bonnet adorned with delicate ribbons and feathers. "Darling, what do you think? Does it bring out the color of my eyes?" Fiona noticed that Devlin's eyes were focused on Lady Dharma and the material she was being shown by one of the dressmakers on the other side of the lounge, and her lips turned down.

Without removing his gaze from Dharma, he replied, “I’m sure you’d look ravishing in anything you selected.”

Fiona pouted. Not the least bit mollified. “What is that material that Lady Dharma is examining?” she snapped at Madame Camille.

“Oh, that’s a deep burgundy velvet. It would not suit your coloring.”

“I want to see it.” Before Madame could say more, Fiona made her way to where Dharma was discussing the material with Rosemary. “It brings out the blue of your eyes beautifully,” Rosemary said as Fiona arrived.

Steam was almost coming out of Fiona’s ears at Devlin’s steadfast interest in Dharma. “I’d love a dress made from this velvet. See to it.”

Madame Camille rubbed her hands and stuttered, “But there is only enough material for Lady Dharma’s gown.”

“It’s all right, Camille. Mrs. McTavish may have the material. She is our guest and we want to make her feel welcome. After all, she will become part of Lady Rosemary’s family, and I hope a friend.”

Fiona’s anger vanished, replaced by cautious appeasement. “That is very kind, Lady Dharma. Perhaps Madame Camille is correct and the color would look better on you.”

“Perhaps. However, look at this beautiful emerald velvet material. It would look stunning on you. What type of gown would suit Mrs. McTavish’s figure? Perhaps we should look through the sketches and find a beautiful design to show off your figure?” Dharma skillfully drew Fiona further into the lounge, away from Devlin’s knowing gaze. He could hardly follow them back here. Women were being measured and changing behind the curtains.

Philippa arrived with some designs in hand. “Come sit with me. I’d be happy to advise you on suitable gowns for all the occasions. Do you have gaps in your wardrobe? Where should we start first?”

Soon the ladies were pouring over gown ideas and fabric, any animosity forgotten. Dharma looked back through the curtains to see Devlin pacing, looking like he could throttle her.

With gowns and material selected, Fiona was finally being measured and Dharma slipped away as Philippa began asking her questions about her life in Scotland and who she knew in London.

She held her head up high as Devlin drew her over to the corner, away from prying eyes and big ears. “Please calm down. We are in a public place looking at material and gowns. What on earth could go wrong?”

“You know damn well why I’m so angry. You’re involving yourself and my sister in something that does not concern you and putting everyone in danger. Plus, if Fiona thinks we are playing games, she could refuse to tell me what I need to know. Destroying any chance of clearing my father’s name.”

“Well, calm yourself. She is so wrapped up in advancing her wardrobe trying to seduce you, she’s as happy as a clam. We are just ensuring that you have the option to choose who you marry once your father is cleared. We believe the lady is playing you false. She slipped out to meet a man at Montague House.”

He glanced around the room and, noting that they were not being observed, dragged her behind a screen. “I should put you over my knee and spank you. When did you visit the museum?”

Dharma wanted to say promises, promises, but instead, she tried to placate his temper. “While you were at Tattersalls. We invited Fiona.”

“You went with her alone?”

“Of course not. We invited Hawthorne and Fencourt to accompany us.”

His hand on her arm tightened. “Fencourt! Now you really are pushing the boundaries. He’s Longton’s son.”

“I don’t think he is in league with his father. He couldn’t care less about Fiona, for one. He wasn’t at all worried when she slipped away. And honestly, I think he’s harmless. He doesn’t have the brains to be deceitful.”

“What would you know about deceit? “

She shook out of his hold. “You taught me how easy it is to deceive. You took liberties and then walked away.” The tips of Devlin’s ears turned red.

“If you despise me so, why are you trying to help?” He had her there.

“If you must know, clearing your father also helps my friend Rosemary. Lord Whetton would have no objections to her marriage to his son.” What she wanted to say was he wouldn’t have to marry Fiona, but she wasn’t about to feed his ego by letting him know she still found him the only man she desired.

Devlin brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek, his thumb tracing the delicate curve of her jaw. “Is clearing my father’s name for Rosemary all you care about? Or is there something else your heart desires?”

*Why couldn’t her face hide her inner thoughts?*

With a sudden, deliberate movement, he lowered his lips to hers, and the world seemed to stop. Their kiss was slow and tender, a promise of desire and a hint of longing. The room disappeared, the chatter vanished, and it was just the two of them, lost in the intoxicating magic of the moment.

When they finally broke the kiss, their breaths mingled in the air. Dharma’s cheeks were flushed, and her blue eyes were filled with a mixture of surprise and desire. Lord Devlin gazed at her with a mixture of admiration and a hunger for more.

“Dharma,” he said, his voice husky with desire, “Don’t give up on me yet. You know who I desire in my bed. Can you wait?”

She smiled, her eyes sparkling with newfound confidence. “Perhaps you might be worth waiting for.” She looked over her shoulder. “I should get back while Fiona is still engaged.”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you mentioned Fiona slipped away while you were at Montague House? Were you going to tell me?”

She pressed a kiss to his lips and backed away from temptation. “Talk to Hawthorne. He can tell you all about her chat with a red-haired man.”

He pulled her back into his arms and whispered in her ear, his breath sending tingles down her spine. “Please don’t put yourself in danger. I couldn’t bear losing you.”

“I won’t lose you either.”

Then she was gone. Back to pretending the woman everyone was fussing over, and building a trousseau for, was someone she could ever like.

Fiona would not become Lady Devlin. On that, she swore.

She would free Devlin by helping to reveal that his father was framed.



## Chapter Eleven

The following night, Lady Longton's ball was well attended, largely thanks to Lord Devlin. Everyone within society wished to meet the beautiful, rich, widow Mrs. McTavish while spitefully watching Lady Dharma's reaction.

Dharma's smile stayed firmly on her face until her cheeks were screaming. To her utter disappointment, the pair made a handsome couple.

"Now that he has a prosperous tin mine, it would appear Lord Devlin is no longer in need of a wealthy debutante for a wife. He obviously prefers someone more experienced." The spiteful Lady Dorset laughed at Dharma as she breezed past with her two friends. The three debutantes loved the situation Dharma found herself in. From the *ton* favorite to the *ton* laughingstock. Philippa squeezed her hand.

"Pay them no mind. They are young and foolish. And cruel," she added under her breath. "If Devlin could, he'd be here with you. We are so close to fulfilling his need to clear his family name."

Philippa had learned Fiona did indeed have brothers from her discussion at the modiste this morning. So Fiona may not have a lover. Why would she risk losing Devlin with that deception? The man she met could be her brother or her hired accomplice. But it would appear Fiona had one catch in mind; being Lady Devlin was her goal.

The agony of the ball made Dharma want to scream. Instead, she dutifully played her part as a cast aside young

lady and she flirted outrageously with the young bucks who were lining up to dance with her.

Soon Dharma had danced herself toward near exhaustion and still nothing had occurred that would throw light on the enemy. She made her way back to Philippa's side, wishing this night was over.

Devlin had stayed by Fiona's side all evening, accompanied by Rosemary and Hawthorne. They had planned it this way so that if Fiona slipped away, someone would be free to follow her. She watched Rosemary and Devlin take to the dance floor. Rosemary threw her a look and Philippa nudged her with her elbow. *Finally.*

As soon as the music started, they noticed Fiona allowed Lord Fencourt to escort her outside onto the terrace. "I feel like some air," Philippa said, and the two ladies headed outside.

But once outside, the couple seemed to have vanished.

"You go down the stairs to the left. I'll take the right. But be careful."

"Absolutely not," Philippa replied. "It's far too dangerous and if caught alone, you... think of your reputation."

"Then what should we do?"

"Nothing. We will hide in the shadows and see how long she is with Fencourt, or who she comes back with."

Dharma wasn't happy, but deep down inside Philippa was correct. If someone caught her alone in the gardens, she would be ruined.

They waited in the shadows until Dharma's teeth chattered. The night had become quite cool. She was about to suggest they return inside when Philippa's hand gripped her wrist. They could hear voices. But as they drew closer, it became obvious they were speaking in a language neither of the women understood. There were three voices.

Dharma peered through the bushes along the balustrade and saw Fiona, the man from the museum garden and... She

drew in a sharp breath and stepped back. Lord Longton. Fencourt was nowhere to be seen.

They were all talking in a language she didn't recognize. And it sounded like Lord Longton wasn't happy.

Philippa pulled her back into the shadows. "They're speaking Gaelic, I think."

"Could the parchment be written in Gaelic?" Dharma could barely hide her excitement.

"I'll tell Tobin to investigate the language. It's a language that the Scottish highlanders used, but isn't it interesting that she is talking to Longton when she left with Fencourt? Where is he?"

They pressed back into the shadows as Fiona and Longton stepped onto the terrace. The other man slipped away. The couple switched to English.

"I'm warning you, Fiona."

"He's agreed to wed me. I have no reason to blackmail you into marriage now. And Devlin knows nothing. Everyone gets what they want."

"Good."

Fiona's voice made Dharma's skin crawl. "Before we go inside, let me just remind you that should anything happen to me, I will send certain information to the war office."

"I'm well aware of the situation I'm in. Fencourt is ensuring that Lady Dharma is kept away from Lord Devlin. Now it's up to you to ensure you put an end to his hunt. Serve him up as your husband and marry the man."

"It's not that easy. Lord Devlin isn't a fool. He's dismissed my husband as the traitor, knowing it had to be someone far senior within the cabinet."

"Then I best find someone else to blame. Lord Doyle. He's dead, so can hardly refute any evidence. Plus, he's Irish. The Prime Minister doesn't trust the Irish."

"You can do that?" Fiona asked in awe.

“I’ll contact your man, Stewart, when I’ve organized a plan. You concentrate on seducing Devlin and mention Lord Doyle’s name.”

“How do I suddenly come up with Lord Doyle? Lord Devlin will be suspicious.”

Longton walked them toward the door so they couldn’t hear what he said.

“Well, now we know who the traitor is, but how Devlin’s going to prove it is beyond me.” Philippa’s words were dancing around in Dharma’s head. What she was more excited about was the fact they had proof that Fiona was in league with Longton. Devlin wouldn’t marry her now. Would he?

“Do you think it’s safe to go inside?” Just then, out through the terrace doors came Hawthorne and Rosemary and the ladies quickly moved to meet them. They explained everything and suggested to Hawthorne that they needed to talk with Devlin and Sin.

“How will he get away from Fiona?” Rosemary asked.

“He’ll find a way. Let’s meet at His Grace’s house tonight, then Devlin can say it’s urgent business with the tin mine.”

No sooner had they re-entered the ballroom than Devlin was there asking Dharma to dance. Since she was supposed to take a turn on the floor with Hawthorne, she looked at him, but Hawthorne merely stepped aside.

“What are you up to?” Devlin asked. “I didn’t go to the trouble of pushing you away to see you become involved in this dangerous situation.”

“Gosh, you look lovely tonight, Lady Dharma. Why, thank you, my lord.”

Devlin grimaced. “Apologies. You look beautiful tonight. Then again, you always look beautiful.”

“Apology accepted, but you are causing quite the stir dancing with me.” Had that made him forget his question? “I’d wager there is a bet at Whites over who you will actually

marry. I know who I'd put money on and my odds have improved significantly."

"Fiona is dancing with your brother. It is polite to return the favor." So he hadn't sought her out just because he had to see her—touch her...

"So, what were you all doing outside on the terrace? And don't say getting some air. It's too cold. Your lips were almost blue, indicating you'd been outside a long time." He wanted to dance with her to get information. His goal, as always, was his father.

"If you must know, Philippa and I were following your betrothed."

"Don't call her that," he snapped.

"But that is who she is. You agreed to her blackmail. Just because you're cross with yourself for agreeing to such a stupid proposal, don't take your frustration out on me. Besides, she just met with Longton and he most definitely is the traitor. I therefore think it would be more than honorable for you to decamp from the proposal."

His grip on her hand tightened. "You heard Longton admit his part?"

"Not exactly. They were speaking in Gaelic, or so Philippa thinks. Perhaps the parchment your father hid in Rosemary's music box is in Gaelic too."

"Then how do you know it's Longton who's the traitor?"

"I don't think I'm going to tell you. I want to enjoy the music and the feel of your arms about me. You can talk with Hawthorne about Longton. I'm supposed to be keeping out of the situation, remember?" She watched his beautiful jaw tighten and his lips part in almost a snarl, so she added, "Now, now, our audience is watching."

He spun her as if he'd like to send her into the nether, nether. But she refused to tell him anything else. She relaxed in his hold and let the music wash away the complexity of their situation. She wondered where they would go from here. If he didn't have to marry Fiona, and cleared his father of

treason, would he open his heart and let her in? She knew she could not settle for anything less. She'd been very open with him about what she desired from a marriage. Perhaps once he'd cleared his family's name, he could open that shuttered heart.

“What will you do when you clear your father?”

Her words startled him. “I've never let myself think that far ahead.” He paused for a moment before adding, “I actually don't know. I've never really believed I'd find the evidence I need.”

“You could do anything you desire.”

His eyes flicked to her mouth, her bosom, and then her eyes. “You're right. I could go after who and what I desire.”

She sucked in a breath. He wanted her. The heat in his eyes burned down to her inner core. But want and desire were not love. She desired his heart, but he kept it safely enclosed in his chest, as he had been hurt once before. She would show him the risk was worth taking.

They just had to apprehend Longton so that they could take their time to get to know one another, without the stress of his family's treason hanging over him.



Impatience wasn't his worst vice, but right now Devlin knew abandoning patience could destroy any chance of keeping his enemies in the dark as to the fact that he was on to them. So he spent time with Fiona and his mother in the drawing room of his townhouse after the ball. He had to hold his knee to stop it from jiggling.

Finally, his mother, who was obviously waiting for Fiona to declare her intention to retire to bed, was too tired to wait further.

“If you'll excuse me, I'll retire.” As she rose, she purposely looked toward Fiona with an eyebrow raised. His mother didn't wish to leave her alone with him. Very wise. He

expected he'd have to fight off a seduction. Fiona ignored his mother's subtle suggestion. His mother could not hide her sigh as she exited the room.

*One, two, three...* "I thought your mother would never leave," Fiona said as she rose and came to kneel at his feet, running her hands up his thighs. Now, rather than jiggle, he had to stop his legs from tensing in revulsion.

"That's probably why she stayed up so late. Mother feels it's not appropriate for us to be alone together this late, even if you are a widow."

Her hands halted their journey, but did not leave his thighs, and her eyes flashed with anger. "But I'm more than a widow. I'm your betrothed."

"My mother is a tad old-fashioned." Before Fiona could grow suspicious, he pulled her up and onto his lap. She almost purred like the cat who'd swallowed the cream. He had to put a stop to this before he lost the copious amount of brandy he'd drunk.

She snuggled into his chest. "Since we are now betrothed, it behooves me to clear the name I will take. While you were out this afternoon, I found something in my husband's journals. There is a mention of a person named DubhGhail. I believe that's Gaelic for Doyle. Does that name mean anything to you?"

There was a Lord Doyle in the war cabinet with his father, but the man was dead. How convenient to use Doyle to keep Devlin away from investigating Longton. A dead man could not protest his innocence. There was no way Devlin would let another innocent family suffer. Longton had to answer for his crime. But he would play her game.

He pushed her off his chest and looked into her face. "There was a Lord Doyle in the war cabinet." Feigning excitement, he hugged her tightly. "This could be the breakthrough we are looking for."

He stood with her in his arms and carried her upstairs. She thought he was taking her to bed, and he was, but she would

be alone. He'd organized for his butler, Mr. Tyler, to interrupt his journey.

In time, Devlin heard a throat clear. He acted as if he'd been on the stage all his life. "What is it, Mr. Tyler?" annoyance in every stilted note.

"An urgent message from His Grace. There has been an accident at the mine."

He slowly lowered Fiona to stand on her feet and hugged her tight. "Damn it. I'll go at once." Without a backward glance, he took off down the stairs. Not caring what Fiona thought.



The shadows from the fire danced over the walls of His Grace's library as Devlin told how he'd escaped Fiona's clutches. "I'll have to do a release about an accident at the mine." Sin said.

Devlin settled into the chair by the fire. "I hadn't considered the aftermath of my deception, but she could get suspicious if you didn't." He accepted the drink Sin handed him.

"Longton is a formidable enemy. I'd rather not take any chances. It will take some time to get a man to Cornwall in order to ascertain the details of the accident, if Longton even bothers, and we should have him by then."

"God, I hope so." Devlin could hardly believe his goal was within his reach.

"Then I bring you good news," Tobin announced as he sauntered into the room with his man of business, Mr. Gordon, behind him. "My wife was right. The letter's written in old Gaelic. Thankfully, Mr. Gordon is from Scotland and can read this dialect."

Devlin leaned forward. "So, it's old Scottish, not Irish?"



“Definitely, Scottish, my lord.” Mr. Gordon answered while pulling the paper out of the folder under his arm. “It’s rather interesting reading. It clears your father completely. Unfortunately, it doesn’t quite go as far as stating who the villain actually is.”

“How does it do that?”

Mr. Gordon answered. “It reveals a plot to frame your father and hijack a grain shipment to Napoleon for a huge sum of money.”

Tobin stood beaming. “So, you see Devlin. Your father’s name will be vindicated.”

Devlin sat as still as stone, not quite believing what he’d heard. But would this years old parchment be enough to lift any doubts when the name of the real villain remained a secret?

Then his body shook, and he couldn’t stop it. Anger burst forth in his gut, churning and spewing. Lies and treachery ruined and destroyed the family, causing the death of his innocent father. He’d died for nothing, and someone was to blame. Longton was to blame and... “Someone must pay.”

No one contradicted him. Sin stepped forward. “We will uncover the culprit and yes, we will make him pay for all your family has suffered.”

Devlin stood. “As long as that’s clear. ”

Tobin cleared his throat. “I propose that Sin take this letter to Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister, and then to Prinny, and ask them to make a public release clearing your father.”

Devlin turned to face Sin. “But if we do that, Longton will know we are on to him. He’ll be on his guard and may strike out at my family and friends to stop me from uncovering his guilt.”

Sin walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “This parchment is the only thing we have that will clear your father. If something should happen to it before we present it to Prinny and Lord Liverpool... well, if we can’t find evidence against

Longton, you'll miss the chance to clear the Devlin name and receive the apology you deserve."

Devlin couldn't swallow or breathe. The letter delivered to the right people would see him able to claim all that he desired. His sister would marry well, his mother could re-enter society with her head held high and he could... he could marry the woman who made his soul soar and his heart burst with joy—Dharma. But he might never avenge his father's death. Could he live with that?

Mr. Gordon suggested, "Why not give it to Lord Liverpool and Prinny, but ask them not to reveal anything until you uncover the real traitor? Surely it will be safe in their hands."

All the men looked at him with raised eyebrows. Tobin uttered, "That could work. Liverpool is a fair man, and he's not very fond of Longton."

Devlin paced the room, trying to think. Did he trust Liverpool and the government when it had been men within the government that had framed his father in the first place? So much rested on this decision. This small parchment, over ten years old, held the fate of his family and the happiness he might finally grab. As he paced, a cunning plan formed in his head. He swung round to face his friends with a huge smile on his face.

"I have an idea. A brilliant idea, if I may say so myself. Let's take the parchment to Liverpool now as soon as this meeting finishes. We will ask him not to reveal anything until we clarify Longton is the villain."

