

THE SECRETS OF NEDWORTH HALL



THE
Charmed
HEIR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MERRY FARMER

The Charmed Heir

THE SECRETS OF NEDWORTH HALL

BOOK FOUR

MERRY FARMER

THE CHARMED HEIR

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Chapter One

NEDWORTH HALL, CAMBRIDGESHIRE – JULY, 1890

Miss Charlotte Benning did not consider herself to be living a charmed life. She was merely the daughter of a hard-working and determined industrialist, who was so devoted to his factories and their employees that he spent all his time with his business partner, Mr. Horace Jeffries, instead of searching for a wife to replace Charlotte's long-deceased mother. She had neither class nor education to recommend her, unlike the new friends she'd taken to her heart during the three weeks of the Nedworth Hall house party thus far. She was simply Charlotte, her papa's daughter, and nothing else.

She supposed that she had earned an invitation to the party because Lady Cambourne had known her mother. At least, that was what Charlotte assumed. Lady Cambourne had intimated

as much on a few occasions in the early weeks of the house party, though Charlotte hadn't thought much of it. According to her father, her mother had been a good woman of respectable breeding who had loved her enough to give her life for her.

That was all Charlotte knew and all she needed to know.

"That is why I have no grand expectations for my life, other than catching the eye of a nice man with a good nature who might offer me a quiet and comfortable life," she told her friends on a surprisingly pleasant afternoon in early July, as their cabal took tea together out of doors.

They sat in the shade of a marquee that Lady Cambourne had requested the indefatigable footmen of Nedworth Hall erect for them. Charlotte rather liked the marquee. She rather liked the sweet and jolly footman, Jack, who waited on them as their group conversed. Not in *that* way, of course. The kind young man was comely, but he reminded her so much of Uncle Horace in his mien and mannerisms that she felt as though he was a brother of sorts.

Charlotte was so preoccupied smiling at Jack and thanking him for retrieving her fan from where she'd left it on the terrace that she almost didn't register the sly, disbelieving looks of her companions.

She blinked. "Have I said something wrong?" she asked, opening her fan and wafting a cool breeze across her heating face.

Lady Yvette and Lady Patience in particular exchanged looks as though they would burst into smiles and laughter.

"That is all you wish?" Lady Yvette asked. "A quiet and comfortable life?"

Charlotte blinked at her. "Yes. Is that too much to ask?"

"No, not at all," Lady Patience said slowly. "But you must admit, your life is already decidedly comfortable, thanks to your father's wealth."

Charlotte fanned herself faster, eyeing her cup of tea to avoid the knowing looks of her new friends. "Papa has worked

tirelessly to build his factories into something presentable,” she said, uncomfortable with her friends’ continued smiles. “I suppose one could say we are well-off, but Papa has no title, nor does he own any sort of grand estate. In fact, we live at the whim of Uncle Horace, that is, Mr. Jeffries, most of the year.”

“At the whim of Mr. Jeffries?” Lady Eleanor asked, her brow pinched in a confused, and most likely disapproving, given the sourness Lady Eleanor embodied most days, frown. “Whatever does that mean?”

Charlotte cleared her throat, folded her fan, and reached for her tea. “We live with my father’s business partner, who allows me to call him Uncle Horace,” she said, only a touch embarrassed to admit that her father’s wealth was so modest that they had been required to live with someone else from her earliest memory. “Uncle Horace owns Ganymede House.”

For some unknown reason, Lady Yvette choked on her tea, then sputtered, “Ganymede House?” Her face was pink, as though she were trying desperately not to laugh.

Charlotte blinked and answered, “Yes, that is where Papa, Uncle Horace, and I live most of the year, when we are not in London, or when I am not attending house parties.”

Again, Lady Yvette and Lady Patience exchanged glances. Charlotte shifted uncomfortably in her chair, taking another sip of her tea. She was beginning to feel as though she were the butt of a joke, and she wasn’t certain she liked it.

To deflect whatever teasing blows Lady Yvette and Lady Patience might be tempted to direct at her, she glanced across to Lady Angeline and said, “I would never presume to think that I would end up with a Marquess, like you, my dear friend.” She glanced to Miss Melanie Pennypacker. “Or even an ambitious young man with dreams of bettering himself, like you, Miss Pennypacker.”

Miss Pennypacker laughed in her loud, American way. “Engaging yourself to a man your father sees as beneath you is not for the faint of heart,” she said. “I’m surprised he has allowed me to remain at the house party for its duration instead of demanding I return to London with him.”

“I wouldn’t miss the remainder of the house party for the world,” Lady Angeline said. “Rafe agrees. We decided together that we simply must stay until the identity of Lord Carshalton’s heir is revealed.”

Lady Eleanor snorted so suddenly that she caused her companion, Miss Millicent Silverstone, to start and drop the biscuit she had been in the process of handing to her mistress. Lady Eleanor gave Miss Silverstone a vicious look, then said, “You are fooling no one with your protestations of innocence. The three of you have continued on at the house party because our host and hostess are so lax in their morals and discipline that they say nothing when you creep about the hallways long after dark to sleep in beds that you should not.”

Charlotte’s face burned with embarrassment for the bold accusation. So much that she picked up her fan in her free hand and wafted cooling air over her cheeks.

The thing was, neither Miss Pennypacker, Lady Angeline, nor Lady Patience made any attempts to contradict Lady Eleanor’s statement. Lady Angeline looked sweetly sheepish, Lady Patience grinned coyly, and Miss Pennypacker came right out and said, “If I end up with child before the end of the summer, that will only ensure that my papa cannot back out of his agreement that I should marry Frank.”

Charlotte nearly dropped her teacup. She could never be so bold as any of her friends.

And yet, hearing their whispers and seeing the excitement in their eyes on the occasions when they had spoken frankly about the joys of love and of the flesh had awakened things in Charlotte that she hadn’t suspected she harbored. She was intrigued by the idea of physical love. In the last three weeks, she had received more of an education on the matter than her dear papa had ever given her.

Papa had blanched at the very idea of romantic relationships between men and women. Why, when her body had undergone the changes that every girl’s did when she became a woman, he had sent her to the housekeeper, Mrs.

Jorgenson, to have her explain things, claiming he knew less than nothing about women and their functions.

“You will not catch me behaving in such a wicked manner,” Lady Eleanor said, her back going stiff and her chin coming up. “True gentlemen, men like His Grace, the Duke of Foxley, would never betroth themselves to women of loose character.”

Miss Silverstone—who had been engaged in brushing crumbs from the biscuit she’d dropped on her mistress’s skirts earlier, fumbled the same biscuit again, crumbling it over her mistress entirely.

“Will you stop your fussing, you ham-fisted cow!” Lady Eleanor shouted, slapping at Miss Silverstone’s hands. “The scullery maid would do a better job of attending to me. I’ve no idea why Mama insisted you accompany me to this party.”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Miss Silverstone whispered, nearly in tears. She shrunk back to the edge of the marquee, where Jack, bless him, stepped over to comfort her. He even handed her a handkerchief when Miss Silverstone fought to hold back tears.

Charlotte couldn’t say she thought much of Lady Eleanor anymore. And for more reasons than her mistreatment of poor Miss Silverstone.

To spare the poor woman any further attention as she attempted to compose herself, Charlotte said, “I have no intention of joining the ranks of those creeping through Nedworth Hall’s corridors in the middle of the night. I could never be so bold in any case. But I do so hope that one of the gentlemen of the party will take an interest in me.”

“You mean that you hope Viscount Bygrave will take an interest in you,” Lady Patience said, sipping her tea with a knowing look.

For what felt like the hundredth time in that afternoon alone, Charlotte blushed. “Lord Bygrave is a lovely man,” she mumbled as she sipped her tea.

“Never fear,” Miss Pennypacker said, too loud as always. “It’s as clear as day that he fancies you as well. He has danced with you more than twice at every entertainment Lady Cambourne has arranged, he accompanies you into supper whenever he can, and he turned pages for you when you sang for us last night.”

“He was merely being polite,” Charlotte whispered into her tea.

Secretly, her heart danced with excitement at the implication of Lord Bygrave’s attentions. Viscount Bygrave was utterly charming, and the very idea of becoming a viscountess was so far beyond anything she’d ever dreamed for herself that she could hardly hold the idea in her head.

But most importantly, she was certain that Papa, and Uncle Horace, for that matter, would like Lord Bygrave. He had an open manner and an affable presence that one could not help but be drawn to. He was polite to the servants in a way that went beyond what most men of title showed to those lesser than them. It was almost as if Lord Bygrave had seen much of the world, though he couldn’t have been more than thirty, and it had taught him that there was an inherent equality in all people.

Charlotte believed that she could be quite happy with a man like that.

“Of course he has developed a *tendre* for you,” Lady Yvette said with a hint of teasing, pulling Charlotte from her thoughts. “You are the Carshalton heir, after all.”

Charlotte nearly choked on her tea. “I am not,” she said in a rush, putting her teacup aside. “I’ve no idea who the Carshalton heir is at this point. I thought it was Mr. Crymble, if I’m honest.”

Miss Pennypacker laughed out loud. “No, Frank believes he knows who his father is, and it’s not Lord Carshalton.”

“And with Mr. Crymble being eliminated from the running,” Lady Yvette said, her eyes bright with mischief, “that leaves you as the most likely candidate.”

Charlotte didn't like the way her friends all seemed to glance to her in unison, like she might very well be the heir.

"It is impossible," she said, shaking her head and fanning herself again. "I have a papa, and it is not Lord Carshalton."

"Are you quite certain of that, my dear?" Lady Patience asked, a touch of sympathy in her expression.

"Quite certain?" Charlotte asked. "Of what?"

"That Mr. Benning is your natural father?" Lady Angeline asked, her cheeks going pink, as if she was surprised to ask the question.

Charlotte's insides tightened. The ghost of suspicion that had lingered in the back of her mind for years curled through her. Her papa seldom spoke of her mother. There were no images or likenesses of her at Ganymede House. On the few occasions when Charlotte had asked for her mother's name, her papa had only answered "Mary" and offered nothing further.

Almost as though he had never known her mother at all.

In *any* sense of the word.

She cleared her throat. "Stephen Benning is my father in every way that matters," she said, sitting straighter and holding her head high. "That is all I know and all I wish to know."

The air practically hummed around their group for a moment, as if some great army were poised to attack, or as if lightning would strike.

A moment later, the atmosphere cleared and the tension of a dozen unasked questions dissipated as the sound of male conversation and laughter snagged all of their attention. All of the ladies turned to the side as most of the gentlemen acquainted with their particular circle of the house party rounded the corner of the garden and headed toward the marquee.

Miss Pennypacker jumped up at the sight of her Mr. Crymble walking side-by-side with the Earl of Carnlough, who now acknowledged him openly as his half-cousin. Lady

Angeline swept right out of her chair and rushed forward to meet her fiancé, Lord Rothbury, as he stepped into the shade of the tent. Lady Patience similarly went to greet her fiancé, Mr. Covington, with a stolen kiss to his cheek that would have shocked Charlotte, if she hadn't already seen so many other astounding things since the house party began.

Charlotte noted the discreet way Lady Yvette ambled over to Lord Theydon, and the way the two of them exchanged glances that could most definitely be described as heated. In contrast, Lady Eleanor practically bounded over to the Duke of Foxley, fervor in her eyes. The duke smiled politely at her, but seemed more interested in the refreshment table in the corner, where Jack and Miss Silverstone stood.

All of that sailed right past Charlotte as soon as Lord Bygrave moved to greet her.

“Miss Benning, you are looking lovely this afternoon,” he said, smiling openly at Charlotte.

“You are too kind, my lord,” Charlotte said, curtsying in a way she was certain was clumsy.

“It isn't kindness to observe the truth,” he said, his smile broadening.

Charlotte had no idea how to reply to that. When it came to Lord Bygrave, her mind and heart became hopelessly tangled, and her lips would not form words. Or rather, she was terrified of the words they might form. There was entirely too much of a chance that she would blurt out “I would be yours, if you wanted me” or “Nothing would make me happier than to be your wife and the mother of your children.” One simply didn't rush around saying those sorts of things to a marquess, though.

Lord Bygrave seemed to sense her overwhelmed feelings. “The gentlemen were all just in the billiard room, contemplating how pleasant we find your company.” He glanced around at the others, but his gaze came back and rested on Charlotte, and his smile grew. “Theydon pointed out that it was a terrible shame we were in there while you were out here, and I proposed we amend that.”

“What a brilliant idea,” Lady Yvette said. She hooked her arm through Lord Theydon’s and started out of the marquee. “I propose a walk.”

“An excellent idea,” Lord Rothbury said, smiling brightly at Lady Angeline.

“Would you care to take a turn through the gardens with me, Miss Benning?” Lord Bygrave asked, offering his arm.

“I would love that,” Charlotte said, her heart light and her feet restless.

A moment of confusion followed as the marquee was abandoned. Lord Theydon and Lady Yvette went ahead, outpacing the rest of them and disappearing entirely before Miss Pennypacker and Mr. Crymble, along with Lord Carnlough, Lord Rothbury, and Lady Angeline could follow them. Lady Patience and Mr. Covington took off in a different direction, leaving Charlotte with little doubt as to what they were about to get up to.

There was more confusion as Lady Eleanor dodged the chairs under the marquee and nearly pushed Miss Silverstone down in order to grasp Foxley’s arm. The duke had momentarily looked as though he would venture out on the walk on his own, but Lady Eleanor wouldn’t have it. For a moment, the duke hung back, as if he would help pick Miss Silverstone up from where she’d tumbled when Lady Eleanor pushed her, but Lady Eleanor tugged him on.

Charlotte watched the whole thing, as did Jack, and when the two of them happened to meet eyes across the shaded area of the marquee, Jack shrugged and sent Miss Silverstone a sympathetic look.

“Has anyone attempted to speak to Lady Eleanor about the way she treats her servant?” Lord Bygrave asked Charlotte with a concerned frown as they started off after the others. “Her behavior isn’t winning her any sort of favor with the gentlemen, and if making a match is her reason for attending the house party....” He left the conclusion of his statement unspoken, but sent Charlotte a knowing look.

“We all disapprove,” Charlotte said, feeling bad for not stepping in earlier, “but speaking up directly on such matters is a tricky thing.”

Lord Bygrave hummed.

“I do hope that by not speaking up, you don’t think less of me,” Charlotte rushed to say, certain she was failing to present herself the way she needed to if Lord Bygrave would ever consider her as his future viscountess.

Fortunately, Lord Bygrave smiled. “I don’t think it is possible for me to think less of you,” he said. “You are a lovely woman, Miss Benning. Anyone with eyes can see that.”

“My lord,” Charlotte said, turning her head away and blushing up a storm.

Perhaps it was the heat of that blush, but it served to remind her that she’d left her parasol in the marquee.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I’ve forgotten my parasol.”

“I’ll go with you to fetch it,” Lord Bygrave offered nobly.

They turned back in unison, but before they could take more than a few steps, Charlotte spotted Jack striding towards them, her parasol in hand.

That wasn’t the only thing in his hand, though.

“Miss Benning,” Jack called to her. “You forgot this. And when I picked it up to bring to you, this note slipped out.”

Jack presented her with the parasol and a small, folded piece of paper.

“Thank you so much, Jack,” Charlotte said, smiling at her friend as she took both the parasol and the paper.

Jack nodded to her, sent Lord Bygrave a brief, curious glance, then bowed slightly and took himself off to join the other servants tidying up the tent.

“I’ll take that,” Lord Bygrave said, allowing Charlotte to hand her parasol to him. He even opened it for her and held it over her head to shield her from the sun.

It was such a dear, kind action that she almost ignored the paper in her hands as she opened it.

As soon as she read the words contained on the simple, rough paper, her smile dropped and her heart leapt to her throat. She pressed a hand to her suddenly beating heart, no idea what to think or feel.

The paper contained only one, simple sentence: "*I know who your mother is.*"

Chapter Two

It was an absolute mess on a scale that Dante hadn't thought was possible.

"I have you cornered now," Covington teased Theydon cheekily as he leaned over the billiard table, cue in hand.

"Not a chance," Theydon laughed, moving to stand directly in Covington's line of sight, just past the shot he was setting up. "That guinea will be mine."

"Isn't there some sort of proverb about counting one's guineas before they've hatched?" Covington said, then took his shot.

Dante glanced up from the letter in his hands at the sound of billiard balls clattering, but rather than looking at his friends, his eyes went straight to the golden guinea perched on the side of the table.

He sighed and glanced to the letters again, not even checking to see whether Covington's shot had won him the game or not. If he had even a small amount of skill at billiards, he would have played every man at the house party and taken their coin as readily as Covington had. If he'd had skill at cards or dice, or any other endeavor that would win him money, he would have tried his hand at that to solve his problems.

Problems which stared him in the face as he sorted through the letters on his lap as he sat in the corner of the billiards room with his friends.

The packet of letters had come that morning. Not just one letter from his harried father, but half a dozen from creditors as well. Among the stack was a bill from a tailor in London, a request that rent be paid on a townhouse in Mayfair, and a rather sorrowful missive from a place called The Chameleon Club, stating that a certain tab had gone unpaid for more than a year, and measures would need to be taken soon.

Dante sighed and rubbed his sore eyes, not entirely certain what to do about it all.

"I say, Bygrave," the Duke of Foxley said, coming to stand closer to Dante's chair. "It can't be all that bad. You do know all of the money Covington earns will be going to a good cause."

"And I've plenty to spare," Theydon said with a laugh.

Dante blinked in surprised and glanced around. His friends were staring at him as though he was in the middle of some sort of misery.

"You could always play me to win the guinea back for him," Covington said with a grin. "Double or nothing?"

Dante let out a breath and almost laughed at Covington's mischief. "It's not the game," he said. "Or anything you lot have done at all." He held up the blasted pile of letters in one hand. "It's my miscreant brother, Damien."

Most of his friends hummed and aahed, knowing what he meant.

“You have a brother?” Mr. Crymble asked, leaning against the side of the billiards table.

“He does,” Theydon said with a wry grin.

“I do,” Dante sighed. “I have a rascally, wicked, irresponsible brother who has likely piled up debts all across England.” He held up the letters again.

“Every family has one,” Foxley said with a sympathetic smile.

“I dare say they do,” Dante said folding up the letters so he could put them away. “I would hope that not every family has been brought to the edge of ruin, thanks to the brother in question.”

“It can’t be all that bad,” Theydon said, leaning against the table by Crymble’s side. “I’ve met Damien. He’s damn good company.”

“Oh, Damien is a treasure,” Dante agreed, standing so that he could tuck his pile of letters into his inside jacket pocket. “He’s one of those charming rogues who you cannot help but like. He charms everyone he comes across, smiles his way into dining for free, and never fails to secure invitations to house parties and soirees across England and the continent.”

“Then why wasn’t he invited to this delightful affair?” Covington asked, smiling as though he would have liked to include Damien in his plots.

Dante merely looked at Covington without answering. His gaze flickered to Theydon. Theydon, who knew the answer to the question as well as he did.

“My brother is not the sort who would find any use in a party such as this,” he answered.

The words were inadequate to describe everything about Damien’s character and why a house party that had the intention of matching up young people and marrying them off would be utterly useless for his brother.

