



THE FAKE  
FEBRUARY

# Rake

CHARLIE LANE

# *The Fake February Rake*

THE RAKE REVIEW

BOOK TWO

CHARLIE LANE



Copyright © 2024 by Charlie Lane

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

Charlie Lane asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work. Charlie Lane has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

First Edition

Editing by Krista Dapkey

Cover art by Dar Albert

Series logo by Sadie Bosque

Proofreading by Melinda Greathouse

 Created with Vellum

*For Brian—not a rake.*

*And for all the folks out there who love softy cinnamon rolls.*

# *Contents*

[The Rake Review, February 1, 1820](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Charlie Lane](#)

[About the Author](#)

*The Rake Review, February 1,  
1820*



*Dearest reader,*

*An intelligent lady understands that a man is not a necessity, though he is, in some select situations, desirable to have about. So it is for our beloved rakes.*

*January's specimen was so very diverting that it would be a pity to abandon such delights just as we've discovered them. In that spirit, I introduce to you, dear reader, a truly exceptional gentleman—though I use the term loosely—to keep you warm during the cold days of February. Though retreat may be more in order when dealing with Dr. H\_\_ J\_\_.*

*For years he has waltzed effortlessly into our homes, despite his dubious parentage, unlocking our doors with his congenial manners, gentle smile, and smoldering good looks. We thought him an angel.*

*I regret to inform you—he is not.*

*Dr. H\_\_ J\_\_ was discovered just last week exiting a Covent Garden theatre. His hat may have hidden his angelic features, but we'd know that coat of his anywhere, dear readers. Those big brass buttons, that distinguished dark-charcoal wool, that unmistakable, one-of-a-kind green silk brocade lining. A flashy bit of fashion, but without it, we'd never have discovered his taste for actresses, particularly the lovely and talented Miss C.*

*I cannot deny the man's attractions. He is well over six feet and fills out his trousers impeccably. I detect no hint of artificial padding on his frame. He's an intellect to match his good looks, too. At eight and twenty years of age, he is one of*

*the youngest, most accomplished men England has to offer and possesses the most delightfully charming bedside manner. It rather puts one in mind of other delights to be had beside a bed. Or in it.*

*His flaws are few as far as this brazen belle can tell, outside of his roving eye and questionable fashion choices. Yet... if anyone has seen Miss C, who seems to have disappeared since her exit from the alley by the doctor's side, do please inform us. If the women the good doctor dallies with vanish into thin air—as Miss C and a handful of others have done in the past year—perhaps he's better known as the Devil Doctor, and perhaps you, dear reader, should keep your distance.*

*Until next month, remain as ever, entirely brazen.*

*The Belle*



# One



*February 25, 1820*

If Dr. Hades Jones were the type of man to consign people to Hell, he'd have blasted gossip columnists and coat thieves to the innermost circles of that fiery realm weeks ago. Despite his name, however, he was not that type of man, so gossip columnists and coat thieves were safe.

For the moment.

The gossip columnist at least. He couldn't find her and had no idea who she really was. No one did.

The coat thief, however, he'd have in his clutches soon enough. If, that was, clutches wore kid gloves. Not a single speck of dust on them, either, despite the mud-ridden state of the back alley behind the Drury Lane theatre he stood in.

At the end of the alley—a door. The coat thief had entered it but a half hour earlier. The man rarely stayed longer than that with his current paramour, information Hades had gleaned through a week's worth of observations. If this night were like the four others, the door would swing open soon, and the coat thief would exit, and Hades would be waiting, clutches ready.

Once he had his coat back, he'd prove that gossip columnist wrong. Wouldn't she—whomever *she* actually was, the anonymous coward—just expire from embarrassment and guilt when he proved himself innocent of the crimes she'd tossed at his feet with her oh-so-witty observations and accusations?



Hades seethed. The alley turned red, a transformation as abrupt as that which had happened to his reputation after the publication of her article. *The Rake Review* indeed. Mister February *indeed*. Him? A rake? Not in a hundred lifetimes. Yet, now everyone thought him one. And he'd stopped receiving calls. Every one of his patients—miraculously healed.

The red turned a bit fiery. Did he have optical damage of some sort? Was he becoming apoplectic? He closed his eyes and breathed away the rage.

Wasn't entirely the gossip's fault, after all. The coat thief was partially to blame.

The door at the end of the alley cracked open, and dim yellow light sliced into the shadows. Hades moved off the damp alley wall, hands becoming fists, as a man stepped out of the doorway at the end of the alley, a woman ducked under his arm, and the brim of his beaver hat pulled low. Green flashed from the inside of the man's greatcoat, a rich green of brocade silk, dull in the murky alley light.

His own bloody cursed and blasted coat.

"I want my coat back," he said, tapping the tip of his walking stick on the ground beside him.

The approaching figures froze. The man straightened, proving himself taller than the woman but not by much. He'd be shorter than Hades. Together, they tentatively stepped forward. Then again. And again, shrinking the space between them and he. Did they think to intimidate him? Ignore him?

Ha.

Hades flicked his wrist and tossed the outer casing of his sword cane to the side, revealing the honed edge of a narrow blade glinting silver in the darkness, becoming the alley's only moon-stolen light, new and dangerous.

The woman shrieked and shrank into the man's embrace.

"I want no trouble this night," Hades said. "I merely want my coat back."

Two heads bent closer together in the shadows. Then they bolted, parting like the Red Sea under Moses' command and running around either side of him as far from his body as the narrow alley would allow.

Brave. Foolish.

He could catch only one, though, so perhaps not so foolish after all.

An easy choice to make. He stepped to the left and snagged the collar of the man's coat—Hades' coat—and yanked him back, hooked his arm over his shoulder, whirled him around, and slammed his back into the wall, bringing the other arm up to slide the sword between them, caressing the coat thief's neck. His hat long gone, spinning in a puddle behind Hades, the thief glared from between long strands of hair.

*She* glared from between long strands of hair.

"You're a woman." Hades almost dropped her, but just as his muscles loosened, he tightened them once more, keeping her pinned by the blade to the wall. She may be a woman, but she was still a thief.

"Ah, well," the woman said, "no hiding that, I suppose."

"You have breasts. No. There's no hiding that." He felt them, too. Her breathing whispering them against his muscle. Hell. "Except for beneath a man's greatcoat."

She shrugged, looked down at her own body. "I suppose I could hide them under other garments. They are rather small. Any chance you'll pretend they're not there?"

"No." Woman or not, she'd not escape retribution this night. The thief. The reputation ruiner.

"Pity. Well, then. If you just release me, I'll be on my—"

"No." He'd come for his coat and found a mystery. "You're coming with me."

"What?" Panic laced the single word. "No. See, I can say that word, too."

He tightened his grip as she yanked out of it, and when she remained pinned, she began to thrash and wiggle.

“Damn,” he hissed, removing the blade from her throat but holding it close to his side. He risked slicing her neck open with all her jerking about. “Be still.”

“No.”

A wind shifted a cloud across the sky, and the moon’s pale, diffuse light became a brilliant glow. And he recognized her. That pointed chin and wide mouth, those large eyes and cloud of freckles moving across her face. Not an ordinary face, yet not an extraordinary one, either. Memorable, though, because he’d never seen another like it. He’d never seen her as he saw her *now*. When he visited her mother, Lady Ophelia always seemed somewhere else, her brow lowered in boredom or preoccupation. She seemed an automaton moving where her parents sent her. Not tonight. The shadows brought her to life, and her eyes sparked green and gold, defiance and determination, and her mouth seemed mobile, unpredictable, the kind of lips that would shock a man.

“Lady Ophelia?” he asked, his voice slow and halting.

She stopped wriggling and stood still, head bowed. Would she talk? Look up at him? Run?

“No?” she said finally.

He almost chuckled. “You’re unmistakable. No denying your identity.”

“It’s of no importance.” She lifted her head, faced him, finally. Her wide mouth firm and determined, it twisted as she blew a lock of hair out of her face. “How did you discover me?”

“You’ve made the location of my greatcoat a topic of considerable interest in the last few weeks. It was not difficult to follow the gossip and pin you down.”

“Ah. Excellent deductive skills, Dr. Jones. Now, release me.”

“Give me my coat.”

She grinned, a wicked little thing. “Take it from me.”

He wanted to growl, but Hades Jones, physician to the ton, didn’t do such things.

“No more teasing,” he demanded. “Return my coat, and I’ll release you.”

Her gaze flashed to the end of the alley. What did she look for there? The woman who had fled? He would not look to see. He must keep his prey in his sights and under his paw.

He stepped backward but raised the blade between them. “Take it off.”

She pulled the coat more tightly about her tall frame. “It is part of my disguise.”

“And why do you need a disguise? You’re the reason the entire ton thinks me an abductor of women. Tell me, what need do you have that requires such sacrifices of me?”

She bit her bottom lip. Was she about to laugh? Damn her to hell.

“It’s not funny. It’s ruining me, ruining my business. I have earned my reputation with every action and every word. My name is built of caution and patience, yet it fell within a week. Because of a *coat*. No. Because of *you*. I will not let a spinster unravel all my work so easily.” Hard words, yes, but she deserved to hear them. “How’d you get your hands on my coat anyway? Never mind. Do not answer.” It didn’t matter.

He flicked the tip of his sword to her throat, hovering several inches away from delicate skin, knowing he wouldn’t use it to do anything but frighten her. “Take it off.”

She hugged it tighter. “Why does it matter so to you? You can procure another.”

God, he *hated* the coat. So ostentatious with that green silk lining, those big brass buttons. But his half sister had picked it out for him. And he loved *her* if not her fashion sensibilities. She’d been so proud when she’d given it to him. And she’d been asking about it relentlessly since its disappearance. He needed it back to show her he cared.

And just as importantly, to stop the woman who currently wore it from using it to conduct nefarious business.

“The more pertinent question is why do *you* need my coat?”

“I’ve told you,” she said, her voice calm though her gaze flicked toward the blade at her throat, “it’s a disguise.”

“Greatcoats are not difficult to come by. Find another.”

“No.” She ran her hands down the lapel. “I rather like this one.”

“Take. It. Off.”

She held his gaze and licked her lips, and his groin tightened because her lips were plump, and they looked soft, and he could tell that the shadows of the alley only hinted at the pink of them. He could not help but think of a different context where *take it off* would produce an entirely different meaning. He swallowed.

She uncurled her fists and let the coat’s edges fall open, revealing the very gentle slope of small breasts pressed against the linen of a man’s shirt.

How long had it been since he’d had a woman? Couldn’t even remember. Months? Perhaps a year. More. His sword vibrated in his hand, snapping him out of his lust haze to find her arm had slammed into the blade, pushed it aside.

She darted through the opening and ran. He ran after her, feet pounding madly into puddles, and when he reached the end of the alley, he could almost graze the tails of his greatcoat flapping behind her.

He lunged, grabbed, and missed.

She jumped into a hack waiting on the street, and he fell face-first into the mud. He scrambled to his feet as the hack door snapped shut, and he took off at a sprint as the conveyance lurched forward. He reached the door, and his fingers brushed cold, wet wood. He had it!

Then a gap opened up in the traffic, and the horses bolted forward, and Hades hit his knees in the mud once more.

Damn. He didn't have it. He watched the hack disappear then climbed to his feet with a groan, rubbing his ribs where they'd surely be bruised in the morning.

Minx. Damn dangerous minx. What in hell was she up to? Despite the absolute failure of an evening, relief curled through Hades. At least it hadn't been an actual blackguard at the back door to the theatre. At least the woman sheltered under Lady Ophelia's arm had appeared willing to go with her. Where were they going?

No matter. His coat was gone, and his reputation too. He scraped his palms down his face and turned toward home, each step heavy with the same dread that had filled him since *The Rake Review* had named him February's most dangerous rake. He'd wanted one thing in life—to make the ton *need* him. Need him with the same intensity with which they'd thrown off his mother. He'd wanted to be indispensable.

But they'd dispensed with him easily. One article and his usefulness had dissolved like bread in a rainstorm. That debacle would die soon enough, though, and they'd once more beg him to attend their bedsides.

Once he caught Lady Ophelia.

No need to run down the street after the vixen, though. He knew where she lived.

## Two



Lady Ophelia Howard stared at the slash in the arm of the greatcoat as if it were a gash in her own flesh. The coach swayed as it took them deeper into London and farther away from the dangerous doctor, rocking her belly into a state quite dangerous to the velvet upholstery of the unmarked coach. She'd made a mistake. Oh, *pudding*. She'd made a horrible mistake. She'd taken the doctor's coat on a whim, in an hour of great need. And she'd let the man's name sit on wagging tongues after that blasted gossip column because... it was convenient. An alibi of sorts. If everyone attributed the missing women to the good doctor, no one would go looking for the real rogue. Her.

She cringed, guilt sitting heavy in her roiling gut. She'd done what she had to. For herself, yes, but also for the women who needed secrecy, needed to slip quietly into the night.

*I will not let a spinster unravel all my hard work so easily.*

More guilt slicing like the blade of his sword cane. But then also... *Humph*. She was a spinster by choice, thank you very much. Perhaps she should banish guilt. The man seemed a right arse, after all. So very different from the other times she'd seen him, walking in and out of their townhouse with such long strides and clear purpose, his gentle words to her mother soothing even when muffled by closed doors. His golden hair and too-handsome face, his body—tall and well-proportioned—the type of form to instill confidence in the sickly. If Dr. Jones said you would be better, well then, you would.



Tonight, he'd been an entirely different man, a—

“What a riot, Mistress C.” Peggy clapped her hands and threw back her hood, revealing the pixie-esque face that had captured the imaginations of all London from the very first moment she'd appeared on a Drury Lane stage. Capturing, as well, the attentions of one Lord Edward Crook, third son of a viscount and Peggy's most recent paramour. And the father of Peggy's unborn child. Not that the man cared. Well, he did care. He was quite angry. Blamed her, took back his gifts, left her with nothing but a soiled reputation and a job as an actress that would soon be taken from her too. As soon as her condition became apparent, as it must do soon. An inevitability, that.

Peggy didn't seem to care she'd been thrown off like a torn stocking, though. Her golden curls bobbed and her bow-shaped mouth grinned. “An absolute riot. Better than the stage, I swear. And I should know, being up on one every night of the week. That man had a *real* blade. And”—she gasped, hands flying up to cover her mouth—“was he truly the Devil Doctor? Oh, Mistress C, you fought him off for me. A more valiant woman I've never met.” She sighed, falling back into the squabs. “He's as handsome as the Brazen Belle describes, isn't he. A devil with an angel's face.”

He *was* handsome. More so in the shadowed alley than in the sun-drenched halls of her own home. When he came calling on her mother, he was a statue of complete perfection, every hair combed into place, his clothes tailored to fit his body and in the first stare of fashion. Though not foppish. Far from. He seemed impeccable then, professional, untouchable.

In the alley, he'd seemed enraged, dangerous, divine, his golden hair tousled, his blue eyes blazing, every inch of his over-six-foot frame pulled up tall and towering. She'd known by how his greatcoat swamped her own tall-though-waifish frame that he was big—wide shoulders and impressive chest. Up close... well, seeing was *more* than knowing.

“Do you think,” Peggy said, her voice a tad breathless, “he was there to abduct me?”

“Abduct? Why would you think that?” Ophelia poked at the slash in the coat. Horrid thing. She’d not meant to ruin it.

“Because he’s the Devil Doctor! It’s what he does. They say he has a harem in Portsmouth.”

Rumors. About him. Because of her. She’d stolen the coat. She’d “abducted” the women. Helped them, in all actuality. To a better chance in life. At a women’s refuge, a house in Dorking. Not a *harem*.

“Peggy,” Ophelia said, holding her arms out wide to best display the coat, “it wasn’t him.”

“But how do you know?”

“Because I’m the one wearing the coat the Brazen Belle uses to identify him by. Because I’ve been at every location of every missing woman attributed to him. Because I am abducting you now.”