"Well, that is what we discussed, but I can't see—"

Devlin interrupted Tobin. "Then later in the day, we will work out a subtle way to leak that I've found the parchment, which clears my father and names the true traitor, and I'm going to take it to Liverpool. We can copy the letter onto another piece of parchment. We'll make Longton think I haven't shown it to anyone yet, and that I still have the note. He'll have to come after it—after me. He'll have no choice, especially if he doesn't know what the parchment reveals."

Sin clapped his hands. “That’s brilliant, because by coming after the note, Longton reveals he’s the villain. That’s the only evidence Liverpool will need.”

“And if something should go wrong, Liverpool still has the original. Who can we use to leak the news?” Mr. Gordon asked.

“Mrs. McTavish. We know she’s in league with Longton. As Hawthorn indicated, she implicated Lord Doyle. I’ll let her overhear me telling mother how it was found in Rosemary’s jewelry box. I’ll have the box with me. I’ll tell mother I’m going to hide it until I can take it to Liverpool. I’ll make it known I can’t meet with him until the following day. I have to wait for him to arrive back in London.”

“One slight drawback. It’s bloody dangerous. What if he comes after your sister, or someone close to you, to use as leverage? Or takes a shot at you?”

Sin nodded at Tobin’s words. “He may kidnap someone close to you to exchange for the note. And if you don’t actually have it....”

An image of Rosemary and Dharma flashed in his mind. “It’s only one more night. Surely we can keep our families safe behind our townhouse doors.” Devlin prayed his words were true. The idea that something could happen to the young ladies because of his actions... It didn’t bear thinking about.

Silence blanketed the room for several minutes. Finally, Sin said, “I think it’s the best option we have.”

“Bloody only option if we want to capture Longton,” Tobin added.

Devlin retook his seat and the men hunkered down as he explained his plan on how to trap Longton and clear his father’s name. His future depended on this outcome. If their plan worked, he could marry Dharma and give her the life she deserved.



With nerves churning, Dharma kept watch at the window, waiting for her brother to return from the Duke of Sinclair's house. Although ready for bed, dressed in her satin robe covering her delicate lace night-gown, she would not sleep until she learned what the men were up to.

Finally, she heard the carriage. She was about to race downstairs to greet him and demand to learn what the plan was, but unfortunately, both Lord Devlin and Lord Hawthorne were with him. She looked at her dress and decided it wasn't appropriate to join them. Her brother would have a fit.

Instead, she crept downstairs in time to see them enter Tobin's study. She'd bet all her pin money that if she knocked and entered, the men wouldn't tell her anything. She glanced over the banister and couldn't see any staff. It was late. *No one would see...*

Listening at a keyhole is akin to sinning with the devil. Or so Dharma's mother scolded when she caught Dharma listening to a conversation she was having with her doctor. It's how she found out her mother was likely going to die.

For a long time afterwards, she'd thought God was punishing her for eavesdropping, but tonight she held no such illusions. She was sick of men deciding what information, or news, should be shared with women.

How annoying that she could only grasp a few snippets of conversation. Hawthorne was closest to the door and from his words she'd gathered that Sin was taking the parchment to Lord Liverpool tonight, and that it cleared Lord Devlin's father. But it was also obvious the men had a plan to capture Longton. However, she couldn't quite hear Devlin. *Bother.*

She heard chairs scraping, which meant the men were likely getting ready to leave. She turned to scurry back upstairs to Rosemary's room but was not quite fast enough. It was Devlin who caught her. He stopped dead when he spied her on the stairs and Tobin ran into his back.

"I say..." Tobin's words petered out. "Dharma, why are you still up?"

Hawthorne pushed past Tobin, who blocked the doorway to the study and peered up the stairs. No doubt hoping to see Rosemary. When she was not there, he said, "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I shall head home for some sleep. I think we will all need to be sharp on the morrow."

As the front door closed after him, Dharma looked at her brother and Devlin. "So, you do have a plan."

Her brother advanced toward her. "You are not to get involved. This is very dangerous business and—"

"—Would you mind if I have a private word with Lady Dharma?" Devlin spoke, but his eyes never left her face.

Tobin looked between them and then pushed past Dharma as he made his way up the stairs, calling over his shoulder, "Just ensure she understands how dangerous this situation is. And I expect you to behave like a gentleman."

Devlin raised an eyebrow and indicated she should enter the library. As she walked past him, that familiar shiver of desire slid over her skin. While he might not feel obligated to Fiona now, Dharma was still not simply going to become his wife. He had to demonstrate he could open that locked up heart of his, but being this close to him made it difficult to remember she had to hold back and make him reveal his feelings. So, she deliberately chose a chair and ignored the idea of sharing the settee with Devlin, no matter how much her body screamed to do just that.

To her surprise, he closed the door behind him. Her body couldn't repress a shiver at being alone with him, and that didn't bode well for her willpower to resist him.

He stood looking at her like a delicious treat. "I realize you only have my best interests at heart, but I have to make you understand how dangerous the situation has become. You must promise me to stay in this house with Rosemary until this is all over." He paced the beautiful antique rug.

She took a deep breath to gather her anger. "I'm not a stupid young girl. I know what is at stake here. I also know you are in grave danger and it scares me to death." She gulped

back a sob. “You’re going to draw Longton out, aren’t you? Set a trap for him.”

Devlin stopped pacing, and with hands on hips, shook his head. “You really are too clever for your own good. How could you know...”

“It’s what I would do if I were in your shoes. Get a confession in front of witnesses like my brother and Hawthorne. Which, of course, means Longton has an excellent opportunity of killing you first.”

She couldn’t take it one more minute. She rose to stand before him and took his hand and placed it over her heart. “We could have a wonderful life together. I can’t lose you now. Please try to find another way. Isn’t the parchment enough?”

## *Chapter Twelve*

**H**is arms were bands of steel as he gathered her close. “This is the only way that guarantees my father is avenged and Longton pays for his crimes. Besides, I don’t want to leave any doubt that my father was maligned. He was not a traitor.

“I think of Hawthorne and Rosemary. My sister is so happy, and Hawthorn’s father would have no objections if Longton is unveiled as the traitor. There will always be those who doubt me unless I prove Longton’s guilt. My mother could re-enter society and I... well, I would have something to offer my future wife and children—an honorable name and position in society. I could focus on rebuilding the capital I need to turn our estate around.”

“Your life is not worth the risk. Not to me. A woman worth marrying would care nothing for what society thinks. All she’d want is your heart. And I know Rosemary would not wish to see you dead.”

“A man would be very lucky indeed to have a wife such as that.” He could resist her no longer. He’d sworn under his breath that he would do nothing to encourage her until this night was over. He may very well die and he didn’t want to show her what they could have together, only to take it away.

But his will was not strong enough. He tilted her head up, and she did not draw back. He gently cupped her chin in his hand and pressed his lips to hers. He almost sighed with contentment. They were all he’d dreamed about. Soft, full, and tender. He wanted to drink in the tenderness until his body quivered. He wanted her taste and scent to fill his mind and his

memory. It took but a moment for Dharma to open to him. As his tongue slipped into her hot and inviting mouth, his groin tightened and he moved back a tad so she would not feel his urgent reaction to a simple kiss. He did not wish to encourage her. He was so close to taking her here and now in case he never got the chance, but... if he didn't come back, and she got with child... she'd be ruined. It wasn't fair.

Her tongue dueled with his and, to his surprise and relief, she did not back away from the kiss. She took part wholeheartedly.

There was heat, want, and need between them, and he finally could not stand it a moment more. He swept her into his arms and deepened the kiss. Dharma's taste was intoxicating. The feel of her soft curves pressed against him drove him on. There was no way she could not feel how much he wanted her.

Devlin could not tell how long they stood there, a smoldering embrace in the cooling study, the smell of the embers filling the air. He did not wish to end the kiss. He wished he could lay her down on the settee and make love to her all night. He shouldn't, but his will was weak as she ran her tiny hand over his chest. *You could find mutual pleasure without risking her reputation.*

"I need you tonight more than I ever have. I promise not to go too far and ruin you." When she smiled at him as if she trusted only him, he was lost.

He eased her down on the settee. If he was to ensure her pleasure, he needed a minute to douse his raging need, which wasn't helped when his glittering gaze feasted on her darkened, hard nipples showing through the fine linen of her nightgown exposed when he'd pulled her robe apart. "Command me. Where would you like my mouth, my lips ... ?"

"Everywhere," was her husky reply.

"Your wish is my command."



He took his time untying the tiny ribbons holding her nightgown closed and keeping his gaze from her bare skin. He peeled back the edges and marveled at the shape of her breasts. Full and firm and waiting for his touch. He didn't make her wait long. He nuzzled her breasts, letting his lips glide over the plump mounds, dipping to kiss the valley between her breasts. She sighed in approval as his mouth found one taut nipple and gently rolled it around his mouth, licking with his tongue. Her sighs turned to soft moans as he suckled her. She was liquid heat beneath him, her soft curves inflaming his ardor, while he still struggled for control over his rampaging need to sink deep between her thighs. Something he would not do tonight, but something that would give him the power to defeat his enemy and return to her. He stayed suckling her breasts until, at last, he felt a modicum of restraint.

With his raging need under control, he lifted her nightgown over her head and sat back to drink in the beauty of her nakedness. She was a vision that made man understand the power of God to have created something so beautiful.

Then he kissed down her stomach and nestled between her thighs. He watched in satisfaction as she gripped the cushion behind her head; her raised arms lifting her bosom as if calling for his mouth, while her hips lifted slightly, also calling for attention. Her body recognized his moves and cried out. His hands touched her silken thighs, and she needed no further encouragement to part them so that he could slide between them.

He glanced up at her succulent body. Her eyes flew open.

"I'm waiting to be commanded. Where should I kiss you next?"

Her hips lifted in answer as she pleaded with him. "I bow to your prowess... ." He'd forgotten she was an innocent, and he loved how a slight blush covered her cheeks as he looked at the womanly heart of her.

Holding her gaze, he slowly lowered his mouth and licked through her wet folds. Her eyes closed and her head fell back

on the cushion with a sigh.

He pressed his mouth against the sensitive moistness of her sex. Licking and stroking with his tongue, he teased her, and he could feel her arousal when the small nub between her folds swelled against the pressure of his mouth. “You taste of the sweetest nectar. I swear I could live on nothing else.”

“God, don’t stop. I order you, beg you.”

He smiled to himself as he bent and enthusiastically obeyed. He found her nub and gently sucked. Then he licked until he felt her body stiffen. He teased her for a few moments longer before finally plunging his tongue deep inside her. Her cries of pleasure filled the room, inflaming him even more. In moments, Dharma convulsed, her hands gripping handfuls of his hair as she shuddered and moaned. He rose onto his knees to watch the beautiful sight, but became alarmed when small trails of tears leaked from the corner of her eyes.

He gently stroked her stomach and quietly asked. “What’s wrong? Have I shocked you?”

Her lids fluttered open, and she smiled as he imagined an angel would smile. “That was beautiful, almost surreal. I never realized how fabulous making love could feel. It touched me here.” She placed his hand over her heart.

He understood completely. His heart had pounded in unison with hers. He’d never wanted to please a woman as much as he wanted to with Dharma.

He squeezed his body to lie down next to her. “But we haven’t really made love. This is simply the delicious appetizer before the main course. You know I can go no further tonight because—”

She placed her finger over her lips. “You will come back to me. Promise me.”

“You are the best incentive. I have to remain alive.”

“Can you swear that if you feel your life is in mortal danger, you’ll withdraw to fight another day? Withdrawal to come back to me. With Lord Liverpool holding the note that

clears your father, it won't take long for Longton to be exposed. Your revenge doesn't have to be claimed tomorrow."

He would never get her to understand what his father's death had done to him. The fact he'd not been there and the soul-destroying knowledge that his father had died for his family. He was so close... "I will try to do as you ask... But my patience ran out long ago."

She held his gaze for a moment and then slowly nodded, hugging him to her. They stayed, holding each other and wishing this night would never end.

"Perhaps if you loved me enough, you could forget this dangerous—"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Don't make me choose. Please... a man's honor is all he has, and I swore on my father's grave to avenge him."

She lay looking at him as if her world was ending and his heart cracked; the pain ripping through him.

Finally, she rolled onto her side facing him, and ran a hand down his body to his groin where he was still rock hard. "It would be unfair to leave you in such a condition." She fumbled with the placket of his trousers and slipped her hand inside. At her first touch of his thrumming cock, a groan welled deep in his chest.

Dharma rose to her knees next to him, and her free hand traced over the clothes hiding his chest and stomach from her view while she stroked him intimately. "I'm not sure what to do now."

"Just keep doing what you are doing. Let me for a brief time forget everything but the feel and touch of you."

She was breathtaking. The graceful curve of her bared shoulders, the gentle mounded slope of her pert breasts, and the flawless perfection of her naked skin were all he could desire. Not to mention the alluring rose shape of her soft mouth, with the darker color of her brows a contrast to the fair luster of her hair.

Devlin tried to think of something other than her hand upon him. He wanted to make this moment last all night, but it wouldn't. He'd spend in her hand if she continued much longer.

The sight of her full breasts jiggling with the movement of her hand was a temptation he could not resist. He rose and nibbled down her slender throat, lingering for a moment at the point where her pulse beat fast and light. Dharma made a small sound as his thumb circled the luscious crest of her nipple. Her skin was soft silk beneath his touch, and infinitely feminine.

Her little cries grew in volume as he licked her mounded flesh, taking her erect nipple into his mouth, suckling deeply. He could feel Dharma's hand tighten around him, and he whispered her name into the silent room.

He fell back on the cushion with a stifled groan, and she followed him down, her lips seeking his in a branding kiss. She thrust her tongue deep into his mouth as her hand worked him harder and faster.

Desire spiked and fed his hunger. He closed his eyes, imagining what she would feel like beneath him as he possessed her body slowly inch by inch. The image was so evocative and he moved restlessly, seeking the glorious shattering finale to come.

Devlin's hand reached over and covered hers, urging her on as he thrust powerfully into her hand. She wasn't frightened as his thrusts grew in speed and intensity. She glanced at his face and he didn't hide the feelings in his heart from her. He was lost to the world of pleasure.

Her other hand reached down and gripped his balls and that was it. He was going to climax. With a loud guttural groan, he pushed harder against her hand. Rapture took him prisoner and held him captive as a loud roar reverberated around him as he arched frantically, calling out her name as he came.

When Devlin could finally breathe again, he pulled her down into his arms and hugged her tightly, showering the top

of her head with little kisses. “That was incredible. I cannot wait until I have you in my bed, both of us naked and all night to indulge you.”

“Just see that you stay alive to give me such a night.”

He stroked down the small of her back. “After what we just shared, I shall certainly try.”

Dharma pushed out of his hold. She stared down at the utterly tempting, devilishly handsome man who’d just turned her insides out. She wanted to share his bed. She wanted to feel him deep inside her. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with this man. She wanted to be his wife and the mother of his children. “I can’t wait to do this again with you.” She beamed at him. “I can’t explain how wonderful it feels to be in your arms.” Dharma hesitated before saying, “I know it’s not always like that. What we shared was special. Well, special to me, anyway.”

She waited for him to admit he felt the same as her. That what they just shared was special. She knew he’d had many lovers and just once she wanted him to be honest about what was in his heart.

“Devlin, stop being the coward. When you love someone, you open yourself up to all kinds of emotions. Suffering is one of those, for sure. Maybe the person will break your heart, and you’ll never be able to look at yourself in the same way again. That’s the risk of being in love. That is the burden you have to carry.

“But when love is returned. When love lights up your soul and protects your heart, the burden is weightless. Because the light of love lifts us up and allows us to fly. Come fly with me...”

He pressed a kiss to her lips before gently putting her aside and taking a handkerchief and wiping both of them. He buttoned up his trousers and reached for her nightgown to help with her dress. Once she was fully clothed, he pulled her into his lap and whispered in her ear, “It was the most special moment in my life and I’ll cherish it always.”

It wasn't exactly the declaration of love she'd hoped for, but he had more important things on his mind.

His enemy waited to be exposed.

As if reading her thoughts, he stood, still holding her in his arms. She looked confused before she pushed out of his hold.

Her eyes met his and her heart beat faster. She saw—was it love?—it was certainly something. His next words warmed every inch of her.

“I will come back to you and we will continue this—discussion. You are mine and soon we will have a lifetime to make our own memories—happy memories.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Now go to bed and make sure you and Rosemary do not leave this house for any reason until I send word.”

“I promise you I'll not do anything that will take your mind off your task. I want you back in one piece.” With that, she left him standing by the fire, looking into the dying embers. She would pray through the night that he was victorious in his quest tomorrow. He deserved to get everything his heart desired, and she was just happy to know she was the one thing he wanted.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

**T**he gas lamps cast a dim glow on the cobblestone street as Devlin's carriage headed for home. The scent and taste of Dharma swirled in his brain when he should be totally focused on his enemy.

She was so perfect in his arms tonight and a part of him wanted to forget the oath he'd sworn over his father's grave—to avenge him. Clearing his father's name—was that enough? Was he being foolish? Was risking his life when he could have the most wonderful life with her by his side with children, a place in society once his father was cleared? It's all he'd ever dreamed of. And now, with Dharma, he could have that dream. A shiver ran over his skin. He was so close to having it all.

He wished he could be there to talk with Lord Liverpool to see if his lordship thought the note enough, but perhaps it was best to leave that conversation to the Duke of Sinclair.

Whatever happened tomorrow with Longton, at least his father's name would be cleared by Parliament and Devlin hoped, also by Prinny. He rested his head on the back of the squab and went over his plan in his head. It was risky, but they had the advantage. Longton didn't know about the note yet. The bastard probably didn't even know they were on to him.

In the next moment, the carriage went up in the air on one side and came down with a crash. Devlin gripped the strap above the window as the carriage tilted and then crashed back down. He heard the wheel snap as they slid along the cobblestones. His senses went on high alert and he pulled the pistol from his jacket pocket before leaping out of the carriage.

“We hit a broken barrel, my lord. It’s snapped the wheel clean off.”

“Are you and Douglas all right?” Douglas was a young groom, traveling on the back of the carriage while his Tiger drove. Devlin looked around. They were only a street from home, not a likely place for an ambush given it was too public.

“I could unhook one of the horses for you to ride home.”

Devlin shook his head at his tiger. “I’m merely one street from home. Douglas can accompany me. You stay here with the carriage and I’ll send others to help get the horses home and the carriage off the street.”

As they set off for home, the oil lamps cast eerie shadows against the cobblestones. The night was still, save for the distant sounds of carriages and the occasional flicker of a candle from a nearby window.

Douglas asked, “The horses weren’t hurt, were they, my lord?”

He smiled at the young lad. “Just frightened. They’ll be fine after a rubdown and a bucket of oats.”

Soon, they turned into the alley that led to the back of the stables behind his townhouse. Devlin glanced over his shoulder, his senses tingling with a primal instinct. Something wasn’t right. His eyes narrowed, searching for any signs of danger.

He put a hand on Douglas’s shoulder to stop him. Whispering, he said, “Douglas, I want you to quietly go around to the front of the house and send men to the stable as quick as possible,” and he gave the lad a push in the opposite direction.