But those same reasons, coupled with the letters that sat heavily in Dante’s pocket, were why he was in attendance. The

simple fact of the matter was that things had reached a point, with Damien's spending and his own desire for more out of his life than forever chasing his brother and tidying his messes, where Dante needed to find a wife.

He needed to find a wife of means, one who brought a large dowry with her.

Rothbury hummed and nodded, as if he'd put the pieces that were swirling around Dante's brain together. "You're being prodded into marrying a wealthy heiress so that you can mop up the mess your brother made," he said.

"Precisely," Dante sighed.

"Again, that seems to be the case for at least one son in every family these days," Foxley said.

"Well, if you nobs wouldn't mismanage your estates so badly, and if you would embrace the modern realities of farming and getting the most out of your land, you wouldn't be in this position," Covington said. He was still teasing, and despite his low birth, he fit right in with their particular circle of gentlemen. The thing was, he was right.

"I most certainly have embraced the benefits of modern industry," Foxley tried arguing with him, smiling as he did. "I've updated all sorts of things on every one of my estates so as to reap the greatest benefits from them. For myself and my tenants."

"Would you care to play the next game of billiards, Your Grace?" Covington asked, a teasing sparkle in his eyes as he half bowed and swept a hand over the table.

Foxley laughed. "Not on your life, Covington."

Dante could sense that their band was about to descend into silliness, so he interrupted the slide by saying, "Fortunately, I have the luck to have formed a warm friendship with a woman who is not only lovely, but who happens to be the sole heiress to an industrial fortune."

The others grinned and laughed, elbowing each other.

“Miss Benning,” Theydon said with an approving nod. “She is a lovely creature.”

“She is an angel,” Dante rushed to say, as if he needed to defend her. “She is innocent and kind, she has the voice of a lark and dances as if she walks on clouds. And she is, in my opinion, the most beautiful of the young ladies Lord and Lady Cambourne have invited to Nedworth Hall this summer.”

“I think my Angeline might steal that crown of Loveliest Lady from Miss Benning,” Rothbury said with a proud smile of his own.

“Sorry, my lords,” Crymble said with a happy smile. “I’m afraid Miss Pennypacker has your ladies pipped at the post in the race for most beautiful.”

“I suppose this is where I step in and say that Lady Patience outshines all of your goddesses,” Covington said. “But my bride’s virtues are best not discussed in public.”

They all laughed, even Dante. Really, men were horrid when they started talking about women. It would only be a matter of seconds before they debased themselves and their sweethearts by speaking of them in terms they shouldn’t. And that was why women were far and away the fairer sex.

“It is a sin that the ladies are out enjoying the sunshine while we are in here,” Theydon said. “I propose that we go find them and spend our time with them instead of playing fruitless games and fretting about money in here,” he said, clapping his hands together.

“An excellent idea,” Rothbury said. “I haven’t seen Lady Angeline since breakfast, and I am not too proud to say that I long to be with her again.”

Several of them laughed at Rothbury’s newfound sentimentality as their group left the billiards room to find the nearest door that would take them out to the gardens, where the ladies were most likely to be on such a lovely day.

“Theydon, you just want to entertain the ladies because you believe Lady Yvette to be Carshalton’s heir, and you wish to secure her hand before anyone else does,” Covington said.

“I have it on good authority that Lady Yvette *is* Carshalton’s heir,” Theydon said, glancing back at Covington as they all filed outside through one of the open French doors in the conservatory. “And she is already all but mine as we speak.”

Dante arched an eyebrow at his friend as he passed him on the way into the garden. He had his doubts about Lady Yvette. In several ways. He had his doubts about Theydon as well. Theydon was an immoral, impudent scamp. But, like Damien, in the very best of ways. Which was why he was not at all surprised that Theydon knew his brother.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Covington said as they resumed walking abreast out in the garden sunshine. “Since it turns out Patience isn’t the heir, my money is now on Miss Benning for that honor.”

“Oh?” Rothbury asked. “And why do you think that?”

“Well,” Covington said, looking just a bit abashed as he peeked at Dante. “No one knows who she is the natural child of, for one.”

“She’s certainly not the natural child of Stephen Benning,” Theydon agreed. “Not unless Horace Jeffries is, in fact, Honoria Jeffries or something else along those lines.”

“And wasn’t Lord Carshalton one of Teesville Steel Mill’s investors?” Covington asked. “The old man was friends with Benning and Jeffries. He could easily have palmed his get off on the two of them all those years ago.”

“Please do not speak of a lady as lovely as Miss Benning as someone’s ‘get’,” Dante sighed. He tried not to be irritated with his friends. They meant no harm.

“Sorry,” Theydon said, thumping Dante on the shoulder. “Best behavior from here on out, I swear.”

It was something of a hollow promise, since they’d rounded the corner of the house and spotted the ladies having their tea under a large marquee tent that had been set up to provide shade. They would all be on their best behavior in front of the women or risk falling out of their favor.

And none of them, Dante especially, wanted to fall out of favor with the ladies.

In fact, he was so polite with Miss Benning—and the others behaved like the perfect gentlemen they were all supposed to be, even when Lady Eleanor chose to behave horribly towards Miss Silverstone—as they greeted the ladies and invited them to walk through the gardens, that no one observing the friendly gathering would have guessed at the naughty things half of them had gotten up to and the other half would most likely get up to, if given half a chance.

The walk started out easily enough. Dante shared his thoughts about Lady Eleanor with Miss Benning. He could tell from her expression more than her words that Miss Benning didn't approve of Lady Eleanor either, but there wasn't much that a sweet soul like Miss Benning thought she could do to reprimand a woman who was, if not in age, then in station, above her.

Dante saw the concern Miss Benning had for Miss Silverstone as a mark in her favor, and was about to tell her so when she said, "Oh dear. I've forgotten my parasol."

"I'll go with you to fetch it," he offered, then turned to head back to the marquee.

He didn't get very far.

"Miss Benning," one of the footmen said as he approached them. "You forgot this. And when I picked it up to bring to you, this note slipped out."

"Thank you so much, Jack." Miss Benning took the parasol and a piece of paper from the footman.

It was not lost on Dante how handsome the footman was. He was precisely Damien's type. Which was yet another reason to be grateful that he had been sent to the house party instead of Damien. Not a footman would remain unfiddled with if Damien were present.

"I'll take that," Dante said, taking and opening Miss Benning's parasol as the footman returned to the marquee.

A moment later, as Miss Benning read the few words on the paper, her beautiful smile turned to shock.

Confused, Dante took the liberty of glancing over her shoulder to read the content of the note.

What it contained was entirely unexpected.

“I know who your mother is.”

Despite his determination to be good and kind and not to turn into a matrimonial mercenary, laying his claim on the wealthiest woman at the party, Dante’s heart skipped a beat, and his hopes of a bright financial future peaked with those words.

Could it be that Miss Benning was Carshalton’s heir after all?

“What does this mean?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calm and controlled.

He inched closer to Miss Benning, touching his hand to the small of her back so that he could comfort her...and display to anyone who might be looking that she was his.

As much as he hated himself for being so cold with his intentions, his actual feelings for Miss Benning were very much warm.

Miss Benning glanced to him, clearly alarmed. “I don’t know,” she said, then bit her lip worryingly.

There was nothing for it but to ask the impertinent question. He cleared his throat, then asked, “Begging your pardon, Miss Benning, but do *you* know who your mother is?”

A moment of fear, most likely of what Dante might think, flashed in Miss Benning’s eyes before she let out a breath and admitted, “I do not,” in a small voice. “But I am not Lord Carshalton’s heir,” she rushed to add, her eyes wide with alarm.

Again, Dante winced before asking, “Are you quite certain of that?”

“I am,” she said, but without as much certainty as she might have. “I have a father. A beloved papa. He’s...he’s the only father I’ve ever known and the only father I want to know.”

The way Miss Benning lowered her head and worried the slip of paper in her hands told Dante more than her words ever could. She loved Stephen Benning, and that told Dante that Benning was a wonderful father. If Miss Benning had any inkling at all about what he presumed her father’s true nature was, she did not want to admit to it.

Really, Dante wouldn’t have been at all surprised if Miss Benning was completely ignorant of her father and Mr. Jeffries. Such knowledge was kept as far away from young ladies as possible. Even if Miss Benning knew that love did not always behave as moralists and preachers dictated it should, it could very well be that she adored her father to the point where she would be unable to see anything that society might call a wrong in him.

But that did not in any way mean it was impossible for her to be Carshalton’s heir.

“Has your father ever spoken of your mother?” Dante asked carefully.

Miss Benning peeked up at him sadly. The glorious thing had no idea how sweet and becoming she looked with that expression.

“I know what you are implying, Lord Bygrave,” she said in a surprisingly calm and mature voice. “But I cannot be Lord Carshalton’s heir, I cannot.”

Dante took those words to mean that she very much held it as a possibility, but if it were true, it would break her heart.

“I have no wish to be the center of intrigue,” she went on with more passion before he could find words to reassure her. “I know that some of my friends relish the chance to be the heroine of some sort of thrilling story. Lady Yvette most certainly does.”

Dante laughed a little, glancing off at the hedge maze, where Lady Yvette and Theydon had disappeared. "I've no doubt of that."

"Miss Pennypacker is far stronger than I'll ever be, and Lady Patience is so much more daring," Miss Benning went on. "But I don't want any of that." She sighed.

"What do you want?" Dante asked, inching closer to her, even though part of him warned that he was closer to crossing a very important line with the lovely woman than he should have been.

The way Miss Benning glanced longingly at him made Dante's heart beat faster. "I just want to marry and keep house for a good man," she said. "I want to be a mother and make the world a better place for my family."

"I think it is entirely likely that you will do all of that and more someday, Miss Benning," Dante said, utterly charmed.

Miss Benning's mouth twitched into a smile, but impatience flashed in her eyes. "I don't want the more, Lord Bygrave. I don't want to be a mysterious heiress, or to have a mother I've never known and always believed to have died bringing me into the world to suddenly make her name known." She held up the scrap of paper.

"Do you know for certain that your mother is dead?" Dante asked before he could think better of it. "I'm sorry, that was a callous question," he said.

Miss Benning lowered her head. "Papa has never confirmed that is the case," she admitted. "He has told me next to nothing about her, only that her name was Mary, she was a good woman, and he is forever grateful for her bringing me into his life."

Dante reached for Miss Benning's hand to hold it in comfort. A lot had been left unsaid with those words. At least Benning had never lied to his daughter, or so Dante assumed. The vague nature of the information he had given her meant that Dante could only conclude the woman had either not died in childbirth after all, or if she truly had, there were people in

the world, people at Nedworth Hall, who knew Mary's true identity.

"Do you have any idea who penned this note?" he asked, more like an investigator taking on a case than a suitor curious about the paternity of his would-be bride.

Miss Benning took a resigned breath and shook her head. "None at all. It's written in pencil, not pen, and on regular paper, not fine parchment. So it wasn't necessarily written by anyone of means or title in the house. Granted, that does not rule out someone of noble birth. They could have taken paper and a pencil from a servant. But it could be someone's servant, either a member of the household or one brought here by a guest."

Dante blinked in astonishment and smiled at Miss Benning. "Those are astute observations, Miss Benning," he said, his heart pounding for her. "You're exceptionally clever."

Miss Benning blushed and glanced down. "Not really," she said. "But I have spent quite a bit of time in my papa's and Uncle Horace's offices."

Miss Benning was more and more of a revelation with each passing moment.

Dante was about to tell her as much, but Covington and Lady Patience had come back to fetch them.

"There you are," Lady Patience said. "We've come up with the idea of creating a shadow puppet play for Lord and Lady Cambourne as thanks for their hospitality. We need the both of you to help us come up with a plot and to construct the puppets and shadow theater."

"A shadow puppet play?" Miss Benning asked, smiling at the idea.

"Everyone is required to participate," Covington told Dante, a sparkle in his eyes.

Dante grinned back at him. He suspected the shadow part of the endeavor was the point, and that the whole thing was an excuse to allow those who were coupled to spend time together.

He was all for that.

“I’ll participate if you will,” he told Miss Benning, offering his arm so that they could accompany Covington and Lady Patience around the garden. He leaned in closer to add, “And I will do everything I can to help you discover who penned that note.”

“Thank you, Lord Bygrave,” Miss Benning said.

“Call me Dante,” Dante whispered against her ear.

Miss Benning blushed, smiled beautifully, and nodded, though she didn’t speak his name.

She didn’t speak his name *yet*. If Dante had his wishes, she would speak his name every day for the rest of their lives, whether she was Carshalton’s heir or not.

Chapter Three

Charlotte had never known it was possible to experience such feelings of elation and anxiety simultaneously. Her walk through the gardens with...Dante, he had asked her to call him by his given name...had been glorious and uplifting. A viscount found her charming and was paying her all his attention. Charlotte could practically see her dream of marrying a good man and bearing him children appearing on the horizon, like a ship full of good things sailing back to its home port.

But at the same time, the disturbing note Jack had handed her burned like a brand in her pocket throughout the afternoon.

Who could have sent such a thing to her? Why would they approach her with a revelation about her origins now? And worst of all, what if someone knew something she did not about herself? What if she truly was Lord Carshalton's heir?

“I find it disconcerting in the extreme,” she whispered to Dante later that afternoon, as their group sat at tables in one of the larger parlors, cutting black paper to make their shadow puppets.

Lady Yvette had taken the lead on writing and rehearsing the play itself, along with Lord Theydon, but Lady Eleanor seemed intent on having a hand in the whole thing and dragging the Duke of Foxley along, so there was quite a bit of noise at the other end of the room.

“It is concerning when one stops to consider that someone might know more about your own life than you do,” Dante agreed.

Charlotte burst into an unexpected smile, proving that her emotions were as changeable as the wind at present. “So you do understand,” she said, desperately tempted to reach her hand across the table to where Dante was sorting bits of puppets they’d cut out so that they might be assembled and take his hand. “It is so reassuring to know that I am not alone in this.”

Dante paused his work and did what Charlotte did not dare. He reached for her hand, brushing the back of it with his fingertips in a way that sent shivers up Charlotte’s spine. “I understand that we all have things about ourselves that we would prefer others not to know,” he said, sliding his fingers around so that he could gently take her hand. “And I can imagine that it would be deeply troubling if someone else was privy to those secrets when we ourselves are not.”

Charlotte pinched her brow in confusion. “Do you have secrets, Lord Bygrave?” she asked.

“Dante,” he corrected, murmuring as if the word were its own love poem. His gaze was so soft and warm that for a moment, Charlotte forgot she’d asked him a question at all, until he asked, “Would you be horrified if I did have a secret?”

Charlotte blinked out of the intoxicating spell he’d cast on her. She had all the feelings that her engaged friends had spoken of in the last few weeks. So much so that she was

beginning to understand why a woman would risk her reputation to act upon them.

“*Do* you have a secret, Dante?” she asked, lowering her eyes a bit as she spoke his name.

She wasn’t trying to be coy, but when she glanced up at him with her head still bowed and saw the way Dante drew in a breath and his cheeks flushed, she feared she was acting like some sort of coquette.

“You cannot reveal the location of the object the hero seeks so early in the play,” Lady Eleanor shouted from the other end of the room, shocking Charlotte out of her moment of warmth. “The revelation must come when the hero himself finds out.”

“It is better for the audience to know sooner in the drama,” Lady Yvette argued in return. “That way they feel as if they know something the characters do not and can anticipate the moment when all is revealed.”

Charlotte and Dante turned in unison to find the two ladies standing nearly toe-to-toe, as if they would fly into some sort of boxing match at any moment.

“Poppycock,” Lady Eleanor snorted. “You simply enjoy feeling superior to others.”

“Oh?” Lady Yvette said, pulling back a little. “Is this the pot calling the kettle black that I hear?”

“How dare you?” Lady Eleanor gasped. She then turned to the side and snapped. “What are you giggling at, you sniveling wench?” to Miss Silverstone.

Poor Miss Silverstone had been helping the Duke of Foxley hang the sheet against which their shadow play would be enacted. Judging by the smile on the duke’s face and the way he and Miss Silverstone faced each other, Miss Silverstone was laughing at something the duke had said, not at her mistress’s arguments.

“Oh,” Miss Silverstone said, dropping her end of the sheet. “I...I’m terribly sorry, my lady,” she said, wilting like a flower kept in a closet.

“Wretched, miserable girl,” Lady Eleanor mumbled as she stepped away from Lady Yvette and snatched up her shawl from a sofa where she’d left it. “Come here at once,” she ordered, then hissed, “This is what one gets when they hire a foundling as a companion.”

Miss Silverstone scrambled across the parlor to help Lady Eleanor don her shawl, then followed meekly as Lady Eleanor marched out of the room, chin tilted up.

A brief, crackling silence followed before Lady Yvette sighed with perhaps a bit too much satisfaction and said, “Well, wasn’t that a delightful bit of drama.”

Lady Patience and Miss Pennypacker laughed, but all Charlotte could manage was an uncomfortable titter.

“Do not worry,” Dante said, holding her hand tighter. “Yes, we all have secrets, myself included. But I will protect you from whatever damage might be done by those who wish to use the revelation of secrets to do you harm.”

Charlotte blinked as an idea came to her. “Do you think that Lady Eleanor was the one to send me the message?” she asked in a whisper, leaning over the table to be closer to Dante. “She does seem determined to win the duke for herself and to diminish the other ladies who have yet to find themselves husbands, as we have all come here to do.”

As soon as the words were out of Charlotte’s mouth, she was mortified. Not only had she disparaged one of her friends, she had more or less stated that she was husband hunting and Dante would need to be exceedingly dull not to realise he was her target.

Fortunately, Dante only smiled and raked his thumb over the back of her knuckles. “I do think Lady Eleanor is motivated by jealousy, and that she wishes to be a duchess. But surely, she must know that you are otherwise spoken for and therefore no competition of hers.”

His eyes lit with fire and the way he leaned even more toward her made Charlotte wonder for a moment if he would kiss her. Right there. In the parlor with their friends all around.

Good sense got the better of him—or perhaps it would be better to say that fate intervened to preserve Charlotte’s reputation—when the duke interrupted them with a polite call of, “I say, Bygrave, would you help me finish hanging this sheet?”

That was the end of the private moment between Charlotte and Dante. Obliging and affable as always, Dante stood and crossed to help Foxley, and Lady Yvette joined Charlotte at the table to finish constructing the puppets.

“Lady Eleanor is an absolute pill,” Lady Yvette mumbled as they worked. “She believes herself to be superior to the rest of us. But I know things that she does not know,” she added with a mysterious look.

Charlotte merely smiled politely in return. She could feel that Lady Yvette was goading her into asking what her secrets were, but Charlotte was too embroiled in her own mysteries to guess at anyone else’s. Even with Dante’s pledge of help, she still had no idea who could have sent her the note or who might have known the identity of her mother.

A thousand questions continued to swirl through her head as she made her way upstairs to her room to change for supper an hour later. Why would someone contact her about her mother now? It had to have something to do with Nedworth Hall. Whoever knew the truth must have been a member of the party. Or perhaps a part of Nedworth’s staff. Perhaps Lady Cambourne herself knew the answer and had invited her expressly to reveal all.