Peggy’s eyes widened, then she giggled. “So it is. How marvelous.”

The coach hit a bump, and they flew up, jolted back down. Ophelia gripped the seat, and Peggy hugged her belly, a rounded bump barely showing beneath voluminous, heavy skirts. Her face went a bit green.

“You’re not going to cast up your accounts, are you?” Ophelia asked.

Peggy shook her head, closed her eyes, and gulped in a slow breath. “No. I’ll be fine. But if I did, do you think that Devil Doctor would come tend to me? My, but he’s a prime one.”

“You should not call him the Devil Doctor.”

“But by all accounts, he’s horrid! Acts horrid, at least, because he certainly does not look horrid. He’s a rake of the highest order. No. He *surpasses* the order altogether, and—”

“He’s entirely innocent. Remember?”

Peggy chuckled. “So he is. I keep forgetting.”

“I would appreciate it if you forgot all of this—him, me, the altercation in the alley. Once we arrive at Hawthorne House, you will be safe and cared for, your child too, until you can find other accommodations and opportunities. No need to discuss how you got there.”

“Understood, mistress.” Her eyes narrowed, and her gaze roved over Ophelia from the tip of her muddy men’s boots to the top of her hatless head. “We’ve talked much this last week, but I still do not know... why are you doing this?” Ophelia swallowed, looked out the window. “Your name is clearly not what you gave me. Mistress Charity. *Humph*. I’m a flighty little thing, I’m aware, but I’m not entirely without sense. And I know a stage name when I hear one. But do not worry. I will not ask for your identity.” She licked her lips and scrutinized Ophelia further. “I can tell from the way you speak, the way you hold yourself... you’re no commoner. And if you’re a peer’s daughter or wife, then... why? Why care about the likes of me, the type of woman your men come to when... when”—she licked her lips—“they bore of you. I mean no offense, of course, but—”

“None taken.” How could one take offense to the truth?

How much to tell her, though? Ophelia wrapped one arm around her body and fiddled with the slice in the arm of the greatcoat with her other. “We may quickly lose the attentions of our husbands, fathers, and brothers...” Her mother had lost her father long ago, though they both yet lived. “But we... we never lose their protection. Hm.” She grasped her forearm, her hand a vice that squeezed past the thick wool of the doctor’s coat and its silk liner, past the linen of her man’s shirt and past skin, too, to the very bone. “That’s not quite true, is it? Some unfortunate women lose even that.” She wasn’t answering Peggy’s question. She was letting her mind drift too much, avoiding difficult memories. No more.

“I... I knew a woman,” she said, “and her son.” Her father’s former mistress—tired and sick and abandoned—and her half brother—just toddling about, a brilliant gem in a drafty tenement. “They died because no one could, or would, help them.” Belinda’s pale face and thin frame in Ophelia’s

father's study. She'd hit her knees and turned her hands into a prayer, begging Ophelia's father for help he refused to give. He'd shoved her, cold and crying, back onto the street. Ophelia had hidden behind a faintly cracked door, listening, watching, heart breaking.

"Like my Eddy," Peggy said, the sparkle gone from her voice.

Ophelia nodded. She'd heard of Lord Crook's reaction to his paramour's state in whispers drifting through ballrooms and parlors. And Peggy had confirmed it when Ophelia had first snuck backstage at the theatre. Lord Crook had grown incensed upon learning his mistress was with child—called her a climber, accused her of doing it on purpose, threatened her.

Ophelia clutched her fists and pulled them into the large sleeves of the greatcoat. The man would not get his hands on Peggy. Never.

"We'll get you to safety," she promised. "Hawthorne House is but a few hours' drive away. Soon, you will be among friends."

Peggy nodded, a slow movement that quickened until she resembled a pecking hen. "How many other women... like me... have you helped?"

"Not many. You are the fourth. But I've only been at this a year, and four is rather a lot in that span of time, I think. There should not be so much as one in a year, but... there have been four whom I could help. Who knows how many more exist whom I could not."

"Yes." Peggy's eyes glazed and her cheek hollowed as she tilted her head. "How many illegitimate children do you think the Devil Doctor has? With a harem like I've heard of, he must have an entire army of them."

Ophelia groaned, wagged the sleeve of her—his—coat before Peggy's face. "He doesn't have a harem, remember?"

Peggy snorted. "Ah, yes. It's just such an excellent story, I keep forgetting. How'd you come by his coat?"

A mistake. A panicked decision she regretted but not enough to set the rumors right after she'd read February's *Rake Review*.

"He treats my mother's nerves. He was visiting with her and left his coat in the antechamber. I was on my way out. An emergency had arisen. One of my... charges needed to leave a day earlier than scheduled, and I rushed from my room dressed in a gown instead of"—she gestured to her men's apparel—"this, but as I descended the stairs, I heard voices coming from my father's study. Leaving my father's study. I darted into the antechamber to hide, but I didn't have time to wait, though. So I snatched up the coat and hat abandoned there on a settee, donned them, and marched out tall as if I were the doctor himself, even waved a hand above my head when my father bid the doctor goodbye."

That had been the first night she'd been spotted, *the coat* had been spotted. She'd not even noticed its recognizable buttons and liner until she'd taken it off in the wee hours of the morning in her bedchamber. And when she'd read the *Rake Review*, she'd known instantly. It wasn't the good doctor who'd been spotted. It had been her.

She'd continued to use the coat. Disguises were valuable, after all. But she'd not thought London would take the gossip column seriously. Had he truly lost all his business? Because of her? She slumped lower in her seat as Peggy's face curled into disappointment.

"I know," Ophelia said. "It was not good of me."

Peggy waved her worries away. "It's not that at all. It's only... I had been hoping for something a bit more scandalous. She leaned forward, eyes bright, hands cupping her knees. "I thought perhaps you were lovers, and you had stolen his coat after an illicit and wonderful night in his bed, and he has since made it his life's purpose to track you down and make you pay. In an illicit manner of course."

Ophelia snorted. "You've been too long on the stage."

"I think perhaps you've been too long outside a man's embrace."

Ophelia snorted again. “The embrace of a man is too much trouble.”

“Why, it’s the easiest thing in the world.”

“To procure it, perhaps, but afterward...” She lifted a brow, let her gaze drift to Peggy’s abdomen.

Peggy sighed, but it wasn’t entirely a sorrowful sound. “You have a point, I suppose. And I cannot help but think the embrace of a man as compelling as the Devil Doctor might just be worth it.”

“It’s not. I assure you.” No man’s attentions were worth the trouble, the abandonment, the eventual loss.

The hack rattled south through London toward their destination, and Ophelia, not for the first time, enumerated the faults of men. Even those men who seemed good, perfect even, treated women as if they were nuisances at best and disposable at worst. Just look at her father. She would never let one control her, and she would deliver as many women to safety as her limited freedom allowed.

“What are you going to do, then?” Peggy asked.

“Hm? About what?”

“The Devil Doctor. He seemed awful angry.”

He had. He’d recognized her, too. There was no escaping him now. What would he do with her secret? She could ignore him no longer, and she’d have to pay for her crimes on her own terms or pay whatever price he demanded.

“I’ll return his coat. Tomorrow.” Ophelia wrapped the garment tighter around her, dreading giving it away. It had served her well in the last several weeks. She had become rather fond of it.

“Do you think that will be enough?” Peggy asked.

She hoped so. She did not particularly wish to discover what price the Devil Doctor would demand she pay for her sins. A few hours ago, she’d thought nothing of the gentle doctor. But now she’d seen his edge, seen him as a sword unsheathed, and she knew well that blade could cut deep.

When provoked, the doctor may slice her in half instead of sewing her up.



# Three



February 26, 1820

Hades slicked his hand through his hair, making sure every lock was in place. He straightened his jacket and checked his cuffs and the shine of his boots. Not a speck of mud on them, not a hint of lint. Everything as it should be to begin to put his life right.

Now that he knew the coat thief's identity, he could not only reacquire his clothing, but he could also put an end to the woman's antics. He'd come to Lady Ophelia's doorstep not to meet with her today but to meet with her *father*. Hades shivered away the chilly wind beating at his back and knocked on the door. Three precise, loud raps. The door opened equally quickly.

"Dr. Jones," the butler said, all of February's ice in his voice. "We did not call for your services today."

No they had not. Neither had any of his usual patients. Precisely the problem.

"I've come to speak with your master," Hades said. "It is about Lady Ophelia."

The butler frowned and stepped back from the doorway. Hades danced with him, following him inside until the butler stopped, made himself into a boulder, and neither of them went any farther.

"I shall ask the earl," he said with a sniff.

"Yes, you do that."

The butler slammed the door closed, almost snapping it into Hades' nose.

Usually, Hades offered servants a warmer greeting, camaraderie even. Another doctor might be held in slightly higher esteem than the butler or the footman, but not Hades. Not a marquess's by-blow. But Hades was patient, so he stood tall and still, and he waited, and then the door opened once more, and the butler stepped aside, ushering him in.

A short walk brought them into a study Hades had visited on his first interview with the Earl of Plinkton, the one that had determined he would be the countess's new physician.

Now, as then, the earl sat behind a large oak desk with not a speck or piece of paper cluttering its top. The pristine surface seemed to reflect all the earl's power and wealth and all those things he thought Hades would never have.

Hades' gloved hands made fists he forced back open almost as soon as they were made. He didn't want this man's power. He wanted only to protect the vulnerable women of the ton. The women like his mother, whom everyone looked over because they thought they were safe, not realizing they took that safety for granted. The countess and others like her were often quite vulnerable indeed. As his mother had been.

"What is it you want, Jones?" the earl asked, cold dismissal on his lined face.

"I'm here to speak of your eldest daughter. Lady Ophelia."

He did not wait to be offered a seat. Such an offer would likely never come. So he sat anyway, refusing to be dismissed.

"What can you possibly have to say about my daughter?"

Hades crossed one leg over the other. "You must take control of her." Or else the girl would hurt herself more than she'd hurt Hades.

"Ophelia." The earl's expression tightened, his lips disappearing into a mirthless line. "Ophelia does as she pleases."

"Do you know what she pleased to do last night?"

Lord Plinkton stiffened, his brows pulling together to make a vee. “Last night my eldest daughter was sleeping in her bed. As difficult as she is, I will not abide aspersions on her character.”

Hades wanted to offer the man a sharp bark of laughter, but he held onto it. “Then why was she in the alley behind the Theatre Royal last night, escorting an actress into a hired hack?”

“She was not.” Lord Plinkton shot to his feet, the skin of his knuckles tight and bloodless as he curled his hands into fists.

“I saw her clearly. Face-to-face. Unmistakable. Lady Ophelia, freckles and all.”

“Bloody— I’ve read that column, the *Rake Review* nonsense. I’ve heard the rumors. Why do you think we’ve stopped calling for your services? Answer me—what were *you* doing in that alley? Looking to abduct another woman?”

Hell. “The column is false. Slander,” Hades said between gritted teeth. “And *your daughter* inspired the rumors.”

Lord Plinkton laughed, a long, hard, bloodless sound to match his fists. “What a fib. Do not come into my house and darken my daughter’s name.” But he lowered slowly back to his chair and tapped a single finger on the top of the desk, storms of doubt swirling in his eyes.

“I can give you proof,” Hades said. He kept his voice calm, would present a face of control to the man close to snapping before him. “She has my coat. A greatcoat my half sister gifted me. It disappeared from this very house, though I did not connect the day of its disappearance with my call to see your wife until last night. I can only guess that it was Lady Ophelia caught exiting a Covent Garden theatre with an actress on her arm. Not. Me.” He allowed a bit of a sword’s edge into those last two words. “Call her down and ask her for the coat. You’ll see.”

For several long moments the only sound in the room was the tapping of the Lord Plinkton’s nail against the table.

Hades remained a statue, patient, determined.

“Hapard!” the earl cried out.

The butler appeared with the first syllable of his name. He must have been lying in wait just beyond the door. “Yes, my lord?”

“Bring Lady Ophelia to me. I do not care what she is doing nor what her desires are. She comes. Now.”

Hapard bowed. “Yes, my lord.” He turned to leave.

“And, Hapard? When she leaves, search her room. I want to know if she is in possession of a man’s greatcoat.”

“Yes, my lord.” The butler disappeared.

And Hades could breathe easier. He stood on the edge of victory. He’d save Lord Plinkton’s daughter from future ignominy, and in his relief, the earl would offer Hades his position in the household back. And when he embraced Hades once more, others would soon follow. It would take time, but it was a start.

Still... discomfort pulsed through him, made him want to thrust a hand through his hair or wiggle when he needed to retain his composure. “My lord,” Hades said, refusing to fidget, “can you not simply ask your daughter to produce my coat? Having her room searched without her consent seems a tad... unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary? Ha! Have you met my eldest daughter?”

“Briefly. Last night.” At sword point. He cringed. Perhaps he’d overreacted.

“In an alley outside a theatre! *If* you are telling the truth. So you know, Dr. Jones... you *know*. She’s a menace.”

“I—ah—”

“You cannot deny it!” He wagged a finger at Hades, his previous rage dissolved into harmless exasperation.

Perhaps Hades could not deny it. She had certainly menaced his life, and with such little contact thus far. But all

the same, she was allowed her privacy, her agency. Or she should be.

“You’re not going to... hurt her?” Hades asked.

“No. I’m not a monster, man, not as they claim *you* are. I’ve heard about the harem.”

Hell.

“Father.” That voice. “Hapard said you wished to speak with me?” Lady Ophelia sauntered into the view, her tall frame draped in green lace of all things, too frilly and delicate for a woman like her, too girlish and innocent.

Hades stood and turned to face her.

She gasped. “No! You!”

He bowed. “Yes. Me.”

Her gaze flashed to her father then back to Hades. “What have you done?”

The earl jumped from his chair and strode toward Lady Ophelia, his steps causing Hades’ fists to bunch, his muscles to ready. Just in case the man’s hard stride turned violent.

“He has some interesting accusations,” the earl said, “and I wish to hear what you have to say about it.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts and looked away. “I cannot imagine what that man would have to say about me.” If there was a brazen belle in London, it was not that gossip columnist hiding behind her anonymity. It was Lady Ophelia, pretending innocence with utter confidence.

“Oh really?” Lord Plinkton said, circling her with long, lazy steps. “You’ve nothing to say about actresses? Back alleys? Stealing coats?”

“I’ve no idea what you speak of.” She gave a sharp, brittle laugh. “Nothing you say makes an ounce of sense, Father. It’s what you get for listening to the Devil Doctor.”

Hades’ fists tightened, and his nails dug pain into his palms. He’d have to put an ointment on them later to soothe and heal the cuts he’d likely put there.

“Is this what you were looking for, my lord?” Hapard appeared, a gray and green greatcoat neatly draped across one arm.

“That was quick.” Relief had taken hold of Hades, and his legs almost lost their strength. He finally had the coat back. Thank God.

“It was poorly hidden, Dr. Jones,” Hapard said.

“That’s mine!” Lady Ophelia lurched toward the coat and the butler, but Hades reached them first and snapped the coat away so that she caught nothing but Hapard’s sleeve. She recovered quickly, her empty, clawed hands flattening into gloveless blades as she rounded on Hades. “You.” She pointed a trembling finger at him. “I was going to return your coat today, you... you *toad!* There was no need to involve my father.”

“See.” Lord Plinkton produced a crystal decanter and tumbler out of nowhere and waved them above his head before snapping them onto the top of his desk. “A menace. A complete termagant.” He poured three fingers of amber liquid into the tumbler and nodded at Hades. “You?”

“No, thank you.” Hades did not drink during daylight hours.

The earl shrugged.

“Father!” Lady Ophelia screeched.

“She used to call me Papa,” Plinkton said with a sigh. “Then she refused three proposals her first season. Three! And three the next and five after that. Five! Would have thought to see half the number of proposals from her second year. But the suitors considered her a challenge by that time, and—”

“This is hardly relevant.” Lady Ophelia’s voice held a warning.