Once the lad had sprinted off, Devlin moved into the shadows of the trees lining the gravel drive. He drew his pistol and began moving stealthily through the dark towards his stables, hoping Douglas had set off the alarm.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps shattered the quiet, approaching rapidly from behind.



Three men materialized from the shadows, their menacing presence sending an ominous shiver down Devlin's spine. The men had been lying in wait. They wore tattered clothing, but they could still be part of Longton's gang, scarves obscuring their faces. Their eyes glinted with malice, a clear sign of their ill intentions.

Before Devlin could react, the first man lunged at him with surprising speed and struck him a powerful blow, knocking him sideways into the path of attacker number two. He tried to find his feet; he took aim with his pistol and fired and noted with satisfaction the cry as the bullet found its target. But he wasn't quick enough. Number three was upon him, and before he could pull the knife he carried from his jacket, he received a branch to the back of his head. Stars explode in his vision as pain shot through his skull. He stumbled forward, disoriented, but maintained his footing.

Assailant number one moved in, wielding a thick wooden club. He evaded the swing with a quick sidestep, his years of fencing lessons serving him well. He retaliated with a swift punch, his fist connecting with the thug's jaw. The man stumbled backward, momentarily stunned.

But as Devlin celebrated his minor victory, the third man sprung forward like a panther. He grasped Devlin by the arm, wrenching it behind his back in a painful hold. His grunts, struggling against the iron grip, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Who are you?" Devlin demanded through gritted teeth, his voice laced with defiance.

The man smirked, his fetid breath wafting over Devlin's face. "That's for us to know, and you to find out, milord," he sneered, relishing in his captive's vulnerability.

With swift, brutal force, the thug delivered a powerful blow to the back of Devlin's head. The world spun, and darkness consumed him as Devlin crumpled to the ground, unconscious.



Dharma barely slept. Today would change her life forever. Either she'd find the happiness and love she craved or her world would crumble into a screaming mess of despair. She tried to show enthusiasm for the food on the table in front of her, but it tasted like ash in her mouth.

Lost in thoughts of everything that could go wrong today, she started when the dining-room door crashed open and the Duke of Sinclair stood there. "Where is your brother?"

She slowly rose to her feet, her shaking limbs refusing to work. "In his study."

Sin cursed and took off up the stairs, yelling for Tobin. Blood turned like ice in her veins as she followed. Tobin appeared on the landing above. "Your Grace, what is all this noise?"

"They've taken Devlin. Ambushed him in his stable yard last night. His young groom saw it all and the lad tried to follow them. He lost them, though, but they were heading east. I've sent for Lord Battling and Lord Hawthorne."

Tobin saw her standing on the stairs and quickly ushered Sin into his study. "Find Rosemary and ensure you do not leave this house for any reason. Do I make myself clear?"

"What will you do? You must find him." Dharma cried with anguish.

"We will, but I can't concentrate on Devlin if I have to worry about you." With that, he re-entered his study and firmly closed the door.

She sank to sit on the stair and fought the tears. The emptiness inside sucking in the helplessness rising like a tidal wave. Could she keep the news from Rosemary? There was no point in both of them suffering. She quickly wiped the tears from her face. Rosemary could stay in ignorant bliss for a few more hours.

As she made her way up to her bedchamber, a thought suddenly struck. She'd promised not to leave the house, but that didn't stop her from inviting someone to the house. Someone who might have information and wasn't aware of it. Fencourt was quite a young man who was a tad naïve. He surely didn't know what his father was up to? Even if he did, he might be silly enough to let something slip that could help them.

As quickly as her skirts allowed, she changed direction and made her way to the library. She barely noticed the warmth of the room as she took a seat at her writing desk. She drafted a note and then found a young lad who could deliver it.

“Put the note only into Lord Fencourt's hands. No one else. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Off you go then, and hurry.”

No sooner had the front door closed, and the missive was dispatched, than her brother and Sinclair made to leave.

Tobin pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I will find him and bring him home to you. Don't be afraid, we have well-guarded the house.

She could barely breathe, let alone speak, so she nodded and squeezed his arm. Standing like a scarecrow, helpless, as the men left to bring the man she loved more than life itself, home to her.



Two hours later, Dharma had finally told Rosemary what had happened. After crying uncontrollably and trying to go to her mother, Dharma had put Rosemary in bed with a cup of tea and a few drops of laudanum.

She kept a tight rein on herself, wanting to do just what Rosemary suggested and head to Devlin's and question the witch Fiona. However, she wasn't so stupid because if Longton captured her or Rosemary, the men's ability to stifle

the villain may be jeopardized. And she needed to win, or Devlin might be lost to her forever.

So where the hell was Fencourt? Had the lad found him? Every minute counted. If she could just appeal to the romantic in Fencourt, maybe he would reveal something about his father. Like where would he have taken Devlin?

What with little slumber the night before, Dharma drifted towards sleep as she sat in the drawing room with the sun streaming through the windows. It was only the butler, clearing his throat, that alerted her that Lord Fencourt had arrived.

“My sweet lady, I received your summons and came immediately. How can I aid you?”

“Why don’t you pour yourself a brandy? I have a terrible tale to tell and I feel you’ll need it. In fact, I’ll have a sherry.” Should she be nervous about revealing the truth about his father? Was Fencourt the enemy, too? He didn’t appear to have a deceptive streak, but then she wasn’t very experienced in reading people.

He settled into the chair by the fire and she breathed a sigh of relief. If he got upset, she had a clear run for the door, which remained open. She also suspected that Sutton, their butler, would hover nearby, fully aware of who her visitor was related to.

“What is this all about, Lady Dharma?”

She took a fortifying sip of sherry. “Your father has kidnapped Lord Devlin.” She expected to see surprise or outrage on his face, but his first reaction was to sigh.

“I had hoped it would not come to this, but father is not a man who should be crossed.”

*He knows.* “You haven’t even asked why?”

“I know why, as do you. You’re now looking at a man who will lose everything because of what my father has done.”

“Just as Devlin did all those years ago. But for Devlin, it was an injustice because, as you know, his father did nothing

wrong.” *Would he admit it?*

He sat for a moment drinking and seemed lost in thought, as if trying to decide what he would reveal or do. “I haven’t known long. My father asked me to pay attention to you and find out if there was any talk about Devlin’s father. I had no idea why until a few days ago, when I overheard Mrs. McTavish and my father talking. By then, what could I do?”

“You could have warned me.”

“You don’t know my father,” was his dry reply.

*He’s scared of his father.* That wasn’t good, because he’d probably be too scared to help her. Unless...

“If your father kills Lord Devlin and you do nothing to help, society will blame you. They cannot blame you for what your father did in the past, but they will count you as an accomplice to Devlin’s death. You need to help me stop your father.”

“You want me to help you ruin my life?”

“No. I want you to help me so we can save your standing in society.”

“Whatever happens, my father will ruin me. He’s taken Mrs. McTavish too. She knows too much.” He downed the rest of his brandy and stood to refill his glass. He turned to face her with the decanter in his hand. He looked like he’d shatter as easily as the decanter if he threw it in the fireplace. “If I help, will you let me gather my belongings and funds and head to America before letting society know what my father has done?” She nodded. “I can start a new life. In the Americas, no one cares about a title, about your past. I can be plain, Mr. Fencourt. In fact, I can be anyone I want to be.”

“Will you be satisfied with that?”

He sighed. “I don’t have a choice. To be shunned and shamed here, or be accepted somewhere else. In the Americas money talks. I’ll have a better life there. I could become a plantation owner. Look at Devlin and how his family suffered here.” Silenced lengthened.

Dharma rose and crossed the room to stand beside him, her heart going out to the situation he faced and not really knowing how to help him. She took Fencourt's head in her hands and planted a big kiss on his forehead. "It will be very difficult for you, but society will remember you as the hero who wanted to put things right. I'll see to that. Please tell me where he is."

"I doubt it. They will know me as the traitor's son. But you're right, I don't want to be an accomplice to murder—especially of a peer." He pulled her close. "Besides, I don't think I stand a chance with you. Is he more important to you than I?"

She cupped Fencourt's cheek. "I cannot help whom I love. Just as you cannot help who your father is." She pressed her lips to his. "But I will never forget what you have done for me. I will stand by your side as will Devlin. But you have to help me save him first? I know it could destroy your family, so if you cannot help me, I will understand."

He stood looking at her for a moment. She could see the indecision in his eyes. She held her breath until Fencourt said, "I will tell you where he is holding Devlin captive, but I won't be party to my father's capture."

"I'll ensure everyone knows how honorably you have behaved in helping Lord Devlin and myself."

"It won't be enough. Look at Lord Devlin. He's tried so hard to restore the family name to everyone's good graces, but after ten years, still they judge. I'm ruined. I need to leave and make a new life in the Americas. Unlike Devlin, I have money. Plenty of money."

She squeezed his hand because Fencourt was correct. "Powerful people will stand by you. The Duke of Sinclair, my brother, and the Marquis of Devlin." How ironic because it should have been his family name that had been ruined all those years ago anyway, and Lord Longton had cost the late Lord Devlin his life. How could Longton make up for that? One thing was for sure. She would not let Devlin lose his life

as well. Or the opportunity to prove beyond a doubt that his father was innocent.

She took a deep breath. “I won’t lie. You are rectifying something that should have been known ten years ago. I respect your decision not to come with me, but I have to go.”

“Where are you going?” Philippa asked, as she tried to enter the drawing room as Dharma was leaving. Lady Clayton looked at Fencourt.

“Excuse my manners, Lady Clayton, but I must take my leave too.”

Dharma pressed Philippa’s hands. “I haven’t got time to explain. Send word to Tobin, tell him to get word to Lord Sinclair. Lord Longton has captured Devlin. Fencourt says he’s being held in the stables at Tattersalls.” And before Philippa could stop her, Dharma raced for the stables to ride to the rescue.

With the help of a groom called Hamish, she saddled her mare, Cleopatra, and with the young man accompanying her, she made ready to stop Longton.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She should wait for the men, but the delay might cost Devlin his life. She would simply ensure Longton didn’t move Devlin before her brother and the other men got there. If Longton moved Devlin, the two of them would follow. She would not let her beloved out of her sight. She’d only intervene if Devlin was in immediate danger. Besides, Hamish had brought a gun with him and she had her trusty little pistol in her pocket.

Her heart lodged in her throat the closer they got to Tattersalls. The sun was still high in the sky, but that meant the streets were busy. Hamish rode close beside her and she was thankful for his company.

Longton needed Devlin dead, but he needed to know where Devlin had hid the evidence. Then, Longton would simply kill Devlin and hope that it would resolve the situation. Dharma suspected how he was going to achieve it, because Fiona was missing, too. He’d make it look like Fiona had

killed him in a fit of jealous rage for calling off their engagement and then probably he'd stage it so it looked as though Fiona had killed herself.

Longton did not know that Devlin had already given the evidence to the Duke of Sinclair or her brother. They also had copied it, word for word, in Gaelic and English. She bet Longton didn't know that it was now safely in Lord Liverpool's hands. If he learned that truth, Devlin would be dead.

Worse still, Longton thought Devlin had found the note, but it was actually Rosemary and her who had found it. Several people had read it. He couldn't kill all of them, could he? Certainly not without raising suspicions.

Whatever Longton did, it was over for him. Perhaps that is how she could get him to surrender, by letting him know there was no point in killing Devlin.

If the bastard touched a hair on his head, she'd see Longton destroyed. See how Longton liked living with the rumor of murderer and traitor over his head? She now understood Devlin's need to avenge his father and how he'd risk all to do so.

She dug her heels into Cleopatra's side and urged her horse through the crowded streets, trying not to breathe too deeply.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

**P**ain.

Pain everywhere.

He wondered if it was worse to be stretched on a rack, waiting to be drawn and quartered? Every muscle in his body was on fire. The chains pulled taut; his arms stretched far above his head so that his feet barely touched the ground. His joints screamed, wanting to pop from their sockets.

He tried to raise his head, but each tiny movement caused nausea to erupt deep in his gut and he fought the urge to vomit. He'd been hit hard on the side of the head and when he blinked, trickles of blood ran into his eye.

Devlin closed his eyes and stayed his head, trying to focus through the pain. His pride was in tatters at having let the enemy overpower him and render him unconscious with one simple blow. He should have realized Longton would act sooner than expected. How much did he already know? Had Sinclair reached Lord Liverpool with the parchment? He didn't mind dying if he thought it would not be in vain.

Except—he would miss Dharma. He would disappoint her and she would be so upset. He didn't want to leave her grieving.

He forced his eyelids to lift and waited for the haze to clear. He kept his body still, hiding his return to consciousness from anyone who might be in the vicinity. Like a fox testing the poacher's trap, he evaluated his position.

They'd chained his hands above his head, stretching toward the ceiling, and he could smell horses. The slate stones beneath his feet were covered in bits of hay. Was he in the stables at the back of Montague House, or had he been moved? He hoped the former, because Sin was meeting him here and if he didn't turn up, he was sure his friend would search the area.

The burning pain in his shoulders had his head spinning. Don't faint.

The stable was quiet except for the sound of horses stamping and snorting. Deathly quiet. Sensing he was, in fact, alone, Devlin gingerly lifted his head to survey his prison. With the ringing in his ears and the haze clouding his brain clearing, he noticed more.

There was a piece of tarp on the floor with metal implements laid out in a line. Torture implements. Fear grew to unimaginable proportions. He yanked on the chains with all his strength. The chains did not break. Would he have the strength to withstand the torture? Longton wanted the parchment, but it was too late. He needed to resist any torture as long as he could for two reasons. One because of the chance of a rescue, and the other, if Longton learned Liverpool had the note, he'd simply kill Devlin.

Just then, he heard the door to the stable opening and murmurs. Would it be Longton himself or one of his minions?

Hope briefly flared when he caught sight of Fiona, but then he noticed that someone had tied her hands behind her back and her face was streaked with tears. He yanked on his chains in a futile attempt to get free.

"I'd stop trying to get free. You'll break your wrists, very painful, and you still won't be able to escape."

Longton stepped into the box they were holding him in. Rage churned in his gut. Because of Longton, his father killed himself, and his family had suffered years of indignities. For such a small, innocuous looking man, Longton had caused enormous pain.

“Lord Devlin, you’re awake. I wondered if you’d come round at all. It pleases me because now I can tell you how, just like your father, you’ve failed.”

How he’d love to punch the smug bastard in the face. “Even if you kill me, I’ve won. I have proof and someone will reveal it.”

“I thought that was the case. Mrs. McTavish here denied the existence of such a paper, but after a little persuasion, she admitted the truth. Now I want to know where it is and who has seen it?” A man stepped out of the shadows. “Mr. Fillion is going to help loosen your tongue.”

He hoped he had the strength to endure. At least long enough for Sin and Tobin to rescue him. “Do your worst.”

Longton laughed. “Oh, did you think he was here to torture you?”

Only then did Devlin understand why Fiona was here. She’d have to die too, and Longton would torture her, expecting Devlin to reveal the hiding place of the parchment to help Fiona.

“For the love of God, just tell him,” Fiona begged as she began crying again. He hated to tell her that this was her fault. She should have sided with Devlin instead of betraying him. How could she not understand that you could never trust a man who’d sell out his country?

Devlin’s heart was pounding in his chest. Sweat peppered his skin, and he thought he was going to vomit. “If I tell Longton what he wants to know, we’re both dead.” He tried not to let his fear show, because they were dead either way. Their only hope was a well-resourced and planned rescue.

“I should have expected you to do something so dishonorable as to torture a helpless woman,” Devlin goaded. He would do anything to delay.

Mr. Fillion led Fiona to the other brick wall in the box and chained her arms up high like his.

“Helpless? She was trying to blackmail me. How do you think I learned of this parchment’s existence? Once I have this

so-called parchment, which I still do not believe exists because if it was, it's taken an awful long time to come to light, and you are both dead, then this matter is settled.”

“You can't be that naïve.”

“With you gone, and the parchment destroyed, there is no way your friends can prove that it was me who was the traitor.”

“But it would cast doubt. Others may investigate. A rumor may well start, just like with my father's name. Conjecture will tarnish yours. My friends will see to that. Are you going to kill everyone who may believe my father innocent?”

“If I have to. No one is dragging my family down just because I had to gain money to save my estates. I did that the quickest way I could before anyone knew my family was having money problems. No one suspected the Longtons because I gave them no reason to. All I had to do was aid Napoléon with a few dates of grain deliveries, and I earned a fortune. England triumphed over him anyway, so all ended well.”

“Not for my father and my family, it didn't.”

“Yes, well. Once suspicions were raised, I had to frame someone. I already have a person lined up to frame for your deaths. But I need to know what names to add to the list. Who else knows of the parchment?”

That's when Devlin realized Fiona hadn't revealed who else had seen the document. Did she know? His eyes flew to hers, begging her not to reveal more if she knew. He tried to wrack his brain. She'd been hiding outside Rosemary's bedroom door the day the ladies had the jewelry box on the bed. Surely Fiona must realize where the parchment came from. Even if Longton killed them tonight, others, including the ladies, had witnessed the document, and they'd had it translated and copied. Would Longton get away with killing everyone who knew of the note's existence? It didn't matter. Longton was obviously mad. It meant the ladies and his friends were in dire danger.

He could see in Fiona's eyes she knew, but for some reason she'd not told Longton. Was it because thinking there was only one person who knew about the document helped her blackmail him? Would she tell him now? But her lips remained tightly closed even as Mr. Fillion began gathering his instruments. Her head dropped to her chest and Devlin hated that she'd accepted her fate. She knew she would die, and she'd decided to take her secrets with her... unless she couldn't withstand the torture...

At Fiona's first scream, Devlin knew he'd never hold out. No matter what he thought of her, he couldn't let her be tortured. Devlin struggled against the chains, but it was hopeless. He screwed his eyes closed as bile threatened to choke him. He swallowed. "When I get free, you'll wish you'd killed me when you could."

"Oh, I'll kill you, but I need the parchment first. I can't risk it surfacing again."

"You're a dead man," Devlin exclaimed and lunged at Longton, but the chains drew him up short.

Longton merely laughed while Fiona screamed and begged for it to stop. Soon her screams died as she fainted into blissful unconsciousness.

He could not let this go on. He would have to tell. Could he lie and buy them time? "Why did you pick my father?"

"You've already guessed. He took what should have been mine—your mother. I loved her, and he stole her."

"He didn't steal her. My mother never loved you. How could she? You're a monster."

"I had to marry a woman I despised. And then when I needed more money, I had a choice: murder her and marry again or sell a bit of grain to the enemy. Treason is such a silly word for what I did."

He wanted to rip the man's heart out with his bare hand. His father died for something Longton saw as selling a bit of grain. He sold out his country and framed Devlin's father.

Mr. Fillion, who'd slipped from the box, returned with a bucket of water and threw it over Fiona. It did its job and Fiona began to come around.

Devlin's head lowered, and he let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. His muscles tightened and flexed. He'd give Longton what he wanted. He couldn't let Fiona suffer. He could not appeal to the man. Longton was insane.

Fiona was whimpering softly as Fillion once more approached. She tried to avoid his hands, but soon the sharp knife was nearing her eye this time and she screamed.

Devlin flailed in his chains. "Stop. Stop. I'll tell you where it is."

Longton nodded at Mr. Fillion, and he stepped away from Fiona.

"It's sealed in a tin and I've hidden it in Kensington Gardens, so it wasn't easily accessible." Longton wouldn't be able to access the gardens until it opened to the public on Saturday. It was a lie, of course. The Duke of Sinclair held the original parchment. "You'll never find it without my help. I'll have to take you there."