Those thoughts danced around in her head as she opened the door to her bedroom, then stopped abruptly with a gasp at the sight of her bed.

There, lying out as if waiting for a babe to be brought into the room, was a simple, antique baby gown. Its once white linen had yellowed with age and it had a stain on the skirt, as if it had been left in the damp at some point, but it was undeniably a very small baby’s gown. Placed on top of it was another note.

Charlotte flew across the room to snatch up the note with shaking hands. She pulled it open with almost enough force to rip the simple paper—like something a butcher might wrap meat in—and read.

“This was your christening gown. Mr. Benning graciously allowed me to keep it as a memento. He was a good and dear man, despite what others said.”

Charlotte clapped a hand to her mouth as she read the few words, written in neat pencil, over and over. Was it some sort of threat? Was the author of the note threatening to expose her in some way? Or perhaps to expose her dear papa? Her papa was a good man, therefore she could not imagine anyone saying anything against him. Had he been scrutinized or vilified for getting whoever her mother was with child?

A sound at the door as someone entered without knocking shocked Charlotte so deeply that she yelped in panic as she whirled around. It was only her lady’s maid, Vicky, entering the room with what appeared to be her freshly pressed supper gown, but Charlotte nearly burst into tears all the same.

“My lady,” Vicky said, closing the door and rushing to put the gown down, then to attempt to comfort Charlotte. “Whatever is the matter?”

“I....” Charlotte hesitated. She trusted Vicky, but she was too uncertain of her own feelings and the implications of what someone was trying to do to trust the woman with everything just yet. “Someone must have mistaken my room for someone else’s,” she said, breathless and high-pitched. She crumpled the note in her hand to hide it. “They’ve left an old baby’s gown in the room.”

Vicky glanced to the bed when Charlotte did, then frowned. “That’s strange,” she said, breaking away from Charlotte to go to the bed and pick up the gown. “I’m certain I saw Mrs. Seymour, the cook, and Mrs. Blanchard, the housekeeper, arguing over this very gown earlier with one of the maids, Flora.” She lifted the baby gown carefully and brushed a hand over it. Then she glanced to Charlotte. “I could

return it to them or find out who it was intended for, if you'd like."

Charlotte pressed a hand to her stomach and swallowed, then nodded quickly. "Yes, please. Or, no." She stopped Vicky as she started across the room. "That can wait until later. I need to dress for supper first."

"Yes, my lady." Vicky put the baby gown on one of the chairs near the window and came to help Charlotte change.

In fact, Charlotte couldn't have cared less about changing, even though it was necessary and expected. But it occurred to her that whoever had placed the gown in her room had done it for a reason, and until she learned who it was and why, she wanted to keep the whole thing quiet.

As far as she knew, Nedworth's housekeeper, cook, and maids were honorable and discreet—well, she had not met Mrs. Seymour, the cook, at all, since there was no call for any of Lord and Lady Cambourne's guests to venture into the kitchens and no excuse for the kitchen staff to be seen abovestairs—but she did not want to risk gossip.

All the same, she was anxious and on edge once she went downstairs, and all through supper as well. Even though Dante walked her in, as usual, and sat by her side.

"Has something else happened?" Dante asked once conversation around the table had turned to the shadow puppet play to be performed after supper. "You seem more pale than you did this afternoon."

Charlotte glanced around the table, and when she was certain no one was listening to the two of them, she turned to Dante and whispered, "I received another note when I went upstairs to change, and with it a baby's christening gown. The note stated that the gown was my own."

She felt a bit miserable telling Dante all these things, but her heart was so agitated by it all that she needed to confide in someone.

Dante looked nobly concerned. "I'm not happy about the way someone is toying with your emotions," he said, reaching

under the table to rest his hand on her leg.

The gesture was, perhaps, a bit too forward, and Charlotte had the impression that Dante had misjudged the distance to her knee and ended up caressing part of her inner thigh instead, but she didn't care. Her blood was suddenly enlivened, and instead of panicking about what someone in the house knew about her past, she could only think of Dante and all of the promise between them.

She was certain something might have happened, but just then, Lady Yvette stood at the end of the table, wine glass in hand, and said, "To our theatrical endeavors and all the joy they bring."

Everyone at the table—well, everyone but Lady Eleanor—raised their glasses and cheered on the toast. Charlotte nearly knocked her glass over as she quickly reached for it. She had no idea what sort of conversation had led to the toast or what anyone at the table had been talking about, but she called out, "Hear, hear," with everyone else, then stood to leave the supper table with the others once it was done.

There was a confused buzz of activity as everyone departed the dining room and headed down the hall to the parlor where the play would take place. Only their group was involved in presenting the play, so they entered the parlor while the rest of Lord and Lady Cambourne's guests, and Lord and Lady Cambourne themselves, remained in the hallway for the time being.

It took longer to put everything in place for the play than anyone anticipated. Lanterns needed to be lit, scenery needed to be hung, and the puppets themselves needed to be arranged so that they would be ready for use. While Miss Pennypacker and Miss Silverstone arranged the puppets, with Mr. Crymble's and Foxley's help, Lord Rothbury set about dimming the lights in the room.

In the midst of that, Dante grasped Charlotte's hand and led her to the far, unused end of the room. He drew her behind one of the screens that shielded the tables and excess supplies from creating the play from the audience.

“I am concerned for you, my dear,” Dante said, standing extremely close so that they could both fit behind the screen and not have their conversation noted or overheard. “This business with the notes and someone claiming to know your mother has you distressed.”

“What if I’m not who I believe myself to be?” Charlotte asked, letting her fears out. “What if...what if my papa isn’t my papa? I think it would break my heart.” Her voice caught on the end of her words.

“Whatever the circumstances,” Dante said, resting a hand on the side of Charlotte’s face, “your papa is your father. He earned that right by loving you and raising you to be the wonderful young woman you are. Whatever the truth of the matter, you can rest assured in that.”

“Oh, Dante,” Charlotte sighed, so comforted by his words she could have cried.

He went on to say, “We are who we create ourselves to be. Even if the rest of the world might call that a lie, we know the truth in our own hearts and demonstrate that with our lives.”

There was something strange and introspective in the way he spoke. It was enough to make Charlotte wonder what sort of truths he might have that the rest of the world might have called lies.

But those thoughts were banished a moment later when Dante focused his gaze on her again and murmured, “I will protect you from anything. I am devoted to you, Charlotte. I am your servant.”

He followed those words with a kiss. It was quick at first, then deep and slow as he slanted his mouth over hers, teased her lips with his own, then parted them to taste her.

Charlotte had never been kissed before, let alone in such a manner. Right from the start, it was divine. She gave herself fully to it, leaning into Dante and sliding her hands around his back. She let him explore her mouth in full, and when one of his hands brushed across her breast, she pressed into it.

The kiss was so glorious and invigorating that she found herself making small sounds of pleasure. She knew she should stop, but it was as if some powerful force within her had finally discovered what it had been craving her whole life, and she wanted more.

Dante seemed to feel the same way. His sigh held volumes of passion as he changed the way he kissed her. He moved closer still to her, tugging her right up against him until she was certain she could feel something in his trousers. She gasped, then made a sound of invitation.

She wanted it, whatever it was. She wanted Dante. Best of all, she knew that she could have him if she wanted, and that he could have her.

Just as she began to relax into that thought, someone clapped, and with a clattering of chairs and the sound of the parlor doors opening, Charlotte was suddenly aware that she and Dante were far from alone.

Chapter Four

Dante should have known better. From the moment he slipped behind the screen to be alone with Charlotte in the dark, he was well aware that he should have known better. He briefly told himself that he was merely pledging his loyalty and protection to Charlotte...right up until the moment when he had her in his arms with his mouth slanted over hers.

It was heaven. Mercenary intentions be damned. Yes, he needed an infusion of cash to cover Damien's debts and to help his father keep the family name and estate from sinking, but all that faded to nothing as he realized how dearly he loved Charlotte.

And it was love. It may have been new and blended with the infatuation of a new acquaintance, but its roots were true and the shoots springing from it contained the promise of a lifetime within—

The clap coming from the other side of the screen, followed by a rise in the noise as their audience for the evening entered, sent Dante hurling back to earth.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, backing away from Charlotte, though he still held her hand.

“Oh,” Charlotte sighed. There was not much light in that corner of the room, but there was enough for Dante to see Charlotte’s crestfallen expression.

“You misunderstand me, my darling,” Dante rushed to correct her, tightening his grip on her hand. “I want nothing more than to continue to make love to you all night. I was merely asking your forgiveness for potentially embarrassing you with our...closeness.”

“Oh!” Charlotte said, her tone and expression completely different. “Yes, you are wise to have forbearance.”

Whether she acknowledged it or not, Charlotte, too, had not only forbearance, but decided cleverness. She grabbed a few scattered items, including a pair of shears, from the table beside them, then walked out from behind the screen as though their entire purpose for retiring there had been nothing more than to fetch supplies for the play.

A quick survey of the room proved that no one had seen Dante and Charlotte secret themselves behind the screen, and no one seemed to notice them emerging either. As had become typical for the house party, Lady Yvette seemed to have monopolized everyone’s attention by greeting the audience as they flooded into the room.

“Welcome, welcome one and all to this premier performance of *The Princess and the Troubadour*,” she said, holding her arms wide.

“I was of the opinion that we had decided to name the play *Love’s Triumph*,” Lady Eleanor said with a huff.

“No, no, we decided nothing of the sort,” Lady Yvette said, lowering her arms and frowning at Lady Eleanor.

Dante rested his hand on the small of Charlotte’s back and ushered her toward the sheet at the front of the room. He had

the sense that often came with a storm on the horizon that something was about to burst, and he didn't want Charlotte to be nearby when the inevitable clash began. He didn't want to be near Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor either. Theydon—who had been suspiciously close to Lady Yvette the whole time—and Foxley seemed to have the whole thing in hand, and Miss Silverstone hovered near her mistress, like she would pull her back to safety.

“I wish they wouldn't fight,” Charlotte said as she and Dante moved behind the sheet, where those who were seriously dedicated to the shadow play had everything primed and ready to go. “But I am grateful for the diversion they created.”

The way the shadows from the lanterns at the back of the room highlighted Charlotte's smile made the expression seem far more mischievous than modest. The idea that Charlotte had a bit of mischief within her, despite being the sweetest, most innocent young lady of his acquaintance, had Dante's heart hammering against his ribs and his trousers tightening with desire. What he wouldn't give to be the one to unleash the naughtiness that he could see lingering just under Charlotte's charming demeanor.

“Whatever the play is called,” Lady Yvette's voice rang out loudly from the other side of the sheet, “it is time to begin. Please take your seats.”

Dante watched Charlotte as she hurried to join Miss Pennypacker, Lady Angeline, and Lady Patience where they sat on cushions on the floor, just behind the sheet. The way things had been decided that afternoon, those three ladies would maneuver the puppets to produce the actions of the characters in the play. Dante, Rothbury, and Mr. Crymble would provide the scenic effects, and Covington was responsible for sound effects.

The play itself would be recited by Lady Yvette, Lady Eleanor, Theydon, and Foxley as they stood in front of the sheet, occasionally directing the audience's attention to particular shadows that would be cast onto the sheet by the light of the lanterns. Dante actually found the whole thing to

be an ingenious form of entertainment, one that had existed for millennia.

“Our story begins with a lonely troubadour, Vincent, who set out on a journey from his tiny hamlet in the French countryside in search of a magic lyre,” Lady Yvette said in a voice that would have been at home on any of the grand stages of Europe.

Theydon started to sing, but before he could get past the first note, Lady Eleanor interrupted with, “I thought we’d agreed his name was Victor and that he came from a cottage in the Black Forest and was in search of a silver trumpet.”

Dante caught Charlotte’s eye as she held up the paper figure of the troubadour. He rolled his eyes at the argument brewing on the other side of the sheet.

To his delight, Charlotte giggled, her eyes flashing back at him in the lantern light.

Better still, instead of being shocked or subdued by Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor’s bickering, the audience chuckled softly as well.

“Regardless,” Lady Yvette sighed. “The troubadour of undecided name set out from his indeterminate home in search of a magical item of great power, and he sang as he did so,” she rushed to add in a slightly louder voice, as if doing so would prevent Lady Eleanor from interrupting again.

It worked. Theydon resumed his song—and the man was a surprisingly adequate singer at that—as Charlotte danced her paper figure from one side of the sheet to the other to mimic the character traveling. As she did, Dante and Rothbury passed a string of paper birds and clouds across the rollers that had been set up at the top of the sheet to indicate movement.

“The troubadour traveled over hill and dale, day and night, until he reached a river at the edge of the forest,” Lady Eleanor said, her voice hard and a bit clenched. Dante imagined her glaring at Lady Yvette in an attempt to force her version of the story they were telling into being.

“And as he reached that *lake*,” Lady Yvette said, emphasizing the word, “he was met by a mermaid.”

“He was met by a dryad, because mermaids only live in the ocean, not in lakes or rivers,” Lady Eleanor said through clenched teeth.

The audience chuckled a bit louder. Behind the sheet, Crymble had moved a piece of blue glass over one of the lanterns to create a spot on the sheet that could be seen as either a lake or a river. Charlotte stopped the figure of the troubadour, and Miss Pennypacker had lifted a puppet that could have resembled a mermaid or a dryad of some sort. Dante couldn't see what the figure looked like from the view of the audience.

“Good Sir Troubadour,” Miss Silverstone read the mermaid-dryad's lines in a surprisingly strong, sweet voice. “Why have you traveled so far from your home?”

Foxley cleared his throat and answered, “I have ventured far away from my, er, French home in the Black Forest to reach this, um, river-lake because I was told that the—blast—the occupant of this, er, body of water might have information as to the whereabouts of a—dash it all—magical item of great importance.”

Foxley added an additional few words at the end of his speech that caused someone on that side of the room to gasp, and someone else to burst into peals of laughter.

They weren't the only ones laughing. More and more of the audience members were finding it difficult to take the play seriously. From the side of the sheet where he stood, Dante could see a few of the younger house party guests practically falling over each other with laughter, hands clapped to their faces, as they watched the real drama unfold.

“I know of this magical, musical instrument of which you speak,” Miss Silverstone continued gracefully, despite the ball of confusion that the plot of the play was descending into. “But before I tell you, you must bring me three items of great value from the surrounding land.”

Dante exchanged another look with Charlotte as she grabbed a second puppet, this one of a bear, to be ready for the next part of the play.

It didn't matter what was going on with the others, Charlotte was radiant. It didn't matter that she was crouched on the floor behind a sheet, or that the heat from the lanterns illuminating the scene had a sheen of dew forming on her brow and parts of her blouse. The smile that she couldn't seem to wipe away as the action of the play grew more and more frantic as Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor battled was breathtaking.

Best of all, Charlotte continually glanced to Dante, as if the two of them were part of something gloriously entertaining together and not grasping to keep up on their own. That she was able to keep up as Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor constantly changed the story, having the troubadour go first to a castle, then to a cave, as he met a dragon that was somehow a wizard in the very next sentence, was so endearing that Dante stopped paying attention to the twists and turns of the drama at all and had eyes only for Charlotte.

In the joy that shone from her, he could see the spritely child she had likely been and that she could very well give birth to for him someday. He admired the maturity and grace with which she kept her wits about her as her friends grew closer and closer to blows. He adored the way that her laughter was clearly for the delight of the game they were all now playing and not something cruel to make fun of the ladies who were embarrassing themselves on the other side of the sheet.

In short, Charlotte was perfection. Dante wanted to marry her and make her his viscountess, and someday, when his father passed, his countess, more than anything in the world. He would find a way to propose to her that very night. And if she was willing, he would do what so many of the other house party guests had dared to do and find a way to take Charlotte to bed.

Those amorous thoughts were cut off by a shout of, "You wicked cow!" from Lady Eleanor.

Dante started, turning away from his adoration of Charlotte and glancing out from behind the sheet to see what was happening.

He'd lost track of the dialog, but whatever had been said, Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor had stepped in front of the action on the sheet to stare each other down from mere inches away.

“What did you call me?” Lady Yvette demanded.

“A wicked, despicable, immoral cow,” Lady Eleanor repeated her insult.

Dante ducked back behind the sheet, gesturing to the ladies with the puppets that the play was over and the real drama had begun.

Charlotte set her puppets aside and leapt up—Dante reached for her and gave her a hand, then kept her hand in his—to step around the edge of the sheet.

The others did the same just in time to witness Lady Yvette saying, “Are those the only words you know? I would have thought that someone with as sharp a tongue and as abrasive a personality as yours would have a larger vocabulary.”

“I can think of more than a few words that would describe you,” Lady Eleanor growled, her hands balled into fists at her sides. “But it would be impolite of me to say such words in mixed company.”

“Bitch,” Lady Yvette said, not so much as an accusation, but as an inventory of possible words, words she was not afraid to use. “Cunt. Whore.”

Half of the audience, on both sides of the sheet, gasped in scandalized shock. The other half burst into uproarious laughter.

Lady Yvette played up to the laughter, grinning at those who were amused as if she were a comedienne on the stage. Or in some sort of music hall. They donched closer to her, laughing, but also looking as though Lady Yvette had gone too far.

“Why am I not surprised in the least that a woman of your despicable character would know such words,” Lady Eleanor said. Whereas Lady Yvette had taken on the mien of an actress, she suddenly looked more like a major in the Salvation Army. “Only a woman of the lowest moral value would speak such things.” She glanced to Foxley, as if she had been trying to impress him with her statements.

Foxley stood off to the side, Miss Silverstone beside him, looking mortified. Miss Silverstone glanced up at him, then stepped toward her mistress and whispered, “My lady, perhaps now is not the time.”

“Shut up, you fool,” Lady Eleanor snapped at her.

Miss Silverstone jerked back as though she had been stung. Foxley frowned at her, then glared at Lady Eleanor.

Lady Eleanor didn’t notice. She had turned back to Lady Yvette, and by the look in her eyes, she had her knives out. “Don’t think I don’t know what you have been getting up to at this house party,” she said. “If anyone knows what it is to be a shameless harlot, it is you.”

“There you go,” Lady Yvette said, extending a hand to Lady Eleanor, as if on cue. “Tossing about terms you wouldn’t understand, seeing as you have no inkling of what a harlot gets up to and likely never will.”

Those in the audience who were laughing laughed harder, while those who were horrified squirmed in their seats and glanced to the doors.

“I understand what she’s doing, but she needs to stop,” Charlotte whispered, pressing herself close to Dante’s side, almost as if she would hide behind him.

It was likely wrong of Dante to slip his arm around her, like he could shelter her from the madness unfolding, but he did it anyhow. “And what is she doing?” he asked.

“Can’t you see?” Charlotte said, leaning closer to him still. “She’s terrified. She’s trying to make it all seem like part of the entertainment, because she’s afraid of what might happen otherwise.”

Dante drew in a slow breath as he recognized that Charlotte was right. Lady Yvette was in a panic, but she was the sort of woman who could turn panic into defense by pretending she was in control of the situation. Funnily, now that he saw it, it occurred to Dante that Lady Yvette had been in a constant state of panic from the moment he'd first met her at the beginning of the house party.