But not one her father seemed intent to heed. “You have been sneaking out of the house. To do what?” He downed his liquor and slammed the glass to the table then stalked toward her, marching her backward until the backs of her legs hit a

chair and her legs buckled. She dropped into it with a sharp gasp. "Tell me!" he yelled.

She flinched then found her composure once more. "You tell me about your former mistress." She shot to her feet, pushing Plinkton back.

Hades backed away from the fray and inched toward the door. He could just... slip out unnoticed.

"Tell me about the woman who carried your child," Lady Ophelia demanded. "Tell me about how they both died."

Hell. Hades eyed the door. So close now. Was it cowardly to run when he'd shot the first bullet that had begun this battle?

His face drained to a sickly white, the earl dropped into a chair. "Wh-what?"

"I know about Belinda, Father. And Jack. And how you gave them only enough to barely live off of, then refused to help when they fell sick." Her voice, so strong to begin with, cracked.

Hell. He couldn't leave. Not now.

"Do you wish to know what I've been doing with the doctor's coat when I sneak out of this house? What I've been doing for over a year now since Belinda and Jack's deaths? Helping women who need it, because I couldn't save them. And because you wouldn't."

The earl closed his eyes and held his breath.

Hades inched away from the door, closer to Lady Ophelia. He reached for her but let his outstretched arm fall when his fingers trembled near her shoulder. "You've been helping the women who disappear?"

She nodded. "Women in the family way who have no other recourse or support." She swung around to face him fully. "You. You impatient devil of a man! You've ruined everything and not just for me, but for *them*." She took a step nearer to him, and he took a step back to avoid their chests brushing together. Then she took another step, and he another, and on



and on until he was pressed against the wall, paintings rattling on either side of his head with the force of his back hitting it. “What do you have to say for yourself?” Her lids pulled wide, gray eyes ablaze, full of fiery retribution.

He cleared his throat. “I apologize.” Hell. No he didn’t. No matter her motivations, her actions were dangerous. “I apologize if any harm comes to your friends. But I do not regret my actions in coming here today. Not only have you damaged my reputation, if you continue as you’ve been doing, you could be caught, could damage your own reputation. You could end up injured or worse. You must be stopped.”

He slipped his coat from the arm it hung over and snapped it out between them, forcing her away from him. He slung the coat around and over his shoulders then slipped his arms inside. A perfect fit, familiar and warm. But now it smelled of lemon when it never had before. And of sugar and something else, something feminine and rich. It smelled like her.

He’d have to have it cleaned.

Her hands clenched and unclenched, and her pose, rocked back onto her heels, seemed slightly hesitant. “I am not at risk. But I... I apologize for tarnishing your reputation. I did not set out to do that.”

Hades snorted.

The earl jumped from his chair and put himself between them, his gaze wide and wild on Hades. “Will you seek retribution? Will you tell others what she’s done?” Now that his daughter’s actions were laid bare, he’d lost his composure entirely, lost his power, too. His demands had transformed into pitiful pleas.

“No,” Hades said. He just wanted to be done with the entire thing, to begin working on restoring his reputation, and that required the earl’s help. “I want you to help me—”

“Marry her.” Lord Plinkton darted around Hades, grasped his shoulders from behind, and pushed him toward Lady Ophelia. “Marry my daughter.”

“Pardon me?” Hades and Lady Ophelia said in matching indignant voices.

“Marrying an earl’s daughter will go some way toward fixing your reputation.” Plinkton circled Hades once more and reached for his daughter’s hands.

She slapped him away, wrapping her arms around her torso. “No. I will not give my life and freedom to fix his reputation.”

“What freedom?” her father asked. “Because you’ll have none of it now. I’ve clearly given you too much of the stuff. But what else was I to do with a daughter like you?”

Ophelia flinched, a tiny thing likely no one else would notice. But Hades was trained to recognize pain, its symptoms and tells, no matter how small and hidden.

“She’s got a dowry,” Lord Plinkton said, stepping in front of Lady Ophelia to bargain entirely with Hades.

The man was serious.

“Why?” Hades demanded. “Why offer your daughter in marriage to me, a marquess’s illegitimate son, a physician, a man the gossips say either carries women away to a hidden harem or kills them?”

Lord Plinkton looked over his shoulder at his daughter, a lingering glance that softened his face a bit when he returned his attention to Hades. “She has hurt you, and she must pay the price for that. There are consequences, Dr. Jones, and she must learn that. She ruined you, so she must fix you. Besides”—he leaned close, whispered—“now she’s *your* problem.” He patted Hades on the shoulder and strode for the door. “I must tell your mother the news, Ophelia. Dr. Jones, do stay a while. Get to know your betrothed. I’ll leave the door open.” Then he disappeared.

And Hades was left alone with the woman who’d ruined him, taunted him, and stolen his coat... the woman he might just marry.

# Four



Ophelia likely deserved this. She should have seen it coming, been prepared with a quip or three to show she commanded the situation. Not the doctor. Not her father. But her body had not the sense of humor her mind did, so it threatened in a variety of ways. Her legs felt weak and quivery, and her eyes stung more than a little. Her stomach roiled. Would she become reacquainted with the food she'd broken her fast with an hour ago? *Pudding*, she hoped not. How humiliating. When she was already quite thoroughly humiliated.

She commanded her legs to work and walked to the window with a pleasingly steady gait. The street outside was busy, sunny, chipper even, unaware of the events inside her father's study. She placed a hand against the cool glass. Had she really confronted her father? After four years of silence, had she truly revealed she knew all? Yes, unfortunately, she had.

An uncharacteristic loss of control when a sarcastic tease would have been better, safer.

"Lady Ophelia." Soft footsteps sounded behind her, the gentle *thunk* of a boot atop the thick rug. "We should discuss your father's proposal."

"I have received eleven marriage proposals, Dr. Jones, and I can assure you"—she swung around, ready to face him—"that was not a proposal." She had to face him. To show she was not scared.

Dr. Jones looked right through her, his gaze heavy on the world outside the window. What was he thinking? No matter. His thoughts were immaterial.

“I meant my apology,” she said. “And I am glad you have your coat back. It is”—she reached for the sleeve, and his gaze yanked to her hand so near his arm—“ripped. Just here.” Her fingers trailed the gash. “I was preparing to sew it up when Hapard burst into my chamber. I shoved it under my bed. Had no idea he’d go looking for it.”

Dr. Jones opened his mouth and inhaled deeply before speaking. “I apologize for that. I did not know your father would order your room searched.”

“I was going to return it,” she grumbled, removing her hand from the coat.

“It would not have stopped me from coming here.” His voice was hard as stone.

“What do you mean? You wanted your coat. You’ve got it, and—”

“And you would still be galivanting about London doing as you please, risking yourself in every way possible.”

“My risks are not your concern.”

“They are now.”

Oh no. Oh, *pudding*. He couldn’t mean... he didn’t intend to... “We are *not* marrying!” she cried, stomping her foot.

He shrugged, a cool slip of a movement for a man whose portrait could be titled *Control*. He’d not been controlled last night in the alley, though. He’d been wild, and she’d bested him then. Perhaps she could best him now if she drove him a bit... wild.

She turned to hide her growing grin and put some distance between them. When she reached the window, she sat on its ledge and contemplated him. Not a hair out of place on his head. Not an unintended wrinkle in his cravat. But that coat he clutched—wrinkled and dirty and torn and so very gaudy, so very unlike him.

“Why does the coat matter to you so?” She held her eyes wide open and still, a look of pure innocence. “It’s so very... gaudy.”

“It was a gift.” The words flew from his mouth like bullets as red flew across his cheeks. Then he blinked, and his expression returned to that of placid politeness. His next words held the easy cadence of a congenial conversation. “From my half sister, Lucy. She gave it to me when I finished my apprenticeship at Guy’s Hospital.”

Ah. How unexpectedly... sweet. The gift and his protection of it. Its sweetness was neither here nor there, though. She must press on.

“Yet you did not notice it missing.” She suppressed a grin and plucked at her skirts. Such motions often disarmed the opponent, made the impression you weren’t thinking, observing, plotting.

“I did. The very evening it disappeared. I returned home and went to take my coat off but found it not on my body.”

She laughed, imagining him fumbling for a missing coat, turning in circles, chasing a conveyance down the street in case he’d left it there.

“I chased a hack down to see if I’d left it.”

She almost choked. My, but her useless mental meanderings had proved so... accurate.

“And,” he continued, “I revisited the houses I’d been to that day, but no one had seen the coat. I thought it lost forever. Until the Brazen Belle described it so accurately escorting an actress I’d never met into an alley I’d never stepped foot in.”

Back to that were they? Ophelia did her best not to cringe and breezed past the growing guilt on her shoulders. “Your half sister, was she angry?” And worse, had she abandoned Dr. Jones as the rest of the ton had? *Pudding*, but she’d not thought of that, of his family and their reaction. She’d thought only of her own safety or hiding as best as possible her identity so her father did not find out, so she could continue.

“My family knows me well, Lady Ophelia.” His voice had dropped an octave, become low and dangerous, lacking now the charming, light voice he likely used with his patients. “My grandfather, Viscount Springwell, my mother and stepfather, Lucy. They risked censure to accept a babe born out of wedlock, to accept the mother of that babe. They are not the sort to abandon a person based on rumors and the ill will of the ton.”

“Right. Yes. Excellent. So glad to hear that.” Dr. Jones’s parentage was no secret. His mother was the daughter of a viscount and his father the scandalous Marquess of Preston. Dr. Jones was not the only child the marquess had produced outside of wedlock. She knew of at least one other and had heard gossip of his legitimate son’s behavior as well. More than one wife, she’d heard. At the same time. Unbeknownst to the ladies in question. The doctor had been raised by his mother’s family, given every advantage of money and education. And he’d used it well, gained trust from a starting place of ignominy he’d not earned but been born into.

She rather admired that about him. And yet she’d... *pudding*. Best to be done with this, with him, so she could return to her room and wallow in guilt for the rest of the day, perhaps the rest of her life.

“Dr. Jones,” she said, standing and smoothing her skirts and lacing her voice with more than a little steel, “whether I marry today, three months from now, three years from now, or never at all, I do not intend to stop.”

“Stop what?” The man could furrow a brow, and his dark-gold eyebrows glinted unhappy above sky-blue eyes.

“Saving women. Helping them. Risking myself, as you put it.”

“Don’t.” He moved toward her, one long step putting him right against her, the edges of his coat almost brushing against her skirts. He’d become in a breath the man from the alley, composed entirely of sharp edges and fury.

“Pardon?” His answer made no sense. Or perhaps her own sense was muddled by his closeness, the smell of mint on his

breath, cologne on his neck, the chill of February still whipped into his cheeks.

“Don’t stop. It needs to be done. But don’t do it alone.” His chest almost brushed against her with every breath, their position an echo of their meeting in the alley, but instead of pressing a blade to her throat, he lifted a hand to her face and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. He offered not retribution but something much more dangerous and suspicious—support.

Dangerous because no one had offered her that before. She ached for what he seemed to offer. Dangerous because his words set her heart beating to a lively waltz. One, two, three; one, two, three; faster and faster. One, two, three; one, two, three. Him, her, and the dwindling space between their bodies. Dangerous, as well, because she could not trust his words. Or any man’s.

*Pudding.*

She ducked beneath his arm and strode away from him. Yes, strode. Run was perhaps a more apt description but also more humiliating.

“You don’t mean it,” she said. Of course he didn’t. She would not be so fooled.

“I do.”

“You need a respectable wife. Otherwise, you would not be entertaining my father’s daft proposal.”

“You agree it’s a proposal, then.”

Was that a smile she heard in his voice? Her anger spiked. He thought to tease? Now?

She stopped her retreat, her hand gripping the doorframe, so close to escape. “Not one I will ever accept. This is best for you as well, Dr. Jones. I can never be respectable.”

“You will.” His voice was closer now.

Yet she could not turn around to face him. Something in the silky gruffness of his voice... if she faced him while he spoke like that, looked at those blue eyes and those good looks and that muscled body, while honey poured from his lips with



each word, she'd expire. Her knees would give out, her brain turn to mush.

"You will be respectable," he continued once she did not turn around, "as will I. Neither of us will do a thing to damage our reputations."

She stiffened. More cages. Always more cages. Her suspicious instincts had been correct.

"But I am not without funds, those I've earned from my medical practice, my inheritance from my grandfather. Enough money can do the job you've been doing alone well enough."

"Pay someone, you mean? To escort the women in my stead." She peeked over her shoulder.

The corner of his mouth tipped up, an almost smile more soothing than a good cup of tea. "Yes. A trusted someone. To keep them—and you—safe."

She would *not* be soothed! "No." She swept into the hall. "You may stay here. I'm leaving." To find her parents. It was all a joke. It must be a joke. She would not be forced to marry the doctor, surely.

"You'll consider it," he called out, his voice a honey-hued echo that followed her down the hall. "I hope." Softer words, barely audible.

She pressed the heels of her hands to her temples and shook her head, shook his words away, heard the front door click shut just before she rapped on the door of her mother's bedchamber.

"Come in," her mother said, voice muffled from the other side of the door.

Ophelia pushed through and found her mother sitting near the fire, a blanket spread across her lap, and her father pacing the room from fireplace to bed and back again. He did not even look up as Ophelia entered.

Mama smiled, though. "I have heard the news, my love. Congratulations are in order."

“No, they are not. What did you tell her, Father? That you—”

“You and the doctor suit. And he offered for your hand. And I have accepted for you. That’s what I told her.” He stopped pacing just before her and glared, an implicit demand she keep her silence as well. About his mistress, his son.

Of course she would. She did not wish to hurt her mother, and she did not know how much her mother knew.

“Father accepted the doctor’s proposal before speaking with me.” She pulled a seat close to her mother, the dancing flames singeing the bare skin of her neck, and sat. “Aren’t you concerned about the rumors, Mama? About the... *Devil Doctor*?”

Mama smoothed a hand over Ophelia’s head then cupped her own cheek. “Your father told me what you did. It was very dangerous. You’ve been too long without a husband. It is time.”

She shook her head and rose. “No. Do you want me to marry a man I do not love who does not care for me? Do you want me to end up like—” She snapped her mouth closed before *you* could escape her lips. She’d always thought her mother silly, weak, scared of every snuffle, taking to bed with every minor disappointment. But she’d thought better of the position in recent years. Odds were, an unhappy marriage had made her mama that way, frayed her nerves and killed her spirit.

“The doctor is handsome, and now I know he’s not a true devil, an unredeemable rake, I welcome him into the family with open arms.”

“But his parentage!” Ophelia flinched as she spoke. She did not judge him for something beyond his control, but if the words helped her escape the web closing tightly around her, she’d scream them from the rooftop.

“Do you think you deserve better?” her father asked. “You’ve refused a baker’s dozen of men, and—”

“Not quite. Merely eleven.”

“The exact number does not matter when it requires two numerals to express it! You had your chance to choose, and this... this outrageous behavior merely solidifies what I’ve known for some time now—you need a husband to tame you.”

“I’ve never done anything untoward before. I’ve caused no scandal. I’ve merely refused to marry men who would make my life a misery. Let me remain as I am—a spinster—and I will watch after Mother and—”

“No. You have three sisters, none of whom are married.”

“The younger two are not yet out.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Her father’s bellow bounced off the wall and felt like a punch in Ophelia’s gut. Her mama sank lower in her chair, taking refuge nearly entirely beneath her quilt. “You must marry, and, as your own devilish actions have ruined the man, you’ll marry him whether he’s a devil or no. The man needs respectability and so will not throw his wife’s name into scandal. And we cannot afford scandal. Your sisters need husbands. If it gets about you’re a thief who does who-knows-what with actresses in Covent Garden back alleys, no men will have them. Do you understand what I’m saying, Ophelia?”