"He's lying," said Mr. Fillion.

"We'll soon find out. I'll have to bribe a guard and break open the locked gate to get into the gardens tonight." He turned to leave. "Cut him down, but keep him chained."

"What about her?" Fillion asked.

"Leave her here. If he's lied, we'll need her again."

Fiona sagged in her chains. He'd bought her some time. He hoped his friends could work out where they were, and soon. What would Longton do when he learned there was nothing in Kensington Gardens? What would he do when he learned the Duke Of Sinclair had already shown the parchment to Prinny and the Prime Minister?

He prayed to God that Sinclair had done just that.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

**D**harma and Hamish watched Longton leave with a man virtually carrying Devlin in chains to a carriage. She needed to follow, but she couldn't leave Fiona here injured as she was, even though this was all her fault.

“Hamish, can you follow the carriage without being seen? If they see me, they'll know they're caught, but they don't know you. Once they stop at a destination, come back. I'll get Fiona and hopefully my brother will arrive soon with reinforcements.”

Once Hamish left, she raced into the stall to free Fiona. How could she stay mad at the woman when she saw what they'd done to her? “I didn't tell them anything,” she said.

“Don't talk. I'll try to get you down. Do you know where they've taken Devlin?” Fiona nodded. “My brother will be here soon. I'm going to have to shoot the hand-irons off. Hold as still as you can. I only have one shot.”

She wondered if she should use her only shot, but she couldn't get Fiona down any other way. Luckily, her shot hit the mark, and the clasp broke and the chains fell away. Fiona slumped to the floor. She got her some water to drink and tried to wipe the blood off Fiona's face.

“Devlin's leading them on a goose chase. He's lied to save me. Plus, Longton thinks he and I are the only people who have seen the parchment. They don't know that you and the others have seen the parchment, too.”

“They soon will, though.”

The familiar male voice made Dharma's hope flare, but when she looked up to see Fencourt there, holding a pistol, her blood curdled.

Stay calm. "What are you doing? You told me your father deserved to be caught."

"He does, but that will ruin my family. I cannot stay in England and allow them to scorn me like they did to Devlin. So, you and I are going on a little trip."

"You're going to desert your father? Your country? For something you didn't do? Lord Devlin didn't give up. He fought to show society what a fine man he was. And he tried to show how noble he was."

Fencourt smirked as he walked closer to where the two women sat on the floor of the stable stall. Fiona almost crawled into her lap. "But he knew his father was innocent. I know mine isn't. I can't live with the shame."

Dharma slowly rose to her feet. "Taking me with you will only add to your shame, because I do not wish to go. You'll be kidnapping me."

Fencourt aimed his pistol at Fiona. "I've been busy the last few days when I learned the depth of my father's situation. I have gathered enough gold to start again in the Americas. I already own a plantation in Virginia. If you do not come with me, the lady dies." The pistol pointed directly at Fiona.

Dharma believed him. "So you already own a plantation? You tricked me earlier by denying it. That is the first place my family and Devlin will look. They will come for me."

"Not if they're dead. I suspect father will see to that. Besides, once I get you with child, it will be too late. He won't want you back then."

Would he? If he loved her, he would, but there's the rub. She didn't know. Fiona said nothing. It was as if the life had been sucked from her and she'd given up to fate.

"I think Mrs. McTavish has suffered enough. If I come with you and I swear not to escape, you will let her come with



us, and we will let her out near Mayfair. I can't leave her here in case your father returns."

Fencourt considered her request and slowly lowered his pistol. "Let's go then."

Dharma helped Fiona stand, but she collapsed. Fencourt scooped her into his arms and Dharma could have run, but his gun was still aimed at her. Besides, she would not be responsible for Fiona's death. She'd given him her word. Seems she was honorable, too.



Unbeknownst to Devlin, Hamish, who was following, alerted Sin and Tobin and the men of the rescue party, who happened upon him on the way back towards Kensington Gardens.

Hamish, The men joined the chase. They were not far behind the carriage.

Sin called across to Tobin. "Tell the men we wait for Devlin to get out of the carriage, then attack. Devlin is a sitting duck if we attack when he's still in the carriage."

"Once we have Devlin, try to take Longton alive, and then we can take him to the magistrate."

"My Lord, we will need to go back to Lady Dharma and Mrs. McTavish."

Tobin almost fell off his horse at Hamish's words. "I beg your pardon?"

"Lady Dharma is who sent me after the carriage. Lord Fencourt told her where his father was holding Lord Devlin. Surely, Lady Clayton told you, sir."

Tobin cursed under his breath. "I haven't spoken to her. It's mere coincidence we found you. We were heading to Longton's town house. Are you telling me she is somewhere with Mrs. McTavish?"

"She's at Tattersalls in the stall on the left wing of the stable, where Lord Devlin and Mrs. McTavish were being

held.”

“And you left her there?” Tobin almost roared.

“Keep your voice down,” Sin hissed into the wind.

“Sorry, but I’m going to go back for Dharma. Hamish, you come with me. You have enough men without me.” Before Sin could nod, the two men peeled off and rode back the way they’d come.

Sin sent one man to gallop past the carriage so they had someone in front. The men in the carriage didn’t seem to notice, thank goodness. They were drawing near to Kensington Gardens and suddenly the carriage slowed.

Sin nodded to his men, and they spread out, hidden away from the street lamps.

The carriage door flung open, and Sin watched Longton ascend. He walked toward a small gate, his pistol drawn, and Sin watched as he shot the lock off the gate. Calling to the other man in the carriage, he pushed Devlin out suddenly, causing him to drop to his knees.

A tall, burly man stepped out of the carriage behind Devlin and grabbed the chains binding Devlin’s wrists, pulling him to his feet. Longton was making his way toward a small gate in the hedgerow. How the Earl knew a gate was there was anyone’s guess.

“We need to take down the man who has Devlin first,” Sin whispered to his men. “I’ll shoot him. You be ready to race to free Devlin once I fire. And you,” he indicated to the second man, “Then follow me as I chase down Lord Longton. It’s better if I take him since he’s an Earl. If I have to kill him, I will.”

The plan almost worked perfectly except that before Sin could reach Longton, the traitorous Earl turned and fired. The bullet hit Sin’s shoulder, and before Sin could stop his man, he’d fired back and Longton fell to the ground, a bullet through his heart.

Sin cursed into the darkening night. “Damn. It would’ve been better if we’d taken him alive.” His shoulder burned, but

it was a mere flesh wound. It had simply grazed the top of his shoulder. He made his way over to where the burly gent lay cursing on the ground. “Oh, do be quiet and let Thompson here bind that wound or you just might bleed to death.”

Just then, they heard galloping horses and Sin turned with his pistol raised, but it was only Tobin returning with Hamish. He lowered his weapon as Tobin swung from his horse and ran to where Longton lay, unmoving.

“Bloody hell. They were no longer in the stable. Is he is very much dead? Fencourt took Dharma, and it would have been better to see if Longton knew of his plans.”

“He has Dharma? Quick, get these chains off me.” Devlin shook the chains as he rose to his feet. Sin walked over and he lay Devlin’s hands on the edge of the carriage wheel. “You’d better be an excellent shot. Perhaps Tobin should do it, given your injury.”

Before Tobin could say anything, Sin fired, and the lock on the chains broke open. Devlin shook his wrists and watched the chains fall away. He rubbed his hands together to get the circulation back.

Sin asked, “Are you all right? Can you ride?”

“I’m fine. Just a bump on the head where they knocked me out. They tortured Fiona, not me. Is she still alive?”

Tobin shrugged. “I have no idea. She wasn’t in the stable.”

“How is your shoulder?”

“I’m fine. What do you need me to do?”

Devlin asked, “How many men do you have with you? I have a fair idea of where Fencourt will be headed. He knew his father was being investigated. He’s not the idiot we took him for he’ll have a plan. I suspect he’ll flee England. And if he wanted to take Dharma, he’ll have a ship nearby.”

“God almighty. Fencourt could race to any port. How do we know which one?”

Sin was right. He closed his eyes momentarily. “It has to be somewhere in London, on the Thames. Fencourt has to flee

quickly. He knows we will be right behind him.”

Tobin swore. “Does anyone know the tide schedule? Could he sail tonight from the Thames? If he can’t sail on tonight’s tide, then Great Yarmouth could be where he is heading.”

Sin gave him a blank look. “Don’t look at me.” Walking to collect the horses, he called over to his men. “Does anyone know if ships can sail from the Thames tonight?”

Silence.

Devlin uncoupled the carriage horses. He’d need one to ride.

“I know.”

He looked at their captive on the ground and wished he could plant his boot in his face, but if he knew something... He squatted down next to their captive. “And what do you know?”

The man licked his lips as he looked at the hostile faces surrounding him. “I know the tide turns at twelve tonight. I also know Fencourt is leaving from a dock on the Thames. I know exactly which one.”

Sin made him very aware of the knife he was carrying when he handed it to Devlin. “And the dock is where exactly?”

The man held his nerve. Devlin would give him that. “I want your word that I’ll not hang or be sent to the colonies. A term in the Newmarket gaol. No more than twelve months.”

His gut clenched at the idea that he would have to agree, but he’d do or promise anything to get Dharma safely home. Safely back in his arms where she belonged. He could no longer pretend he didn’t love her, because the idea of losing her would see his world end. Funny that it wasn’t the fact he would have to rely on a parchment, not Longton’s word, to clear his father, that paled in comparison to the fact he could lose Dharma.

“I give you my word as the Marquis of Devlin that you will not serve longer than twelve months in the Newmarket

gaol, as long as Mrs. McTavish is still alive.”

“She was when Longton and I left.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. So, information please.”

## *Chapter Sixteen*

**D**harma fought down her panic and if it wasn't for the fact Fencourt had pulled a pistol on her, she wouldn't be scared. But it was obvious Fencourt would kill her if she did not play into his fantasy of them being a couple.

True to his word, he had released Fiona on the outskirts of Mayfair. She prayed Fiona had the strength to make it to Clayton House and alert the men as to where Fencourt was taking her. Her stomach cramped and her limbs shook as they reached the dock because there may not be much time and Fiona, alone and on foot, could take hours to reach help.

The moon hung low in the London sky, casting a silvery glow over the bustling docks. The scent of saltwater and adventure lingered in the air as a magnificent ship, the "Lady Seraphina," loomed tall, its masts reaching for the heavens.

The ship was being prepared to sail, and deep inside, she knew it was Fencourt's ship. How long had he been planning this escape? Most likely from the moment his father knew Devlin was closing in. Even as dusk fell, she could see there was no point appealing to the battle scarred crew for help. Better the devil she knew came to mind.

Fencourt relied on the fact she couldn't trust the crew too, because he hadn't locked her in a cabin. She was in a well-furnished stateroom room which had an open-air balcony at the end.

"Don't think you can call for help by running onto the quarter-gallery."

Is that what the balcony was called? She merely tilted her head in acknowledgement before Fencourt left the stateroom, leaving her guarded by a dangerous-looking sailor.

Thoughts raced through her head. Could she jump from the ship if she had a chance? The deck was a great height above the river. She could break her neck, or a leg, or arm, or anything. The thought of being held captive by Fencourt, the real Fencourt, the one he'd hidden from her, made her think she'd rather drown than live a life as his captive.

If she asked for fresh air, would her guard let her onto the balcony or, at the very least, open the door?

Whatever happened, she could not sail on a ship with him. She'd rather die. For once they left England, Devlin might search for her, but he might never find her. She'd lose the man she loved, and there was no way she could survive being with Fencourt—not for months or years, anyway. She would escape from the ship before it hit open sea, or die trying.

She moved near the jib doors, which opened onto the quarter-gallery, and it suddenly dawned on her. There was no way Devlin and her brother could storm the ship without risking injury or death. Her rescuers would be extremely vulnerable from above. The well-armed sailors held all the power. She had no choice but to jump, but she needed to time it perfectly. The minute she heard the rescue begin, or the ship got underway, she would dive off the balcony. She could swim, her brother used to call her a fish, but her dress could drag her under. She'd have to loosen the ties before she jumped so she could slip out of the gown. If she could make it across to the big rope anchoring the ship next to them, she just might make it.

She'd worry about getting up onto the dock later. As long as she escaped Fencourt's hold before Devlin did anything foolish like try to board the ship.

Taking a chair near the door, she said, "I feel as if I'm going to be sick." And she gagged. "Would you mind opening the door for some air?" The sailor looked at her and noted her

paleness. He opened the door, probably never dreaming she'd be stupid enough to jump.

She took a chair by the door to the balcony and, while trying not to draw attention to herself, reached around her back and undid the hooks of her gown. Even if she could only get some hooks undone, it might be enough to rip apart the rest as she hit the water.

Time seemed to drag, but the clock on the other side of the stateroom showed it was getting close to midnight. When had the Captain said they'd set sail? Time was running out. Plus, she was getting tired and hungry, with fear the only thing keeping her awake.

A rifle shot jerked her awake. Was it Devlin and his men? The man guarding her moved towards the door to the stateroom. Dharma took her chance and gathered her half undone gown, and raced for the open door onto the balcony. She didn't have time to look at the surrounding chaos. Instead, she scrambled over the railing and, before her guard could reach her, she jumped to the water below.

She sank like a cannon ball, the freezing water soaking into the many layers of her clothing, the weight pulling her under. She tore at her half undone gown, and finally the hooks gave way and she slipped free. She tried to kick her legs to untangle them from her garments. Her lungs tightened to bursting point and soon black spots swarmed in front of her eyes. With one final kick, her gown drifted away, and she stretched toward the surface. Almost there. She could see the thick anchor rope of the ship twisting down to its anchor in the dark depths, and on a prayer she gave an extra kick and broke the surface, gulping in much needed air.

Chaos reigned all around. Shots rung in the air and there was so much shouting and cursing she could hardly hear herself trying to breathe. She could see Devlin's men trying to board the ship. She had to let them know she wasn't onboard. But how to get up on the dock? She couldn't climb up the thick rope covered in slime. She looked along the dock and saw a ladder. Each berth had a robe ladder where the ship met



the dock. If she could sneak onto the dock and let Devlin know she'd escaped, then hopefully no one would get hurt.

She kicked out to swim the fifty feet toward the ladder. She swam the last few feet underwater and was thankful for the dark night as the clouds rolled in, obscuring the half-moon.

Shivers accompanied the goosebumps on her skin as the chilly night air hit her when she emerged from the dirty river water and climbed carefully up to the dock. Modesty was something she couldn't think about. Embarrassment be damned, she thought to herself as her shift clung to her body revealingly.

She flopped onto the dock, her teeth chattering so hard she thought a few pearly whites might fall out, trying to gather the strength to stand, when a large, cold, wet, hand grabbed her arm and dragged her to her feet.

“Just as well I'm a better swimmer than you. I saw you dive from the quarter-gallery.”

Fencourt! God damn it. If she'd swum straight for the ladder she would have beaten him, but he knew it was there and she had not. “Let me go. My brother will never give up hunting you if you take me. And good luck getting back on your ship. His men have you surrounded.”

To her surprise, he dragged her along the dock towards where her brother and Devlin were fighting his crew. They were almost to the gangplank when a touch of cold steel at her neck made her lift her chin up and begin to pray.



“We have to get on board. They're weighing anchor. Fencourt's getting away and Dharma's on that ship. I can't lose her.”

“Calm down, Devlin,” shouted Tobin. “I don't give a fig about Fencourt. Dharma is all I care about. She's my sister, but getting ourselves killed by storming the ship won't save her.”

Devlin crouched behind a roped set of barrels waiting to be loaded on another ship. Dharma was all he cared about, too. He fought the panic that she might be taken from him. He'd lost so much already, and it was because of Fencourt's father, and he wasn't about to lose anything else.

"Can we swim and climb up the ropes?"

Devlin shook his head. "They're already lifting them."

"The rope closest to the dock won't be raised until they are ready to sail and the large schooner coming up river won't pass for a good half hour." Tobin pointed. "They can't sail until it passes. We have time to think through our options. Keep a level head, man."

Devlin was about to respond that he could not sit by and do nothing while they held Dharma on the ship with Fencourt doing god knows what, when a voice he knew too well spoke from behind them. He twirled and almost stop breathing. A dripping wet and barely clad Dharma had a large glinting knife at her throat.

Fencourt called out, "Lord Devlin and Lord Clayton. Lay down your arms and let me board my ship or I'll slit Lady Dharma's pretty little neck."

"You're not leaving England with my sister," Tobin called.

*You're not leaving England full stop*, Devlin thought to himself. He needed Fencourt to back up the evidence the parchment they'd found revealed, and confirm the traitor was Lord Longton. Devlin rose from where he crouched behind barrels full of brandy. "One shot through the head, and you won't have time to slit her throat."

"Are you willing to take that risk?" Fencourt said above Dharma's squeal.

"If you let me on the ship, I'll release Dharma if you give me your word of honor that I can set sail without interference."

"Don't do it," Dharma uttered. "You need him to verify the details of his father's crime."

“Shut up,” Fencourt hissed. “If I die, she dies.”

Devlin didn't hesitate. Dharma was what he wanted most. Why hadn't he listened to her? They had the parchment, that would have to be enough. She was right. He can't change the past, but he can create a wonderful future with her. Those of the *ton* would choose to believe what they wanted to believe, but the parchment should be enough to pacify Lord Whetton for Rosemary to wed Hawthorne. Lord Whetton may well believe the truth. Once they told him the story, and his son backed it up. He wasn't a friend of Longton's.

There was only one problem. There was no way he would allow Dharma to walk onto the ship with Fencourt. The man's honor wasn't to be trusted. “I'll give you my word as a gentleman that you can board the ship, but Dharma stays here with me,” and he crossed his arms and stood in front of the gangway, showing they were now at a stalemate.

Fencourt shuffled on his feet, nervously weighing up his chances of a better option. “Do you swear on your father's grave?”

“I swear I will not stop you boarding the ship if you leave Dharma here, unharmed.”

He could see Dharma's lips were turning blue, and she was shaking so hard her knees were knocking. If he didn't get a coat on her soon, she could get very sick. Fencourt must be cold, too. “What is your answer? We can't stand out here all night.”

Fencourt moved toward them. “Stand back from the gangway. Well, back.”

Both Tobin and Devlin signaled to their men to stand down and move back. They backed away, giving Fencourt free access. Devlin held his breath and time seemed to stand still as Fencourt inched toward his freedom, keeping the knife nestled at Dharma's neck. At one point Dharma stumbled in the cold and the knife slipped. Devlin growled as a small trickle of red dripped onto her white shift.

The pair crept towards the gangplank. At its step, Fencourt shoved Dharma hard and as both Tobin and Devlin raced forward to catch her, Fencourt dashed up the gangway and into the depths of the ship.

Devlin tore off his greatcoat as Tobin helped his sister to her feet. Devlin made her slip the coat on, and she swam in it making her look so vulnerable.

She stood looking at him, her bottom lip trembling. “You let him get away. Did you capture Lord Longton then?”

Tobin looked at Devlin and replied for him. “He’s dead. Let’s get you home.”

Her head dropped to her chest. “I’ve ruined everything.”

“No.” Devlin said. “You’re safe. That’s all that matters.”

As he stepped toward her to gather her in his arms, a rifle shot rang out and he watched as if in a nightmare as Dharma’s body twitched and her head snapped up, her mouth opened in surprise as she slowly crumpled to the ground.