His observations returned to the scene in general, which had gone on as he and Charlotte had whispered, when Lady Eleanor shouted, "I heard you just now, you and Lord Theydon."

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Theydon said from the side, his jaw tight and his frown pronounced.

"Behind the screen," Lady Eleanor said, nearing hysterics. "Did you not think anyone would hear your passionate sighs and the rustle of fabric as you did unspeakable things?"

Lady Yvette and Theydon exchanged a confused, panicked look. Several members of the audience hummed with interest and turned to look at the screens in question. A few of the ladies rose from their seats and headed for the doors, bathing the room in light once they had them open.

Dante winced and loosened his grasp on Charlotte on the off chance that someone should look their way and she should be implicated. Because he knew as well as anyone that it wasn't Lady Yvette and Theydon that Lady Eleanor had overheard behind the screen, it was him and Charlotte. He'd been careless, and if the winds of accusation shifted and blew the storm over to them, Charlotte's reputation might be in danger.

"You did not hear either myself or Lady Yvette, or both of us together, Lady Eleanor," Theydon tried to salvage the situation.

"I heard someone," Lady Eleanor said, as if she didn't believe him.

"And what is so wrong with enjoying intimacy now and then?" Lady Yvette argued, tilting her chin up until she looked

rather like a Valkyrie about to ride. “God would not have given us bodies that feel pleasure or inspired us with ardor if He did not intend us to put those feelings to use. And why limit those feelings to the bonds of marriage either? Just because someone has signed a paper and stood before an altar with another does not suddenly make intimacy right or acceptable.”

Something in Lady Yvette’s defiant but sorrowful expression jogged Dante’s memory. Lady Yvette had been married once, to a much older man. She had been widowed within the last two years as well. The poor woman must have been speaking from experience.

But that was not what ultimately caught Dante’s attention about the speech. It wasn’t what captivated everyone else in the room either, despite the radical views Lady Yvette had expressed.

What brought everyone else in the room to silence and left them with their jaws dropped was the man who stepped into the bright doorway, dressed to perfection, smiling broadly, and said, “I could not agree more.”

Dante caught his breath, then puffed it out on a single word, “Damien.”

Chapter Five

The man who stood in the parlor's doorway was an exact copy of Dante in every way, from his height to the shape of his form to the features of his face. He was dressed for travel, but still maintained an aura of fashion and friendliness that made Charlotte smile, despite the odd and exciting manner of the man's arrival.

Even had Dante not whispered his brother's name, Charlotte would have guessed in an instant they were brothers. She'd known twins before—her dear papa and Uncle Horace had a pair of friends, Mr. James and Mr. Jonathan Dorian, who came to visit sometimes when Charlotte was invited on holidays just like the house party where she found herself now—but those two lovely gentlemen weren't anywhere close to being as identical in every way as Dante and his brother.

The others in the room noticed it as well. Nothing else could have ended the argument between Lady Yvette and Lady

Eleanor as thoroughly. One of the gentlemen Charlotte had not come to know particularly well even exclaimed, “Good god! It is as if the two of you are the same person!”

“We most certainly are not the same person,” Dante murmured, then broke away from Charlotte. “Damien, what are you doing here?” he asked, dodging around several of the stunned audience members as he tried to reach his brother at the door.

Lord Rothbury and the Duke of Foxley had gone to work lighting lamps around the room to illuminate the scene more—though Miss Silverstone appeared to be trying to stop the duke from engaging in an activity that was decidedly beneath him—so by the time the two brothers met near the doorway, there was more than enough light for everyone to marvel at the sight of the two men together.

“Why, I heard there was a grand and enjoyable party to be had, and I simply could not prevent myself from joining,” Damien said, his smile dazzling. He glanced to Lord and Lady Cambourne, who stood near the back of the room, evidently conferring on the matter. “But if I am not invited, I will leave,” he added.

Lord Cambourne said one last word to his wife, then stepped away, clearing his throat, like he would take charge of things. “You are welcome to join us, sir,” he said, addressing Damien as if he knew the man well already. “But be aware that the purpose of this particular party might not be one you would care to participate in.”

A curious whisper spread across the assembled guests. Charlotte puzzled over it herself. The purpose of the party, to her understanding, was to enable young men and women who had been passed over on the marriage market to find a spouse at last. Dante’s brother had as much of a right to marry as anyone else...didn’t he?

“Lord Cambourne,” Damien said, sidling over to Lord Cambourne and addressing him with far too much familiarity. “You should know that I will always care to participate in any sort of party.” He dared to wink at the man, then glanced

across the audience as though he were on a stage and said, “I see so many jolly faces here, and I’m certain we can find all sorts of ways to entertain ourselves and others.”

Damien seemed to focus in on Jack, who stood off to one side of the room in his finest footman’s livery, barely able to contain his amusement at the misbehavior of the upper classes. Jack’s expression flashed to surprise and then an even wider grin when Damien winked at him as well.

“I, for one, believe that more makes merrier,” Lady Yvette said, swishing past Lady Eleanor so that she could move around the edge of the audience to be in a position to be introduced to Damien.

She wore a smile on her face that Charlotte wasn’t certain she approved of, but that smile dropped when Lord Theydon caught her arm, pulled her back, and whispered something in her ear.

“Truly?” she whispered back to him, eyes suddenly bright with mirth.

Charlotte didn’t catch his answer. Before it came, Lady Eleanor growled, “Of course you would want to make the acquaintance of yet another man of clearly questionable character,” and added a huff, as if she knew how low Lady Yvette would stoop to gain male favor.

Charlotte was as shocked at the rudeness of her comment as anything. But once again, she did not have time to react before she was drawn in another direction.

“Which one is the charming Miss Benning that you have written to me about?” Damien asked Dante while gazing curiously over the guests.

Dante pinched the bridge of his nose in aggravation, then grabbed his brother’s arm to march him around the front of the room to Charlotte. The other guests took that as a cue that the entertainments for the evening were over and began to gather themselves and leave the room.

“This is Miss Charlotte Benning,” Dante introduced his brother as they met in one of the less crowded corners of the

room. “Miss Benning, this is my miscreant brother, Mr. Damien Dixon.”

“How do you do?” Damien greeted Charlotte with a purr in his voice that was positively scandalous. He reached for her hand and drew it up to kiss her bare knuckles, another outrageously forward gesture.

It was the way he wiggled his eyebrows once the first kiss was done before stealing a second kiss that had Charlotte bursting into laughter. “I am well, I suppose,” she said, barely able to keep herself composed. “Though to be honest, after the last fifteen minutes, I’m not certain how I should be feeling about much of anything.”

“Yes, I have that effect on people,” Damien said with a graceful shrug of his shoulder, letting her hand go.

Charlotte laughed more, even though Dante rolled his eyes and sighed. Dante’s reaction was as endearing as his brother’s charm.

“My brother is an utter nuisance, Miss Benning,” Dante said, glancing out over the room as if to make certain everyone was leaving. “He has a habit of arriving places uninvited when he thinks he has something to gain there.”

“Of course I have something to gain,” Damien said, as bright as ever, which now formed an amusing contrast with Dante’s irritation. “I have made the acquaintance of the most beautiful and lovely woman in all of England, and I dearly hope that acquaintance blossoms into something more.”

Charlotte grinned from ear to ear. “You’ve only just met me, Mr. Dixon,” she reminded him.

“Yes, but my dear brother here has been writing to me about you for weeks now,” he revealed. “I feel as though we are intimately acquainted already.” He shifted closer to her and lowered his voice to end his sentence.

Heat flooded Charlotte, but she still felt the desire to laugh. “Dante—er, that is, Lord Bygrave—has written to you about me?”

She peeked at Dante to find his cheeks pink and his countenance tight with sheepishness. “How could I not write about you?” he asked Charlotte in a quiet voice.

Charlotte’s insides shivered and danced with hope and something she was reasonably certain was desire. Dante wanted her. Enough to write to his brother about her.

“And now that I have seen for myself, I can tell precisely what my brother has found so delightful,” Damien took the reins of the interaction once more. He leaned closer to Charlotte and said, “I may have to steal you for myself.”

Charlotte laughed. Dante did not. He scowled suddenly at his brother as though Damien had committed a terrible offense.

“I am not offended,” Charlotte rushed to reassure him. “I know enough not to be swayed by flattery.” She sent Dante a look that she hoped conveyed that wild horses couldn’t drag her affections away from him.

Dante frowned at his brother for another moment, before relenting and smiling at Charlotte. “You are, as always, too kind, Miss Benning,” he said, reaching for her and touching her arm. “But if you will excuse me, I need to have a further word with my brother and discuss his accommodations with Lord and Lady Cambourne.”

“Of course,” Charlotte said, inclining her head slightly to Damien. “You should be well settled before we make each other’s acquaintance more fully. And I should very much like to learn more about Lord Bygrave’s brother. I will confess that I already find you most fascinating.”

“And you have only begun to scratch the surface of how fascinating I can be, Miss Benning,” Damien said with a supremely flirtatious look.

Dante sighed and muttered something under his breath, rubbing his brow as well. Charlotte felt a little sorry for him, but she could also sense the love and care between the two brothers, so she did not hold Dante’s aggravation against Damien.

“I should help my friends tidy up after our shadow play,” Charlotte said, starting over to where Lady Angeline and Lady Patience, along with their fiancés, were taking down the sheet and sorting things. “It was lovely to meet you, Mr. Dixon.”

“It will be lovelier still on the morrow,” Damien said.

Charlotte laughed. “I don’t doubt it.”

In fact, as she stepped over to join her friends, she was relatively certain the house party was about to fly off into another sort of adventure entirely.

“What are you doing?” Dante whispered sharply.

He grabbed his brother’s arm and marched him out of the parlor as fast as he could.

Damien went with him, but glanced over his shoulder at Charlotte as they went. He also seemed to catch the footman’s eye before Dante yanked him out into the hallway.

“What do you mean, what am I doing?” Damien asked once they were secluded in the hallway. “You wrote to say you’d found a charming young heiress, and I’ve come to assess the situation.”

Dante flushed with guilt as he remembered the tone and content of the earliest letters he’d sent to Damien. With a sigh, he tugged his brother even farther down the hall and into a smaller parlor so that he could be assured they’d be quite alone.

“I will admit that my earliest assessments of Miss Benning were a little on the mercenary side,” he said, keeping his voice low despite the fact that they were alone. “But I have come to see that she is one of the most lovely women of my acquaintance.”

“No!” Damien gasped in amused horror. “Oh, Dante, you haven’t!”

“I’m not playing these games with you,” Dante said, rather than give in to his brother’s theatrics by asking what he hadn’t done.

Damien answered as though Dante had spoken the right lines regardless. “You’ve fallen in love! This is a travesty of the highest proportions.”

Dante pinched the bridge of his nose again and began to pace the room. He loved his brother unconditionally and always had. Damien was his very favorite person on the earth—well, up until now—and heaven only knew the sort of mischief the two of them had gotten up to together. And there was no question that the greater part of that mischief from their earlier days was the reason they were in the positions they were in now.

But they’d grown apart in character, though not affection, in the past several years. Dante was no longer the giddy, carefree reprobate that Damien continued to be. That was very much by design, but it also meant that he sometimes grew impatient with Damien’s continued insistence that life was a pleasure garden to be enjoyed.

“Whether I have fallen in love with Miss Benning or not is irrelevant,” he said, returning to Damien after a little pacing.

“I think it’s very relevant,” Damien said, looking a little surprised. “I’ll feel horrifically guilty stealing the young lady right out from under you.” He paused briefly, then asked, “Has she been under you yet?”

Dante wasn’t often angry with his brother, but those callous words brought him as close as he ever came to the emotion. “Stop being an impertinent bitch,” he snapped.

Damien’s eyes went wide with shock that teetered on offense. It also bordered on amusement, though, as if Damien were still deciding how to react to Dante’s burst of emotion.

“You really do love her,” he said, calming a bit.

Dante was grateful that his brother could read his feelings, and that he was a good enough man to bring them both back from the verge of a battle. He sighed, shrugged a bit, then said, “Yes, I believe I do.”

Damien hummed, crossing his arms and tapping his lips with one finger. “This could be a problem,” he said.

“How so?” Dante asked with a frown.

“As you well know, I am a single man who is not in possession of a good fortune, so I am in want of a wife to provide one for me,” Damien said.

Dante’s frown deepened. “I thought the very purpose of everything the two of us have done is because you do *not* want to end up saddled with a wife.”

Damien’s teasing manner dropped entirely, which was a cause for alarm, as far as Dante was concerned.

“It’s bad this time,” Damien said. “Those bills I sent you are only the beginning. I’m afraid that I lost a great deal of money to some very bad people in London this past month, and the only way I can think to scrape together that cash before being skinned alive is to marry an heiress.”

“Oh, Damien,” Dante sighed. He squeezed his eyes shut in frustration, and when he opened them, he asked, “Will they literally skin you alive? Have you been dallying with the sort who would turn violent to settle the debt?”

“Well, no, thank God,” Damien said, still looking sheepish. “But they have threatened to go to the press with the story of my proclivities and a list of my past lovers.” He lowered his head a bit.

Damien sighed. The press had been in a furor to publish accusations of buggery and inversion. They had ever since the Cleveland Street scandal had taught them that there was a great deal of money to be made by exposing harmless men who simply happened to love other men instead of women.

That, of course, was another reason why marrying an heiress would save Damien’s hide. Everyone knew that marriage to a woman didn’t actually signify anything, but it would help if Damien ended up with his back against the wall.

“Miss Benning is Lord Carshalton’s heir, is she not?” Damien went on while Dante was still gathering his thoughts. “That’s what you said in your letters.”

“I’m still not certain about that,” Dante admitted. “She is someone’s daughter, that much is certain. She’s received a few

alarming notes from someone at Nedworth Hall indicating that they know who her mother is.”

Damien’s eyes lit with excitement. “I say. That’s rather intriguing, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Dante said in a flat voice. “But it also means that someone is threatening the woman I’ve come to care about deeply. Someone other than my wicked and shameless brother.”

“Me?” Damien said with exaggerated shock, pressing a hand to his chest. “*I* am a threat to her?”

Dante narrowed his eyes at him. “You’ve just said you will attempt to steal her from me and marry her for her fortune. How is that not a threat?”

“I am a delightful young man,” Damien said, tilting his chin up, mischief glittering in his eyes. “I have been told so many times.”

“By women?” Dante arched one eyebrow.

“Well....” Damien put on a sheepish look.

Dante shook his head, tired of playing. “Leave the whole marrying an heiress thing to me,” he said. “I’m the one who prefers women, after all. That was the whole point all those years ago.”

“It was,” Damien said with a mock solemn nod. “But there are still creditors.”

“And we’ll do what is necessary to satisfy them.”

Damien cleared his throat. “I tried that. They weren’t game for it.”

“Oh, Damien,” Dante groaned. “Have you no shame?”

“None at all,” Damien smiled. “But I could have shame, for the right price. Whether she’s Carshalton’s heir or not, Miss Benning is still the sole heir of some industrialist worth a fortune, right?”

“She is the daughter of an industrialist, yes,” Dante said. “But she seems convinced her father’s fortune isn’t as grand as

people seem to think it is.”

“Regardless, one of us has to marry her,” Damien said.

“*I* will marry her,” Dante corrected his brother. “Because I have fallen deeply in love with her, and I cannot imagine the rest of my life without her by my side.”

“Dante!” Damien gasped. “I had no idea you were such a romantic.”

“Charlotte makes it easy to be a romantic,” Dante said, smiling despite his continued restlessness and worry over the situation.

“Footmen make me a romantic,” Damien said, grinning like a fool. “They’re always so eager to please. I’m certain I saw one who looked decidedly delicious just now in the parlor.” He glanced past Dante and out into the hallway.

“Unbelievable,” Dante sighed, shaking his head. “Please do not cause both of us to be ejected from Nedworth Hall before matters are settled due to your wicked behavior.”

“It’s Nedworth Hall,” Damien said, as if that explained everything. “Everyone who is anyone knows that Lord and Lady Cambourne have not led sterling lives of spotless piety. I would be disappointed to discover that their staff is not as licentious as the darkest corners of London. Why, I remember a rumor from somewhere that they have been known for employing young women who have been importuned by their former employers, even to the point of accepting children who have been born on the wrong side of the bed.”

“Yes, but must you always be the one to add to the immorality of every house you visit?” Dante said, starting toward the door as he sensed the conversation was coming to its end.

“Of course,” Damien said, laughing. “Life is so much more interesting that way.”

Dante rolled his eyes as they walked into the hall. Life with Damien had always been *interesting*, and now he was certain that the house party was about to head in that direction as well.

Chapter Six

O vernight, the most exciting thing about the Nedworth Hall house party switched from being the identity of Lord Carshalton's heir to the dramatic arrival of Mr. Damien Dixon.

"I cannot believe how thoroughly identical to Lord Bygrave Mr. Dixon is," Lady Patience said as Charlotte and her friends sat on one of the shady hillsides near the house, trying their hands at painting the pastoral scene that spread out around them. "It is as if Lord Bygrave was somehow able to create an exact duplicate of himself."

"Well, not precisely exact," Lady Yvette said, a mysterious grin on her face.

Charlotte puzzled over the remark and was about to ask what her friend meant by it when Lady Eleanor snapped, "If you would spend more of your time in moral improvement and less in noticing the qualities of the men around you, perhaps

Lord Theydon would have proposed already instead of stringing you along to get *other* things from you.”

If it were possible, the air on the hillside would have crackled with the electricity of a coming storm. Lady Eleanor and Lady Yvette had not patched up their altercation from the night before. In fact, it felt as though the two of them were just waiting for an excuse to go at each other once more.

Instead of hurling back some sort of withering invective, Lady Yvette sagged a bit. An anxious sort of sadness lined her face that made Charlotte’s heart go out to her, despite the way the feud between Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor was beginning to wear thin.

“At least I have male attention,” Lady Yvette said at last. “Which is more than you can say. Miss Silverstone has received more attention from your intended target than you ever will.” She nodded to Miss Silverstone, who had been relegated to cleaning Lady Eleanor’s brushes on the hem of her skirt, since Lady Eleanor had forgotten to bring a rag for that purpose with her.

“How dare you suggest—”

“Mr. Dixon is quite dashing, though,” Miss Pennypacker cut Lady Eleanor off before she could stir the pot any further. “Lord Bygrave is as well, mind you, but Mr. Dixon has an added degree of joviality to him.”

“Yes, I thought so as well,” Lady Angeline said, her cheeks bright pink. She glanced furtively to Lady Eleanor—who was seated beside her at one end of the camp they’d made, while Lady Yvette was all the way at the other, beside Charlotte—then looked to Charlotte. “I’m glad Lord and Lady Cambourne agreed to let him stay and join our company.”

“He seems like the sort who will get us all into a delightful amount of trouble,” Lady Patience said, grinning. “Arden tells me that he knows Mr. Dixon from some of the wickeder social circles he’s been a part of.”

“It seems to me that he would be the ideal sort of man to have as one’s brother-in-law,” Miss Pennypacker said,

grinning at Charlotte.

Charlotte's face heated, and she glanced down at the paper she was splotching with watercolors that simply would not obey. "Lord Bygrave has yet to make any sort of declaration."