She swallowed. Prison bars were closing in on her. “I do.”

“You’ll marry the doctor, or I’ll cast you off.”

“Reginald, no.” Mama reached for him.

“I *will* do it. Nothing but daughters, Marigold.” He shook Mama’s hand away. “You gave me nothing but daughters. Not an heir in sight. Disappointing. A bit like you.”

“Marrying the Devil Doctor will not help my sisters wed,” Ophelia said, finding and grasping her last argument with both hands. “No one will wish that sort of connection.”

“They will if he’s devoted,” her father said. “Get the man to fall in love with you, Ophelia. Get him to commit to you entirely and let the ton see it.” He dropped into a chair with an exhausted sigh. “They’ll consume such a story like the finest champagne and forgive you both. You’ll never be good ton”—he flashed her a disgusted look—“but you’ve never been that

anyway. At three and twenty with such a scandal hanging over your head, you have no options, my dear. Marry the doctor and be his problem from this moment forth.”

Silence rushed through her head with the ferocity of a flooding river, and she could neither think nor speak, yet somehow her body moved her backward and her hand found the doorknob, and after many stumbling steps toward her bedchamber, her head found her pillow.

*Pudding*. Sausage pudding with onions. A disaster. She couldn't marry. She wouldn't. No matter what her father said. Her *father*. That *scoundrel*. She kept his secrets, yet he spilled hers as easily as tea from a too-full cup onto a lady's skirts.

She could go to Hawthorne House! Yes, that was it. They would take her in.

But... then she'd be too far from London to help anyone who might need it. They'd found a friend in her, a convenient operative to their cause, someone to shuttle women from town unnoticed to a safe haven in the country. If she escaped to Hawthorne House, she'd give up her mission.

She could not do that. But staying meant marrying, and marrying meant...

She rolled to sitting, pushing wetness that was absolutely not tears from her cheeks. Marrying meant... help in her cause.

Had Dr. Jones meant what he'd said? Would he really help her in this way?

He'd seemed so sincere, but all men did especially when they were not.

She could not trust him. Could she?

# Five



*March 1, 1820*

Hades snapped his teacup onto the table, ran a hand through his already perfectly coifed hair, and glanced at his greatcoat draped over a nearby chair. It glowed like a star in his drawing room, an omen, a cursed object, a symbol of everything that could go wrong. And had. The sight of it rolled a lightning-glinting cloud through him. At least he had it back. Lady Ophelia could no longer use it to drag his good name through every back alley London offered.

He should feel better because of that. But while the retrieval of his coat hampered the creation of new problems, it did little to solve the existing ones weighing him down. Everything he'd worked for—gone.

Marrying Lady Ophelia might fix it.

But she'd rejected him.

The damn coat might as well burst into flames and burn down his house. His life was already in the ashes of a great conflagration.

“Hades, is something upsetting you?” His mother set her teacup down and smoothed her skirts, gave her tiny, controlled movements her entire attention. Her voice held its usual calm, but he knew the disarming softness covered steel. She was strong and stout, and large swaths of her golden hair had turned white already at six and forty. Though the lines of her face were indicators of her joy more than her sorrows, her

sorrows had given her a hidden strength. Many underestimated her. Not those who knew her. Not Hades, certainly.

Lucy, his half sister, looked just like her but without the markings of age. Her round cheeks were rosy, and at seventeen years of age, she was still learning the controlled movements of maturity. She still bounced a bit, still shook with excitement, still smiled without reserve. And he could never help but smile back.

He granted his family a smile now, a reassuring one, the kind he gave the ill to soothe their worries. “No, Mama. All is well, especially with two such lovely guests to occupy my time. Did you see? My coat has returned from the tailor. All fixed.” He nodded at the coat slung across the chair.

Lucy glanced over her shoulder and clapped her hands. “Excellent! You do look fine in it.” When she turned back to him, her face glowed with pride. “Papa said you would not wear such a peacock thing, but I knew it would suit you. It’s the very finest of its kind, and you always want the finest.”

“I cherish it.” And he did. Even though it didn’t suit him at all. He cherished, rather, the girl who’d given it to him. He’d been eleven when his half sister had been born, and he’d loved her since he first laid eyes on her pink, wrinkled, screaming face. She looked much prettier now, but he loved her just the same.

“Did you find whoever pilfered it?” his mother asked, always cutting with her questions. “Whomever it really was that Brazen Belle identified with it on, being an absolute scoundrel?”

He licked his lips, prepared to lie. If only his mother and sister had stayed in the country. But they’d arrived two days ago and taken up residence in the second bedchamber of the terrace home Hades used as both living and working quarters. They’d not said why yet, but Hades’ recent descent into infamy and his loss of patients meant he was more than welcome to have the company, no matter said company’s motives.

His mother and sister were welcome only in select homes in London's fashionable neighborhoods. Lucy was entirely legitimate, the daughter of his mother and a wealthy country gentleman who had loved his mother long and well and who had saved her when she'd been with child, abandoned by Hades' father. Not really his father. Mr. Jones had been an excellent father to Hades, the only paternal figure who mattered to him. And he and Lucy had barely understood their mother's infamy as children, hidden away in the country, surrounded by people who loved them, including their grandfather, Viscount Springwell.

It was the viscount's power and wealth, and more than that, his acceptance, that secured Hades' standing on the fringes of society. Hades' own skill had gained further ground.

All lost now.

But he smiled anyway, just as he did for his patients when he discovered a fatal case but needed more information before letting the knowledge loose. "I did not catch the thief." True enough. "But now I've got my coat back, sh—" He cleared his throat. "He can no longer use it to slander my name. All is well."

"Poppycock." His mother lifted her chin. "Do not tell fibs, my love. Nothing is well, and that is why we've come to visit. You've a *need* to be occupied when you never have before. It's a problem. I've not even seen you smile since we've arrived."

"Since we've arrived?" Lucy scowled. "I've not seen Hades smile in years."

His smile certainly slipped now. "I was just a moment ago smiling. How can you say—"

"Not that thing." Lucy waved it away. "That smile you give all the time. The fake one. The one for patients."

"She's right, Hades," his mother said. "That smile is for others, not for yourself."

They sighed, the corners of their almost identical lips turning down.

Ah, that was it, then. They'd come out of pity. He fell into the back of the chair, glad to slip fully out of the doctor's smile and wear Hades' own frown for just a bit. "There have been... problems of late."

Lucy crossed her arms and huffed. "That Brazen Belle is the problem. You would not be unoccupied if not for her. She's ruined everything. That and whomever stole your coat of course."

"Do not worry, Lu," he said. "I have a possible solution to my reputation problem." Not that it was a viable solution. Lady Ophelia had said no, after all.

"Oh? What is it then?" his mother asked, lifting her teacup to her lips.

"Marriage."

She spit her tea back into the cup, an involuntary action that preceded a coughing fit.

Hades stood and found her side, patted her back. "Are you well, Mother?"

She cleared her throat and waved his hands away. "Quite. Quite."

He sat once more and crossed one ankle over his other knee. "Marriage to an earl's daughter."

There went his sister's tea, another fit of coughing. When he stood to pat *her* back, she held out a palm, stopping him. "No," she choked out. "None of your *tender* ministrations, please." She straightened, patting a serviette down her tea-spotted skirts. "An earl's daughter?"

"Hades?" His mother shook her head. "Surely you jest."

"I do not." He clasped his hands behind his head.

His mother and sister exchanged a look.

"He's given his heart away," his mother said, sighing.

"And his head," Lucy added, rolling her eyes.

They turned to him with unwavering gazes.



“Her father will never allow it, love,” his mother said.

Hades grinned again, this time wider, truer. “He’s the one who ordered it. Long story. The end result is we have his approval.” He leaned forward and lifted the teapot. “More tea? Since you’ve spilled yours.”

“But where did you meet the girl?” his mother asked.

“Part of the long story. You could say the Brazen Belle brought us together.”

“Do you love her?” Lucy asked, clearly not interested in the tea Hades still offered, hand hovering with the teapot over the table.

He dropped it back amongst the cups and saucers and spoons. “No. Love is entirely unnecessary.”

“Have you asked her opinion on that?” His mother’s voice was like a log crackling in the grate, nice and cozy until it snapped and sparked and threatened danger.

“We’ve barely exchanged words,” Hades admitted. And most of those not at all amicable.

Silence in which two sets of blinking eyes regarded him as if he’d just sprouted wings. He looked over one shoulder then the other. Nothing but shoulder blades and fine wool. “Have I said something untoward?”

His mother exploded to her feet. “I will not allow it! Your grandfather will not allow it. And your stepfather will not—”

“Allow it. Yes, yes. I understand. But I’m an adult, and I may marry where I please. It has been some time since I’ve relied on the finances of others for support.” Though that could well change if his reputation never recovered. “And so I am beholden to one in the matter of choosing a wife.”

She sat back down, slowly, as if dropping through a well of honey. “But why, Hades? Why marry a woman you barely know?”

“It’s simple, really. She’s a spinster. An earl’s daughter, as I’ve already said, and with good reputation.” Though how she’d maintained that after all her hijinks he could not

understand. Seemed a miracle. “Marrying her, having her family accept me into their home, will go a long way to recovering my reputation. Once the ton sees that she’s married me and not disappeared into some south-of-London harem, they’ll welcome me back into their homes. Many marry for money or titles. I am marrying to recover my patients, my profession.”

Lucy bounced in her seat and reached over to pat their mother’s arm. “Tell him, Mama. Tell him why we’ve come. Perhaps when he knows he has another choice, he’ll abandon this horrid plan.”

He bristled. “It’s not horrid, and—”

“Yes.” His mother perked up, liveliness and purpose animating her form once more. “A dear friend of mine is sick, Hades. No doctor has brought her relief. I would like you to visit her.”

Hades shook his head. “She won’t have me in her home. You know that. Not now. And even if she will, her family—”

“Her family is one daughter, a nervous woman just as desperate for a cure as my friend. She’ll give you entrance. They’ve both agreed to see you because—”

“I’m their only remaining option.”

His mother winced, shrugged.

“This is a much better option, brother,” Lucy said, twining her fingers together and pressing her hands to her chest. “You will cure her where no one else has, and then people will begin welcoming you back into their homes.”

“Hm.” He scratched his jaw. “Perhaps.” Using only his skill to save his reputation would be distinctly satisfying, but if that were going to work, it would already have done so. The ton had thrown over their best doctor. They’d rather die than have him in their homes. But if an earl with no scandal to his name and his (seemingly) pristine daughter were to accept him, help him set the rumors to rest... that just might work. Besides, marrying had other advantages. Lady Ophelia was not a beauty by the ton’s standards, but there was an electric

spark to her that demanded attention, a fierceness to her gaze that called up flames in his own body. The woman had spirit, and the eleven other men who'd proposed to her had likely seen it too. Wanted it.

He was not immune. He would like to see what she looked like beneath his overly large coat, beneath her well-fitted, simple gowns. He'd like to see her with her wild curls released and tumbling down her back.

She, however, did not harbor similar desires, did not want to marry him at all. Natural, he supposed. But she owed him, and if she could not see that, well... perhaps he'd turn into what everyone thought him to be—a proper rake—and seduce her.

Not a terribly bad idea, though not a terribly proper one. But he'd do anything to revive his business. He'd been the most proper man in Christendom to get where he was before the Brazen Belle ruined it all, and if he must, he'd be the biggest rake in London to get it back.

"I'll visit your friend," he said. He'd never refuse someone in need.

"Excellent!" His mother reached into her pocket, pulled out a bit of folded paper, and handed it to him. "Here's her address."

He raised a brow. "How long have you had that in there?"

She shrugged. "I did not know when the opportunity would arise to discuss this with you. It's best to be prepared."

"I'll give you that. And I'll visit your friend. But I'll also marry the earl's daughter. When I marry her, and she does not disappear, these ridiculous rumors will be put to rest."

His mother groaned.

Lucy groaned.

"Do you promise I won't disappear?" Lady Ophelia said from the doorway.

They shot to their feet, and Hades looked everywhere, waiting for the proper reaction, the proper response to simply

appear.

It did not, and after several moments of awkward silence, Lady Ophelia took a tentative step farther into the room. “Your butler told me you were not at home, but I heard voices, so I came in after he left.”

Somehow, he was not shocked. But he was... pleased. He smiled without thinking and almost reached out to trace its shape with his fingers. It felt real, like a smile for himself. But also for her. Because she was here, and that *must* mean something good.

“I apologize for the intrusion,” she said, eyes flicking toward his mother and Lucy, “but I need to speak to Mr. Jones.”

He bowed, remembering his manners. “Lady Ophelia, meet my mother, Mrs. Jones, and my sister, Miss Jones. Mother, this is Lady Ophelia Howard.”

The three women curtsied.

“I did not expect you today,” he said. Or ever, after her reaction the other day.

She took another tentative step. “Yes, well, I’ve had time to consider it, and I’ve come to speak with you in possession of a clearer head. But I see you have guests. I knew I was intruding, but I did not know I was... intruding. Apologies.” She ducked her head and backed toward the door. “I’ll return—”

“No, no.” Hades strode toward her. “Do come in.” He reached for her arm, but when she shied back, he stepped away, swept that reaching arm out toward the open room, the fire, inviting her inside.

She hesitated, then nodded and joined them. “I am sorry, Mrs. Jones, for the intrusion.”

“Not at all,” his mother said in her softest voice, her eyes crinkled at the corners in a welcoming smile. “Do please join us. My son was just telling us about you.”

Lady Ophelia flashed him a worried glance, and he offered her his most reassuring smile. Hopefully she'd understand. He'd betrayed nothing of significance.

"I was informing them of our possible future arrangement," he said.

"Ah." Lady Ophelia licked her lips. Plump and nicely shaped ones, too, curving a wide mouth into an expression of wary curiosity. She turned toward his mother. "It has all been rather... sudden."

"And you have been hesitant?" his mother asked.

Lady Ophelia nodded.

His mother tilted her head slightly. "Tell me, what do you think of my son?"

Hades almost groaned, but he would not deny his mother this moment or the answers to any questions she desired.

"I..." Lady Ophelia looked at him, her plump lips parted slightly, her eyelids blinking in quick flutters over her wide gray eyes. "He's... fascinating. Though I hesitate to say it for I fear of how it might inflate his ego."

His mother chuckled. "An excellent answer to warm a mother's heart. And quite right, I'm afraid. The man knows his value all too well. Tell me, what do you find so fascinating about him?"

"At the risk of further inflation, I suppose I must say... he's an enigma." No hesitation in the lady's answer this time. "He is more than he seems. An annoying trait. One likes to know what one is getting. But... fascinating all the same."

"True again. We all are more than we seem, I hope," his mother said. "I like that you are capable of seeing beyond the surface." Her soft smile brightened into a grin. "I assume what you've come to discuss necessitates privacy?"

Lady Ophelia gave a tight nod.

Hades wanted to hear what she had to say. Her description of him echoed her easy teasing in the alley the other night, and her daring wit startled and intrigued him.

Hades strode for the door, swiping his coat from the chair back as he passed it, and slinging it over his shoulder. “We’ll retire to my study. Mother, you and Lucy may stay here and enjoy your tea.”

“Keep the door open,” his mother said, arching a brow. “And remember, we’re only down the hall from you.”

Lucy’s eyes twinkled. “And can likely hear *everything*.”

“*Not* that we’ll be listening.” His mother pierced Lucy with a narrow-eyed stare. “Unless we’re needed.”

“Yes, Mama.” But Lucy rolled her eyes.

Hades strode into the hallway without waiting for his visitor. But the sound of her slippers slapping on the tile behind him told him she followed him to the end of the hall and into his study. His leather satchel gathered dust behind his desk, but he picked it up and checked its contents. Everything there he might need. He picked the paper with his mother’s friend’s address from his pocket and read it. Quite close. He could walk. He snapped his satchel closed and turned his attention to Lady Ophelia.