He almost couldn’t believe it except Tobin’s roars filled his ears and her brother turned and fired at the ship. They all dived back behind the roped barrels.

His heart constricted with terror as he registered the prone form of his beautiful, gallant, unconscious love. Get up—please! But she lay like death. On hands and knees, he crawled across the cold, hard ground and dragged Dharma to safety. She was so still. Tentatively, as if he didn’t want to feel the truth, he gently touched her neck, checking for a heartbeat. The icy knot in his stomach eased as he felt a flutter under his fingers. Her pulse was erratic, but she was alive. Thank the lord she was still breathing.

Gently, he cradled her face. “My love, wake up.” His voice sounded gruff and angry in the middle of a gunfight.

She did not stir. With his hands shaking, he pulled back the sides of the greatcoat he’d lent her to check her wound. Someone had shot her under her right shoulder, and it seemed like her collar-bone was broken. Perhaps it was the pain and

cold that had seen her faint. There was a lot of blood and he pressed down using the great coat to try to stem the flow.

He gently shook her. “Wake up. I can’t live without you. I’m so sorry it took me to this point to understand what you were trying to tell me. The past doesn’t matter when love enters your life. Only the wonderful future we could make— together.”

He swallowed hard, his heart pounding as if it would break. He smoothed the hair off her ashen face and whispered, “Come on, you little fighter. Don’t give up on me now.” Emotion pricked behind his eyelids.

She had to live.

“We have to get her home and seen by a doctor. You go, and I’ll try to ward off Fencourt until he sails.”

He looked at Tobin’s worry filled face. “You take her. This is my fight. I owe Fencourt and I’m not about to let him sail off to another life after this.” He gently placed Dharma into Tobin’s arms. “The men will cover. We’re close to the carriage. Tell her I love her and I’ll come see her soon.”

The two men sat staring at each other for a moment. Tobin nodded. “Do nothing reckless. Losing your life over a man like Fencourt is stupid. Besides, Dharma would kill me if you didn’t survive.”

That made him smile. He pressed a kiss to her cold lips and moved to cover Tobin’s escape.

## Chapter Seventeen

A strong, steady heartbeat thudded beneath her ear. Muscular arms held her tight against a solid chest. The masculine scent of sandalwood. *Devlin.*

Pain owned her body, and she had to fight to stay awake as each step jarred and sent spears of agony through her shoulder. She couldn't help the tears that slid from under her eyelashes.

As the mist on her brain continued to clear, she realized she was being carried, and that they were moving at a fast pace. Heavy booted footsteps hitting cobblestones. Her senses focused.

The only good thing about the pain spearing through her body meant she'd survived.

The rush of relief gave her the strength to open her eyes. The world appeared distorted. It was too dark to see, so she reached up and cupped the face above her and tried to get her voice to work through the pain. Each stride caused hot, raw pain and brought tears to her eyes. The sound that came out was croaked and muffled from the river water she'd drunk; she hoped Devlin understood. "I knew you'd save me," she managed.

"We cut it a bit fine," he said. "It took us too long to find the right ship."

Tobin? Not Devlin. Tobin. Dharma's heart almost stopped.

"Where's Devlin?" she croaked, struggling in Tobin's arms until the pain made her weak. Was he hurt? Injury forgotten, she closed her eyes and gave a silent prayer. Was he dead? She

couldn't remember anything except the cold, putrid water pulling her under and then being captured by Fencourt. That steel blade at her throat... then... she was shot! She pummeled Tobin's coat with her fists. "Put me down. I have to go to him."

"You're losing a lot of blood, so don't move." Tobin simply held her tighter. "Devlin's fine. He's just finishing what we started."

Dharma slumped back against his shoulder, her head suddenly dizzy. "It hurts. A lot."

"The bullet's broken your collar-bone. I'm taking you home. The doctor needs to get that bullet out."

"Did you find Fiona?"

"No. Was she not with you?"

"I made him release her. She was badly hurt. We should find her."

"After everything she did? I hope she never returns."

"But she can back up Devlin's story."

Tobin momentarily stopped. "That's true. I'll send men out to look for her." He continued towards the carriage.

She couldn't hold her cry of pain in anymore and Tobin's face paled further. They reached the carriage, and he gently laid her on the squab before giving the driver instructions. She bit back a cry of agony as the carriage moved.

"Sorry, but this is going to be a very painful journey. I can't waste time, so we will move at a pace," said Tobin, keeping the pressure on her wound.

"Will he have to kill Fencourt?"

"I hope not. We need him to ensure Devlin's name is cleared, leaving no doubt."

Her mind cartwheeled. Despair seeped into every pore. If Fencourt died, that meant the parchment written in old Gaelic and not really naming names, just cryptic clues, would be his only evidence. Would that be enough? Given Society's

tendency to believe the worst—probably not. It was little wonder Devlin sent her away with Tobin. She'd cost him everything; her stupidity at leaving the house after he'd purposely told her not to, had made him a captive, had caused him to suffer terrible indignities, cost him his pride, and, worst of all, destroyed his only hope of clearing his father and restoring the noble family name of Lord Devlin.

Would he forgive her?

And she wanted him. She wanted him so much. The truth sizzled across her heart like a lightning bolt streaking across the sky.

All her life she'd believed in love, but now the one man she wanted to love her, the one man who she could envision sharing her life, body and heart with, may never return her feelings. The monster of her nightmares was marriage to the wrong man. She was now facing her own nightmare—had she destroyed any chance Devlin could learn to love her?

He might not want to admit it, but she wondered if as the years passed, he would resent all he'd lost because she'd ignored his warning and left the house, only to be captured... He'd had to let Fencourt go to save her. Could he still capture her without getting himself killed?

Devlin would feel obliged to marry her, given the intimacies they shared. He wouldn't be so selfish as to walk away. He had too much honor.

Unlike her. The horror of her actions—her selfish actions—made her tremble, made her retch into her hand.

For ten years he'd believed in his father, in his family's honor, and in himself. He would never give up when he had a sister and mother to care for and protect. And he hadn't.

He was an honorable man—even to the point of saving her life at the expense of his own honor and his family's vindication. The thought of his sacrifice tore a sob from deep within her. His family. Rosemary! Would she still be able to marry Hawthorne?



Her breath seemed to be stuck in her throat. Right now, all that mattered was that he survived and, if possible, captured Fencourt. Then she would have to beg his forgiveness.

She must have fainted from the pain, for when she awoke it was to familiar surroundings and Tobin laying her on her bed. Philippa barked orders, organizing the doctor to be sent for and clean cloths and hot water. "Some laudanum too, if you please," she told the servant.

Dharma collapsed back onto the mattress and shut her eyes. Her throat burned, and she was desperate for a drink. As if reading her thoughts, there was a knock on the door and the servant entered carrying a tray.

"A drink of brandy," said Philippa, tipping her head back and pouring the fiery liquid down her throat. She coughed and spluttered as the warmth invaded and her pain dimmed.

"Ohh," she croaked out.

"A dose of laudanum, too. That collar-bone needs to be reset."

Philippa moved across the room to where Charlotte stood. Her stepmother had arrived as soon as she'd heard the news. "I hope the doctor gets here soon. The blood loss has slowed, but the longer the bullet remains in her, the higher the risk of infection."

Charlotte rubbed her hands together. "We need to get more brandy into her until she falls unconscious. Getting the bullet out and setting that collar-bone will hurt like the devil."

"I wish Tobin hadn't left to go back to the river. She might have to be held down."

Charlotte nodded. "But I hope the doctor finishes before Devlin arrives. I don't want him to hear her pain."

She didn't have the heart or strength to tell the ladies she could hear them. "More brandy please," she whispered.

As the ladies helped her drink, slowly she sunk into unconsciousness.



Devlin's men found themselves pinned down, while the schooner sailing up the river, which had been blocking the Lady Seraphina's departure, was almost completely past, leaving a clear river passage to the sea. Soon, Fencourt could pull up the last anchor and sail off. Revenge burned in his soul. The villain had shot Dharma. He thumped the barrel he was leaning against.

He stilled and turned and stared at the barrel. Brandy!

At the edge of the docks, Devlin slowly stood with a determined look in his eyes. His white linen shirt was covered with sweat and dirt, without his greatcoat that he'd given to Dharma. The adrenalin pumping through his veins meant he didn't feel the cold. Bloody Fencourt was a dark presence on the ship, but Devlin's thirst for revenge gave him the edge.

He tightened his grip on his pistol, wishing he was close enough to put a bullet through Fencourt's black heart for his betrayal and lack of honor. He should never have trusted the man given who his father was. He'd let the man onto the ship and he'd still shot Dharma. "Fencourt, or should I say Lord Longton, since your father is dead, I'm coming for you," he called out, his voice echoing across the water.

Fencourt sneered from the shadows. "I'll be leaving soon!"

The tension between the two men was palpable. He'd been in purgatory for years, because of Longton, and now his son would not better him. Tonight, it would reach its climax. He had a plan to outsmart the cunning villain.

A nearby stack of barrels filled with precious brandy had caught Devlin's eye. An idea formed, and he knew it was their best chance to lure Fencourt, or was it Longton, off the ship. He gestured to his loyal men, who were hiding in the shadows nearby.

"Loosen the ropes holding the barrels, lads!" Devlin ordered, and the men swiftly went to work. He unplugged a

barrel and let the scent of the brandy waft through the air, intoxicating and enticing—and a weapon if used well.

“Find some sticks, and cut up the rope and soak it in the brandy, and tear up your clothes, wrap strips of the cloth around the sticks.” Just then, Tobin arrived back at his side. “How is she?” he asked with his heart in his throat.

“I didn’t wait for the doctor, but the bleeding had slowed. I wanted to be here to help.” He looked at all the activity and a smile broke on his lips. “I think I ascertain your plan. You mean to burn the ship?”

With the barrels positioned strategically, Devlin took a torch and ignited it, his eyes locked onto the towering ship before him. He dipped the rest of the sticks in the brandy, while Tobin struck another flint and went down the line of men. The flames blazed.

“All of you, throw the sticks and rope on the ship. I’ll take this barrel and set it alight at the top of the gangway.” As the flaming weapons hit the ship, setting the cargo alight, Devlin hurriedly carried a half-full barrel up onto the deck while Tobin and the men gave him cover with pistol fire. With the lid to the barrel already off, Devlin waved the torch over the liquid within, igniting the alcohol in the wooden cask. The brandy inside caught fire and burned brightly. He kicked at the barrel and it rolled into the passageway leading to the stateroom. He waited as the flames licked the walls before dashing back to the safety of the dock.

The ship’s crew members shouted and panicked as the fire spread, and Fencourt emerged from the shadows, coughing from the smoke, his eyes aflame with fury. “Goddamn you to hell, Devlin.”

His lips curved into a triumphant smile. Fencourt’s only chance of escape was over the side of the ship again or down this gangway. “I’ve given you a choice. Surrender or face the flames.”

Fencourt hesitated, but his instinct for self-preservation surfaced. The flames danced higher, the half empty brandy

barrels the men were setting alight and then hurling onto the ship, threatened to turn the “Lady Seraphina” into an inferno.

“If you dive over the side, I will shoot you. But I will let you walk off this burning ship with your life if you surrender to me.”

He laughed. “And I’m supposed to believe you?”

“Unlike you, I am a man of honor. My word is my bond.”

Fencourt had the decency to look afraid. “You just need me alive to vouch for your father, but I hate to say it, I don’t really know anything that happened back then.”

That was probably true. Fencourt was younger than him, and his father would not have involved him. “But you know your father is guilty of kidnapping me and Mrs. McTavish. And you shot Lady Dharma.”

“That was not me. It must have been one of the sailors. I won’t surrender to be hung for something I didn’t do.”

*Liar!* But how would he prove it? “Well, you kidnapped Dharma.”

“The way I see it, I rescued her from my father and Mrs. McTavish.”

Devlin was sick of this banter. Fencourt deserved to die, but not before he’d told Lord Liverpool what he knew about his father and his treachery. “Isn’t your arse about to catch fire? I’d make your choice and soon.” He ensured his pistol was cocked and ready to fire.

“Whatever choice I make, I’m probably going to die.” Devlin didn’t dissuade him from that thought, instead getting ready for him to take a dive over the side.

Fencourt said, “I’ll come with you.” That took him by surprise. “I’ll help you clear your father, but not for you. I’ll do it for Dharma. She wants to wed you and I want her to have a good life. That’s how much I love her—do you? Love her? Or is her fat wallet still the attraction?” Fencourt had descended the gangway as he spoke and it wasn’t just the burning anger within at his talk of loving Dharma, but more

that he didn't want Fencourt to escape, that saw his fist hit Fen-Longton's face so hard he dropped unconscious on the dock.

"Good work. Now he's not going anywhere," said Tobin.

"Help me get him in the carriage. We go to Lord Liverpool's residence now. I don't care that we have to wake his lordship up. I've waited a long time for this."



The men had arrived at Lord Liverpool's residence early in the morning, and after a brief discussion, the Prime Minister requested an urgent meeting with the Prince Regent. By eleven in the morning, the group of men had assembled on Prinny's doorstep.

Once admitted, Devlin and Lord Liverpool had a private word with Prinny before a formal committee of England's current war cabinet was called to listen to the evidence against the dead Lord Longton.

Rich tapestries and gleaming chandeliers adorned the grand chamber in the Prince Regent's London home, casting a golden hue on the gathered dignitaries. In the stateroom, The Prince Regent sat at the head of a long, polished table. To his right, Lord Liverpool, and to his left, Lord Devlin, waited anxiously.

The doors creaked open, and two stern-faced guards escorted the prisoner into the room. The atmosphere tensed as Lord Fencourt, the alleged traitor's son, looked around. His eyes darted nervously, but his posture remained composed as he approached the center of the room.

Lord Liverpool spoke in a grave tone. "Lord Fencourt, you stand accused of conspiring with the enemy, your father, in betraying the trust of this nation. Do you deny these charges?"

Lord Fencourt took a deep breath, his gaze shifting between the Prime Minister and the Regent. "I knew my father was hiding something, but until a few days ago, I had no idea

what it was. All he asked me to do was spy on Lord Devlin, and to let him know what his lordship was about. I am not the traitor you seek. It was my father, Lord Longton, who committed these heinous acts against our country ten years ago, and who framed the late Lord Devlin for his crimes.”

As the late Lord Devlin’s innocence was pronounced, a murmur swept through the room. The Regent leaned forward, his expression demanding an explanation.

“I have evidence, letters, and documents that have been translated from old Gaelic that can lead to only one conclusion about his father’s guilt. Longton was the head of the war committee, and it was he who organized the theft and sale of the grain shipment to the French before the Battle of Waterloo,” Lord Devlin declared, producing a bundle of documents.

The Regent accepted the evidence, untying the ribbon holding the documents and scanning the contents with a furrowed brow. He passed them to Lord Liverpool, who also studied the documents, his stern expression slowly giving way to a mix of disbelief and realization.

“You know what these documents hold?” the Regent asked Fencourt.

“I do. Lord Devlin explained, and I can quite believe them to be true. My father confessed all to me the night he kidnapped Lord Devlin.”

“I hear you tried to help Lady Dharma rescue Lord Devlin,” Lord Liverpool’s voice boomed out. “A shame that you then undid that good work by abducting the lady. What shall we do about that? I was told someone from on board your ship shot the lady.”

“I did not shoot Lady Dharma. I would never have hurt her. I love her.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” the Regent exclaimed. “What are we to do with you?”

“If I may speak on Lord Fencourt’s behalf. By attending this hearing, he has helped me clear my father’s name.” Lord

Devlin spoke, his voice filled with sincerity. “However, I cannot forgive the indecencies he perpetuated on Lady Dharma, a woman I hope to make my wife.” A hushed murmur grew through the crowd as he turned to face Fencourt. “While I would not care if you were hung by the neck until dead, I think Lady Dharma’s big heart would. She knows you helped save me. Therefore, on her behalf, I do not seek his death. Instead, I request that a sentence of transportation to the Colonies for life is his punishment.”

A lot of slapping the table and a round of vocal hear, hears sounded around the room.

The Prince Regent rose from his seat. “Lord Fencourt, you have brought forth crucial information to clear a man wrongly accused.” He turned to face Devlin. “Lord Devlin, I pronounce your father innocent of all rumors of treason. We will restore your family’s good name and welcome you back to the House of Lords. We will sign over any of Lord Longton’s property not entailed to you. In addition, the money Lord Longton made from the sale of the grain will be paid as a fine to Lord Devlin’s family. The war cabinet will know how much it would have been worth and what that value is in today’s currency.”

Devlin could hardly breathe. All of that would go a long way to restoring his family’s finances. In addition, Dharma would know once and for all that he was not marrying her for her money.

The Regent’s words hung heavily in the air, a mixture of relief and sorrow coursing through the room. Lord Devlin, who had borne the weight of false accusations with stoic resilience, felt a surge of emotions at the unexpected turn of events.

“And I have listened to Lord Devlin’s request for leniency where you are concerned, Lord Fencourt, or should I say Lord Longton, as your father is dead.” The Regent’s voice carried a note of somber authority. Lord Devlin, standing nearby, anxiously awaited the fate of the man who had inadvertently caused his family so much suffering.

The Regent paused, his gaze shifting between the accused and Lord Devlin before finally declaring, "I shall grant Lord Devlin's request for leniency only because his family has been so grossly wronged. You will be taken on the first prison ship to the colonies where you shall serve ten years as a prisoner of His Majesty, the length of time the Devlin name has been under a cloud, and then you will be freed. However, you are never to step foot in England again. Your children can, but not you."

A hushed tension settled over the room as Lord Fencourt absorbed the weight of the Regent's decision. Lord Devlin, though grateful for the resolution, couldn't shake the melancholy that clung to the proceedings. His gaze remained fixed on Lord Fencourt, a mixture of empathy and understanding in his eyes.

As the guards moved to escort Lord Fencourt away, the Prince Regent turned to Lord Devlin with a nod of approval. Devlin suspected this leniency might have been Lord Liverpool's idea, but he appreciated the gesture, nonetheless.

"Your family has been dealt a disservice for which the crown sincerely apologizes," the Regent spoke to Lord Devlin. "Rest assured, justice will be served, and we shall clear the Devlin name of any suspicion. I recommend that your father be given posthumously the Order of the Garter for his service to the War Cabinet."

"Thank you, Your Highness. My father would have been proud. My mother will be gloriously happy," Devlin replied, his voice tinged with gratitude and sadness. Lord Sinclair and Lord Clayton, standing steadfastly by his side, seemed to embody the true meaning of loyalty.

With a last nod of acknowledgment, Devlin made his way from the room, head held high. Yet, despite the victory, an emptiness lingered within him. Dharma's absence, her unwavering support and understanding, left a void that even the clearing of his father's name couldn't fill.

He'd had news that the surgeon had successfully removed the bullet and reset her collar-bone and all was well.



He yearned to share the news with her, to bask in their success together. As he headed home to share the news with his mother, Devlin couldn't shake the feeling that true jubilation would only come when Dharma was by his side. He couldn't wait to tell her and thank her for helping him clear his father's name.



In the drawing room of their somewhat shabby looking London townhouse, Warwick Sneddon, the Marquis of Devlin, stood before his mother, Lady Devlin. It was the first time in a long while he was proud to think of his full name and title. The glow of the morning sun cast a warm hue upon the room, accentuating the intricate, tired tapestries and near kindling furnishings. He had a lot to put right now.