Miss Pennypacker snorted. "His every look at you and the attention he pays you are his declarations," she said.

"Lord Bygrave *has* been very attentive," Charlotte admitted with a smile.

"Has he kissed you yet?" Lady Patience asked, her eyes dancing with guileless teasing.

"Men should not go around kissing ladies they are not married to," Lady Eleanor sniffed.

Charlotte wanted to sigh with disappointment as the conversation was pulled back in the wrong direction. Miss Pennypacker, Lady Patience, and Lady Angeline looked similarly disappointed.

"There's nothing wrong with kissing," Lady Yvette grumbled, glaring at Lady Eleanor.

"Says the woman of little virtue who was engaged in scandalous behavior behind a certain screen last night," Lady Eleanor said, her words sharp and clipped.

Charlotte's face burned hot. Lady Eleanor must have heard her and Dante behind the screen the night before. She'd known she was being too loud with her enjoyment. But Lady Eleanor seemed convinced it had been Lady Yvette and, most likely, Lord Theydon.

Charlotte blotted her paper with too much watery paint as she bit her lip. The right thing to do would be to come clean and confess it had been her and Dante misbehaving. Staying silent was the coward's way out. But she was loath to turn Lady Eleanor's expansive wrath against her.

"I am shocked that Lord and Lady Cambourne haven't cast out the chaff in our midst," Lady Eleanor went on, staring hard at Lady Yvette. Lady Yvette seemed particularly interested in

her painting. “After all, there is one amongst us who has already driven one husband to the grave.”

“My lady, you shouldn’t say such things,” Miss Silverstone whispered.

“Be quiet!” Lady Eleanor snapped. “I’m merely pointing out what everyone knows, that someone in our acquaintance caused a man to die of a broken heart with her lascivious behavior and should be—”

“Enough of this,” Lady Yvette hissed.

She tossed her painting carelessly aside and stood. Without looking at any of the rest of them, she brushed off her skirts, snatched up her parasol, and stormed off.

“I’ll go after her,” Charlotte said, putting her painting aside—she was terrible at it anyhow—and scrambling to stand.

It took but a moment to catch up to Lady Yvette.

“I’m so sorry for Lady Eleanor’s awful behavior,” she said softly.

Lady Yvette looked at her in surprise before her expression dropped into something melancholy. “Her behavior is not yours to apologize for. She’s a cold-hearted witch who would rather point fingers at others than take responsibility for her own failings.”

Lady Yvette was absolutely right about that, so Charlotte didn’t say anything. She could only hum in agreement.

That wasn’t true, though. She could come clean about the night before.

“It was me that Lady Eleanor heard behind the screen last night,” she confessed, lowering her head a little. “Me and Lord Bygrave.”

Lady Yvette’s eyes went wide and she blinked at Charlotte. Then she smiled. “Actually, it *was* me,” she said, almost as if she were proud of her indiscretion. “Me and Nathan.”

Charlotte nearly tripped in confusion and shock, until she remembered Lord Theydon’s given name was Nathan.

“It would appear we were both misbehaving with our beaux behind the screen last night,” Lady Yvette went on. “Misbehaving is rather fun, don’t you think?”

“I—” Charlotte’s mouth flapped for a moment before she broke into a sheepish smile. “Yes, it is, rather,” she admitted. “I think I would like to do more of it.”

“Good for you,” Lady Yvette said, taking her arm and continuing to walk on as though they were sisters. “And what a splendid opportunity you have for wickedness in front of you. Brothers. Twins, even! What I wouldn’t give for a set of twins. I wonder if they are identical in every way.”

Charlotte’s jaw dropped open at what she was fairly certain Lady Yvette was implying, but before she could react, and before Lady Yvette could go on, they were intercepted by a matronly woman in servant’s clothes. She wore an apron that had a few, small stains on it, and a sprinkling of flour marred one arm of her blouse.

“Miss Benning?” the woman asked, face red and eyes anxious.

Charlotte blinked. “Yes. I’m Miss Benning.”

“I...that is...I—” The sheer force of the woman’s nervousness began to send Charlotte into a panic. “Er, this is for you,” the baffling woman blurted. She reached into her pocket and drew out a letter, thrusting it at Charlotte.

“For me?” Charlotte asked, taking the letter from the woman’s trembling hand.

Instead of answering, the woman turned and dashed away, holding one fist to her mouth, as if to keep herself from crying out. Or just crying.

“Whatever is the matter with Mrs. Seymour?” Lady Yvette asked, frowning after the woman.

“Mrs. who?” Charlotte asked in a shaky voice. She stared at the letter in her hands instead of at the fleeing woman.

“She’s Nedworth’s cook,” Lady Yvette told her, inching closer. “What does the letter say?”

The last thing Charlotte wanted to do was open a letter of the sort she was reasonably certain she'd just been handed in anyone's company. Unless it was Dante's company. But Dante wasn't anywhere near.

There didn't seem to be a way to quickly discover what the letter was about without offending Lady Yvette, so she braced herself and opened it.

“My dearest child. You have no idea how wonderful it's been for me to see you at Nedworth this summer. You have grown into a beautiful and kind woman. I give credit for that to Mr. Benning. It gives me peace to know I did the right thing by giving you to him. I only wish the man who sired you had been so kind.”

Charlotte gasped and slapped the letter shut before she could read the rest of it. There was another paragraph, but she'd seen at a glance it wasn't signed. Whatever else the author of the note had written would mean nothing after reading the truth she'd dreaded learning.

Stephen Benning was not her natural father.

“I...I must go,” she whispered to Lady Yvette, then tore off down the hill in the direction of the house.

“Charlotte!” Lady Yvette called after her. “Charlotte, my dear, are you sure you're quite alright?”

As kind as it was for Lady Yvette to show her so much care, she wasn't the one Charlotte wished to share her worries and fears with. She needed to find Dante. She needed him to help her decide what to think.

Charlotte glanced at the rest of the letter as she hurried toward the house. The second paragraph contained more praise for the woman she had grown into. It seemed to have been finished in a hurry and did not contain any sort of conclusion, nor, as she had noted before, was it signed. Charlotte wondered how it had gotten into the hands of Nedworth Hall's cook.

She wondered if the letter had been penned by Nedworth's cook. Lady Yvette had called the woman Mrs. Seymour.

Charlotte racked her brain in an attempt to recall whether her papa had ever mentioned anyone named Seymour. She couldn't recall anyone remotely like the woman she'd had such a brief glimpse of visiting them before. She wished she'd paid more attention to the woman who had delivered the letter than to the letter itself. Would she have seen some of her own features reflected in the woman's face?

That thought caused Charlotte even more distress, and by the time she crossed into the rose garden and spotted Dante heading toward her, she was close to tears.

"Dante!" she called out, desperate for whatever comfort he could give her.

Dante flinched and looked around at the sound of his name, even looking at the path behind him. Then he turned back to Charlotte, and a bright smile lit his face. "Here I am," he said, a sparkle in his eyes.

Something niggled at the back of Charlotte's mind, but she was too distressed by the turn of events to pay any attention to it.

"Dante, look," she said, approaching her beloved and holding out the letter to him.

"What is it, my chickadee?" Dante asked, meeting her halfway through the rose garden.

"I...I don't know for certain," she said, handing the letter to him. As he opened it and read it, she went on with, "Mrs. Seymour, Nedworth Hall's cook, handed it to me not ten minutes ago, when I was walking with Lady Yvette."

"The cook?" Dante blinked. "Whyever would the cook hand you a missive?"

Charlotte opened her mouth to explain, but nothing came out. It didn't need to. Dante read the letter, drew in a long breath, then let it out with a curious, "Oh!"

"It's the same handwriting as the other two letters," Charlotte pointed out.

Dante's mouth twitched. "Right. The other two letters." He handed the letter back to Charlotte, cleared his throat, and turned to her with a triumphant smile. "It would seem that you have discovered the identity of your mother at last, my dear."

Charlotte tried to find joy in that, as Dante clearly did. All she could do was frown, and then wilt.

"Do you know what this means?" she asked, her distress showing more with every moment.

Dante looked delighted. "Why it means that you are Lord Carshalton's heir, does it not?"

"No," Charlotte said, her breath catching, then coming out as a sob. "It means Papa is not my papa."

She couldn't help it. She burst into tears and threw herself against Dante's broad chest.

"Oh, my sweetling, no," Dante said, closing his arms around her. His happiness changed quickly to sympathy for her. "You're right, of course. How damnably insensitive of me."

"You know how worried about this turn of events I was," Charlotte wept against his shoulder.

"I...I did," he said, stroking a hand comfortingly over her back. "And I'm sorry that you've received such a blow. Give us a hug, then. Let Uncle Da-ante make it all better."

"Uncle!" Charlotte gasped, then straightened. "What will Uncle Horace say when he learns I'm not my father's daughter? What if he thinks papa did something untoward to have me and breaks things off with Papa?"

"Horace?" Dante blinked. His frown deepened. "Benning," he said, as if piecing together a puzzle. Then he gasped. "Not Stephen Benning and Horace Jeffries," he said.

It was Charlotte's turn to frown. "Yes, but you knew that. Stephen Benning is my dear papa."

Charlotte inched back, letting go of...Dante. Who she was no longer entirely certain was, in fact, Dante.

She squinted a bit as she studied the man before her. It was impossible to tell.

“Dearest, you’ve no need at all to worry,” possibly-not-Dante said with a smile. “I am quite, quite certain that Horace Jeffries will never, ever leave Stephen Benning’s side. They are...partners.”

Dante-who-was-possibly-Damien studied her with the same sort of assessing look that she gave him. That surprised Charlotte. Surely, there was nothing curious about her that would cause Damien-Dante any sort of pause.

Charlotte shook her head to clear that thought as the most important part of what the man in front of her had said came back to her.

“Truly?” she asked, clasping a hand to her heart. “Do you truly think Uncle Horace wouldn’t mind Papa pretending that a...a foundling child was his own?”

The very thought that she was no longer an heiress and her father’s kith and kin, but only a foundling girl who was likely sired in sin, and by someone not particularly nice, if the letter was to be believed, made her burst into tears again.

“Darling,” Dante-Damien said, holding his arms open for her. “Of course he won’t mind.”

Charlotte was too overcome with emotion to care whether the man offering her comfort was her beloved or his brother. He was kind, and his words were comforting. That was all she cared about.

With a sob, she fell into his embrace, letting him close his arms around her and hum softly against her head.

“I am quite certain that your Uncle Horace and your papa will continue to love you every bit as much as they do now, regardless of what truths come to light,” he said, stroking her hair. “I may only be a poor, silly, ignorant viscount, but I am quite certain that you are the jewel in the crown of the empire they have built, and that you are very much wanted and adored. Probably far more than most babies who make their entrances in this world.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte wept into...her friend’s neck. “That means a great deal to me.” She pulled back, but allowed...whomever it was to keep her in a loose embrace. “But what do I do?” she asked. “How do I discover whether Mrs. Seymour is my mother or some other member of the household? Do I want to know the truth? Will...will people look down on me if it is revealed I’m the illegitimate daughter of a servant?”

Her friend shrugged. “It could mean you’re the Carshalton heir after all,” he said. “They wouldn’t look down on you for that.”

Charlotte gasped. “I really could be.” Her eyes lost focus for a moment as she contemplated that possibility. Then she looked at...him again. “What should I do?”

Her friend smiled. “Well, for one, I think that the very first thing you should do is to marry my handsome and utterly loveable brother, Damien.”

Charlotte was most definitely talking to Damien and not Dante.

She grinned. “Is that what you advise?”

She could tell that he knew she’d figured out his trick, but he kept up the ruse anyhow by saying, “Absolutely. For you will not find a more enjoyable soul to be with in this lifetime or the next. My brother is one of God’s finest creations. You will never experience a dull moment with him, should you both live for a hundred years.”

“And I suppose he is precisely the sort of modest and self-sacrificing man that any woman who stands to inherit a mysterious fortune from a deceased lord would want as her husband,” Charlotte said with a smirk.

“Indubitably,” Damien said. “For who better than my brother to know how to spend a fortune like that?”

Charlotte hummed and sent him a wry look. “Your brother has already spent that fortune, hasn’t he?” she asked. “He’s one of those scoundrels you read about who has squandered the family fortune on wine, women, and song, I’d bet.”

“Madam,” Damien said with exaggerated gravity. “Upon my honor, I swear to you that my esteemed brother has most definitely *not* squandered his fortune on women.”

“Oh, I see,” Charlotte said, matching his mock seriousness. “But the wine and song?”

“I do so like a bit of wine and song,” Damien said in a near whisper, lowering his head.

Charlotte laughed out loud, gripping Damien’s arm, glad beyond telling that she had found him and that he had been the one to comfort her. She didn’t even mind the fact that he continued to hold her inappropriately close. She didn’t feel so much as a whisper of threat from him.

At least, she didn’t until Dante’s voice cut across the garden with, “Damien! You cur! What are you doing with my beloved?”

Chapter Seven

He loved her. Dante had felt the sentiment growing in him almost from the start, but it was his conversation with Damien that forced him to drop whatever pretense of impartiality in the pursuit of an heiress he had and to simply accept the fact that he had fallen hopelessly in love with Charlotte Benning.

Love was a wonderful thing, and as breakfast ended and he saw Charlotte off with an ardent smile as she went on some painting expedition with her friends, Dante determined that he had a solemn duty to discover who had been sending his beloved notes and to demand they cease threatening Charlotte...or bring the reunion between her and her mother into the open. He honestly wasn't certain whether the letter writer had good or evil intentions.

He considered involving Damien in the hunt, but even though his brother joined the party for breakfast, where he

drew a great deal of attention and inspired generous amounts of laughter when he spilled coffee on himself, then intimated to one of the footmen that he needed help changing clothes, Dante thought better of it.

If he was going to discover who knew the truth about Charlotte's parentage, he would be able to do it most efficiently if he searched on his own. That search began with finding and questioning the round-faced young lady's maid Charlotte had brought with her to the party.

"I don't know anything, my lord," the girl, Vicky, said, looking half terrified of Dante. "There was nothing in the room when I'd been there earlier to fetch a shawl for Miss Benning, and then there was a letter and a baby gown there that she'd already discovered when I came back from mending her evening gown."

Dante sighed and rubbed a hand over the bottom half of his face. His consternation clearly had the maid frightened of him, so he softened his demeanor when he asked, "Could I see the baby gown?"

"Yes, my lord," Vicky said, then dashed off to get it, as if she didn't dare naysay a viscount.

Inspecting the baby gown revealed nothing, though. It was an old dress, that was it. Its simplicity suggested it did not belong to a member of the upper classes, but Dante and Charlotte had already figured out Charlotte's mother was likely of low birth.

With that in mind, Dante set out to interrogate as many of the Nedworth servants as he could find. The trouble was, Nedworth Hall was run efficiently and effectively, and by design, the servants were not loitering about, waiting for one of the guests to pester them. The ones he did see were hard at work, and Dante felt guilty interrupting them.

It was after a quick few questions put to one of the upstairs maids that Dante was directed to a family parlor in one of the quieter wings of the house, where Lord and Lady Cambourne were enjoying a peaceful afternoon tea. Confronting the hosts of the party with the issue of Charlotte's parentage wasn't

exactly what Dante wanted to do. There was no telling what they would think and whether stirring that particular pot would lead to someone being dismissed or Charlotte or himself being asked to leave the party. But it was the best lead he had, and it turned out to be the most fruitful.

“You say someone has been sending Miss Benning anonymous notes regarding her mother?” Lord Cambourne asked.

“Yes,” Dante answered.

Lord Cambourne frowned across the small table where he and his wife sat. Lady Cambourne met that frown with one of her own. They were the expressions of people who knew a great deal about what was actually going on, which made Dante’s pulse pick up.

“And the nature of these notes was threatening?” Lady Cambourne asked, a touch of disbelief in her voice.

“Well, no,” Dante admitted. “They seemed rather more... informational. It was the suddenness of their appearance that alarmed Miss Benning.”

Lord Cambourne let out a heavy breath. “I was afraid that would happen,” he said to his wife.

Dante grasped his hands behind his back so that he didn’t flap them with excitement. He was certain he was about to solve the riddle, which would make Charlotte happy.

“I was the one who suggested a private meeting should be arranged for the two so that we could avoid this,” Lady Cambourne said with what felt to Dante like pretend offense. The way her eyes sparkled as she looked at her husband was far more like flirting than arguing.

“You were not,” Lord Cambourne teased her in return, his smile sly. “You said that Miss Benning should be allowed to shop at the marriage market before being burdened with the truth of her birth.”

Dante could barely breathe with excitement. “So it’s true, then?” he asked. “Miss Benning is Carshalton’s heir?”

Lord and Lady Cambourne stopped their eye flirting and glanced to him in unison, as though they'd forgotten he was there.

"No one ever said that," Lady Cambourne said with a coy grin.

"So she isn't Carshalton's heir?" Dante asked.

"No one said that either," Lord Cambourne answered, even more mysterious.

Dante would have huffed a sigh if he wasn't speaking to his betters and the hosts of the party. "Could you at least let me know who is sending the letters so that I might resolve things for Miss Benning?"

Lady Cambourne opened her mouth, but Lord Cambourne answered, "No," before she could speak. When both Dante and Lady Cambourne looked at him in question, he said, "The matter of Miss Benning's parentage is for the affected parties alone. I will not force a valued member of our staff into a situation she is afraid to be in."

Dante had been about to argue he was an affected party, as he intended to marry Charlotte, but the second part of Lord Cambourne's statement had him snapping his mouth closed. So Charlotte's mother *was* a member of Nedworth's staff.

He was about to say something to that effect when Lord Cambourne narrowed his eyes at Dante and went on with, "Besides, you have enough on your plate at the moment, what with your own dark secrets threatening to come into the light."

Dante's heart felt as though it stopped. He swallowed. "Whatever do you mean, sir?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

Lord Cambourne smiled wolfishly and sat back in his chair. "Should you really be poking about in other people's personal affairs when you have a rather large skeleton in your own closet, *Lord Bygrave*?"

Dante gulped again. "I have nothing to hide," he lied.

Lord Cambourne grinned. "No? Not even now that your deliciously entertaining brother has arrived at our party?"

“No,” Dante squeaked, flushing as hot as blazes.

Lady Cambourne cleared her throat. “It is all well and good that you have captured Miss Benning’s attention and she yours, but ask yourself, *Lord Bygrave*, is it truly honest of you to offer for Miss Benning’s hand, which I am certain you intend to do, without telling her what she is getting herself into?”

They knew. Dante had no idea how, since, as far as he knew, only he and Damien knew his secret, but they knew.

The only thing he could say to salvage the situation was, “I’m afraid I have no idea what you are talking about.”

They all knew that was a lie.

He cleared his throat, “If you will excuse me, I need to go find Miss Benning.”

“Or perhaps your brother?” Lord Cambourne asked, sly as a fox.

Dante nodded to him, then rushed out of the parlor to the sound of Lord and Lady Cambourne laughing—not unkindly, but certainly enjoying his discomfort—behind him.