She stood on the rug before his desk, slowly spinning in a circle. Her pelisse was a rusty red with some fur around the high neck, and a gown of pretty, bright-blue velvet peeked out from beneath its hem. Tiny, corkscrew curls had escaped her coiffure at the nape of her neck and were just visible beneath her ridiculously wide-brimmed bonnet. He could barely make out her features when she tilted her head at a certain angle.

There’d never been a woman in his study other than his mother and sister. Lady Ophelia should have looked out of place; however, she looked... just right, the colors of her clothing blending nicely with the dark hues of his office furniture and curtains. And like those basic blue curtains and furniture, she was fashionable yet practical. He’d chosen the pieces in his study himself because he’d known he’d need a space that suited him well, that fostered calm and focus and confidence.

That she fit here seemed a message. He listened to messages when they presented themselves. It was why he was such a good physician. Symptoms that other physicians glossed over or disregarded entirely meant something to him. They were clues.

Her. Here. Looking like that. Making his fingers itch to touch her. Another clue. Another message he'd listen to. She'd come to him, as well, and after that rejection. He wouldn't even have to seduce her.

Marrying her was the right solution.

He swung his coat off his shoulder and slipped his arms inside, then he snapped up his satchel, hat, and sword cane and strode for the door. "Come along."

She hurried after him. "I thought you wanted to talk." A frown in her voice as her footsteps hastened to keep up.

"I do. But I have a patient to meet with this morning, and I see no reason not to walk her way as we discuss our future." Future. A vague fairy tale place Hades had always been preparing for. He had been so close to achieving it. But the woman at his back had ruined it. She might fix it too. All might not yet be lost. He opened the front door and held it wide as she stepped out into the sunlit street, blinking. "More private this way, too. Did you bring a maid with you?"

"No."

"Excellent." Not at all proper. Damn. Just like her, no matter how sedate and tame she seemed during the day. Could the sort of woman who stole coats and stole women to safety, who lied to their fathers... could that sort of woman truly solve his dilemma? Or would she create entirely new ones?

"I must admit," he said, "I thought your father's proposal an excellent one. And I still rather do, but I also have my reservations."

"Why?" she asked, no hesitation in the question as she barreled forth. Her habitual style of walking so far as he could tell.

“Why have you changed *your* mind, as you so clearly have?” he countered.

“It is what you said the other day. That you would help me help others. I spoke with my father after you left, and he means every word he said. I must marry. I could simply... run. Hide. But I’d rather not. I’m not a fool. I understand the complications of life such an action would bring. You are my other option. And if what you said that night is true, you are the more palatable option of the two.”

A sensible train of thought. He was impressed. “True.”

“Now you answer my question. What are your reservations?”

“Very well. You are much too... what’s a delicate way of putting this?”

“I do not need delicacy. Tell me.”

“You’re too bold. Too spirited. You are walking scandal.” On the most basic level, her boldness, her spirit, appealed to him. He had always liked a challenge, and she was a worthy one, refusing to bend before strong wind or steel blade. She’d fooled him at first. He’d seen a dutiful daughter, quiet and forgettable. That’s what she’d wanted—to disappear. But now that he’d seen beneath the disguise, he could not understand how she had hid it so well. Her brash, undeniable strength, her fierce determination. She was not a complicated woman to understand. She knew what she wanted and went after it. As he did.

“Well,” she said, the exasperation in her voice as clear as the blue-sky day around them, “I cannot change who I am, but I can promise you that my... complicated activities have gone undiscovered for over a year. Until you. And with your help, I do not have to do anything to achieve my goals that will cause me to be discovered.”

He stopped walking, turned to her sharply and grasped her upper arm, stopping her as well. He turned her toward him so he could peer down at her, past that obscuring, wide brim of her bonnet, and finally into those fascinating gray eyes.



She met his gaze boldly, didn't flinch from his grip.

“And you find that acceptable?” he asked. “To be on the margins of the battle instead of at its center? You can bear it?”

One of her cheeks tightened as if her jaw clenched or as if she bit the inside of it. “Yes.” But that little hollow cheek, those little challenging eyebrows fleeing up her forehead, gave a different answer.

“I don't believe you.” He released her and stepped into motion once more.

“Let me prove it to you.” She rushed to catch up with him, holding her skirts inches higher than she should to dodge some mud and refuse.

They crossed the street and stood at a crossroads.

“That way”—he nodded in one direction—“will lead you home, Lady Ophelia. And that way”—he nodded in the other direction—“is the direction I am going in. You may go home now and marry the man of your father's choice. Or you may come with me and prove you can be a helpmeet to me. Not a vigilante at the heart of some rescue operation.”

She swallowed and rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, her gaze darting between the two paths.

“What will it be?”

“I'm coming with you.” She held her head high and her spine straight as an oak tree.

“Very well.” He stepped around her and headed toward the address on the paper. “The patient we're visiting today has an excitable daughter, one who's particularly nervous about her mother's deteriorating health. Such family members can often be distractions for me. You will help me with her.”

She hurried after him. “You would like me to distract the daughter?”

“Precisely. Prove yourself a useful helpmeet, and a proper one, and—”

A child appeared from around a corner and barreled toward Lady Ophelia, a dog almost as big as a horse at his side. Hades grabbed Ophelia, swung her away from the danger, and right into his arms. She braced her forearms against his chest where she buried her head with a little shriek.

An electric shock rocked him back on his heels, made him clench his arms more tightly around her. She smelled of citrus. Was it her soap? He lowered his nose to her nape and inhaled deeply, a thing he should never have done because she smelled *good*, made him hungry, ravenous. The sweet, citrusy scent quite stole his wits. Must have.

Because he kissed her. A tiny flutter of a thing at the base of her neck where he wished to do more, where he wished to nip her with his teeth, lick her, taste her.

She gasped, and he felt—*thought* he felt at least—the rapid beat of her heart against his chest before she ripped from his arms with a blush, her hands covering her neck where he'd pressed his lips.

“Thank you, Dr. Jones,” she said. “I would have been crushed by those two.” She gave a high laugh, false and awkward, and when they stepped into line with one another again, she put more inches between their walking bodies. Would she mention the kiss? He waited, counting their steps. When he got to one hundred, he swallowed his disappointment.

Best to stick to practicalities anyway. He cleared his throat. “As I was saying before we were interrupted, prove yourself an excellent helpmeet, capable of letting someone else do the work, and we’ll make our situation more permanent. No scandal. One morning to prove yourself.”

Not that he'd behaved himself this morning. That kiss. Small but... not. His lips tingled, and not from some odd, as-of-yet undiagnosed malady. He was in a perfectly fit condition. The only thing that ailed him was the knowledge that she tasted so damn good.

*That kiss.*

Improper behavior, yes, but it had supplied useful information. His body liked her body—a crucial necessity for a good marriage.

If all went well this morning, his suspicions would be proven true—it was a good partnership. They both needed something. And if she could behave for one morning, perhaps they could give it to one another.

## Six



How difficult could it be to avoid scandal in a little Mayfair townhouse inhabited by two widows and populated by at least three maids and an equal number of footmen? Ophelia had never been set an easier challenge. She almost scoffed at the Devil Doctor. Would have had he not strode off and kept a demanding pace until they'd reached their destination. By that time, despite her long legs, her scoffing capabilities had been reduced to wheezing.

When the butler ushered them into the tiny, cheerful home and all the wide-eyed maids and footmen haunting doorways scattered, Dr. Jones stopped in the foyer, blinking at her, head tilted.

“You’re ill? Do you often take ill like this?”

“I’m not ill. Merely... short of breath.” Said with hands braced on knees, each word pushing through puffs and wheezes.

He gave a curt nod. “You need more exercise. If we marry, I’ll ensure it.” His eyes blazed.

*Pudding.* He meant something by that, didn’t he? Something naughty?

She straightened and breezed past him, forcing her breathing into a more normal pace. “I do not need more exercise. I’m perfectly healthy.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but the butler waved toward the stairs and said, “This way please.”

“How often do you walk?” Dr. Jones demanded as they climbed the stairs behind the butler.

“Every day.” She turned her head away from him and muttered, “And evening.” Well past evening, actually...

“I heard that. Such inadvisable outings must—”

“Stop. I’m aware. And I’ll prove to you how serious I am about that.”

They reached the top of the stairs in silence, and the butler led them down the hall.

“If you walk so much,” Dr. Jones whispered, “there must be something wrong with your lungs to begin with. Are you often out of breath as you just were.”

She rolled her eyes. “I was only out of breath because you are so tall and took no care to slow your pace for me. My lungs are in perfect working order. It is only that I do not often have to run to keep up with my escort.” She was testing him, as he was her, attempting to determine if he was all he proclaimed to be—the kind of man who would support her ventures instead of sabotaging them. So far, he neither passed nor failed, but his lack of consideration for her during their walk was not a mark in his favor. “Men are always inconsiderate.”

He stopped, though the butler did not. “I apologize.”

She stopped, too, a few steps ahead, and turned to face him. He’d heard her? She’d spoken low, had not meant him to hear. She cleared her throat. “For...”

“Not modifying my pace for you. You’re correct. It was inconsiderate. I’ll do better.”

“Oh.” Had any man, or woman for that matter, ever used those words with her—*you’re correct*? It made her stomach flip in much the way his lips pressed against her neck had done. She’d not thought there enough skin visible beneath her fur-collared pelisse for a man to kiss. What little existed, though, he’d discovered. And conquered. Sparks had danced across her skin, waltzing outward from the small site of connection to everywhere hidden beneath pelisse and gown

and stays and shift. She could still feel a tingle low in her belly, especially when she looked at his lips—full and pink and sculpted.

Had it been an accident, though? A brief and unintended brush of his lips on her skin when he'd been pulling her to safety? Yes. Most likely. An accident. She used the sensible words to squash the tingles flat.

“Thank you,” she said. “It is rare for a man to admit he’s wrong.”

He nodded and caught up with her, and together they met the butler at the end of the hall in front of a closed door.

The butler knocked, calling out, “Lady Billford? Dr. Jones is here to see you.”

Silence from the other side of the door, then a light cough, then weak words with a hint of defeat. “Do show him in.”

The door swung open, revealing a woman nearing fifty standing in front of a window, her slender silhouette thrown into darkness by the sun flooding through the glass behind her.

Dr. Jones bowed. “Baroness Billford? I am Dr. Hades Jones. You know my mother.”

Lady Billford stepped forward, her lips curved in a hesitant smile. “Yes, she wrote to me saying she would send you my way.” Something grim in her voice. A bad sign, that.

Dr. Jones held a hand out to Ophelia. “And this is Lady Ophelia Howard. She is my assistant today and...” His gaze snagged hers.

*Pudding.* The man knew what he was doing, didn't he? Only one thing would make their appearance here together without a chaperone anywhere close to proper, which is what he wanted out of the woman he married—the ability to at least seem like a proper, society-approved matron. But his hanging sentence put her in something of a corner. To do what was proper, she'd have to shackle herself to him further, and she was not yet entirely sure that route was the one for her. Doing as she knew he wished would create more complications,

potentially, but it would also help her pass this test. Failing was worse than... than pudding!

She stepped forward, mind made up. "I am betrothed to Dr. Jones. I begged him to let me help today. I wish to know my future husband's work."

Lady Billford's brows sliced toward one another, and her mouth slimmed to nothing, a look of pain, of consternation, but it did not last long, and as quickly as it had come, it went. What ailed her? Where was her pain? Hopefully Dr. Jones could help relieve it.

Guilt sat heavy on her once more. This was what she had done by letting everyone think him the Devil Doctor—deprived those in pain from his expert help.

"And this," the baroness said, extending her hand to gesture across the room toward the fireplace, "is my daughter, Viscountess Preston."

She'd not realized anyone else was in the room. But there the viscountess stood, as if she'd stepped from the striped wallpaper like a prisoner stepping out of his jail cell.

The viscountess rushed forward, her hands fists punching into her own belly as if she were kneading dough. "I am so very glad you've come, Dr. Jones. We've heard... rumors, of course, but we are desperate. My mother cannot keep down her food, and she is sleeping all the time, and—"

Dr. Jones put a hand on her arm, a soft touch that silenced her, and brief too, for he soon dropped his arm to his side once more. The silence remained though the touch did not, and into it he poured a smile as golden warm as sunshine. "My lady, I will speak with your mother about her symptoms first. And conduct an examination."

"In private!" The baroness reached toward them, her other hand before her mouth as if she had surprised herself with the outburst.

Dr. Jones nodded. "In private, if it pleases you. And then I'll speak with you, Lady Preston to see if you have anything

of value to add to the case. In the meantime, I am afraid to ask this of you. I do not wish to impose..."

Lady Preston shook her head. "Not at all. What is it you need, Doctor? I will help in any way possible."

"You see, on the way here, my betrothed suffered a scare. She was almost run over by a horse or a dog. I'm sure she would like a restorative cup of tea."

Time to prove herself by distracting the obviously upset daughter. He'd even given her a helpful start, an excuse to take the woman away. He was masterful, wasn't he? A master manipulator.

She let Lady Preston lead her out of the room, down the stairs, and into a small parlor near the front of the house. Ophelia sat near the window and smiled as the viscountess approached after summoning a servant. Surely one of the three maids and three footmen who she'd seen scatter upon their arrival would answer soon. In the meantime, she'd see if she could discover anything of use to the doctor.

Lady Preston was sallow and quite frail, and her hands constantly fluttered—about her skirts, her shoulders, her hair. They never stopped, and neither did her gaze, darting this way and that, never settling as she sat on a chair close to Ophelia's, only a small table separating them.

Until Ophelia put her hand out, an offering. "It will be well. Dr. Jones has been treating my mother for a while now, and she's made much progress. He is quite good. And the rumors are nothing. Fabrications. There is nothing of the devil about Dr. Jones." Except, perhaps, when he pulled a sword from a cane in a shadowed alley and thrust a gleaming blade into your throat. She swallowed and resisted putting her fingers to her neck where she could still feel the cold steel bite into her skin.

The viscountess's already hollow cheeks sank deeper. "They say he has a"—she leaned low and whispered—"harem."



Ophelia wanted to groan. But refrained. Barely. “I assure you he does not.” Her words a tumbled mess of exasperation. “Trust me.”

Lady Preston shook her head, biting her lips. “It’s difficult to trust. Men in particular.” A bitter ache to her voice that could only have been created by experience. Ophelia had heard it often in her father’s mistress’s voice. Belinda had lost all hope at the end, and Ophelia could not blame her.

Ophelia reached a little farther, caught Lady Preston’s wrist, felt the woman’s pulse, pounding like death demanding at the door to be let in. “I understand. It is.” She’d not yet met a man who could be trusted. Why else was she here, testing Dr. Jones as he was testing her?

The tea arrived, and Lady Preston poured. She seemed to calm after her first sip, or perhaps Ophelia’s reassuring had, like the doctor’s earlier, helped. She’d be sure to tell him that.

“My mother had a bad marriage,” Lady Preston said. “My father, he...” Her pale face drained of any remaining blood.

“You do not have to say anything.” She understood all too well the woman’s meaning.

“And my own husband... I could not have a child, and before he died, he often let me know, in a variety of ways, what a disappointment I was.”

Ophelia nodded, her muscles tightening. The facts of Lady Preston’s life were why Ophelia did what she did. Women often needed someone to champion them. Men were supposed to be their protectors but were often their tormentors instead.

“You need not speak of it,” Ophelia said.

“Do I upset you?”

“Yes and no. I am upset you had to endure such a thing, not that you speak of it. Perhaps if we spoke of it more, we might not have to endure such treatment.”

“Yes.” Lady Preston sighed and dropped her head into one hand as she clinked her cup and saucer down onto the table

between them. “My mother is all I have left. If she is ill beyond saving—”

“Do not think that. Dr. Jones will know how to save her.” She gave her brightest smile, hoping to reach the golden heights the doctor’s had achieved. She likely failed. She did not have his beauty. Likely, she looked a bit maniacal.