Devlin cleared his throat, raw emotion making it difficult to talk. "Mother, I have news," he began, his voice steady yet tinged with emotion.

Lady Devlin, sat gracefully in a worn and tatty ornate armchair, regarded her son with a keen yet gentle gaze. "You've met with the Prince Regent?"

Taking a deep breath, Devlin unfolded the parchment he held and handed it to his mother. "It's about Father's case—the accusations of treason."

Her eyes widened as she read the contents, her hand fluttering to her chest in astonishment. Tears filled her eyes. "Ten years... and you've succeeded. You've cleared his name?"

Devlin nodded, a faint smile touching his lips. "Yes, Mother. I've unearthed crucial evidence that exonerates Father. The accusations were based on falsehoods—a conspiracy meant to hide the true culprit—Lord Longton." He wasn't about to tell her it was Longton's obsession with her that made father a target. Lady Devlin's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, her voice trembling with emotion. "Oh, Warwick, this is a miracle! To think, after all this time..."

Her words trailed off, overcome with emotion. Devlin moved to her side, taking her hand gently. “It’s been a long and arduous journey, but I have cleared Father of the charge of treason and our family name is restored. There will be an announcement in the paper tomorrow. Our family name will no longer bear the weight of such unfounded accusations. Plus, Prinny and Lord Liverpool have sought to compensate us for the error. We will receive a fine hunting lodge with almost one thousand acres from Longton’s unentailed estate and money enough to restore our family.”

Devlin watched as ten years of fear, anxiety, anger and betrayal washed across Lady Devlin until her eyes became alight with joy once more. “The years of isolation, the whispers in society, the shadow over our family... it will all fade away. And Rosemary...”

Devlin nodded. “Yes, Mother,” he said, his heart swelling with a sense of justice finally served.

“My other sons can come home...” Tears slid down her cheeks as she looked at her son, a profound sense of pride filling her. “You’ve done the impossible. I wondered if you were punishing yourself all these years, hunting for something that could never be proved. Thank you for believing in him, in our family... Your determination and dedication have brought light to our family’s darkest hour.”

As the realization sunk in, the weight lifted from their shoulders, allowing a newfound hope to blossom within the walls of their home. With his relentless pursuit of truth, the Devlin family stood on the brink of a monumental restoration—one that would shape their future and redefine their place in Regency society. Rosemary would have many options, his mother could hold her head up high and finally his brothers could come home.

Mother jumped to her feet. “Well, I shall start on the house renovation tomorrow. We must hold a ball and we cannot do that until the house is back to its former glory.” With that, his mother moved and took his face in her hands. “Your father would be so proud of you. As for me... I hope now you can take a breath and enjoy life for a change. Go after what you

want. I have a feeling there is a certain woman who has stood loyally beside this family all that time.”

*Dharma.*

“Do you love her?” His mother teased.

He just smiled. If he was going to declare his love for her, then she should be the first person to hear such a declaration. His mother merely smiled back and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Rosemary said she’d been hurt in your escapades. Go to her. She’ll be eager for news from today.”

He hugged his mother and turned to leave. He couldn’t wait to give Dharma, and Rosemary, who was with her, the news of what had occurred today.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

**T**he opulent bedchamber was bathed in the soft glow of candlelight, the flickering flames casting shadows that danced across the walls and heavy damask curtains. A grand four-poster bed dominated the room, and on it lay Dharma, her body twitching in her unconscious pain. She'd been this way for the past six days.

She was pale and delicate, her brow glistening with a fine sheen of perspiration, ensnared in the grip of a relentless fever, her once vibrant eyes now glassy and unfocused. Worry clawed at Devlin's innards as he sat by her bedside, his broad shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

A skilled physician had been summoned to tend her wounds, but despite their best efforts, infection had set in and the fever had raged on. Delirious with sickness, she murmured incoherent words and tossed restlessly beneath the sheets.

He reached out, gently taking her hand in his, his touch warm and reassuring. He leaned in close, whispering words of love and encouragement into her ear, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Dharma, my strong and brave love," he began, his voice quivering. "You must fight. You cannot leave me, for I cannot bear to live without you. You are the very reason for living, the light of my soul. I need you, as I need air to breathe."

Tears welled in his eyes, but he blinked them away, determined to remain strong for the woman he loved. He continued to stroke her hand, tracing the outline of her delicate fingers with his thumb.

His visit to her beside was his daily routine for the past week. His father had been cleared, the Devlin good name restored, but for Devlin, the weight of the ordeal lingered. He might lose Dharma.

What a bloody fool he'd been. She'd tried to tell him that the past was for the dead and the future for the living. To his everlasting shame, he'd taken for granted that his future would be secure once the stain of treason was removed from the family, but it wasn't. If Dharma died, his future would be bleak and filled with regret. Filled with the regret that he'd not opened his heart to her immediately.

"I remember the first moment I really saw you," he whispered, a small smile playing on his lips. "You were like a vision, an angel sent from above in your delicate night robe, gliding through the room studying the books in the library at Charlotte's house party. I remember thinking, how had I not noticed you'd become this beautiful woman? But then, when I got to know you, I realized you were so much more than your beauty. You are a woman who completes me."

Dharma's eyelids fluttered, and for a moment, her gaze seemed to focus on him. A faint smile graced her lips, and she whispered his name, a barely audible plea for reassurance.

Devlin's heart leapt with hope. "Yes, my love," he said, his voice filled with tenderness.

But her eyes drifted closed once more.

He leaned in to press a gentle kiss to her fevered forehead, his lips lingering there as he willed all the love he felt for her to flow through the touch. He silently prayed to any power that might be listening, begging for her recovery, promising to spend his life cherishing and protecting the woman he couldn't bear to lose.

During the seventh night of his continued quiet vigil, Devlin remained steadfast by his love's bedside.

Philippa came to offer him food and drink, but he shook his head. "You'll do her no good if you get sick, too." When he said nothing, she continued. "And if she woke up now,

she'd hardly recognize you. You need a shave and a bath. Go home and rest. I'll send someone if the fever breaks and she wakes."

*But what if she didn't wake? What if she died, and he wasn't here with her?* He had left his father that night and looked at what had happened. But he couldn't bring himself to speak the words out loud.

He heard a second set of footsteps behind him, and a small hand landed on his shoulder. "Come home, brother. You need rest and they need to bathe Dharma." He looked up into the sorrow filled eyes of his sister Rosemary. "She would want you to deal with the aftermath of Fencourt's confession, and the correspondence is piling up to get into the good graces of the newly cleared Marquis of Devlin. If nothing else, mother needs you. She can't deal with this on her own. She's overwhelmed and unsure of whom to accept. Being out of society for so long, she is floundering."

Duty. He rolled his shoulders and stood up to hug Rosemary. He *had* worked hard for this, and he owed it to his father, but most of all he owed it to his wronged mother to ease the family back into the bosom of society, although why he wanted their approval, he didn't know.

*For the future. For his wife. For his children. For Dharma....*

He looked at her whimpering form laying so delicately between life and death, and his body clenched in fear. Clearing his father meant nothing unless she was by his side. He bent and pressed a kiss to her forehead, whispering, "Fight. Fight hard to come back to me."



Devlin sat quietly before the fire in his bedchamber, drinking a glass of warming brandy. It wasn't a cold night, yet he welcomed the alcohol's burn to warm the ice that filled his heart. His legs stretched out toward the hearth. He could feel

the heat from the fire on the soles of his feet, but the worry gnawing at his guts didn't ease.

Since capturing Fencourt he'd not been able to rest or have a moment to himself, and he needed to think through the implications of all that had occurred—Fencourt's confession to Lord Liverpool and Prinny changed his and his family's world—for the better.

Tonight, when he got home from Dharma's bedside, his mother handed him a silver tray piled with correspondence. At his mother's urging, he had written to his brothers, giving them the news and telling them to come home. He prayed it wasn't too late. He sent a letter to Harry in India, but God knew where George was, so he had no idea how long the message would take to reach him, if it even did. He should have done this immediately, but Dharma was his priority.

His lips curved in a warm smile. His father would be proud of him. Proud, not because he'd done what he'd vowed to do. No, his father would smile down on him because one moment's clarity revealed to Devlin what was truly important in life. Life was to be lived, with and for the living, and he'd stupidly spent the past ten years chasing the dead. It didn't matter what society thought. He knew that now. His friends and family were his reason for being. All that mattered was what kind of man he was in the eyes of family. In the eyes of those he loved.

Shame gnawed at his empty stomach. His living family. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a pertinent conversation with his mother or his sister. Thank God Rosemary had Dharma's friendship. Without his help, Rosemary had managed to attract the attentions of a fine man. He hoped she was planning a marriage with Hawthorne because she loved him, not because she was worried that due to scandal he was her only option. He should make that clear to her. Did she still wish to marry Hawthorne? What were her dreams, her hopes? What kind of woman had she developed into? He didn't know the answers, and that saddened and embarrassed him.

Then there was Dharma. He took a deep breath.

He knew that he'd never want any other woman. She had challenged him at Charlotte's house party and he hadn't liked what she'd made obvious. That he was a man floundering on the verge of losing everything and looking for a way out.

She'd brought out the best and worst in him, and still she'd come to his aid at great risk to herself. He gave a sigh and felt his body quicken. Did she love him?

He thought she probably did because she risked her life to save him. And he really wanted the opportunity to tell her how much he loved her. If she died with never hearing those words from his lips... He dropped his head in his hands on an anguished cry.

He sat silently, wallowing in his helplessness, and reached for the cards that were piled high on the tray his mother left for him. He opened the first one. An invitation from Baron Hampton to join him and his family for a dinner he'd hold in Lord Devlin's honor. He let the missive drop to the floor. Lord Hampton, he frowned—who was he—oh, hell... Devlin barely remembered the man considering he made a point of leaving any room Devlin walked in to. *My, my word travels fast.* He knew Hampton had a daughter. It looked as though Hampton was after a Marquis for his daughter.

Each note was along the same lines. Invitations to balls, house parties and even to welcome him back to his rightful place in the House of Lords... His world was expanding and he hated the hypocrisy of it all, even while acknowledging he was going to have to be gracious in his re-entry into Society's good graces.

About half way through the pile, he recognized a seal, and his hands shook as he opened it. It was from Lord Whetton. *This should be interesting...*

*To Warwick Sneddon, Marquis of Devlin*

*I am humbled to the very core of my being as I pen this letter, for the weight of my transgressions against you and your late father lays heavy upon my conscience. With a heart*



*burdened by remorse, I offer you my most sincere and groveling apology.*

*I must confess that in the past, I held a misguided belief regarding your father's actions, a belief that cast a dark shadow upon his name. I, in my ignorance and misjudgment, believed that he had committed an act of treason against our noble realm. I allowed this belief to cloud my judgment, to distance myself from a dear friend, and for that, I am truly, deeply sorry.*

*It has come to my attention that a thorough investigation has posthumously exonerated your late father, revealing the unjustness of my doubts and suspicions. I stand here, my heart heavy with the gravity of my error, and with the deepest regret that I did not stand by his side, nor yours, during those trying times. I can hardly find the words to express how much I regret the suffering this must have caused you and your family.*

*To my shame, I should have known, I did know, that your father was a man of the utmost honor and integrity, a paragon of loyalty to our realm. I should have believed in my friend. It is with the deepest remorse that I acknowledge my grievous mistake in doubting his loyalty and that I failed to be the steadfast friend I should have been to you and your family.*

*I ask for your forgiveness, Lord Devlin, though I understand it may be a request too great. I will do whatever it takes to make amends, to mend the breach between us, and to stand as your friend and ally as I should have all along.*

*Please accept my sincerest apologies, and know that I, and all that the Whetton name conveys, am forever at your service to demonstrate the depth of my remorse. I await your judgment, understanding, if you choose not to grant me your forgiveness.*

*Yours, with the deepest regret,*

*Daniel Eastbury, Earl of Whetton*

To Devlin's surprise, it was a note written with truth and from the heart. He had to give the man credence. He, unlike most of

society, had apologized for his actions. Most of society ignored that part and merely welcomed him back into the fold.

Now there would be no objection to Rosemary and Hawthorne marrying, but only if she fully understood she would have plenty of options. She didn't have to accept Hawthorne's suit because it was the only one she had received.

The same could be said for him. The money he got from the Longton estate mostly restored his wealth and it also brought with it a hunting lodge in Scotland. His title was now as shining and untarnished as the silver tray these notes lay upon, and his tin mine was a bonus. He would be quite the catch.

Images of beautiful, captivating Dharma flooded his mind behind his closed eyelids. Her smile, her turned-up nose when thwarted, and her steadfast loyalty to him and his sister. Her beauty was something that every man saw, but what lay underneath she'd shown only to him. He was not interested in any other woman.

If she survived her fever, he would never make her doubt his love again.

He wanted to show her just how much he loved her. He wanted to prove that he did not marry her for money, but that she owned his heart and even now that he had choices, he chose only her.

What could he do to show how deep his love was?

He sat in quiet contemplation as the fire slowly burned away, and the flames died. He needed to be with her. He left the warmth of the fire and dressed. He'd attended to everything his mother and family needed from him, including actually forcing food down his throat, but what he needed most was to be with Dharma.

They said love healed all wounds, so perhaps his love could help heal Dharma.

A knock at the door startled him. Rosemary popped her head around the door. "They've found Fiona McTavish. The

Bow Street Runners have her downstairs. She's in a terrible state. I almost didn't recognize her."

Devlin quickly descended the stairs. He'd wanted Fiona found for further clarification of Longton's treason, but her testimony was no longer needed. So, what should he do with her?

The flickering light of the oil lamps cast a warm glow across the dimly lit morning room. He wanted to harden his heart when he looked at her, but she looked so pathetic. The air was thick with tension as Devlin paced back and forth in front of Fiona, a lady who had walked the fine line between villainy and virtue. But he could almost understand why—survival. Women didn't have many options when it came to being financially secure. She'd married a man old enough to be her father once before. Obviously, she had wanted better choices the second time around.

Fiona sat on a wooden chair, her once-luxurious gown torn and stained, her face pale beneath the lines of blood caused by the wounds she'd received while Longton's man had tortured her. Her eyes, a mix of fear and defiance, followed Devlin's every move.

The Bow Street Runners, led by the stern-faced Inspector Reynolds, stood at attention, waiting for Lord Devlin's decision. The room seemed to hold its breath as he finally stopped his pacing and turned to face Fiona.

"Fiona," he began, his voice a mix of frustration and confusion. "From the very start, you've been playing a risky game."

Fiona's gaze remained fixed on the floor, and she swallowed hard before speaking. "A woman has to think of the future. Besides, I could have told Longton a lot more and you know it. I let them torture me and never said a word."

Her words held the truth. He sighed, his eyes reflecting a mixture of emotions. "That may be so, but the very lady who saved your life is now lying mortally wounded. I cannot ignore the gravity of your deception."

Inspector Reynolds stepped forward, a hint of impatience in his tone. “Lord Devlin, the lady must face the consequences of her actions. Justice demands it.”

He circled around her, his eyes searching for something in hers. She had suffered already. She had been tortured and her good name was not worth the mud on his boots. She’d never snag herself a title now. “What do you think I should do to you?”

Fiona looked up, fear and tears welling in her eyes. “I deserve to be punished, but I will throw myself on your mercy, as I know you to be a merciful man.”

He stopped pacing and stood in front of her. He watched her throat moving as she swallowed. She should be afraid. “If Dharma dies, deportation to the colonies for ten years.”

She gasped and reached for him, but he brushed her hands away and hardened his resolve. “If you’d told me everything at the beginning, Dharma wouldn’t be have been injured. I can’t forgive that.”

“And if Lady Dharma lives?” Inspector Reynolds asked.

“She can return to Scotland, never to set foot in England again.” He turned away in disgust.

“You best pray the lady lives,” Inspector Reynold said. “Come on, I’m taking you to the gaol until we learn your fate.”

Mr. Tyler met them at the door. “A missive from Clayton House has just arrived.” Devlin grabbed it off the tray before his butler could say more. His heart rose into his throat.

*The fever has broken. She’s awake.*

*Philippa.*

## *Chapter Nineteen*

**W**hy did Tobin's house have so many stairs? Devlin took them two at a time and then raced down the corridor to Dharma's room. He slid to a halt outside the closed door, but before he entered, he gave thanks to God for sparing the woman he loved.

Only then did he enter the room.

Rosemary was by Dharma's bedside, helping her take a drink. They took care of Dharma's right arm by bandaging it close to her chest to protect the collarbone to help it set. She looked exhausted and her limp, dirty hair clung to her head. But he'd never seen such a glorious sight as the smile on Dharma's wan lips when she saw him.

Rosemary slowly stood and moved towards the door as he made his way to her bedside. Once there, he stood looking at the woman he thought he might lose.

"Don't tire her out, brother. She still needs plenty of rest." With that, the door closed, and they were alone.

Choked with emotion, he went to his knees beside her bed and took her small hand in his. "I thought I'd lost you." Tears filled his eyes.

Rosemary and Philippa had filled her in on all that had occurred while she was indisposed. They'd told her how he'd spent most days and nights by her bedside.

"How could I think of dying when I haven't had the joy of hearing you say that you love me?" she teased.

His head snapped up. “I do love you. I love you so much.” And conscious of her injured shoulder, he sat on the bed and gently pulled her into his arms. “I should have listened to you and not tried to right the past—”

“But then our children will be looked down upon. I’m very pleased you kept looking. Not so pleased about being shot.”

His arms tightened around her. “Never leave me, Dharma. Promise me you’ll never, ever leave me.”

“All I wanted was for you to love me and you do. I love you too much to leave you. I fought so hard to be with you.”

He covered her face with kisses. “We will have a lifetime together, forever. I want you to be the mother of my children, to share my life and make me the happiest man alive.”

When he stopped and went still, gazing down at her, she slid her one unbandaged arm around his neck and held his tender stare. “I love you. I tried so hard not to because I was petrified you’d never love me back. But you’re such a good man, trying so hard to look after the people you love. When you were so worried I would get caught in the crossfire of Longton’s evil, I realized that I was a person you were concerned about.

“I still can’t believe you risked your life for me. I should put you over my knee. I told you not to leave the house.”

“Right now, because I am in pain, I wish I had listened to you too.”

“Does that mean in the future you’ll do as you’re told?”

She laughed. “I’d do it again if it meant saving you.” She leaned up and kissed his lips, lingering gently before the effort was too much for her.

“I should let you sleep and get your strength back.”

“Don’t leave me.” She’d fought her demons to survive and come back to him, and she was scared to sleep in case she didn’t wake up, but Devlin would keep her safe. “Stay with me for a while. Hold me until I fall asleep.”

He lay down beside her and wrapped her in his embrace. He pressed a kiss to her hair.

“There is one more thing I need to ask before you sleep.” She turned to look at his handsome face, lines of worry still around his eyes. Proof of his love and how much he cares. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“I’ve heard you are no longer in need of money. I’ve learned you’re actually quite rich and are now the catch of the season. A lady would be stupid to decline such an offer.”

His eyes narrowed. “You are a little minx...”

She cupped his cheek. “Of course I’ll marry you, because I love you, but most of all because you love me back. I don’t care about anything else, but that you love me.”

“I do. There is no part of you I don’t love. Always remember that.”

She yawned and closed her eyes. “I will remind you of those words every day for the rest of our lives.”