He had to find Damien, and the sooner the better. If even one or two other people in the world knew what they’d done, it could spell disaster for everyone. And to be honest, the fact that people knew could only be traced to Damien being indiscreet with the truth at some point. Dante hadn’t breathed a word to a soul, not even their parents.

He had already worked himself into a profound level of agitation when he happened across Damien and Charlotte in the rose garden, looking entirely too comfortable with each other. He knew full well that any romantic attachment on Damien’s part was impossible, but the knowledge of everything that had been done and everything that would have to be done, should the truth get out, made him snappish.

“Damien! You cur! What are you doing with my beloved?” he called out as he charged toward the two people he cared most about in the world.

Damien and Charlotte jolted at being discovered as they were. Charlotte pushed away from Damien, her expression seemingly caught between amusement at whatever Damien had been saying and alarm at having been caught in his embrace.

“Damien!” Damien greeted him, arms held wide. “So good to see you, brother.”

Dante nearly tripped over his feet, his blood running cold. He hadn’t. He wouldn’t.

“Your game is over, Mr. Dixon,” Charlotte laughed nervously. “I am no longer fooled. To be honest, I wasn’t actually fooled to begin with. I know which of you is which.”

Oh thank God. Dante felt weak with relief as he closed the distance between the three of them. He glared at his brother as he did.

“Playing games and telling lies again, are we?” he asked, staring hard at Damien.

“Of course,” Damien said with a particularly foppish shrug. Damien was not generally foppish in appearance, so the gesture didn’t seem natural to him.

“I was confused at first because he isn’t wearing the same suit that he wore at breakfast,” Charlotte explained, stepping closer to Dante’s side. “But then he said a bit too much, and I knew he couldn’t be you.”

She turned to Dante with a smile of affection and devotion that almost made everything better.

It was not quite fully better, though. Dante was still shaky as he took Charlotte’s arm. He frowned at Damien, frustrated that he couldn’t say all the things he wanted to say to his reprobate brother with Charlotte there. He hoped that Damien would read his expression and understand how dangerous it was to play the game he’d attempted with Charlotte.

“I’ve just spoken to Lord and Lady Cambourne,” Dante said instead, turning to Charlotte and ignoring Damien entirely. “They would not tell me anything specific, but I

believe they know who has been sending you the letters, my dear.”

“Oh.” Charlotte sucked in a breath, and her playful countenance dropped into a mournful look in a way Dante hadn’t expected. He wanted to pull her into his embrace and ask what was wrong, but she told him before he could. “I’ve received another letter. Mrs. Seymour, Nedworth’s cook, handed it to me as I was walking Lady Yvette back from our painting excursion.”

She stepped back from Dante long enough to produce the letter and hand it to him.

One quick perusal of the words all but solved the mystery for Dante. Charlotte’s mother was most likely Mrs. Seymour. It could have been one of the other female members of staff and Mrs. Seymour could have just delivered the message. He wished he had been there to see the woman’s face as she handed the letter over.

“How do you feel about this?” he asked Charlotte, handing the letter back.

Charlotte’s whole body crumpled. “My papa is not my papa,” she said, clearly miserable with the information.

“I’m so sorry,” Dante said, slipping Charlotte back into his embrace.

“And I have insisted that he is your true papa,” Damien stepped in. “Whether a man is someone’s father or not is dependent on love, not on birth. Birth is but a coincidence and should not account for anything.”

Dante tensed, staring hard at his brother over Charlotte’s shoulder as he hugged her.

“It’s true,” Damien said, challenge in his eyes.

Dante frowned and pursed his lips. He needed to sort things with Damien sooner rather than later so that they could all avoid a catastrophe.

“My dear,” he said to Charlotte, stroking her back as comfortingly as he could. “Would it make you feel better to

write to your papa to inform him of these developments? He might have insight into the situation that could put your heart at ease.”

Charlotte glanced up at him with an intake of breath. “You’re right,” she said, blinking her tear-rimmed eyes. “One way or another, Papa should know about the letters. I...I have been too preoccupied these last few days to write to him.”

The soft coyness of her smile as she gazed up at him had Dante’s heart turning circles in his chest. He loved her so dearly.

Which was why he had to protect her from scorn and ridicule.

He set her at arm’s length, then daringly planted a chaste kiss on her lips. “Would you like me to walk you back to the house?” he asked.

Charlotte shook her head, clutching the letter to her chest. “No, I can manage it. I’d rather go quickly so that no one will see I’m upset.” She sniffled a bit and wiped her eyes as she spoke.

“Very well,” Dante said, brushing away one of her escaped tears with his thumb. “Come find me later, and we’ll decide what to do next.”

“I will,” she said. She hesitated, then leaned in to kiss him softly before turning and hurrying off.

Dante and Damien both watched her until she’d rounded the end of the rose garden.

“You’re a lucky man to have found that one,” Damien said with a fond grin. “I shall be very glad to have her as a sister-in-law, and not because of any money she might bring to the family.”

Dante was reminded of the other problem on his hands with those words. He whipped to face his brother and growled, “Lord and Lady Cambourne know.”

Damien was slow to drag his gaze away from Charlotte’s retreating back. “About Miss Benning’s mother? That does not

surprise me.”

Dante was out of patience with his brother. “They know about *us*,” he said in a low murmur.

Damien’s eyes widened, then his entire countenance sagged. “Oh.”

“Yes, *oh*,” Dante said. He took a step closer to Damien, then said, “You know that it might ruin everything, ruin the entire family if anyone finds out.”

“No one else will find out,” Damien said in a rush. “Are you certain that Lord and Lady Cambourne actually know? They could be toying with you, with us, and simply guessing at things after reading too many novels.”

The way Damien flushed and the speed of his words was all Dante needed to hear to know Damien had let the truth slip to someone at some point.

“Who did you tell?” he demanded.

“No one!” Damien insisted, and when Dante hardened his look, he repeated, “*No one!*” more insistently. “I swear, no one.” He paused. “Well, no one when I was sober.”

“Damien!” Dante hissed. “You know how important this is.”

“Yes, believe me, I do,” Damien said, looking sheepish. “Even if I was drunk, I don’t think anyone would have believed me. It’s such a tall tale.”

“Who did you tell?” Dante asked again.

“I really don’t think I told anyone,” Damien said. “But, you know, Lord Cambourne and his wife used to partake of some rather sinful circles. I might have been involved in an event or two with him. And a few others.”

Dante threw up his hands. “You’re incorrigible,” he said. “You know what will happen if the truth gets out. You know how it would wound our father’s soul and enrage our mother. The entire family would fall apart, and just at a point when I am doing everything to put it back together.”

“You’re doing a fine job,” Damien said, his smile suddenly bright.

Dante sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, his initial burst of frustration with his brother fading. Damien couldn’t help who he was. He was a charmer and a rogue. He made life amusing and brightened everyone’s day he came across. But none of those were qualities that improved a family’s fortune or stopped it from falling into financial ruin.

That was the point.

Dante sighed again. “I need to see what more I can discover about Charlotte’s parentage,” he said.

“She’s devastated that Stephen Benning is not her true father,” Damien said, glowing with sympathy for her. “Even though I insisted he is in every way that matters.”

“We need to find a way to bring about a resolution to her situation,” Dante said as the two of them fell into mirrored expressions of thought.

“We do,” Damien agreed. “Charlotte is lovely and deserves to know the truth.”

“Yes, she does,” Dante said, snapping a look to his brother. “She deserves to know the *entire* truth.”

Damien looked taken by surprise, then let out a breath. “You’re right,” he said. “She needs to know. Particularly if she is to marry one of us.”

“One of us?” Dante asked, arching one eyebrow.

Damien burst into a smile. “Well, if you won’t do it, I will.”

“Perish the thought,” Dante said, shaking his head and gesturing for Damien to walk back to the house with him.

He supposed that was Damien’s not-so-subtle hint that he really should get on with proposing to Charlotte. He wanted to, but he had a sense that other things needed to be resolved first. But once the issue of Charlotte’s mother was resolved, he would have to find a way to make a far more momentous confession.

Chapter Eight

As devastating as it was to learn that she was not who she'd always thought she was, Charlotte felt better after talking to Dante. And Damien, for that matter. They had been so understanding and had tried with genuine affection to improve her spirits over the entire, life-altering revelation. And even though she'd known him an even shorter time than she'd known Dante, Charlotte thought that she could grow to love Damien very much as well.

With a very different sort of love.

It became clearer and clearer to Charlotte as she made her way up to her room to dry her eyes and refresh herself that she loved Dante. And as more than a passing fancy or a man she could get along with quite well. Having the two brothers with her, and realizing that she would be able to tell them apart no matter how similar their faces, simply by the feelings each inspired in her, had settled things for her.

She loved Dante like she'd loved no other man, and if he were to ask the question, she would marry him immediately.

That certainty buoyed her through the rest of the afternoon, and through supper. She would achieve her aim in coming to the house party. She had found herself a good man who would provide her with a happy, comfortable life. And she would be a viscountess upon her marriage, and someday a countess. She could not have asked for more. Her papa would be so pleased.

Her papa.

The letter she'd written to the only father she'd ever known and sent off with the post before supper had been full of questions, but also with affirmations of her love for her dear papa. Damien was right. Stephen Benning was her papa in every way that counted, and she would always feel that way. Even if it turned out she was, in fact, Lord Carshalton's heir.

But that did not mean she wasn't devilishly curious about whether Mrs. Seymour was her natural mother or not.

Supper that evening was a subdued affair. Damien held court at one end of the table, making a bit of a fool of himself as he told inappropriate stories and made ribald jokes. Some of those jokes had Charlotte's cheeks burning, although she did laugh. Lady Yvette sat by Damien's side, enjoying all of his conversation thoroughly and laughing as loudly as anyone. But the rest of the table was much more reserved.

"Disgraceful," Lady Eleanor mumbled.

She was seated beside Charlotte and had barely spoken throughout the entire meal. Everything she did say was a complaint against Lady Yvette. That made the entire supper something to endure rather than enjoy.

Charlotte was glad when supper was finally over and the gentlemen retired to the billiards room while the ladies headed off to one of the sitting rooms. Charlotte hoped that the gentlemen enjoyed themselves, because the discussion amongst the ladies was short and tense. After the afternoon's argument, none of them seemed to want to be in each other's company anymore.

So as soon as was polite, Charlotte excused herself. She started up to her room, wondering if perhaps she could trust Vicky with the truth of the letters and ask the woman to make inquiries in the kitchen.

Before she made it past the landing at the top of Nedworth's grand staircase, however, she caught sight of Lord Cambourne crossing at the end of the hall. Everything Dante had said about speaking to Lord and Lady Cambourne earlier rushed back to her.

"Lord Cambourne," she called out as loudly as she dared, which wasn't very loud at all. When Lord Cambourne stopped and glanced down the hall to her, she asked, "Might I have a word?"

"Of course, my dear," Lord Cambourne said with a smile, then waited for Charlotte to make her way down the hall to him. "What can I do for you this fine evening?"

Charlotte glanced around as she met Lord Cambourne by the window at the end of the hall. The bright colors of the sunset bathed the garden outside in magnificent color, but even that beautiful sight wasn't enough to sway Charlotte from her purpose.

Not that she was entirely certain where to begin.

"I, er, that is...." She blew out a breath and bit her lip. "I was wondering...no...I have received letters—"

"Lord Bygrave has informed me that you have been contacted by your natural mother," Lord Cambourne said with paternal patience, sparing Charlotte the embarrassment of fumbling through her question.

"Yes," she said, letting her shoulders drop. "I don't know what to think of the letters I received. I always believed that my mother died in childbirth and that my dear papa never married because he loved her and was faithful to her memory."

Lord Cambourne flinched, as though he were startled by her statement. "You did?" he asked, face pinched with curiosity.

"Yes," Charlotte replied, frowning. "Why would I not?"

Lord Cambourne opened his mouth to answer, then snapped it shut. “No, no, I suppose that is how things should be,” he said, not really speaking to her. “Benning always was angelic and discreet.”

“My papa means the world to me,” Charlotte said. “I do not know what to do with the knowledge that he is not who I thought him to be.”

Lord Cambourne’s expression turned cagey. “Yes, it is important that those we love are who we think them to be.”

Charlotte blinked, then frowned. “You are not disparaging my papa, are you?” she asked.

Lord Cambourne smiled mysteriously. “Not your papa, no,” he said. “I was merely pointing out that honesty from those we choose to spend our lives with is of paramount importance.”

Charlotte’s frown deepened. “You’re implying something about Lord Bygrave, aren’t you,” she said.

Lord Cambourne sighed and softened. “I am, my dear.”

“Is there...is there something wrong with him?” Charlotte asked, her stomach twisting to the point where she wished she hadn’t eaten so much pudding. “Do you...do you not think he would make a good husband for me?”

It took longer than Charlotte wanted it to for Lord Cambourne to answer. “That all depends on what you wish from a marriage, my dear,” he said. “If, like some of the other fine ladies at this party, your aim is to marry wealth and title so that you might lord it over your friends, perhaps not.”

“What if all I want is to be happy with a husband I love?” Charlotte asked, twining her fingers together over her stomach.

“Then, my dear,” Lord Cambourne said, resting a fatherly hand on her shoulder, “I suggest you ask your intended for the truth before you give your heart away.” He squeezed her shoulder, then said, “Good night, my dear.”

Charlotte stood where she was, puzzling over his words. By the time she thought to ask him what he meant by that, he'd already gone.

With a sigh, Charlotte dropped her hands to her sides, shook her head, then started off down the hall to her bedroom. Nedworth Hall certainly was filled with mysteries and secrets. She'd thought she had none when she arrived almost four weeks before, but oh, how she had been mistaken. And now it seemed as though Dante had secrets he was hiding as well.

Vicky was not in her room when she arrived. It was a bit early for her to retire, so she wasn't surprised that her maid hadn't come up yet. Charlotte undressed and put on her nightgown and dressing gown on her own. She then went to her writing desk, thinking she'd write a second letter to her papa, but no sooner had she dipped her pen in the ink when she realized she had nothing more to say until she heard back from him.

She put her stationary away and took out the letters from who she now presumed was her mother and reread those. The handwriting was neat, if done in pencil, and the prose was smooth and correct. Whoever had written it was at least somewhat educated. That ruled out the scullery maid, she thought to herself with a tight smile.

A few minutes later, she found herself staring out the window into the darkening night, wondering about Dante. What sort of secret could he have that would cause Lord Cambourne to caution her in such a way? He hadn't said she shouldn't marry him, only that she might need to be careful of her motivations.

Was Dante being untruthful with her in some way? It didn't seem possible. The two of them had only ever been open and honest with each other, perhaps more so than was appropriate for two young people who had only just met. She was certain that she loved him and would be happy with him, though.

The only thing to do was to find Dante and ask what his secret was. If he kept it from her and tried to put her off, she

would know he wasn't trustworthy enough to marry. If he told her and it was something dire, well, they could face that possibility together.

It was still early as Charlotte tightened her robe around herself and stepped into the hall, but by the lazy sound of the house, most people had gone to bed early. She told herself she would check to see if Dante was in his room—she'd discovered which room he'd been given in casual conversation the week before—and if he hadn't already retired, she would wait until the morrow to get to the bottom of things.

But after one knock on Dante's door, he answered.

"Charlotte," he said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come with some questions," Charlotte said, pushing her way into the room so that no one would see her hovering where she shouldn't.

A moment later, she questioned whether that was the brightest idea. Dante was mostly undressed. He'd removed his jacket and waistcoat, and he'd taken his shoes off as well. Charlotte had to admit that the sight of her beau in nothing but his trousers and shirtsleeves was an alluring one. Dante was certainly handsome, with broad shoulders and thick, brown hair that had touches of gold in it.

He was so handsome, in fact, that for a moment she forgot what she was there to say. Dante seemed more intent on studying her appearance than continuing the conversation as well. He raked her with a look that Charlotte could only describe as heated.

"I shouldn't have come," she said.

"You look beautiful," Dante blurted at the same time.

They both started and stared at each other, then dissolved into laughter.

"Thank you," Charlotte said, dipping the smallest of curtsies, mostly to be amusing. "It isn't really appropriate for an unattached lady to visit a man's bedchamber in such a state, though."

“This is Nedworth Hall,” Dante said with a clever smirk, sliding closer to her. “I think we’ve all long past given up on the appropriateness of our behavior.”

Charlotte laughed softly and lowered her head. She peeked up at Dante with her eyes only, then said, “Do you think all of our reputations will suffer because of it?”

“Not at all,” Dante said, coming so close Charlotte was convinced she could smell the remnants of shaving soap and tobacco smoke on him. “Everyone at this house party is guilty of some indiscretion. To reveal our behavior to society at large would be to risk having one’s own behavior brought into the open.”

That suggestion brought secrets to mind, and being reminded of secrets refocused Charlotte’s purpose for being there.

“I spoke to Lord Cambourne earlier,” she said, standing straighter so Dante would know they had something serious to discuss.

“You did?” Dante asked, and if it wasn’t Charlotte’s imagination, he twitched a little.

She nodded. “I asked him about my mother.”

Dante seemed relieved. “What did he have to say?”

Charlotte blinked. “Actually, he didn’t give me much of an answer about my mother. He asked me whether it was important to me that people are honest about who they are.”

Dante flushed and tensed all over again. “Is that so?”

“He seemed to think you were keeping some sort of secret from me,” Charlotte said. She willed herself to be bold and stepped close to him, resting a hand on his arm. “Have you been honest with me about who you are?” she asked. Something occurred to her, and she gasped. “Are you Lord Carshalton’s heir? You and Damien, of course. Is that what Lord Cambourne meant by being honest about who you are?”

Dante laughed, though it was a nervous laugh. “No, we are not Carshalton’s heirs,” he said. “If you were to see our father,

you would guess that in an instant. Damien and I resemble him very much.”

“Strong resemblances seem to be a trait in your family,” Charlotte said, feeling a little easier. She didn’t know if she was prepared for the man she loved to be a much-talked about, mysterious heir anyhow. “I’m certain I’m not the only one who almost couldn’t tell the difference between you and your brother.”

Damien’s face flushed darker. “No, you are not,” he said anxiously.

“Does Damien know this secret that Lord Cambourne seems to think you have?” she asked. A thought, a possibility, was tickling the back of her mind, but she wasn’t sure how to entertain it.

“He does,” Dante said, more anxious instead of less. “Damien is part of the secret.”

Charlotte’s suspicion about what the secret might be grew. But as it did, it suddenly occurred to her that she didn’t care. If Dante and Damien had caused some sort of mischief in the past by pretending to be the other, it didn’t matter to her. Boys would be boys, after all.

“I don’t care what your secret is,” she told Dante, resting her hands on his shoulders and gazing intently at him. “Nothing you could tell me would change the way I feel about you, Dante. I love you.”

“You do?” he asked, his worry blossoming into joy.

“Yes,” she said, smiling. “I know that whatever mischief you and Damien once engaged in, and I’m assuming the secret has to do with the two of you pretending to be the other in a delicate situation, it could never be anything truly wicked. Damien is a scamp, but he is not evil. And you are simply the most wonderful, honest, caring and kind man that I’ve ever known.”