But Lady Preston raised her head, and color returned to her cheeks as she reached once more for her tea. “You are a great comfort, Lady Ophelia. I can imagine Dr. Jones appreciates you tending to patients with him. You set the gossip to rest, don’t you. No one as kind and confident as you would be chained to the sort of rakish devil the Brazen Belle described.”

Ophelia grinned, a true look of victory settling through her. If she chose to have him, he’d have no choice but to have her. But would she have him? She spoke of him with warmth and confidence because it was part of the task he’d set before her, but Lady Preston’s story, brief and vague though it had been, served as a timely reminder.

Men were not to be trusted. Yet... so far, Dr. Jones seemed amicable enough, direct and forthright, and startlingly honest. A conundrum, as she’d admitted to his mother.

Heavy footsteps in the hallway heralded the doctor himself, and she and Lady Preston stood to greet him.

Lady Preston rushed across the room, her fists once more clutched to her belly. “Well, Dr. Jones? Do you have any answers? None of the other doctors have had a word to say to me afterward. It’s a worry. A terrible worry.”

He gave that smile again, the one that melted worry right away. “I do have the answers, Lady Preston. But... I need more time. I have instructed your mother in a system of care, a regimen of health, that will work to heal her. I will return again next week to check in on her.”

“What is it?” Lady Preston demanded. “What is wrong with her?”

“Nothing so terrible, I assure you.” He reached a hand toward Ophelia. “Now, I must return Lady Ophelia to her

papa.” He tipped his hat. “I will see you next week, Lady Preston.”

She took his proffered arm, and after wading through the curious maids and footmen, they found themselves back on the street in the merry light of the afternoon sun.

After they rounded the corner, Ophelia said, “That was quite the evasion, Dr. Jones. You didn’t give her an answer at all.” She sniffed. Men could not be trusted.

“I could not.” Said with the matter-of-fact air of a man describing the color of the sky.

“What do you mean?”

“I could not tell the daughter. The baroness asked me not to.” He flicked a glance at her, and the corner of his mouth lifted. Amusement? At what? “She did not say I could not tell you, though. And though ethics are important to me, if you are to be my partner in this way and in every other way, I feel you should know. You will keep the information to yourself. I trust you.”

Could he trust so easily. *Humph*. “Perhaps you should not tell me.” Though he was correct. She would tell no one.

“The baroness,” he said, “a woman of forty and seven years, is with child.”

After a moment of shocked silence, Ophelia said, “No!” A gasp more than a word. “What a boulder to drop on someone’s head, Dr Jones. Is she *truly*?”

He chuckled. “She is. It’s not unheard of. Her courses had stopped, and she thought the great change in life had come for her. She did not question it until she began to be sick. And fatigued. And the first doctor her daughter called in to tend to her confirmed everything. She”—he cleared his throat—“paid the doctor well to assure he did not reveal her secret.”

“I know I’m delving deep into gossip,” Ophelia said, “and that it is not quite the thing, but I’m afraid I cannot help myself. Did she name the father?”

He chuckled again. “I was curious too. There’s a man—”

“Naturally, one supposes there’s a man.”

He raised a brow. “Their neighbor. He’s a chancery judge. And they’re rather in love. He is currently on the Continent visiting his first grandchild. He knows that the baroness is with child, and he’s returning now. But she does not know when he will return, exactly, and they wished to speak with her daughter together. But in the meantime, her daughter has thrown every doctor in London at her.”

“Why doesn’t the baroness just tell her daughter now? All this prevaricating is unseemly.”

“Says the woman who steals coats and dresses as a man.”

“To do something true and good.”

“I’ll give you that.” He tipped his hat.

And her heart skipped a little bit because it was not the first time he had given such a concession, and it was not the first time he seemed unbothered by her actions. Except, of course, for the tiny little fact that she had stolen his coat and ruined his reputation. That bothered him, clearly.

“So,” she said, rerouting the conversation away from avenues that blossomed poisoned flowers in her gut, “you promised not to tell her daughter.”

“And I promised,” he said, sounding a bit wearied, “to help her until her lover returns to London. They are to be married. The baroness is quite happy about the situation. But for her daughter.”

“That is good.” It was also good, in an odd way, that Dr. Jones had agreed to play a part in the little farce. The baroness trusted him to help her, and he was doing what he could. She knew no other man like that. But knowing what she did about Lady Preston, trouble still brewed. “The viscountess does not find it easy to trust men.”

“Lady Billford told me as much.”

“Aren’t you concerned? If Lady Preston were to find out about your role in hiding the truth from her, she might add fuel to the conflagration surrounding your name.”

“Perhaps, but Lady Billford is concerned for her daughter. She is afraid knowing about the babe before its father returns home will send her into a true panic. Her lack of trust, as you said, in the father’s intentions, could cause a true panic. Lady Billford and her lover wish to do everything as properly as possible to ensure the viscountess that the father has nothing but the most honorable intentions. They do not wish to scare her off from opening her heart again in the future to another lover, another husband, and perhaps another home. She is still so young.”

“But... even with all that, it will be quite hard for her to trust again I’m afraid.” The words felt like rocks against sandpaper in her throat. They made her feel raw and vulnerable as if she spoke of herself and not of another woman.

“I understand. I see it quite often in my profession. When a person has been treated by doctor after doctor as a curiosity, as a devious pretender, when they’ve had their blood pulled out of their bodies by leeches and when they’ve been given medications that hurt them more than help. It is difficult for them to trust another doctor has their best interests at heart.”

“I see,” Ophelia said. And she thought he saw, too. She studied him for a moment, stopping on the pavement. He was golden in the crisp afternoon light, and a small breeze picked up a tendril of his hair and curled it about his brow. He did not smile, but there was a softness to his face that made him seem welcome and open and the sweetest kind of sweet.

“We’re here,” he said, tipping his chin up at the house.

She looked up at the edifice. Where had it come from? She’d barely been aware of the sights as she’d passed them, of the distance falling away beneath their feet.

“Well,” he said, “do you want to know how you’ve done?”

“Naturally. Do you wish to know your own results?”

A brow shot up his forehead. “Have I been under examination as well?”

“Absolutely you have.”

“Crafty minx.” A small, masculine sigh. “I am not surprised. Not with you.” A bit of heat in his voice, in his eyes. It made her feel hot and uncomfortable in her own skin in a way she’d never felt before.

She looked away. “Me first. Have I passed?”

“Yes. Quite well, in fact. You not only did as you should have at every turn, but you comforted the viscountess and kept her calm as I worked. A rare and valuable skill, much appreciated by this doctor.” Suddenly his gloved hand was beneath her chin, and he was tipping her face up to him. Then he was leaning down, down until his lips brushed hers lightly, so lightly, and yet, sparks and butterflies—an entire rainbow—swirled around them. Ridiculous. Such things did not happen. It was all poetry, fantasy, to hide the brutal ugliness of the reality between men and women. All too soon he ended the embrace, and once all the silly, brilliant-colored hues he’d sparked into her world drained away, the world was dull and gray again. For one brief instant, his kiss had changed the world, changed everything.

A mirage. A trick. She would not trust it.

“Lady Ophelia,” he said, a bit breathless, his voice raspy and deep, “will you marry me?”

She inhaled and answered on a breath. “Perhaps.” An answer made more optimistic by the recent memory, the terrible temptation of that tiny, miraculous kiss.

“Perhaps?” For a moment, his gaze sharpened like winter’s first wind on summer-warmed skin. Then a smile crept over his face, showing even white teeth and sparking a sterile gleam in his eyes. Gone was the charming, soothing doctor, and in his place stood the rakish man the Brazen Belle had warned them all about.

Ophelia’s heart did very odd things it had never done before. Beating fast, racing like a thoroughbred at Aston, dancing like a young girl at her come-out ball, waltzing in circles to a string quartet no one else could hear. And the symptoms spread outward. Her breasts tingled, her fingers

twitched, and low in her belly a warmth kindled, grew, and flamed.

What would he do? Kiss her again? More? On a public street in the bright light of day? And what had happened to winter's chill? Gone the closer he came. The color seeping back, too. Another kiss? Oh, she wanted it, tilted her chin up for it, offering her lips.

Then he snapped away from her. He stood tall, folded his arms behind his back, and the rake disappeared. The doctor had replaced him fully. "A maybe. Better than a no." He sounded so very sure of himself. "Perhaps you can explain the areas in which I'm lacking so that I may work hard to earn your approval."

Oh, why did that statement make her heart and stomach flip? Such silly little words, playful and yet practical. But poor replacement for the kiss she'd expected. Desired.

More fool her.

Belinda had told her what happened to women who listened to their bodies instead of their brains. They ended up with child and abandoned. Ophelia had seen the truth of that with her own eyes. Her body's flips and tingles could not be trusted. She needed to test him one more time.

She stepped back and crossed her arms before her, clasping her hands around her elbows. "It is not my approval so much as my trust you must earn. You may escort me to Hawthorne House in two days' time."

"Hawthorne House?" His brows crawled toward one another. "What is that?"

"Your harem, apparently."

"Ah. Where you stash the women after absconding them from London."

"A charity, run by a dedicated husband and wife and financially sponsored by rich but mostly anonymous women of the ton."

He stepped toward the door, toward her. “Sounds delightful. But it would not be proper to escort you alone. Today cannot be repeated.”

“You have told me that in order to be proper, I must involve you in my activities. I’m doing so. Will you deny me?” If he did, she’d know how things would truly be when married to him.

He nodded. “I’ll bring my mother and Lucy. They can act as chaperones. I am sure they would both be interested in the endeavor anyway.”

“Excellent.” One could tell a man’s true character by how he treated the women in his life and by what they thought of him.

“I will pick you up,” he said, “at seven in the morning on the day. We will arrive early, you will conduct your business, and we will return by nightfall.” He turned on his heel, and with a cocky grin thrown over his shoulder, just a flash of an instant long, he left.

She entered the townhouse as quietly as possible, closed the door behind her, and rested her back against it, pressing her eyes shut and sinking into the wood. *Pudding*.

“Ophelia.” Her father’s voice popped her eyes open, and she popped off the door in order to stand tall.

“Hello, Father,” she said. Bright, cheerful, a dutiful daughter’s voice.

“Where have you been? You’ve no maid. No footman. It’s dangerous to traverse London without an escort.”

She rolled her eyes. He didn’t truly care. “I was fine, Father. I was merely gathering information.” No need to tell him the details of where she’d gone today.

“About what?” he demanded.

“Dr. Jones.”

He drew back as if hit by a stream of spittle. “Why?”



“Because you have ordered me to marry him, and I will not marry him blindly.”

“And what else will you do if you do not marry him?” Her father smirked.

She shrugged and crossed the foyer. “Run. Hide.”

His mouth dropped open. “Ophelia, it’s not so terrible. I—”

“You’re right. After gathering my information today, I’ve come to the conclusion that it is indeed not *so* terrible. I believe Dr. Jones may well make a very respectable husband.” If things continued as they had today, if he could convince her he would not limit her pursuits.

There was that trust again, unexpected and foreign.

“Besides,” she added, “you’re right, Father. I owe him. I ruined him, and I should fix it.” She’d seen today—people needed him.

“You... you’ve decided to marry him, then?”

“Perhaps.” She started up the stairs. “Likely. I’ve one more”—she hesitated, rejecting the word *test*—“issue to take into consideration. But if that proves un concerning, well, then, yes, I’ll do as you’ve always wanted me to do and wed.” Inexplicably, his frown deepened. “Why do you look so upset?” she inquired.

“No reason.” He followed her upward.

“You did order me to marry him.”

“I’m aware.”

She did not look back to see his expression, but she heard the scowl in his voice.

“You don’t have to run, Ophelia,” he said. “You just need to marry.”

She stopped outside her bedchamber door. What did that mean? “And I will, Father.” Possibly. “Aren’t you proud?” She flashed him a toothy, false grin and then swept into her room and shut the door.

She would marry, just as everyone had always wished she would do. If the Devil Doctor proved himself as angelic as he seemed.

# Seven



March 3, 1820

Hades had excellent experience ignoring his sister. Likely most older brothers did, but if she did not stop vibrating, she'd shake the wheels right off the coach. He cut a look, hoping to tame her. But Lucy, who seemed to have been waiting to catch his eye, just grinned the sly grin of a young woman highly amused. Her eyes sparkled with a mischief that heightened when she looked at Hades across from her then Ophelia beside her. Their mother, sitting next to Hades, seemed not to notice. She looked out the window as if such an aversion of her gaze could give the others privacy. She likely hoped her daughter would follow suit.

No. Lucy glimmered. She glowed. And when she actually giggled, Hades had had enough. "Lucy. What is it?"

Her hand darted into her pocket and out again, and she shoved a folded square of paper at Hades. "Here. Read. Surely you have already."

Hades scrutinized the papers. "Gossip columns? I do not read gossip columns." Not anymore.

Lady Ophelia leaned forward, stretching out her neck for a better look, and Hades handed half to her.

"They are about you and *a lady*," Lucy said. "*Embracing*. In the street. The columns are mainly attempting to guess when the lady will disappear. None from the Brazen Belle, of course, since she only publishes once a month, but every other gossip columnist seems to be buzzing with it."

He peeked at Ophelia. Her entire face had gone red as a holly berry.

Hades lifted a paper and read. ““The Devil Doctor was spotted with yet another paramour, identity unknown. The ton may have allowed him to enter their homes before they knew the mother’s—”” He snapped his mouth shut, shoved the paper back at Lucy, and glanced at his mother.

“Continue,” his mother said, as if she were listening to a particularly pleasant story.

“Yes, Mama.” Lucy found the spot Hades had left off and continued. ““B-before they knew the mother’s sins””—she winced—““ran through the son’s blood. Now that his blood has proven true, he will never climb so high as he did before. A clumsy Icarus he proved to be.”” Lucy dropped the paper, her eyes tearing and her lips thinned.

“Enough, Lucy. We need hear no more,” their mother said softly. She sighed. “The style is not as lovely as the Belle’s. Not nearly so melodramatic or imaginative.”

“You sound as if you admire her.” Hades’s hand, resting on his thigh, formed the shape of a fist.

His mother shrugged. “I do, in a way. Unlike this other author”—she flicked a dagger-sharp glance at the offending paper on Lucy’s lap—“the Belle has pure motives. She seeks to help women. Perhaps I would not have fallen prey to a scoundrel in my youth had she been around then to lead me away from danger.”

“I am not danger,” Hades growled.

“Do read this one.” Lucy said, holding out another paper to him. “It’s slightly less insulting.”

He relaxed his fist, took the paper, and read aloud. ““One would think the doctor would find a different garment to wear about town, one less flashy and recognizable.”” He looked down at his coat then peeked at Lucy.

“Flashy! It’s perfectly fashionable.” She narrowed her eyes. “Go on, brother.”

He cleared his throat and skipped the paragraph the author spent insulting the coat. “Whoever the woman is, one hopes she knows better than to dally with such a dangerous man. But hope is often disappointed, and the embrace shared between the two, according to several eyewitnesses, seemed as tender as it was close. Do we finally have a peek at how the Devil Doctor seduces woman after woman to his harem south of London?” He crumpled the paper and tossed it to the floor. “Enough.” He handed the rest back to Lucy. “Sorry about that one. My temper.”

Lucy put the papers back into her pocket with a shrug. “As much as I hate to say it, you really should not wear the coat anymore.” Her mouth twisted to the side. “It seems I know nothing of fashion, anyways. Perhaps it was my fault you’ve fallen so far from your goals. Hades, I’m—”

“Your gift is perfection itself, Lucy.” Three sets of eyes blinked back at him. Perhaps he’d been too loud. He pulled the edges of the coat tight. “You gave it to me. I’ll do as I please, and it pleases me to wear your gift.”