He stayed looking at her as she slept. “I look forward to being reminded. I look forward to loving you for the rest of our lives.”

## *Chapter Twenty*

**T**he last few weeks of recuperation were the longest of Dharma's life. Yesterday, the doctor let her remove the sling holding her arm and declared that the bone had healed. Her arm was stiff and would require gentle exercise to regain full movement. This morning, she'd headed straight for her piano but could only manage a few scales.

They were holding a small private dinner for her tonight. A few close friends to celebrate her engagement. Devlin would hold a ball for them on the day of their wedding, which was in a week's time. She couldn't wait.

He'd been such a fussy bunny. Refusing to initiate any intimacies until her doctor said the bone was healed. He was coming around this afternoon, and she knew exactly how she wanted to celebrate.

She made her way to the library to return some of the books she'd spent her time reading while indisposed. The door was open and she entered and got the surprise of her life.

"Devlin. What are you doing in here?"

He ignored her question and moved to close and lock the door. "I heard the doctor said you are healed."

Her smile widened. She gave a twirl and felt his eyes follow every movement. "Do I look a picture of health?" she asked shyly.

"Your beauty leaves me speechless." Seeing Dharma recovered ... In in one long stride he reached her, caught her



up against his chest, cupped her chin, and slowly lowered his mouth to hers.

Dharma closed her eyes, slipped her arms around his neck, and accepted his tongue into her mouth in a warm, loving invitation. He tasted of warm brandy. He tasted—like the man she loved.

Devlin pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. He was panting. “My wild and reckless Dharma. I have missed holding you, tasting you... I love you.”

Her head was so light, her blood so hot, she barely heard his endearments. “I’m here now. Let’s make up for lost time.” And she threw herself back into the embrace, kissing him with feverish urgency.

A groan emitted from deep in his chest as she ran her hands over his body, all the while edging him back toward the large daybed by the fire. “You locked the door, didn’t you?”

“Of course. I’ve waited weeks. I have to love you,” he said, tearing his cravat away from his neck and slipping his jacket off.

For once in her life she was glad of her reckless nature, for his kisses made her boldly impatient to see him in all his glorious nakedness.

She broke their kiss and daringly rained butterfly-light licks and nibbles down his throat until she could part the V of his shirt to slide her hands inside. Her fingers sought his nipples, and she raked her nails lightly over his skin.

He hooked his finger inside her gown at the shoulder and followed her décolletage down to the front, grazing her sensitized nipple as his touch passed over her breast.

“I want you naked,” she panted, feeling her nipples instantly harden.

Never one to be denied that which she wanted, Dharma tore her hands from his chest and pushed the waistcoat off his shoulders and down his arms. She reached and pulled his shirt from his trousers, running her hands seductively up his chest as she helped him to pull the garment over his head.

“You set my world on fire, siren.” He grasped her hips and pulled her closer until she could feel the evidence of his desire hard and pulsing against her belly. More brazen still, she cupped him through his breeches, and he moaned into the silent room.

She ran her questing fingers up the length of his arousal, then up his flat belly to his chest. Finally, she curled her fingers around his nape and stared at him. How had she been so lucky to earn the love of this fine man? She pressed a kiss to his chest. He looked at her in tormented ecstasy.

“They have accepted you back into the bosom of society,” she whispered. “You could now have any woman you want.”

“The only woman I want has been injured for weeks, and now that she’s in my arms where she belongs, she’s doing too much talking.” The wicked smile he gave her sent a thrill to her toes.

Without hesitation, he swung her up into his arms and gently lowered her onto the daybed. She lay back and felt her body quicken as he bent down and stole her breath with his kiss, petting her breasts through her gown.

He stepped back.

“Hurry. I’m not sure how long Philippa can keep Tobin busy.” She shivered in anticipation. He slowly unbuttoned the placket of his trousers. She licked her lips as hungry desire consumed her. She feasted on the breadth of his wide shoulders, the clean sweep of his taut waist, and the sculptured planes of his chest, the marble-like skin covered with sparse hair.

She rose to her knees, kissing his tantalizing skin, stroking his fine velvety flesh, exploring with mouth and hands his powerful chest and rippling belly. Her fingers traveled over his skin reverently. She luxuriated in the feeling of his broad shoulders and the rock-hard curve of his biceps and muscular forearms.

He gripped her wrists and removed her hands from his body, pushing her gently back onto the bed. “Enough, my wild

beauty. I want to last long enough to render you speechless.”

Her body thrummed with impatience as he bent to remove his boots. Then her mouth dropped open as he pushed his breeches and the rest of his clothing down over his sculptured hips. Her breath hitched as she took in his naked body. Her gaze stayed riveted on his enormous jutting erection. “You are a... magnificent specimen, Lord Devlin,” she whispered.

He laughed softly, lifted his lashes, and captured her as she reached to stroke him. He wove his fingers through hers and pulled her into his arms. “I’m pretty sure you have nothing to compare me to, but I’m flattered.”

Her cheeks filled with heat, but she boldly turned around and lifted her hair out of the way, eager for him to proceed. His fingers set about unfastening her gown in the back. She felt her gown gape open, and he ran a finger down her spine.

“Why am I not surprised at your skill in undressing a lady?”

“You’ll be the only lady I undress from now on.”

His husky words sent her heart racing out of her chest. He gently slipped the gown off her shoulders. She moaned as his hands skimmed over her shoulders and he molded his palms to her breasts, his thumbs flicking over her hardened nipples.

Impatiently, Dharma wriggled out of her dress and watched with delight as Devlin tossed it on the floor, his eyes never leaving hers. Like a sinful Madonna, she rolled onto her back, adoring the way his eyes caressed every inch of her exposed skin.

His warm, sure hands moved up her calf, and past her stockings and garters. “They stay on,” he commanded.

Once he had her completely naked except for her stockings, he stood back, his chest heaving with desire. Under his lashes, his eyes devoured her, and she rose onto her elbows, crooking her finger and beckoning him.

He stood silent for a moment, continuing to drink her in before slowly joining her on the daybed. As he moved over

her, Dharma discovered the powerful aphrodisiac of skin against skin.

“I can’t believe you’re mine,” he whispered. “I never thought I’d have love. I thought my father’s scandal would taint me forever and no woman would ever love me. So I locked my heart away.”

She drew in a sharp breath as the pain and irony of his words almost destroyed her. “You’re so easy to love. I loved you even when the words traitor’s son hung over your head.”

“And I’ll never forget that. You made it so easy for me to let my heart fly free, because it was safe in your hands.”

She watched as his head lowered to her breast as he opened his mouth. When he took hold of her and suckled, she closed her eyes and blocked out everything but his touch, his kiss, his body, hard and unyielding above her.

He moved and spread her open with his massive thighs. He rose onto his hands above her; she opened her eyes and watched him—watched them, their bodies joining and separating. He teased her to the edge of insanity with the tip of his cock, moving in short, provocative little strokes.

She lifted her hips, begging for more. “Yes, Devlin. Take me—make me yours.”

“All good things come to those who wait, my love.” But his ragged breath told her she was not the only one on the very edge.

Moving down over her body, he bent his head and tortured her woman’s petals with his clever tongue, laving and flicking and sucking her rigid nub until she was mindless. He was relentless in his quest to bring her pleasure. Again and again his wicked mouth brought her to the sheerest edge of climax, but when her moans heralded her oncoming release, he stopped, returned, and slipped the tip of his enormous member just a little deeper than before.

He teased her mercilessly. Letting her scale the cliff face, but never fly free. Wildness beat its drum in her blood, and she

arched uncontrollably against him, her legs wrapping around his hips.

“Please, Devlin, for the love of God,” she groaned, tightening her arms until his hard chest chafed against her aching breasts.

In one swift movement, he plunged deep within her, the pain sharp, but it faded swiftly.

“Are you all right?” She felt him quiver above her. “So tight, so hot ...”

“More, please.” Closing her eyes at the feel of him filling her so completely, she moved her hips, willing him to go deeper.

He needed no further encouragement. He kissed her lips and withdrew and re-entered her wet sheath at a quickening pace. She joined in, her hips matching his powerful thrusts, the frenzy of their desire shaking her very soul. She could not help the budding cries sounding from within her battered throat. Just when she felt her climax start, he slipped from between her thighs and lay back, pulling her atop him. He paused, panting hard. “I want to watch you come with me for the first time.”

She couldn't think of anything more pleasurable as he lifted her hips and guided her down over the full length of him. He was deep inside her, buried to the hilt, and she felt every hard inch of him. His powerful hands grasped her hips as she rode him. When he slipped a finger between their joined bodies to touch her throbbing center, she shuddered and dropped her head back, quickening her pace.

“You're so beautiful,” he gasped, watching her with dark, glittering eyes.

He reached up, caught her bouncing breasts in his hands, and then, with a ripple of stomach muscles, surged up and took one peaked nipple into his mouth. The feel of his rock-hard muscles rubbing against her mound tipped her over the edge, and she abandoned herself to her shattering climax as she screamed his name over and over and over ... Then she was

conscious of nothing except the exquisite feel of him deep within her—touching the edges of her womb.

Before her cries of passion had ebbed, he gave a rough growl and rolled her beneath him, only to possess her again. He grabbed her wrists and entwined her hands with his as he drove into her like a wild beast. She relished his frantic coupling, and she opened her legs wide and took everything he had to give. His muscles corded and tightened in his neck as he cried out and pulsed deep within her—he shuddered—and collapsed, sated in her arms.

He opened one eye. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head and stroked back his damp hair that covered his face.

“Thank God.” He sounded almost shaken. He laid his head on her breasts, his body still joined with hers, and pressed a single, tender kiss to her skin. He rolled on his side and pulled her tightly against him. “Always be mine.”

She lay watching him. He looked younger and more vulnerable with his face relaxed and happy. Her heart felt full seeing the smile on his face. Dharma thought he needed to smile more and decided he deserved to always look happy. No more shouldering life’s trials on his own. She wanted to be there to help him.

She would be there to help him. To love him. To protect him.

Dharma pressed a light kiss to Devlin’s cheek. He didn’t even move a muscle, merely hugged her tighter. “We need to get dressed,” she whispered into his ear. “We have my dinner tonight.”

“And then I’m taking you to your bed and loving you all night long.”

Her laugh filled the room. “Suddenly I’m not hungry for food.”

This time Devlin’s laugh echoed around the room and she decided it was the sexiest sound she’d ever heard and she vowed to make him laugh every day for the rest of their lives.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

**D**harma made her way down the long corridor toward the top of the stairs. Even the shadows seemed to be judging her tonight. She drew a deep breath and prayed she would not fail. This was her first public appearance as the Marchioness of Devlin.

They had married this morning at Saint Paul's Cathedral. Devlin's mother and Philippa had seen to everything.

Devlin acted as if being accepted back into society was his right, and how she admired his ability to forgive those who used to look down their noses at him and his family. She was not so forgiving, and she had a long memory.

His brother Harry had made it home in time for the wedding, but there was still no news about George, and Dharma knew it haunted Devlin. He blamed himself for not clearing his father sooner. He would blame himself if anything had happened to George. She wished she could take that responsibility from his shoulders, but the man that he was would not let her. She loved that about him, but it also worried her.

Tonight's ball at their London home in Mayfair might not have yet commenced, but already it was the talk of the season. The unexpected rise of the Devlin name, coupled with his marriage to Dharma, meant the cream of London Society would be here tonight, no doubt to appease their curiosity and—more stomach-churning in her mind—to judge.

Her nerves buzzed like dragonflies—dragonflies with large wings and fiery breath.

Rosemary appeared beside her. “Nervous?”

“I feel sick to my stomach.” She watched Rosemary’s lips twitch. “Don’t laugh. This will be you soon. Wait until your first ball as Hawthorne’s wife.”

“I can’t wait. Three months. Devlin is making us wait three months.”

She sighed. “You know what he’s like with propriety. He doesn’t want society to have any reason to think you had to marry.”

“He’s going to be insufferable, isn’t he? Society will rule us all.”

“Not if I can help it,” Dharma vowed under her breath. “It’s my first ball as his wife and Devlin needs everything to be perfect. That’s making me nervous. I don’t want to let my husband down.”

“You could never let him down. He loves you so much. I never thought I’d see him so happy. Thank you.” Rosemary gave her a small smile. “Let’s slay them together. We Devlin women must stick together.”

She laughed and hugged her new sister-in-law. “I always wanted a sister. Now I have one who’s also my best friend.”

“I never thanked you for standing by me all those years. You are such a special woman, and my brother is so lucky to have won your heart.”

She wiped a tear from her face. “We are all so lucky to have Devlin in our lives.”

They made their way together to the entrance of the ballroom. The women spied Devlin at the bottom of the stairs, and Dharma’s breath caught in her throat. He looked so handsome. His formal attire hugged his wide shoulders and emphasized his lean waist and narrow hips. A stiff white cravat gleamed at his throat, making the black-on-white look less severe. His brown hair glinted in the candlelight, and his chiseled face drew her longing gaze. But it was the fiery approval and possessive love she saw shining within his eyes that made her heart flip.



Rosemary took her arm and nodded at Dharma. “You at least have your knight to save you should you ever need it.”

Dharma felt herself quake. She would descend the stairs alone, all eyes on her. Devlin sent her a quelling look that gave her courage and calmed her. She had dived from a ship into the freezing Thames and survived a bullet wound and fever. She was not about to let a room full of society gossips intimidate her.

She raised her head, and, keeping her eye on Devlin, waiting for her proudly at the bottom of the stairs, she began her descent.

“Isn’t my wife the most radiant woman you’ve ever seen?” were the soft words that greeted her as she safely reached the bottom.

“Second, most radiant,” said a familiar voice at her husband’s side. Tobin and Philippa were standing with him.

Philippa flushed and came forward to tuck her arm through Dharma’s. She began drawing her away from the two men, who proudly watched like the love-struck husbands they were. “I have some ladies I want you to meet.”

Dharma looked back through the crowd at her dashing husband and saw his eyes were still upon her. She didn’t think she could get any happier.

Philippa followed her gaze and smiled at Tobin. “Come. Stop gawking. It’s never ideal to let husbands think they’re too important.”

They turned and continued across the large ballroom toward Lady Horsham. All she had to do was get through the next few hours and then Devlin would take her to bed and show her how much he loved her.

She wanted a child. Dharma patted her stomach. Son. How she’d love to have Devlin’s child. Soon she hoped.

Several hours later, Dharma had finally relaxed. She’d survived the ball with no mishaps. They’d made it. Just as her thoughts formed, there was a commotion at the top of the stairs.

She looked up to see a man. She thought it was a man, but his hair was wild, sticking up, and his face was covered with a full and long beard. He wore an eye-patch over one eye and he wasn't dressed in formal wear. In fact, he seemed to be wearing pants made of animal skin.

The music and noise in the ballroom below died and you could have heard a hair-pin drop.

Who on earth was he? She looked across at her husband and saw him start, and then his eyes filled with tears. He forgot his audience and raced up the stairs and embraced the stranger. Harry arrived at her side. "My God, it's George." And then he, too, was racing up the stairs. She went to follow, but Tobin grabbed her arm. "Let them be for a moment. Devlin will be back. He hasn't seen his brother in over ten years. George left the night their father died in the duel."

The ballroom buzzed with whispers and stolen glances, the unexpected arrival of Lord Devlin's long-lost brother casting a peculiar enchantment over the assembled guests. Dharma, despite her initial surprise, maintained her composure with practiced ease, moving among the attendees as if the reunion upstairs were merely a customary diversion.

Philippa orchestrated a seamless transition, commanding the music to resume its enchanting melodies, guiding the guests back into their revelry. She guided Dharma with a gentle yet firm touch, a silent understanding passing between them as they ensured the ball continued its rhythm despite the unconventional family drama unfolding upstairs.

When Devlin returned, his eyes glittered with a mixture of relief and joy. He joined Dharma with a serene smile, the twinkle in his eyes betraying the depths of his emotions. His touch was gentle as he took her hand, reassuring her without words that all was well.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Everything is perfect. George is home. I'll explain more later. This day could not be more perfect. I have everyone I love around me."

“You deserve to be happy. I want you to always be happy.”

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips, not caring who was looking. “Well, if you want to make me happy, I feel very aggrieved that as the husband, I’m yet to have a dance with my wife.”

“I’m more than happy to oblige, my lord.”

He took her hand and led her to the dance floor; she went into his arms as if she belonged there and he whirled her away. Into the dance. Into their future.

In the quiet moments between dances, Devlin shared snippets of his brothers’ past with Dharma, his voice carrying the weight of a decade-long separation and the bittersweet joy of reunion. He spoke of childhood memories, of brotherly adventures, and the sorrow that had kept them apart for far too long.

And as the night drew to a close, amidst the twinkling lights and the fading music, Devlin whispered to Dharma, “Today has been more than a celebration of our love. It’s been a day of miracles—a day where family, once fractured, healed and found its way back home. Are you happy?” he pressed a kiss to her forehead as he tucked her closer to his side.

“More than happy, if that’s possible. I know my husband loves me and would give me anything my heart desires.”

His smile faded as he held her gaze. “Yes. Yes, I would.”

“Then it’s just as well that all I want is your love.”

“That I can give without hesitation.” His beautiful smile returned. “And I shall strive hard to ensure I never lose that love.”

“You won’t. Now, if you want to keep your wife happy, you’ll sneak away with me and take me to bed and show me how much you love me.”

He almost missed a step, then with his wicked grin plastered on his handsome face, he twirled them to the edge of the ballroom, and pulled her through the servants’ door into the corridor. “I’m yours to command.” He swept her into his

arms, and still giggling, he carried her upstairs to his bed and showed her how wonderful married life could be.

## *Epilogue*

**D**evon, *The Devlin Estate - five years later*

Devlin stepped out of the cooling bathwater, grabbing for a towel. A bath he'd been disappointed Dharma had not seen fit to join him in, but then their three children, Angelica, and twins Simon and David, had got over excited at his return. She was seeing to them.

An hour ago, he'd returned from London. An important vote in the House of Lords was the only thing that could take him away from his family these days. He took his duty to his king and country seriously since he'd been denied that right for so many years.

His disappointment at Dharma's absence was short-lived because suddenly music filled the house. Dharma was in the music room, playing on the grand piano. That meant the children were asleep for their afternoon nap.

A smile broke over his lips and he hastily pulled on a shirt and breeches, then bare foot he made his way down the stairs to join her.

He stilled in the doorway, the quiet sanctuary of the music room, with the sun casting a warm golden hue through the windows, bathed the space in a serene glow. Dharma sat at the grand piano, her fingers lightly tracing the polished wood, a mischievous sparkle dancing in her eyes and for a moment he forgot to breathe. He stood silently watching the beauty before

him and thanked the lord for giving him his heart's desire—Dharma.

She looked up, a playful smile gracing her lips. “Ah, there you are, my lord,” she teased, her voice carrying a lighthearted melody. “I remember vividly how very entertaining you make this music room. You take playing the piano to dizzying heights.”

“Without even touching a key,” he added with a wink, as he closed the door behind him.

She laughed, and the delightful sound bathed his heart with love. “There's no need to lock the door. Our staff are very aware of what you do to me on this piano.”

Devlin's gaze met hers, a glint of amusement mingled with affection twinkling in his eyes. He closed the distance between them with deliberate steps, his voice carrying a hint of playful indulgence. “Do they, now? I'm not sure I enjoy being so predictable, but my dear Dharma, your siren song drew me as you knew it would. And I've come undressed for the part!”