“I wouldn’t say—”

Charlotte cut Dante’s modest protest off with a daring kiss. She hadn’t thought she had it in herself to kiss a man with

such abandon, and that while embracing him in her nightgown while in his bedroom at night. Perhaps she was every bit as naughty as her friends after all. She certainly felt the same stir of fire in her blood and in the secret places of her body as her friends had described.

“I love you, too,” Dante sighed when Charlotte paused to breathe. His words took the breath right back out of her, and the way he smiled at her made everything else in the world cease to exist. “I love you so dearly, my Charlotte,” he said.

“Then take me to bed,” Charlotte whispered, giddy with her own boldness.

“Do you mean it?” Dante asked. Charlotte could see and feel the conflict racing through him, see his clear desire for her grappling with his conscience. That only made her love him more, though. Dante was a good man who wouldn’t rush to compromise a woman simply because he wanted her.

She only hoped that his morality didn’t extend to failing to compromise a woman who desperately wanted to be compromised.

“I do mean it,” she said, stepping back enough to tug the sash of her robe loose. “I love you, Dante, and the moment you summon up the courage to propose to me, I will say yes. We’ll be married before the end of the summer at any rate, so why not consummate our love now?”

Dante burst into laughter, but Charlotte did not feel as though he was making fun of her in any way. His laughter was a sound of joy, and perhaps a little madness.

“I pledge here and now, my love, to always do precisely what you tell me to,” he said, tugging his shirt out of his trousers.

Charlotte couldn’t stop the giggle that escaped her as she shrugged out of her robe and tossed it aside. She was doing this. She was really doing it. If the wrong people were to find out, her reputation could be ruined forever.

But no one would find out. Dante was right. The members of the Nedworth Hall house party were all guilty of sins that

none of them wanted spread about London society once the summer was over. They would all keep their secrets for each other.

Dante stripped out of his clothes so quickly that Charlotte didn't have time to keep up with him. Once he was naked, she was too busy drinking in the sight of his strong, masculine body to finish undressing herself. She'd only ever seen naked men in some of the artwork her Uncle Horace had in his house, but those paintings were nothing to the perfection that stood before her.

Dante was beautiful. His body was lean and well-muscled without being bulky. His waist was narrow, and the hair on his chest and groin alluring. She marveled more than cowered at the shocking sight of his member, already a bit stiff with his need for her. She thanked heaven that Lady Yvette, Lady Patience, and the others had been forthcoming about the attributes of the male anatomy and everything it could do.

Her observations were cut short as Dante swept over to her and drew her into his arms for a long, head-spinning kiss. "Are you still certain you want me?" he asked breathlessly in a pause.

"Most definitely," Charlotte sighed in return.

Dante kissed her again, then lifted her in his arms and carried her to his bed. He somehow managed to pull back the covers and remove her nightgown as she stroked whatever parts of his body she could reach and kissed him when he drew near enough.

He tumbled into bed with her, rolling her between the sheets and settling with her on her back beneath him in no time at all. Charlotte loved the feel of it. She loved the heat and weight of him above her and the sensation that he had her in every way. He would take what he wanted from her, but he would shelter and protect her as well.

He dipped to kiss her again, and she closed her eyes and simply enjoyed it. She opened to him and let him tease his tongue along hers. He alternated those deep kisses with

shorter, sweeter ones to her cheek and jaw and neck, then came back to devour her mouth again. It was bliss.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and threw her head back to sigh and moan as he kissed his way down her neck and across her collarbone to tease her breasts. She never would have imagined that lips and a tongue and even teeth would feel so good as they played with her nipples. Dante knew exactly how to draw the most sensation from her and to leave her wanting more.

“You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Dante whispered as he worshiped her body with his mouth and hands. “I would do anything to have you with me forever.”

“I want you,” she sighed, writhing so that he could have more of her body to explore. A part of her was certain she sounded like an absolute ninny, but Dante only growled in response, as if he approved of her words and would act on them.

She couldn’t say, in all honesty, that she knew what she was doing as Dante continued to lavish her body with pleasure. Dante was an excellent guide, though, so she gave herself over to his whims and let him taste and touch her however he wanted. Even when he inched down and spread her legs apart to expose the tenderest part of her.

Her friends had mentioned something about that as well, but the stories were nothing to reality when Dante stroked his fingertips up her inner thigh, then into the wetness between her legs. Charlotte let out a surprised, pleased cry as he explored her there, and she made a sound she had no words for as he found the part of her where all her pleasure seemed to coalesce and rubbed it.

The sensations came at her fast and hard. She gasped for breath and spread her legs wider, gripping the pillow on either side of her head. If that wasn’t good enough, with a moan as if he found her irresistible, Dante lowered his head to where his hand had been and took that part of her in his mouth.

His tongue only had to work for a few seconds before pleasure blossomed and exploded through her. She let out a

cry of pleasure and arched into him as her body throbbed with orgasm. It was so far beyond anything that had been described to her that it nearly brought tears to her eyes.

Then Dante made it all the better by sliding his body up over hers and pushing himself deep inside of her. If there was a moment of pain at being invaded for the first time, Charlotte barely felt it. She was too wrapped up in the pleasure Dante had given her, and in the power and majesty of his body as he began to move within her.

It felt as good to be claimed by him that way as it had for her own climax to envelop her. She could still feel that hum of pleasure as Dante thrust into her with increasing urgency. The sounds he made were wild and wanton, and as the tension in his body seemed to hit its peak, then crash over him, he let out a sigh that made her feel like the most powerful woman in creation.

The moment of completion seemed to hover between them, then gently subside as they both relaxed into the feeling of heated connection that followed. Dante shifted to Charlotte's side, pulling her into his arms and holding her close as they both caught their breaths.

"Mmm, thank you," Charlotte hummed, her face buried against Dante's neck, where she could breathe in his scent fully.

Dante laughed exhaustedly. "I feel as though I should be thanking you," he said. One hand stroked her back lazily.

Charlotte thought she should make some sort of clever reply to that, but she felt too much at peace and too happy to say much of anything. The greatest compliment she could have given her beloved in that moment was to fall asleep in his arms, which she did happily.

Chapter Nine

The contentment that Dante felt in his soul as he slept through the night with Charlotte in his arms was like nothing he'd ever experienced before. It warred with guilt and perhaps a tiny bit of shame, but it overcame those emotions like a conquering hero.

He should not have importuned Charlotte by giving in to her kisses and demands that he take her to bed, but doing so felt like the most natural blossoming of the love between them that could be. He should have kissed her chastely and sent her back to her room with promises of future lovemaking once they were properly wed, but he loved her passionately already. A little ceremony and some words on a paper wouldn't change that feeling or suddenly make it legitimate.

He awoke with only a tiny remnant of the feeling that, really, there was a proper way to do things, and he hadn't done them that way. Charlotte was still in his bed, sleeping as

though she hadn't slumbered so deeply in ages. Perhaps she hadn't. The rigors of the house party had been difficult on her, he'd observed. Charlotte was a gentle soul, and Dante was beginning to suspect that being in constant company was not a natural thing for her. Add to that the way Lady Yvette and Lady Eleanor had been bickering of late, and it was no wonder Charlotte was so worn out.

Charlotte most likely missed her beloved papa as well. Dante grinned as he turned gently to his side, careful not to wake his beloved, and stroked a stray bit of hair back from her face. He would write to Stephen Benning immediately, that very morning, asking for Charlotte's hand in marriage. He would travel all the way to London or Lincolnshire, or wherever Benning and Horace Jeffries were residing at the moment to make absolutely certain that things going forward were done correctly.

Charlotte sighed and shifted in her sleep, inching toward him as if seeking out the heat of his body. Dante stayed as still as he could, smiling at her and letting her find her comfort in him. If he had his way, Charlotte would never experience sadness or strain again. She would live the sort of happy, charmed life that she'd already been privy to for the rest of her days. They would live it together.

All Dante had to do was get past this strange business of Charlotte's parentage. He supposed that a meeting of some sort could be arranged between Charlotte and Mrs. Seymour. If Nedworth's cook wasn't her mother, Dante was certain she knew who the woman was.

The door to his room opened softly, then closed, and footsteps padded across the carpet. Dante assumed it was the maid, come to light the fire. He held perfectly still, hoping his body shielded Charlotte and that the maid was well-trained enough not to look at the guests in their beds.

His thoughts continued along their previous track. He would attend the meeting between Charlotte and Mrs. Seymour, of course. Charlotte would need someone there for help and comfort, if the revelation was too much for her. Mrs. Seymour deserved someone in her corner as well. Perhaps

Mrs. Appleton, the housekeeper, would be available for her, or even Lady Cambourne if—

“Well done, brother.”

Damien’s whisper from the side of the bed nearly shocked Dante out of his skin. He swore under his breath while trying not to move or jerk in a way that would wake Charlotte.

“What in the devil’s name are you doing, Damien?” he hissed, shifting to his back so that he could glare at his brother.

Damien wore a jester’s smile, of course. “I came to discuss things with you,” he said, moving to sprawl across the bed.

Dante shouldn’t have been at all surprised that Damien was undressed. He wore a large, embroidered silk banyan in an antique style, and if the flash of skin at the top of his chest was any indication, he was nude beneath the robe. His hair was a mess, but his eyes were bright and shining and his cheeks were a rosy pink. He was entirely too jolly for the pre-dawn hour... which had Dante convinced his miscreant brother hadn’t spent the night in his own bed.

“We have nothing to discuss that cannot wait until a decent hour,” Dante whispered, still exceedingly careful not to wake Charlotte. “As you can see, now is not the time.” He peeked to Charlotte.

Damien stretched a bit more from where he lay across the foot of the bed, craning his neck to look at Charlotte’s sleeping form. He smiled fondly as he did and said, “I like her. Very much, as it happens.”

“She’s mine,” Dante growled, like he was a bear protecting his mate.

Damien laughed. “Calm yourself, brother. You know as well as anyone that I have no interest in your sweetheart that way.”

Dante narrowed his eyes. “Yesterday, you suggested that you would marry her to satisfy your debts.”

“I was merely joking, bruth,” he said with a grin. “My, you are easy to rile, aren’t you.”

Dante huffed out a sigh. It was entirely like Damien to come all the way to a house party just so that he could aggravate him by pretending he had intentions to marry the woman he loved.

“Did you actually come to the house party because you ran out of footmen to seduce in other people’s houses?” he asked.

Damien answered with a coy and winning smile, looking like the cat who ate the canary. “Jack is perfectly lovely,” he sighed.

“Oh, Damien.” Dante rolled his eyes.

“And Nedworth Hall is out of the London limelight, where there are a few people I would be better off to avoid at the moment,” Damien added with a slightly more remorseful look.

Dante sighed. “So you’re hiding here.”

“Yes,” Damien admitted.

“And possibly investigating other means to pay off your debts while you’re at it?”

“I’ve no need to,” Damien said, falling back into a leonine pose of relaxation. “You’ve already found the solution for me.” He touched one of Charlotte’s feet under the covers.

“Unbelievable,” Dante growled.

“But isn’t that the point of marrying an heiress?” Damien asked. “You were going to use her fortune to pay off the family debts, which are mostly my debts, in any case, and now you’ve bagged Lord Carshalton’s heir.”

Shame filled Dante for his earlier intentions. “I’m uncertain whether she *is* Carshalton’s heir,” he admitted.

“Either way, she’s Stephen Benning and Horace Jeffries’ heir, and that’s almost as good,” Damien said with a shrug.

“Will you please stop speaking of the woman I love as a commodity?” Dante snapped.

As it happened, he was a touch too loud. Charlotte stirred and stretched, then opened her eyes. She smiled and made a

happy sound of pleasure, then said, “Good morning,” in an adorable, sleepy voice.

“Good morning, darling,” Damien answered her from the end of the bed.

Charlotte stiffened and whipped her head to see Damien, then yelped and snatched at the bedcovers. “Oh no, oh no, oh no!” she gasped in a panic.

Dante shifted closer to her, bringing her into the shelter of his arms and making certain as much of her as possible was covered by the bedclothes.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Damien blurted, pushing himself to sit on the end of the bed. The movement also caused his banyan to fall open, exposing more of him than any woman had probably ever seen.

Charlotte yelped again, then covered her face with her hands.

“Damien, you wretch,” Dante shouted at his brother as loud as he dared. The last thing they needed now was for someone to knock on the door, investigating what the noise was about.

“I really am sorry,” Damien laughed, tugging his robe back into place. “God, no one needs to see all this so early in the morning,” he added. “Unless he’s sweet and lithe and agreeable to a bit of mischief.”

Dante felt like a kettle about to boil over. He was seconds away from leaping out of bed, no matter his state of undress, and hurling his brother bodily from the room.

Then he realized that Charlotte was laughing. The sound was muffled, as Charlotte had sunk down to hide in the bedcovers, but it was definitely laughter.

Dante exchanged a puzzled look with his brother. Damien was surprised, but a smile of amusement spread across his face.

“Shocking, isn’t it,” he said, scrambling around so that he could lie on Charlotte’s other side...on top of the bedcovers,

his robe now fastened tightly around him. “One woman in bed with two twin brothers. I know a few people who would pay handsomely to be in this exact situation.”

Charlotte laughed loudly again, and when she peeked her head out from her hands and the bedcovers, her face was scarlet. “That is absolutely scandalous,” she said, her eyes wide. She then blinked and asked, “Do people actually do that?”

“Absolutely,” Damien answered.

“Never mind all that,” Dante said at the same time.

Charlotte glanced between the two of them again, then broke down into giggles.

Dante sighed with irritation and scowled at his brother, but he was beginning to feel giddy and to appreciate the absurdity of the situation as well. Though God help all of them if anyone should burst into the room and find him, Charlotte, and Damien all in bed together, and naked to boot.

“This is absurd,” he said, shaking his head. “We can’t be like this.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Damien said, shrugging one shoulder. “I think this is a great deal of fun. And now we can discuss the wedding arrangements for the two of you.”

“Wedding arrangements?” Charlotte said, her eyes popping wide again as she glanced between the two brothers. She settled on Damien and said, “But he hasn’t even asked me to marry him yet.”

“Dante!” Damien gasped, pretending to be outraged. “You’ve bedded this poor girl without even proposing to her?”

He fixed Dante with an expectant, disapproving look. Charlotte mimicked that look a little too well as she stared at him.

Dante’s mouth fell open, and for a moment it just flapped as his brain caught up to the madness in his bed. “I was going to write to your father today,” he defended himself. “As soon as I got out of bed.”

“Oh, Dante,” Charlotte said, her expression softening with affection. It pulled into a sly grin a moment later. “This is why Lord Cambourne warned me about the two of you,” she said. “You’re both rogues and reprobates, aren’t you.”

“I’m the reprobate,” Damien offered.

He glanced to Dante, as if expecting him to pick up his cue and say he was the rogue, but instead, Dante grew serious and asked, “What did Lord Cambourne say about us?”

Charlotte’s amusement faded into greater seriousness as well. “He said that the two of you are keeping secrets, and that I should make certain you revealed them before I consent to marry you.”

Dante let out a heavy breath and rubbed a hand over his face. He stared hard at Damien, as if he could have an entire, unspoken conversation with his brother about how much to reveal to Charlotte.

In the silence, Charlotte tensed. “It’s something bad, isn’t it,” she whispered, glancing between the two of them. “Lord Cambourne said I should be careful about my motivations for marrying you,” she glanced to Dante, “because if it was a fortune and title I wanted, I might be disappointed.”

Dante was reminded that somehow, Lord Cambourne knew the truth.

“He is not wrong,” he said slowly, still staring at Damien, as if scolding him for letting the secret out.

“He isn’t?” Charlotte asked worriedly. She pushed herself to sit up a bit more, clutching the bedcovers around her chest. “I...I know that your family fortunes have been depleted,” she said. “And I’ve guessed that your debts have something to do with that.” She glanced sheepishly to Damien. “I do not fault you for seeking to marry an heiress in order to shore up your family finances,” she said, glancing down.

“That is not it,” Dante said, shifting to close his arms around her. “I love you, Charlotte. I would marry you even if you were a pauper’s daughter.”

She glanced up at him with a grateful smile. He smiled in return, but it didn't last.

"I'm the one who might be the pauper," he said. "Should certain secrets come to light." He glanced across to Damien.

Charlotte frowned in confusion and glanced between the two brothers. "I don't understand," she said. "You're a viscount. Your father is an earl. Even if your bank accounts are a little low at the moment, I assume you have a family estate you're set to inherit and your title to recommend you."

"That's just the thing," Damien said. "The only reason Dante has the title is because I gave it to him."

Dante sucked in a breath and held it, waiting for Charlotte to guess the truth. Once she knew, it might all be over.

"I'm not sure I follow," she said, sitting up so that she could glance between the two of them. "I presume that the secret Lord Cambourne was referring to is that the two of you switched places at some point in order to gain something. Perhaps sitting each other's exams at university? I've heard identical twins do that sometimes."

Dante was surprised and proud of Charlotte's cleverness, but that only meant he and Damien had to confess the whole story.

"You are perceptive, my darling," Dante said. "But it wasn't just exams at university."

Charlotte glanced questioningly at him, then at Damien when he said, "We switched everything."

"Everything?"

Dante took a breath, swallowed, then said, "I'm actually Damien, and Damien is actually Dante."

"I beg your pardon?" Charlotte said, clutching her bedcovers tighter and glancing rapidly between the two of them.

"I was born first," Damien said. "About twenty minutes before my brother."

“The midwife who delivered us was particular about marking the two of us so that our parents and others could differentiate between the two of us,” Dante went on. “Father was overjoyed to welcome his heir into the world and whisked Damien off at once—”

“While Dante was left to be our mother’s favorite,” Damien finished the sentence. “And that distinction continued on as we grew.”

“Our paths were each set for us, and our parents held us each rigidly to those paths,” Dante continued. “The firstborn was to become the heir, the leader, and the next patriarch.”

“And the second son would be the disposable one, the lawyer or officer, or whatever it was Mama thought you should become,” Damien said, looking sympathetically at Dante.

“She got the idea into her head that I would make a good naval officer,” Dante added with a weak laugh.

“That is because Mama likes seamen,” Damien said with a grin. “A trait that I share with her.”

“Damien,” Dante scolded, hoping Damien didn’t veer off track.

“That’s the point, though,” Damien told Charlotte. “Dante turned out to be normal in the ways that count and extraordinarily studious and competent in others. I knew from a tender age that I wanted nothing to do with women and very much to do with men. And I have a complete aversion to serious work of any kind.”

“Which meant that my brother would most likely be forced into a marriage with a woman he could never love—”

“And put through the absolute horror of conceiving the next generation of Dixons with her,” Damien added with an exaggerated expression of pain.

“And he would most likely drive our father to an early grave and our estate and family name into the ground,” Dante continued.

“Whereas my dear brother here would forever have his ambitions thwarted and his talents wasted.” Damien paused to make sure Charlotte was keeping up, then went on with, “The solution was obvious.”

“We switched identities when we were fourteen years old,” Dante said. “I became Dante, the eldest and heir—”

“And I became Damien, the cheerful reprobate, devoid of all responsibility, able to carry on like a degenerate without destroying the family name or line.”

A heavy silence followed.

Charlotte glanced back and forth between the two of them, then asked, “But didn’t your parents know? You said they were fastidious about telling the two of you apart.”