Lady Ophelia made a small squeaking sound from her corner of the coach, and he looked her way to find her red cheeked and warm-eyed.

“Yes?” he inquired.

“Your loyalty is commendable, Dr. Jones, but perhaps your sister is right. If the coat is what the gossips are looking for, you’re safer out of it.”

“The coat is a problem easily solved,” his mother said. “What I wish to know, and I assume Lady Ophelia does as well, is the identity of the woman you were caught embracing, Hades.”

Hades’ lips trembled, and he hid a small laugh behind a hand.

“What’s funny?” his mother demanded.

He composed his features and looked to his almost betrothed. “Lady Ophelia, would you like to tell my mother whom I was caught embracing the other day?”

The rose pink of her cheeks turned flame red. “You *are* a devil, Dr. Jones.”

“Oh!” His mother’s eyes widened. “Oh, I see now. Well. That’s... that’s good, then.” Her hands fluttered about her skirts. “At least we do not have to worry about *that*.”

“It was Lady Ophelia, wasn’t it?” Lucy grinned. “I knew it! Otherwise, I would not have brought it up in front of her. How horrid would that have been?”

“Slightly more mortifying than right now,” Hades mumbled.

“Oh, look!” Lucy bounced out of her seat and toward the window. “Is that it? Hawthorne House?”

They’d been travelling a few hours on smooth roads with good weather. From what he knew of the placement of the house, the timing was right. He looked out the window as well, his warm breath fogging the glass. It was a large square manor home of gray stone three stories high with ivy climbing the sides. A long drive meandered toward it and circled round a splashing fountain situated in front.

“Yes, that’s it,” Lady Ophelia said, her voice softer than he’d ever heard it before.

The coach descended into silence as it curved around the drive and stopped before the large house. Hades opened the door and stepped down to let the ladies out. Cold air tore at his skin, and he popped the collar of his coat higher to block it out. A spike of adrenaline rushed through him. This was Lady Ophelia’s test for him, just as the visit with Lady Billford had been his test of her. She’d done well. Exceedingly so, and he wanted to perform just as successfully. To win her. Whatever means necessary.

He would have to win her trust first, though. She jumped when he touched her and ran when he pursued. But that small, quiet kiss they’d shared before her house convinced him—if he could gain her trust, he could give her pleasure. In more ways than one.

His mother took his hand as he allowed himself a smile, and he handed her down onto the drive, her attention riveted on the house before them. He handed down Lucy next, and finally Lady Ophelia appeared, offering him a tentative smile. He took her hand and felt that spark flash between them. What would it feel like when no dual layer of gloves separated them, when they touched skin to skin? Would the spark flame up quick and fast and burn out even quicker, or would it simmer to a boil and consume them slowly? He squeezed her hand, a promise to discover the answer to that question later and released her once she stood beside him.

“This is, you say, where you took the women?”

She nodded. “Not a harem.” A quirk of a grin. “A refuge.” She led their small group forward as the door to the house flew open, and a man and a woman appeared. “Mrs. Beckett! Mr. Beckett!” Lady Ophelia ran toward them.

“Lady Ophelia,” the woman, Mrs. Beckett, said, “we did not expect you today.”

“I’ve brought some friends to tour your lovely establishment.”

“Well, all are welcome. As you know.”

When Hades, his mother, and Lucy stopped near them, Lady Ophelia said, “This is Dr. Hades Jones, his mother, Mrs. Jones, and his sister, Miss Jones.”

Hades bowed, and his mother and sister curtsied, and the Becketts beamed and ushered them inside.

“I assume,” Mrs. Beckett said, “you’ve told them what we do here?”

Ophelia nodded. “How is Peggy? Is she settling in?” Then she turned to Hades. “Peggy is the woman you caught—er—met me with last week. In Covent Garden.”

“She is,” Mrs. Beckett said. “Would you like to see her?”

“I would.”

“I’ll take you to her. There’s another woman who wishes to speak with you as well. Her sister needs the particular type of

help you provide.”

Lady Ophelia glanced at Hades, mouth slightly parted, as if she were about to speak.

“Go,” he said, not giving her the chance. He’d show her he understood before she even asked him to. He’d give her trust in the hopes she’d trust him back. “I’ll ask Mr. Beckett to give me a tour.”

Lady Ophelia blinked rapidly as her mouth closed. “Truly?”

Hades nodded. “Tell me everything I need to know later.”

“’Tis for the best,” Mrs. Beckett said. “Mrs. Bellamy is not fond of men. We don’t want to startle her.”

“May my daughter and I visit with the women as well?” his mother asked.

Mrs. Beckett smiled. “You’re all welcome. Follow me.”

And they did, leaving Hades alone with Mr. Beckett in the foyer.

“Dr. Jones,” Mr. Beckett said, “we’ve a guest here who’s been sick far longer than she should be. Would you, perhaps, consider seeing her?”

“Of course.” Hades followed Mr. Beckett to a far corner of the ground floor to a many-windowed conservatory.

“Miss Millsop likes to sit in here during the day. The sun coming through the windows warms the room, and she likes the flowers.”

“Naturally.”

“Miss Millsop?” Mr. Beckett called out.

“On the chaise,” a frail voice answered.

Mr. Beckett led him to the far end of the room where a woman lay on a chaise lounge, a blanket covering her body and a smile covering her wan face. “I’ve brought Dr. Jones to see you. He’s come all the way from London. Will you speak with him?”



Her head tilted. “The Devil Doctor?”

Hell. Hades held his hands open at his sides in a posture of vulnerability. “I hope not, but yes, that is unfortunately what they have begun to call me in town.”

“It is not true, then? About the... harem?” She whispered the last word.

Hades laughed because there seemed no other option, and he sat in a nearby wicker chair. “Not a bit true, I’m afraid.” He held his arms out wide, offering himself up for her inspection. “Are you disappointed?”

“A bit.” She laughed, and the laugh turned into a groan that caused her to wrap her arms around her belly until whatever pained her eased.

He sat quiet, patient, and when she recovered, he proceeded with caution and care. And a half hour later, he knew what ailed her and knew he could do little but ease her pain before she died. She took the news well. Her brother had died of consumption, and she’d feared that would be her end as well. Hades and Mr. Beckett sat with her until she dozed off.

When Mr. Beckett appeared at his elbow, Hades startled. He’d not noticed when he’d left, but he’d brought Lady Ophelia back with him, and she watched him with unfathomable eyes, biting her bottom lip.

Hades held a finger to his lips and glanced at the sleeping woman, and they seemed to understand. Mr. Beckett nodded at a door at the far side of the conservatory then disappeared in the opposite direction.

Lady Ophelia led him through a side door into a large, two-storied room lined floor to ceiling with books. A small staircase led to the second story, and small, delicate railing circled the narrow walkway above their heads.

“An excellent room.” He trailed his fingers down a row of books. “I wonder how it’s organized.”

She shut the door from the conservatory, closing them in together alone with a small click of the lock in the frame. “You

look tired. Exceedingly so.”

“It’s always exhausting telling someone they will not live to see the end of the year.”

She gave a small gasp. “I am sorry to hear it.”

“One of yours?”

“No.” She strode to a corner and pulled a bell hidden there. “We’ll have some tea. And perhaps a walk about the grounds. That will lift your spirits and restore your soul. The tea will take some time, though. There’s much else to tend to here.”

He jerked his attention away from the shelves. Was she... was she attempting to care for *him*? No one did that, not since he’d been a child. He’d simply stopped allowing it. Pride demanded he pay the price of his parentage and give back what he could since his birth had taken so much, especially from his mother.

Yet... yet it felt nice to have someone worry for him, seek to soothe him. His limbs felt heavier than the towering trees in the wood they’d traveled through to get here.

“I would save her if I could.” He closed his eyes and took a heavy breath. “I hope you know that.”

“I do. I saw you sitting with her, talking with her, soothing her. You’re good at such things, making people feel safe.” She crept closer until she stood right next to him, facing the same row of books he perused. “Thank you for trusting me to meet with the woman alone.”

He nodded. He didn’t want to think about passing any of her tests. He wanted to be comforted himself. Every one of his nerves jangled as they never did when facing danger. He’d rather face a million men in a dark alley with nothing but a blade hidden inside a cane than face the dying light in a human’s eyes. He gripped the cool wood shelf before him until his fingertips bit into wood through screaming skin and flesh.

Her hand, small and warm, rested on his, squeezed until he loosed his grip. “And thank you for giving compassion to these women.” She dropped her hand, deprived him of her touch.

“I’d never give anything else. To them.” He turned his head so she could see his eyes when he spoke the words. “Or to you. I hope you know that, too.” He’d known her for a while, but he’d never truly known her until the last week, until the night in the alley when she’d revealed her true nature while wrapped in his coat. What little he’d seen of her told him true—he’d fight for her if she needed him to.

She swallowed and ducked her head, evading his gaze. “Have you told your mother and sister about me? About how I’m connected to Hawthorne House?”

He shook his head. “They can be rather protective of me, and I want them to like you.”

“They love you. Very much. It’s several points in your favor, you know.”

He chuckled. “I love them, too. No points necessary.”

She laughed before her expression grew serious once more. “Your mother... she was not married to your father?”

“No. She is married now. To Lucy’s father. I think of him as my father, too. He’s a good man, a landed gentleman with a big heart. His land borders my grandfather’s, and they’d known one another since childhood. He’d loved my mother from a very young age, but lacking a title, thought her too good for him. When she returned from London with a broken heart and a child three months along, he cared only for her happiness and well-being. They married shortly after, and he’s the only father I’ve ever known.”

“Is she... happy?”

“Immensely.”

“She seems it. She... learned to trust again.” It seemed more a statement made only for herself, so he did not answer it.

He stroked a finger down the spine of a book, imagining trailing it along another graceful, steel-straight spine.

“She has friends among her old set, peers’ daughters. That she had me within wedlock absolved her in the eyes of many,

even if the man she married wasn't my father. Everyone knew that bit of information, though. She'd made a cake of herself with him at a social event, announced to one and all she was with child and had to suffer the killing blow of his rejection and laughter in front of all those eyes, too."

She winced. "How awful."

"She survived. Will you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I use my stepfather's name, but everyone knows my true parentage. I do not attend the balls and routs that are your domain. I attend sickrooms and bedside vigils and births. When—if—you marry me, will you survive the fall?"

She licked her lips and studied his hands. "I think I'd grow wings, Dr. Hades Jones."

He grasped her hand and lifted it, placed a kiss on her knuckles. "I'm certain you already have them." Then his hand snuck behind her neck and pulled her close until his mouth closed over hers, seeking comfort in the softness of her lips.

She gave it to him, sighing into his mouth and softly resting her hands on his chest. The sadness receded in the feel of her body beneath his hands, in the little sounds she made as he parted her lips with his tongue, sweeping it into the cavern of her mouth. She stilled, and though he wanted to take it further, deeper, he released her.

She huffed, an adorable little objection that contradicted her earlier barely perceptible hesitation. She wanted but she did not want.

He tapped her nose and left her side to study the spines of the books. "Not down here, I think. Up top perhaps."

She huffed again, and he could feel her gaze hot on him as he climbed the stairs to the top level of the library.

"If I had not known the truth of the matter before meeting you, Dr. Hades Jones, I would now. A man who kisses a lady and ends it too soon is not a man with a harem south of London." He threw a grin over his shoulder, and she followed

him up the stairs. “It appears you’re looking for something specific,” she said.

“I am. And”—he ran his index finger down a row of spines—“here it is.” He pulled the volume from its home and handed it to her.

Her brows drawn together, she took the book and opened it to the title page. “*Aristotle’s Masterpiece?*”

“You’ve heard of it?”

She shook her head.

No surprise there. She did not know, quite, what she wanted, but he could show her. He would call it education, not seduction. “I have a copy at home I’ll let you borrow.”

She cleared her throat and snapped the book shut. “Dr. Hades, I hate to tell you this, as I feel we are getting closer, but I have no desire to read a biography of Aristotle or any of his works.”

“You’re in luck. It’s not a biography. Nor is it by him. It’s about women’s bodies.”

She plopped the book onto the shelf and pulled herself up tall. “You think I’m a child? You think being a woman does not qualify me for knowing more than you do about being a woman?” She rolled her eyes. “More than this book? How can you be so perfect one moment and so terribly conceited the next?”

“Perfect?” He raised a brow.

She narrowed her eyes. “Did I say perfect? I meant perfectly infuriating.”

“What’s infuriating, Lady Ophelia, is that women often *are* woefully ignorant about their own bodies. Not through any fault of their own, mind you, but because no one will allow them to gain such knowledge.” And if he was going to attempt to seduce her—and it appeared that he was—he wanted her to have all the information possible so she could make an educated choice about being seduced. Because above all else,

he couldn't lose her trust. Was a trusted seduction possible? He hoped so.

"You're a cad."

He shrugged. "I'm right."

"I *do* know about my own body. More than you do." She stomped back down the stairs.

"Tell me, then." He crossed his arms and leaned against the bookshelves, challenging her.

She paced away from him and stopped before the windows, one hand reaching out to lay flat against the glass, fogging it with her body's warmth.

"Belinda told me everything." She returned to him, slower this time, her twined hands before her, her face pale with fury and certainty.

She'd mentioned Belinda before. Her father's former mistress, the woman she could not save. What did she expect him to do? Sneer at her? Doubt her? Shrug away her clear rage and pain?

No.

He looked at the walls, the ceiling, the windows. "You honor her. With your work here. Saving other women. Other children.

She nodded. "I try."

"How did you find out about her? Most men keep their liaisons secret from their families."

"I was never supposed to know, but when my brother became ill, she risked cornering my father in our home. I witnessed the exchange. He would not help. So I did. I tried." She swallowed some strong emotion, closed her eyes, then continued. "I spent weeks nursing Jack, to no avail. And then months nursing Belinda. She faded slower than her son did. We became friends. She was dying of I know not what. And grief."

“She was lucky to have you at the end.” A truth. Many women had nothing and no one. They died alone and forgotten, but Belinda lived on this brave woman’s actions, in her warrior heart.

Ophelia shrugged, as if she did not believe herself to be the blessing she’d clearly been to the dying woman. “She helped me more than I did her. She educated me about a woman’s body to arm me against what happened to her. She told me bodies lied. Brains only are to be trusted when it comes to men. I know how to avoid pregnancy in a variety of ways, and I know how rogues are most likely to lead me astray. I know, most of all, not to trust men.” Her voice wavered on the last bit, and her gaze, strong before, dropped away from his.

She still did not trust him. Perhaps she never would.

“And,” she said, her voice strong even if she’d lost a bit of her confidence, “it is why I will not stop.”

He stepped close to her and, with thumb and forefinger, tilted her chin up to just where it should be—high, always high with confidence and courage. “As I’ve said, don’t stop. But let me help you do it safely.”

“*Pudding*,” she hissed, her breath catching, her voice cracking. “Back to being perfect.”

“Don’t worry. I plan to disappoint you soon.”

Her gaze clouded. “What do you mean?”

“I plan to show you just how much you don’t know about your body.”

She jerked away from his hold, tried to, her eyes sparking dangerous lightning.

But he held her tight, his other hand snaking around her waist and pulling her against him. “Hold on tight, love, and prepare for an education.”

Because he needed soothing, and she soothed him. And because meeting with Miss Millsop had reminded him, as if he needed reminding, of the importance of the work he did. He couldn’t let a contrived scandal keep him from it, and marriage

to this woman, who would likely never trust him no matter what he did, would fix it all.

He crashed his lips to hers, and she melted against him. The kiss was harder than the others they'd shared, a winter storm instead of a warm summer rain, but not cold at all. No ice between their bodies, only her needy hands grasping at his waistcoat to pull him closer and his hands roaming lower to cup her arse and groan at the unexpected handful hidden beneath her skirts.

“I know everything,” she hissed against his lips, a termagant to the very end, “but you can try anyway.”