“I love it when you're naughty,” she said, her husky voice sending shivers over his body. “And I have missed you.”

With a graceful gesture, he took her hand, pulled her into his arms. They stood together, the soft melody of the afternoon drifting through the room. Then his lips could wait no longer and he kissed the woman who owned his heart.

Devlin leaned closer, his warm breath brushing against Dharma's ear as he whispered, “I love watching and listening to you play, but I much prefer seeing you naked upon this piano.”

In response, Dharma's laughter softened into a tender smile, her eyes locking with his in a silent agreement. Without a word, Devlin helped her out of her clothes and she returned the favor. They stood admiring each other in their nakedness. “How did I get so lucky to earn your love?”

She smiled at her husband and stepped closer. “By loving me back.”

On those true words, he lifted her onto the polished mahogany and soon they were both lost in the music of love. Their movements synchronized, a duet of love and passion, as the music room filled with the sweet harmony of their affection.

“There is nothing as thrilling as feeling you deep inside me,” she murmured, her voice choked with love. “I love you ...”

“As I love you, Dharma.” His gaze locked with hers, and he flashed a look so filled with love her heart almost burst from her chest. Then his grin turned cocky. “Let’s see exactly how in tune we are.”

She shivered at the promise in his voice and in his touch. “Yes,” she panted. “Only you can make my body sing.”

He drew back and surged inside her, impaling her with his thick, pulsing shaft. “Like this,” he said, and he took one of her peaked nipples deep into his mouth.

“Oh, yes, Devlin ...”

Dharma welcomed his growing fever and locked her legs around his hips, clinging to him, meeting him stroke for powerful stroke. She felt his composure fraying, and their joining turned frantic, the rhythm building to unleashed crescendo.

His thrusts were relentless in his quest to pleasure her. She held on, wanting them to explode together. Her fingernails scored his back where she clung tightly, her body tightened, and they climaxed in an explosion of convulsive pleasure, his harsh groans louder than her crooning cries.

“Perhaps we made another little girl? One who looks exactly like her mother,” he panted.

“Are you trying to compete with your brother?” she said, still trying to catch her breath. “Do you know something I don’t know?” With strength she didn’t know she possessed, she rolled Devlin over until she lay on top of him, the delicious aftermath of love echoing in their racing heartbeats. “Which one of my sisters-in-law is with child?” She smiled

and then ran her hand down over his chiseled chest and rippling stomach to lightly cup his flaccid member.

“Serena. She’s due around Christmas.”

Dharma gave a little cry. “Harry’s wife. Perfect. Our babe will have a cousin the same age.”

Devlin started then gave a whooping cry and kissed her passionately. “You’re with child again? I hope it’s a girl. Two boys and two girls sounds perfect.”

“You’ve already spoiled Angelica too much.”

“That’s because she looks like her mother, and I cannot help it.”

As she bent and took his mouth in a searing kiss, she felt him harden between her thighs and she realized they would likely have a large family because they could not keep their hands off each other. That’s what she’d always wanted. A large, happy family filled with love.

Of course, it helped that his two brothers had finally found their perfect loves. So, their family was growing. She loved how her marriage had given her the large extended family she’d always wanted.

Devlin grew quiet as the passion once more took over and he simply relished the act of love with the one person he cherished with all his heart.

“Thank you for helping me remember what’s the most important thing in life. I kept looking back because I couldn’t see a future until I met you. You made me see that living in the present, with your love, is all I need. And want. I want and need and love you.”

“You gorgeous man. You were worth the wait.”

These past five years married to Dharma, he’d learned what true love was about. You’d do anything to make that person happy and they would do the same for you. With love resounding around the room and around their house, Devlin couldn’t regret the long years of hardship after his father’s death because if he’d not desperately needed a wealthy wife he



would never have gone to Charlotte's house party and he may have missed his moment with Dharma.

Once he'd satisfied his hunger for Dharma since he'd been away for almost two weeks, they redressed and, as they made to leave the room, he finally confessed, "We have a few guests arriving tomorrow. I hope you don't mind, but I've invited Sin and Charlotte, Tobin and Philippa, Harry and Serena, Rosemary and Hawthorne, and George and Teresa with all the children to stay for a few weeks."

Dharma swung round to look at him with horror. "And you let me waste all afternoon with you! I'll need to get the house organized. The food. How could you wait to tell me, you awful man?"

As she turned to run for the door, he reached and grabbed her hand.

"I'll always want you before all else, and quite frankly, my family and yours can wait."

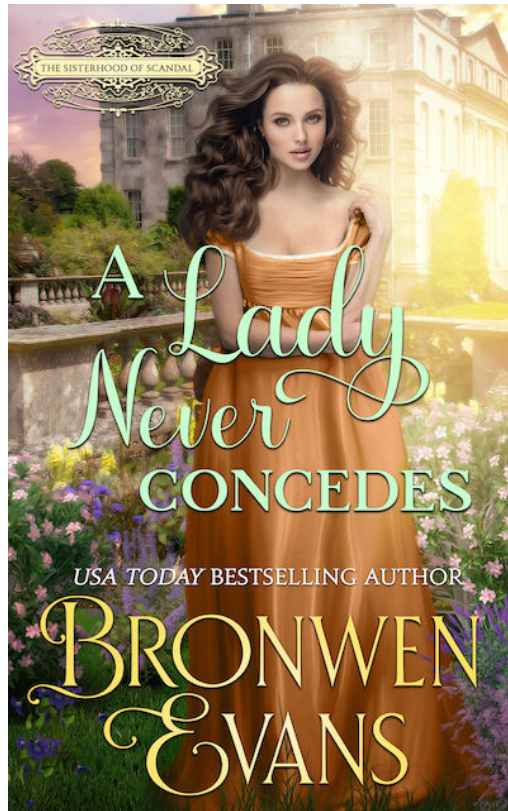
With that, he pulled her in for another kiss, and Dharma didn't seem to mind the fact they didn't leave the music room for at least another two hours.



Thank you for reading Devlin and Dharma's story. I think I might write George and Harry's stories. What happened to them after their father died? Harry went to India and George disappeared – do you think I should tell their stories? Let me know by emailing me at [bronwen@bronwenevans.com](mailto:bronwen@bronwenevans.com)

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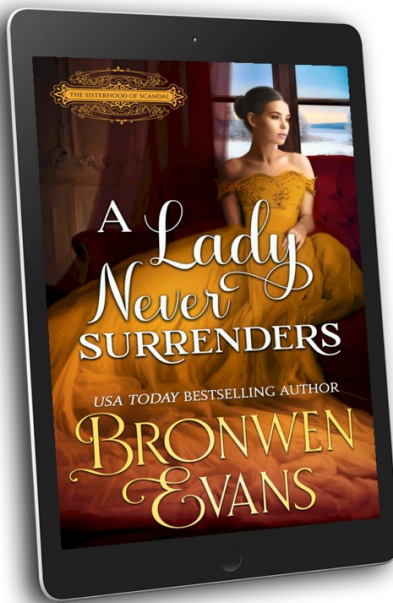
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*Want a taste of Tiffany's  
story?*

**L** *ondon, 1808*

Tiffany stood between two of the most sought after bachelors in all of England. Her guardian and cousin, Fane Deveraux, the Earl of Marlowe, flanked her left side, while Marlowe's rakish best friend, Slade Ware, Marquess of Wolfarth, stood at her right elbow.

Every woman in Lady Rutherford's ballroom envied her. The armor piercing stares were wholly undeserved and Miss Tiffany Deveraux took no joy in the attention.

What the envious debutantes did not understand was that she was all but invisible to both men. Marlowe's mother had always insisted on Fane escorting Tiffany and his sister, Lady Claire Deveraux, to every ball, and where Fane went, Wolf followed.

Since Lady Marlowe was no longer living, the thought of her cut deep. Tiffany still felt the loss. It had been like losing a second mother. The absence of Lady Marlowe also meant the men would soon deposit Claire and Tiffany with Lady Vale, a society matriarch, before heading to the sanctuary of the card room. Tiffany could almost smell the men's fear. Mothers with marriageable daughters were closing in. Like a well-planned military advance, every mother present was maneuvering to introduce their daughters to the men.

Tiffany pushed her glasses back up her nose, feeling more and more invisible as the two men talked over her head, while Claire, who stood behind them, was busy filling her dance card. Her cousin was popular with men looking for a wealthy

and pretty young lady of quality to marry, and also with the young ladies, who were eager to befriend her in order to meet her brother.

Tiffany was not bitter or jealous of her cousin. She herself was neither wealthy nor pretty: a fact that could not be disputed. What she had, thank the lord, was intelligence. She did not need to marry, or marry well. Her gift with numbers saw to that. Soon she would not even *need* Fane's charity. She hugged her smug secret to herself, armor against those who looked down their noses at the penniless orphan.

"I suggest we see the girls safely to Lady Vale's side before Lady Rutherford has us roped in as dance partners." Wolf's words flew over her head since she stood no taller than his shoulder. "Are you listening, Fane?" he persisted in that husky, innately sensual voice that always shook her feminine sensibilities.

"You go along. I think I see Lady Saline Porter," her cousin replied.

She turned in the direction the men were now staring and noted the beautiful young widow with a flock of gentlemen surrounding her. *She* was certainly not invisible.

"I thought your actress was enough woman for you," Wolf said before glancing sharply at Tiffany as if he'd only just realized that she was in earshot.

Fane cleared his throat and smiled down at her. "Isn't that Miss Valora standing with her mother? Look, she's waving at you."

Yes, Valora was standing next to her mother, Lady Vale. "I'm waiting for Claire," she replied. Just then, Claire swung toward her.

"Tiffany, Lord Donahue was just saying that he'd love to beg a dance from you if you have any free?"

She inwardly sighed. Lord Donahue was a nice but dim and pimply young man who had taken a shine to her. Most likely because she'd been kind to him one night at the

beginning of the season, and he'd sought her company ever since.

He stammered over her hand, his face turning a mottled red. "Miss Deveraux, ma-may I have the pleasure of the f-f-first waltz of the evening?"

She could feel Wolf and Fane's amusement without needing to look at them. "That would be lovely, thank you, my lord," and she held out her card for him to complete.

Once Lord Donahue had taken his leave, Fane shook his head. "Why do you encourage the man, Tif? You can do so much better than him."

Claire slipped her arm through Tiffany's and squeezed her hand.

Anger made her bite when really she should have ignored him, but it didn't help that Wolf was there as well. "Not all of us are blessed with looks or money, Fane. You do not know what it is like to go unnoticed. Most of us mere mortals make the most of what God has given us. Lord Donahue is a delightful man." She looked away from the two men beside her. They had never, ever had a moment's doubt about how the world perceived them. Handsome and desirable were their middle names.

She shifted her weight, intending to set out across the room to greet her friend Valora, but before she'd taken a step, Wolf bent to whisper in her ear, "I think when God made you he knew exactly what he was doing."

She stiffened. What was that supposed to mean? Was it a compliment? Her heart hiccupped and she looked at Wolf and found herself pinned by his crystal blue eyes. They weren't, as she'd expected, mocking her. Instead, they were filled with something much worse: pity. She wished the floor would crack open and swallow her whole. Lowering her gaze, she tugged on Claire's arm and escaped around the edge of the ballroom before tears welled.

She knew Wolf was only trying to be kind, but she'd been infatuated with him since that day six years ago when he'd

carried her into her new home. But Wolf was not for the likes of her. Love did not easily find women of her ilk. She didn't inspire poets to write sonnets or artists to paint her portrait. Her heart clenched tight in her chest. Love—oh, how she wished for a man to find her worthy of love.

Yet that was only partly true.

She wanted one man to love her—Wolf. But she was far too intelligent and realized that was but a dream. Wolf could have any woman he wanted Why would he want *her*?

“I could thump my brother. In fact, I should do so every morning until he learns to think before he speaks.”

She gave Claire a weak smile. “It's not his fault. The world has always been easy for him. He does not understand what it is like for those not so blessed.”

Claire shook her head as she waved out to Valora. “No. That's not it. He is shallow. He does not look deep enough. He is distracted by the beauty of a woman rather than what is in her heart, or in her soul. I'm hoping he grows out of it before he finds himself shackled to a woman who, when her beauty fades as we know it will, is empty and boring. Married for the rest of your life is a long time.”

She thought of the way the two men had drunk in Lady Saline.

“We are shallow too. You're assuming a beauty like Lady Saline does not have a heart, yet I know she does.”

Growing up as an only child, books were and still are, her best friend. Tiffany read widely and because of that was worldlier than many of her age, and because she was one of those people who observed rather than partook in life, she had seen the way Lady Saline and her companion, Miss Murphy, interacted. The lingering of fingers as their hands brushed, the little smiles that only lovers understood, and the fact not one of the handsome gentlemen surrounding her, not even her cousin Fane, drew her complete attention away from Miss Murphy.



She humped at the absurdity of life. “They think because we are younger, and female, that we don’t think at all. When in reality we see far more than they do.”

“What do we see?” Valora asked as they arrived at her side.

Tiffany pressed kisses to her cheeks. Valora would not understand, as she was beautiful beyond words. “Oh, nothing. It’s just Fane annoyed me.”

Valora peered round her to stare at the men before they disappeared into the card room for the rest of the evening. “Well, something has upset them. Wolf is remonstrating with Fane rather vigorously.” Tiffany glanced over her shoulder. The two men did seem to be arguing.

Valora soon lost interest and sighed. “I find most men are fairly annoying especially when they insist on proposing when they are well aware I shall not accept.”

“You are getting quite the reputation for saying no,” Claire stated. “If you’re not careful you’ll wake up one day and every man will be too scared to ask.”

“You can talk.” Valora sniffed. “Then he is not the right man for me.”

Tiffany privately thought that perhaps there was not a man who would ever be right for Valora. She’d turned down handsome rogues, attractive dukes, and wealthy lords. She glanced at Lady Saline and wondered if her good friend was that way inclined. She hoped not, as Valora’s brother Lord Vale, was determined to see her wed this year.

“Oh, I say,” Valora, exclaimed as she tapped Claire’s gloved arm with her fan. “Your brother and Wolf are dicing with danger. They’re coming this way and Fane looks most put out.”

The soft hum of female mutterings and fan twitching rose to the level of a swarm of bees by the hive. The men were not seeking the safety of the card room this evening. What were they about? Women were jumping to conclusions—dangerous conclusions. Tiffany hoped they were mistaken conclusions.

Wolf could not possibly be announcing to the *ton* that he was looking for a wife. She knew Fane wasn't.

Lady Rutherford saw her chance and began to gather her two daughters and shoo them in their direction.

Wolf continued to stride purposely toward them, while Fane looked as if he'd like to shove a dagger in his friend's back.

"The Wolf looks as if he's hunting." Claire said exactly what they were all thinking.

Tiffany thought Claire's description very apt. Wolf's lips were curved up in a sly smile. You could imagine a snarl taking its place at any moment. His black hair, cut short to shape his face, gleamed blue-black in the candlelight and his broad shoulders cast black shadows on the walls as he strode the length of the room. When he drew nearer, the sharp contours of his face, the aquiline nose and chiseled cheeks saw many take a step back. Wolf *did* look like he was hunting. His gaze was hard and focused—her heart began to pound in her chest—focused completely on her.

Her legs were suddenly made of jelly.

He stopped directly in front of her taking her gloved hand and bending low over it, his lips brushing the material, making her knees knock.

"Miss Deveraux I would be honored if you would allow me the next dance."

Her eyes narrowed. What was he about? She curtsied and finally got out some words. "How lovely to see you wish to dance this evening, my lord."

His smile widened and she almost forgot to breath.

Loud enough for all to hear, he said, "Only with you, Miss Deveraux. Only with you."

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## About the Author



**USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR BRONWEN EVANS** is a proud romance writer. Her works have been published in both print and eBook formats. She loves storytelling, and her head is always filled with characters and stories, particularly those featuring lovers in angst. Evans is a three-time winner of the RomCon Readers' Crown and has been nominated for an *RT* Reviewers' Choice Award. She lives in the sunny Hawkes Bay, New Zealand with her Cavoodles Brandy and Duke. She loves hearing from readers.



[www.bronwenevans.com](http://www.bronwenevans.com)

Thank you so much for coming along on this journey. If you'd like to keep up with my other releases, my newsletter coupon codes for specials, or other news, feel free

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# *Also by bronwen evans*

## **Bron's Book List**

### **Historical Romances**

#### **Sisterhood of Scandal**

[A Lady Never Concedes](#) - FREE Short Story

[A Lady Never Surrenders](#)

[A Lady Never Presumes](#)

#### **Wicked Wagers**

[To Dare the Duke of Dangerfield](#) – book #1

[To Wager the Marquis of Wolverstone](#) – book #2

[To Challenge the Earl of Cravenswood](#) - book #3

[Wicked Wagers, The Complete Trilogy](#) Boxed Set

#### **The Disgraced Lords**

[A Kiss of Lies](#) – Jan 2014

[A Promise of More](#) – April 2014

[A Touch of Passion](#) – April 2015

[A Whisper of Desire](#) – Dec 2015

[A Taste of Seduction](#) – August 2016

[A Night of Forever](#) – October 2016

[A Love To Remember](#) – August 2017

[A Dream Of Redemption](#) – February 2018

#### **Imperfect Lords Series**

[Addicted to the Duke](#) – March 2018

[Drawn To the Marquess](#) – September 2018

[Attracted To The Earl](#) – February 2019

#### **Taming A Rogue Series**

[Lord of Wicked](#) (also in a [German Translation](#) - [Spanish](#))

[Lord of Danger](#) (also in a [German Translation](#) - [Spanish](#))

[Lord of Passion](#)

[Lord of Pleasure](#) (Christmas Novella)

#### **The Lady Bachelorette Series**

[The Awakening of Lady Flora](#) – Novella

[The Seduction of Lord Sin](#)

[The Allure of Lord Devlin](#)

**Invitation To Series Audio Only (now called Taming A Rogue series)**

[Invitation to Ruin](#)

(Winner of RomCon Best Historical 2012, RT Best First Historical 2012 Nominee)

[Invitation to Scandal](#)

(TRR Best Historical Nominee 2012)

[Invitation to Passion](#)

July 2014

(Winner of RomCon Best Historical 2015)

[Invitation To Pleasure](#)

Novella February 2020

**Contemporaries**

[The Reluctant Wife](#)

(Winner of RomCon Best Short Contemporary 2014)

**Drive Me Wild**

[Reckless Curves](#) – book #1

[Purr For Me](#) – book#2

[Slow Ride](#) – book #3

[Fast track To Love](#) (This Christmas) Novella - book #4

**Coopers Creek**

[Love Me](#) – book #1

[Heal Me](#) – Book #2

[Want Me](#) – book #3

[Need Me](#) – book #4

**Other Books**

[A Scot For Christmas - Novella](#)

[Regency Delights Boxed Set](#)

[To Tempt A Highland Duke – Novella](#)

[Highland Wishes and Dreams - Novella](#)

[The Duke's Christmas List - Novella](#)

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If you're a book blogger, booksagrammar, or journalist and you would like to interview me, please get in touch with me at [www.bronwenevans.com](http://www.bronwenevans.com) I would love to chat with you!

Alternatively you can contact my agent, Sarah Younger, at the [Nancy Yost Literary Agency](https://www.nancyyostliteraryagency.com).