“Ah, but that was only when we were infants,” Damien said.

“We made the switch on the way to Harrow,” Dante went on, “at the beginning of term.”

“Like most unfortunate young men of our station, our parents shipped us off to be educated elsewhere at a young age,” Damien said. “Their attention was very much elsewhere at the time, on our younger siblings and whatever other problems and entertainments they indulged in back then.”

“No one at school noticed the switch,” Dante added. “It was months before we returned home or saw our parents and siblings. We were at an age when physical changes happened rapidly anyhow, so no one thought to question who was who.”

“It was nerve-wracking for that first year,” Damien said with a laugh. “I wasn’t certain we’d be able to pull it off.”

“But we did,” Dante said. “And for more than fifteen years now, I’ve been the eldest and heir, and Damien has been the idle ne’re-do-well, burning through the family’s money as if it were kindling.”

“I have enjoyed myself thoroughly,” Damien defended himself. “And I have made more than a few connections of

great value for the family. I have not wasted my time completely.”

“Not *time*,” Dante agreed. “Just money.”

“And I had fun doing it,” Damien said with a wicked grin.

Dante grinned right back at him. Trying though he was, he loved Damien beyond reason.

The two of them stopped grinning at each other when they realized Charlotte had gone quiet. Very quiet. She sat staring at the coverlet, her mouth slightly open and her eyes focused with thought.

Dante exchanged a worried glance with his brother, then said softly, “Charlotte, love, are you alright? Have we shocked you too much?”

Charlotte blinked, then pulled in a breath and glanced at Dante. “Uncle Horace isn’t just Papa’s business partner. The two of them are in love and practically married.”

“*That’s* the moral you took from our story?” Damien asked with a sly smirk.

Charlotte seemed to ignore him. “They had to pretend, because if they were honest with the world, the world would not accept them,” she said in a somewhat dreamy voice, as if her entire life suddenly made sense to her.

“A great many of us have to pretend things so that society will accept us,” Dante said with a sigh, resting his hand against Charlotte’s cheek. “But as long as we find others willing to keep our secrets, we can live the happiest of lives, and no one needs to be the wiser.”

Charlotte burst into a smile. “Yes,” she said, affection dancing in her eyes.

“Yes?” Dante asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes, I will marry you,” she said. “And I’m certain Papa and Uncle Horace will agree to the match. And yes,” she turned to Damien. “I will gladly pay off whatever debts you’ve incurred. Inasmuch as Papa and Uncle Horace release the funds to me to do so. I think they would like you.”

“To be honest,” Damien said, lowering his head and picking at the coverlet. “I believe I am already acquainted with your papa and Uncle Horace. Not intimately, mind you,” he added with a bit of alarm. “But we are part of the same organization, The Brotherhood, in London.”

“Oh,” Charlotte said. She blinked, then smiled even more. “What a happy coincidence.”

Dante’s heart swelled with adoration for her. So many women might have taken the information she’d just had revealed to her and used it as an excuse to be furious or horrified. She could have used it against them and brought the entire family down by revealing which brother should have been the viscount.

But Dante felt very much not only as though Charlotte would keep their secret, but as if she would protect them from anyone who might try to reveal it, or anything having to do with Damien.

“I suppose only one question remains, then,” Charlotte said, her worry returning. “Whose daughter am I really, and could I be Lord Carshalton’s heir?”

Dante opened his mouth to answer, but an almighty racket sounded from the hall. Doors were opened and slammed, and a young woman’s voice called out, “She’s gone! She’s vanished! Help! Miss Benning has been kidnapped!”

Chapter Ten

The shock and alarm that Charlotte felt upon waking to find herself in bed with not one, but two Dantes was enough to make her hair turn white before its time. But the shock of hearing Vicky shouting out in the hallway that she'd been kidnapped took years from Charlotte's life.

“What does she mean, I've been kidnapped?” she gasped, struggling with the bedsheets as if she would get out of the bed, then realizing that to do so would mean exposing her nakedness to two men, not one.

“Oh dear,” Damien said, his expressive mouth twitching into a grin and his eyes flashing with excitement. “It seems we're in a bit of a pickle, chickadee,” he said, assuming what Charlotte thought was supposed to be a flirtatious pose on his side and twirling one end of his banyan's sash.

Charlotte sent him a look that was equal parts scolding and amused. “How is it that anyone has any difficulty telling the

two of you apart?" she asked with a smirk. "The two of you are as different as chalk and cheese."

"I'm the cheesy one," Damien said with a wink, then glanced hopefully to Dante.

"Yes, yes, and I'm the chalk," Dante said, mostly irritated and impatient, but grinning despite himself as well. He shifted so that he could throw the bedcovers back and stand. "We need to get Charlotte back to her room and calm her maid before damage is done," he said.

Charlotte almost didn't hear him. The sight of his body in all its naked glory, bathed in morning light that now poured through the windows they'd forgotten to draw curtains over the night before was a thing to behold. He was all strong lines and firm curves. She was particularly interested in the shape of his bum as he crossed the room and bent to take up a robe that was draped over the arm of a chair. He put it on as he turned, disappointing Charlotte with only a fleeting glimpse of the part of him she really wanted to see.

"If you'd like," Damien said in a conspiratorial tone, "you can feast your eyes on the sight of me instead, since we *are* identical in *every* way."

He tugged at the ties of his banyan like he would bare all.

"I do not know what you are talking about," Charlotte said with mock stuffiness, scooting away from him and deliberately looking away. She couldn't help but grin, and then giggle.

"Damien, stop teasing my fiancée with your endowments," Dante said in a long-suffering voice. "We have a serious problem on our hands."

He grabbed Charlotte's nightgown from the floor, then held it up while averting his eyes so that Charlotte could slip right from the bed and into the garment.

"Well done, brother," Damien said.

He might have been complimenting Dante on how well he had held Charlotte's nightgown so that she was exposed for as short a time as possible, but when she turned and found

Damien's gaze roughly at the level of her bottom, she doubted it.

"You really are incorrigible, aren't you," she said, shrugging into her robe as Dante held that for her as well.

"Trust me, dear soon-to-be sister," Damien said, rolling off the other side of the bed, then popping to stand. "I am not even remotely interested in anything you might have to offer me. But I do appreciate a fine work of art when I see it."

Charlotte snorted with shock and amusement. She feared there would never be a dull moment with Damien in her life. No, not feared, she looked forward to it.

"We need to return you to your room without being seen," Dante said as he stepped into his trousers from the night before and reached for his shirt. He tugged it over his head, but didn't bother buttoning it or tucking it in.

"That should be easy enough," Damien said, coming around the end of the bed and heading straight for the door.

"What are you doing, you fool?" Dante hissed as Damien threw open the door and looked out into the hall.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Damien snapped in return. "I'm checking to see if anyone is in the hallway."

"You'll be seen," Dante insisted with a frown, marching across the room to him.

"So what if I am?" Damien shrugged. "I'm your brother. I'm allowed to visit your room mostly naked first thing in the morning."

Dante hissed some sort of curse that Charlotte couldn't make out. She would have had a hard time hearing it anyhow over the laughter she was trying to keep inside. She even clapped both her hands over her mouth to stop the sound from getting out. Dante and Damien were absolutely perfect as brothers. They were their own sort of comedic act, and she was certain that if they ever needed the money, they could take to the stage in any music hall and make a fortune simply having conversations with each other.

“There’s no one in the hall, by the way,” Damien said, leaning back into the room and gesturing to Charlotte. “Come on, while we still have a chance of making it to the other hallway unseen.”

Charlotte hiccupped on her laughter, then rushed across the room, finishing with the tie of her robe as she went.

Sure enough, the hallway outside Dante’s room was empty. Dante took her hand as the three of them started down the hall, Damien leading the way as a sort of lookout. The morning light that streamed in through the window at the end of the hallway was enough to illuminate their way, but Charlotte found herself worried that someone would leap out of every shadow they passed and accuse her of wickedness.

Then again, would it truly matter if someone like Lady Eleanor accused her of inappropriate behavior? Between the company she found herself in now, the sort of people she was certain Damien associated with, and the ever-growing list of things she was coming to realize about her papa, Uncle Horace, and the circumstances of her own life, she was starting to see that she had never and was never going to be a part of the circles of society that cared about such things.

“Dante,” she said as they neared the end of the hallway, where it joined with two other halls and the grand staircase, “I’m not certain we need to go to all this trouble not to be seen.”

“We don’t?” Dante asked, pausing with her.

Damien paused as well, glancing back to her.

Charlotte shrugged. “If I’m discovered, then I’m discovered.”

“But, darling, your reputation will be ruined,” Dante pointed out.

“I’m beginning to wonder if it was already ruined,” she said with a sigh.

Downstairs, there were sounds of voices and searching, but it all seemed so distant and unimportant now.

“I always wondered why no gentlemen seemed interested in me,” she went on. “Even though my papa’s fortune is modest by comparison to other industrial barons, I have always been puzzled over why no gentlemen of society have ever wanted to make my acquaintance.”

“Er, Charlotte, dear,” Damien said, looking a trifle sheepish. “Your papa’s fortune is not insubstantial.”

“Not now, Damien,” Dante said through gritted teeth.

Charlotte was surprised for only a moment. There was a chance Damien was referring to the possibility of her being Lord Carshalton’s heir, but with all the other things she was suddenly realizing—things she should have known all along, but had been blind to and not encouraged to think about—she was beginning to suspect, no, *know* that she and her papa had not lived with Uncle Horace because they could not afford life on their own, they’d lived together by choice and by love.

“I think I see now that no man of polite society wanted me or my papa’s money because they viewed me as tainted by Papa’s partnership with Uncle Horace.” She glanced to Damien, since he would know. “Is it...is it common knowledge that the two of them are more than mere business partners?” She winced a little as she waited for the answer.

“For the most part, yes,” Damien said. “But have no fear. Money shields them from the law, and the affability of their characters has saved them from social disgrace on more than one occasion. That and the fact that they’ve never attempted to assert themselves into societies that wouldn’t want them.”

That was the answer, then. Things could have been so much worse for Charlotte if she or her papa, or Uncle Horace, had attempted to win her a place in ordinary high society. She’d lived her charmed life because her father, her *fathers*, had kept her safe with people who would always accept her.

And somehow, delightfully, she’d found a man who would love her for who she was and give her exactly the sort of life she’d dreamed of. He would accept her fathers, too, without judgement.

“I don’t care if anyone sees us,” she said, standing taller and smiling at Dante. She went so far as to take his hand and squeeze it. “I don’t care if they know I spent the night in your bed. I love you. I intend to marry you. If anyone dares to eschew my society or yours, or yours,” she turned to Damien and took his hand as well, “then they are people whom I do not wish to know.”

“Beautiful girl,” Damien said, his smile bright. “If Dante ever throws you over, I’ll marry you in an instant. I cannot promise you anything like what my wicked brother gave you last night, but I can promise you a lifetime of amusement and delight.”

“Damien,” Dante sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand.

Charlotte laughed.

That laugh was cut short almost as soon as it began by a cry of, “There she is!” from the top of the grand staircase.

Charlotte gasped and whirled around to find not only Vicky, but Mrs. Seymour, Lady Cambourne, and a few of the other house party guests coming up the stairs.

“Oh, my lady!” Vicky raced toward her. “You’re not vanished! You’re not abducted! Unless—” She gasped and clapped a hand to her chest, looking suddenly suspicious. “Unless these two gentlemen kidnapped you.”

“Dear Vicky, they did nothing of the sort,” Charlotte laughed. She broke away from Dante and Damien and went to hug her poor, distraught maid. “Why would you think I’d been kidnapped?”

“You were not in your room this morning,” Vicky wept against her. “And the bed was unmade. I felt so, terribly guilty for not coming back last night to see if you needed help undressing. I had such a terrible headache, and I know it was wrong of me to shirk my duties, but I didn’t think you’d mind. And then...and then this morning, you were gone, and I... I...” She burst into tears, sagging against Charlotte.

“I wasn’t kidnapped,” Charlotte tried to reassure her.

To her surprise, Mrs. Seymour had come close. “I don’t know what I would have done if anything had happened to you before...before I could....” She wrung her hands in her apron, then burst into tears herself.

“Mrs. Seymour?” Charlotte set Vicky upright and summoned the courage to ask what she needed to ask. “Is it true? Are you...my mother?”

Mrs. Seymour gasped, then burst into even more tears. “I’m afraid I am, miss,” she confessed.

“Oh,” Charlotte said. She was so overwhelmed with emotions that she didn’t know what to say other than that. A dozen questions that she hadn’t had until a few days ago had been answered, but even more took their place.

“Mrs. Seymour has been in our employ since shortly after your birth, my dear,” Lady Cambourne explained, stepping forward.

Charlotte was very much aware that they’d inched out to the landing at the top of the staircase, and that more than a dozen of the other guests were watching them now, most in their night clothes still.

“She was employed as a maid in a certain house in London,” Lady Cambourne went on. “The master of that house took advantage of her youth and innocence. As it happened, Mrs. Seymour is the sister of one of the maids we employed in our London house back then. When Betsy made us aware of her sister’s condition, and the fact that the offending gentleman had her dismissed when his sins were made known, Lord Cambourne and I agreed to take her in.”

“How remarkably generous of you,” Charlotte said, pressing a hand to her stomach.

“I owe you my life, my lady,” Mrs. Seymour said, a bit worshipfully. “And I owe you the life of my Charlotte. I don’t know what would have become of either of us, if not for your generosity and the kindness of Mr. Benning.”

Charlotte’s stomach twisted with acid. She would have had a drastically different life, that was what would have

happened. In all likelihood, like too many other importuned maids, Mrs. Seymour would have been laid extraordinarily low and forced to do horrible things to keep herself and her baby alive.

“How did I come to be with Papa?” she asked weakly, blinking rapidly.

“Lord Cambourne and I have been friends with your papa and Mr. Jeffries for many decades, my dear,” Lady Cambourne said. “They had often expressed to us their regret that their love for each other could not produce a child. But then, by pure chance, they were staying with us when Mrs. Seymour was in her confinement.”

“They’re such nice gentlemen, your fathers,” Mrs. Seymour said, a bit bashfully. She peeked at their growing audience, as if afraid to say too much. “They have always been generous with me. Mr. Jeffries has sent me letters every month, telling me all about you, since you were born. He adores you so.”

Tears sprung to Charlotte’s eyes unbidden. “And I love him,” she said. “I love both of them as if they are my own.” She sniffled, and Dante stepped up behind her to offer comfort. It was exactly the gesture she needed to ask, “But why did they not tell me about you? Why did I have to find out like this?”

“That is my fault, miss,” Mrs. Seymour said, lowering her head. “I have told Mr. Benning and Mr. Jeffries for years that I wished to be the one to reveal myself to you. I wrote at least a dozen letters and never mailed them, took trips to London, and even to Ganymede House, but I never summoned the courage to say anything. I was afraid you would be horrified that I am nothing more than a cook. You deserve better than that.”

“I invited you to this house party in the hope that all would be revealed,” Lady Cambourne said softly. “And now it has.”

“Now it has,” Charlotte repeated, blinking away more tears. “And I am very happy to meet you.”

She stepped away from Dante, glad that she could still feel his presence and his support behind her, and moved to throw her arms around Mrs. Seymour. She didn't quite feel as though she could call the woman her mama yet, but she very much wanted to come to know the woman who had given her life.

"So then Miss Benning *is* Lord Carshalton's heir," one of the guests said, interrupting the emotional moment.

Charlotte stepped back and searched for who might have made the statement, but there were so many fellow houseguests crowded around them now that she couldn't tell who had spoken.

"I refuse to believe it," Lady Eleanor said with a sniff. "You are all daft to think that a woman who has proven herself to be of low moral character, spawned by a woman who would allow herself to be seduced by her betters, and raised by inverters could in any way be heir to so vast a fortune."

Charlotte was stunned by the rudeness of Lady Eleanor's words. She saw them for what they were, though. Lady Eleanor was most likely jealous that someone whom she did not approve of could be so happy and live such a charmed life.

Nearly everyone else reacted to the unfortunate woman with anger, though.

"How dare you disparage my fiancée in such a way?" Dante demanded, taking a step toward where Lady Eleanor stood, with Miss Silverstone behind her, looking panicked.

"Fiancée?" Lady Patience asked, perking up. It was not lost on Charlotte that she and Mr. Covington were in their nightclothes and holding hands. "Are you engaged, then?"

Charlotte flushed and smiled at Dante. He hadn't actually asked the question, but she felt in her heart as though it was a foregone conclusion.

She stepped away from Mrs. Seymour and took Dante's hand. "We are," she said, gazing adoringly at him. "That is, if you'll have me."

Dante sucked in a breath and smiled, but before he could answer, Damien stepped in with, "Are you proposing to my

brother, Miss Benning?”

Charlotte turned to him with a laugh. “I suppose I am.”

“Marry her, Dante,” Damien said, slapping a hand on his brother’s back. “I like her, and the family desperately needs her.” He winked at Charlotte for good measure.

Charlotte shook her head, still laughing, then turned to Dante, her question in her eyes.

“Of course, I will marry you,” Dante said, sweeping her into his arms, regardless of who was looking on. “I thought we’d already settled this issue.”

“We had,” Charlotte said, “but I wanted to be certain.” She leaned in and whispered against his ear so that he alone could hear, “And I pledge to keep your secret and make certain it is never revealed as long as we both shall live.”

“Done,” Dante said, then kissed her soundly.

A few people behind them gasped in shock at the audacious display. A few others clapped their hands or made other expressions of delight and approval. Charlotte was glad that someone, at least, approved of their match and would accept them, no matter how inappropriate and unconventional their coming together was.

“Just to be clear,” Miss Pennypacker said when Charlotte and Dante finally stopped kissing, “Is Miss Benning the Carshalton heir or not?”

“She is not, miss,” Mrs. Seymour said. “I can vouch for that. I will not reveal her sire’s name in a public setting like this, but if you ever wish to know, my Charlotte, I will tell you.”

Charlotte shook her head. “I don’t want to know. I have a father. I have two of them. They are the only men I ever want to think of as my papas.”

“A wise choice,” Damien said.

“But then, who is Lord Carshalton’s heir?” Lady Angeline asked, a look of excitement and wonder in her eyes.

“I suppose the time has come to reveal all,” Lady Yvette said, standing taller. Her color was high, and an almost manic light shone in her eyes as she said, “I am Lord Carshalton’s heir.”



I hope you’ve enjoyed Dante and Charlotte’s story! I had so much fun writing it. I loved playing around with the idea of identical twins that switched places. So much so that I might have to use this particular plot device in another book someday! I also feel like Damien needs his own book at some point, but we’ll see!

And what a bombshell! Is Lady Yvette telling the truth that she’s the Carshalton heir? Or is there something deeper and darker going on in the woman’s past. She is a widow at a very young age, after all. It’ll be up to Nathan Clarke, Lord Theydon, to discover the truth and to help Yvette in a way that will actually be helpful, all while dodging his own demons. Find out all about it in the next book, *The False Heir*.

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About the Author

I hope you have enjoyed *The Charmed Heir*. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F>.

USA Today Bestselling Author Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Peter and Justine. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



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