# Eight



If Ophelia died while kissing him, she'd die perfectly happy. He smelled of something spicy, and he tasted of something sweet. *He* was sweet, sitting with a sleeping woman to give her comfort after delivering the sort of news no one wished to hear. So blasted sweet. Hard to keep her steely walls up when he treated her with respect, when he grabbed her rear with a passion that made her want to wrap her legs around his waist.

*Could* she wrap her legs around his waist? Physically yes, but... *should* she? For all her bravado, she didn't know *everything*. Just the things Belinda had told her to keep her safe.

*This* was not safe, this groping and grabbing, this fumbling with buttons and tugging at hemlines. She didn't care. For once in her life, she didn't care. She barely knew him. She could not trust a man who had pressed a blade to her throat a week ago. Forever ago, it seemed.

Yes, she wanted to trust, wanted to learn, and she wanted him to teach her.

He swung her around and backed her toward the stairs. Her ankles hit the bottom step, and she fell backward. He caught her with one rock-solid arm and lowered her to a higher step. She leaned back, the edge of the step a pleasant pain pushing into her back and rested her elbows on the step above the one she sat on, settling her weight into them. With wild, hot eyes burning into her, he stripped the gloves from his hands and dropped them to the floor. Then he stepped between her legs

and dropped to his knees between them. His hands disappeared beneath her skirts and reappeared as warm bands of velvet on her stockinged calves.

“You know the basics, I assume,” he said.

“Yes.” Her voice sounded raspy and deep, not her own.

“Tell me.”

“Pardon?”

“Tell me. The basics.” He squeezed her calves. “So I can be sure your knowledge is correct.”

She rolled her eyes but could not speak with the same detachment between breaths made heavy, difficult, by his touch. “You. Go inside. Me. Nine months later... baby.”

He chuckled. “That is the basics.”

“But a babe can be prevented. Timing. A vinegar sponge. A French letter.”

“Correct.”

“But the best means of prevention is to avoid men altogether.”

Another squeeze of her calves, but this one hard and quick as if it hadn't been a conscious act. “True.” He stroked his hands up and down her legs from ankle to knee, pooling warmth low in her belly. “Some say—the book I showed you says—a babe cannot occur without an orgasm.”

“A... a what?” The new word brought her out of the haze she'd happily sunk into.

“Orgasm. Hm. Difficult to explain. Shall I show you?”

She snapped her knees together. Tried to. They hit his shoulders, and he nudged them back apart. “No,” she barked. “Not if it leads to a child!”

“It will not. Not alone, not without the bit you told me about. What I'm about to show you—”

“About to show me?”

“Yes. What I’m about to show you will never produce a child. Only pleasure. In fact, you can practice it on yourself.” His hands crept up to the tops of her knees and walked up her thighs toward her hips. “Some say it is not healthful to do so, but I disagree.” He reached her hips and rubbed his thumbs over her hip bones, making her sink lower into the sharp edges of the staircase.

“And... and...” She could barely speak. “Dr. Jones knows best.” She’d meant to give the words a sardonic edge, but instead they’d come out breathy, believing.

“Indeed.” One of his hands smoothed toward the center of her body while the other left the hidden shadows of her skirts to cradle the back of her head.

She jerked when his hands slipped between her legs and cupped her mound, but then his mouth came down on her own, and she lost herself in another kiss. Not soft or hard, fast or slow, but languid and sure and—she’d never tell him this—perfect, as all his kisses seemed to be.

His fingers parted her flesh, delved deep, making her gasp.

“Tell me what you like,” he whispered along the line of her jaw. “And don’t like.”

Her body convulsed as he stroked deeper. “Yes.”

“Like or don’t like?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then just experience, love, and we can discuss your preferences later.”

The doctor was so very practical, so very logical. And yet his touch revealed a different man—one who plundered and took and gave as well. He worked magic along her skin everywhere he touched, sparking dangerous trails of pleasure deep into her that overrode all thoughts of retreat, of safety, or protecting herself from the evils of men.

He was not evil. He looked like an angel and kissed like a rake, and *pudding* but it was the perfect combination. He nipped at her neck, tugged her earlobe between his teeth, and

she wanted to touch so badly. But propped on her elbows, she could scarcely move. She was pinned between the stairs and him, her body open and vulnerable to anything he might do. She rolled her head back to give him greater access to her neck.

He took advantage of it, biting and kissing and tasting. “You, love,” he growled, “are delicious.”

He was a wolf, not a rake, and his fingers played in her hidden curls, searching, building pressure low and tight in her body.

“Dr... Dr. Jones,” she breathed.

“Hades now and forever.”

Forever? A claiming sort of man, was he? She should not like it. Men claimed women only to leave them. There was no forever. Just for now.

And for now, he made her body feel like silk and flame, alive with fear and joy and discovery. For now, he could have her, and she would have him, too.

“Hades,” she breathed, a capitulation, a name like a cursed whisper.

His lips returned to her in a possessive kiss that stole her breath, and then his hand found what it searched for, and she yelped as spirals of something both pain and pleasure shot through her.

“What... what was that?”

“Just the beginning.”

She moaned as his hand curled that shock of pleasure tighter, higher, leading to something she could not see but very much wanted to know. “You must be...” Heavy breathing as she hushed the words between lips refusing to work. “As much of a rake as everyone says.” A groan as he slipped a finger all the way inside her and stroked. His touch a scandal. Her soul a scandal, too, because she welcomed all of it. “Otherwise you could not”—she gasped as his thumb rubbed over the epicenter of feeling in her body and sent sparks shooting

across her vision—“you would not know how to do *that*. How ...” More meant with that simple question, but his stroking fingers between her legs wiped it all away.

“When I was younger, I made a study of pleasure.” He spoke with a false leisureliness. His body was tight, his eyes furnaces of blue fire. “Learning from everyone with any significant amount of knowledge how to make a body feel alive with joy.”

Alive with joy. Words she was learning the truth of with each touch.

“You’ve slept with many women, then.”

“None. But I have done everything else. Everything but risk a child. Let me tell you what I learned.”

She almost moaned *Yes, show me*, begged even, but she bit her lip to keep the words from him.

“I learned that while rakes are very skilled at giving pleasure, they always take for themselves as well. This is where we differ, love, the rakes and I. I only ever *give*.” Then the hand not between her legs found her bodice and in one smooth move pulled it low so her breasts spilled free. He eyed her with hunger, and his hand cupped and squeezed, and his fingers teased her nipple until it became a hard, aching bud, and she arched into his hand. Then he ripped his mouth from hers and laved a circle round her nipple, nipped it between his teeth and sucked until she screamed his name, tangled her fingers in his hair and held him tighter to her breast.

There seemed no danger of him leaving her, though. *Thank God. Thank God.* She needed an anchor to hold onto as her body transformed, as the world blurred, and she reached for... reached for... what?

“Is this your first breaking apart, love? Your first little death? Come for me.”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Do you feel that pressure building? That promise of something more, deep inside you? Throughout every inch of you?”

“Yes.”

“Give into it.”

She tried, she tried, but—

“Give in to me.” Low words, dark and demanding with the rasp of longing in them. Then he bit her bottom lip and the world dissolved into diamonds and light and pure careening pleasure, and she wrapped her arms around him, lifted her hips against his, something deep inside her needing him there, a part of her.

At the same time, he lifted her in his arms and traded places with her, sitting on the steps and cradling her in his lap. He held her tight and kissed her softly, and she’d never felt safer, never felt more... wanted.

As she melted into him, the world shrank to two. He pulled her bodice up and smoothed her hair and dropped his face into the crook of her neck where he mastered his harsh breathing.

“Thank you for letting me... I needed comfort, and I found it with you.” Lord, she was rambling. “I would have used the tea to soothe my nerves but, as you see, it never came.”

She jumped out of his lap. “The tea! *Pudding*. A maid or the housekeeper or one of the Becketts could have walked through any of the doors in here at any time.” She cupped her cheeks. “*Pudding*. We could have been caught.”

“We weren’t.” He reached for her, pulled her back down on his lap. “Though I would not have been disappointed were we. Seductions mean nothing if no one sees them.”

She jerked, stiffened.

He kissed the top of her head. “I’ve upset you? You know my desires.”

“To wed me, yes.”

“And to bed you.” He almost *purred*. “I apologize. Should I not tell you my intentions? I’ve never seduced a lady before. It’s all quite new to me. If there are rules—”

She grabbed the sides of his face and kissed him. His honesty disarmed her, calmed her, made her, impossibly, want to laugh.

After a kiss that liquified her bones, he sighed and stood, pulling her to her feet as well. “Let us find the others now. Or they’ll come looking for us.”

They soon found Mrs. Jones and Miss Jones, who told them Mrs. Bellamy needed something to help her sleep. Hades prescribed a tincture that could be made from the plants he’d seen in the conservatory then led everyone toward the waiting coach.

Ophelia followed on numb legs. So much to come to terms with. He’d seduced her. She’d let him. But somehow more mystifying was his careful treatment of the women here, those dying and those afraid. He’d taken notice of what had been said around him and what he’d seen, and he’d helped in the best way he could. He’d remembered Mrs. Bellamy had a fear of strange men, and he’d made sure to keep his distance.

Was he devil? Or was he angel? He seemed both, an appealing combination of contradictions.

Ophelia entered the coach first, Mrs. Jones and her daughter behind her, followed finally by Hades, whom Lucy sat next to.

“I always ride sitting next to Hades when I’m tired,” she said. “He makes a wonderful pillow when I eventually fall asleep. You’ll need to know that if you marry him.” The young woman wore a saucy smile.

“Lucy!” her mother said. “You should not say such things.”

“It’s true, though, isn’t it?” She looked to Ophelia. “It’s true.” She turned her attention to Dr. Jones, Hades, as he’d asked her to call him. “Has she told you?”

“Told me? About what?”

“About the woman we need to save. Back in London.”

“No,” Hades said. “She’s not told me.”

This was it. He'd show his true colors here, let his anger rage forth and admonish Ophelia for lying to him or being too scatterbrained.

She made herself hold his gaze. She would stare the truth down as it appeared. But his face did not sour. It softened, and he chuckled.

"We were, erm, busy discussing other matters," he said. "But perhaps you can tell me now, Lady Ophelia."

"Yes, of course." Though she could hardly order her thoughts. They'd blown clear away in the force of his good nature. "Well, um, where to start?"

He raised a brow. "At the beginning."

"Naturally. We spoke with a woman, Mrs. Bellamy, whose sister, Mrs. Fairchild, lives in London. Whose sister wants out of London. Her husband is a drunkard. And violent."

"And you agreed to help her?" Hades asked, his question a test no doubt.

Ophelia glanced at Mrs. Jones then at Miss Jones. "We did."

"We?" He looked to his mother and sister as well.

"We," his mother said, "will all be active in planning her escape, but I will be the one to deliver her to freedom."

"You?" Hades' voice rose a bit on the word, as if he'd finally reached his threshold for supportive patience and instead of finding anger or frustration found confusion. "You can't. Donate money to Hawthorne House, Mama, but do not risk yourself, your reputation, and—"

Mrs. Jones barked a laugh. "My reputation was ground to dust before you were born, Hades. I will stay in the coach if I must, and she will come to me, but I will be there for her. Do you understand?"

Hades held his palms open and up, as if making an offering. "What if we simply hire an unmarked hack? She sneaks out to it, and it takes her all the way here." He clapped his hands together as if dusting dirt from them. "I do not



understand why you must make this more difficult than it has to be, more dangerous.”

Ophelia stared at him, glad to find Mrs. Jones and Miss Jones were also staring.

“No!” Lucy wailed.

“You do not understand,” his mother said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Then enlighten me,” Hades begged.

“It is only...” Ophelia chose her words carefully. How to explain an almost purely emotional concept? “It is only that we do not wish to be alone. It may be more dangerous for us to leave our coach and tread into an alley or a dressing room behind a theatre or a woman’s bedchamber, but they often need us to do so. They are brave, so we must be brave. What they do is more difficult than anything I have ever done.”

Lucy wiped something glittering away from watery eyes, and her mother nodded.

“Sometimes,” Ophelia said, leaning just a little bit forward so she could better see his eyes in the dim light of the coach, “it takes a smile and an arm wrapped around a shoulder to show them they are not alone.”

The hard line of his jaw softened, and as he blinked, clear understanding lit in his eyes. He nodded slowly, a heavy exhale slightly parting his lips. “Yes, I see now.”

Mrs. Jones patted her son’s knee. “You’ve always been a bright boy, Hades. I will retrieve Mrs. Fairchild. Her sister told us... their father was a rough man. He married them both off to rough men like himself.” She sighed and shook her head a bit. “I want to help her. Not by throwing money at her. I want to be by her side at the moment she most needs it.”

Lucy sank into her brother’s shoulder with a sigh. “Me too.”

“Well then.” Hades wrapped a soft yet strong arm around his sister’s shoulder, pulling her closer as her eyelids drifted low. “Let us make sure you have what you need to do so

safely. Would it upset Mrs. Fairchild if I, or another trustworthy fellow, were to ride on the outside of the carriage? As a guard.”

“I don’t think so,” Ophelia said. “Mrs. Bellamy said she would be fine if she is not alone with a man or confined in a small space with one.”

He nodded.

“I’ll communicate with Mrs. Bellamy and Mrs. Beckett about when they can expect us,” Ophelia said. “I’ll also provide whatever else is needed, but... but I’ll refrain from direct participation.” A gnawing disappointment. But one she must live with if she was to enter into this partnership with Hades, restore his reputation and gain the freedom to do as she pleased. As long as she kept it secret.

“Do not worry.” Mrs. Jones brushed a hand down Ophelia’s arm, a gesture of comfort familiar to good mothers but unfamiliar to Ophelia. “We will take care of her. Hades, you have found an angel of a woman to marry. I very much approve.”

Hades’ gaze on her was hot and cold at the same time, burning with memories of their bodies learning each other on the library stairs and rushing through with the cool, calming waters of everything he was—confident, capable, comforting.

The coach rocked as it took them closer to London, and Ophelia’s brain rocked with everything new she’d learned. About him. About herself.

His sister slept in his arms, trusting him to care for her, and his mother told him all their plans with no hesitation. More trust. And she’d seen good of him herself as he’d sat quietly with a dying woman among the conservatory flowers. He was like no man she’d ever met, and while every nerve ending in her body screamed at her to doubt him, to call him a snake, Dr. Hades Jones had stunned her doubting nerves into silence.

After all, how could her nerves scream *Doubt him!* when they’d learned what it was to course pure pleasure through her body? Now, they sang a different tune—*More*. He’d used the

language of the rake to show her what she did not know, but his hands had caressed her with the softness, the adoration, of a lover. She'd not known such a combination existed.

She'd not known a man could listen with such attentiveness, either. He'd wanted to understand, and he'd accepted her reasoning for taking risks.

That, a greater seduction than any other, made her want to run right into his arms instead of running away. Made her feel... a little less alone.

So many evenings, she'd dismissed her maid and dressed alone, crept into midnight streets on solitary feet, and made her way to back doors. She'd ushered women who needed her out of London, basking briefly in their company, their need for her, her ability to help them.

But the next morning, she was always alone once more. No one knew who she truly was or what she could do, had done. No one knew what she cared most about, and no one shared in her passion, her purpose. Now, three souls surrounded her who shared it all—the knowledge of her actions, her purpose, her plans. No longer alone. And with the coach rocking gently around her, and the velvet squabs soft against her neck and wrists and cheek, she rocked into the first safe sleep she'd had in a very long time.



Ophelia was floating, but she did not fear falling. The strong, warm, nice-smelling bands that held her tight would not let her go, and she snuggled closer to them, nuzzling her face against the furnace of her little boat of dreams and listening to the steady beat of a sound it produced.

“Ophelia.” A lovely rumble near her ear.

She nuzzled closer.

The rumble chuckled and nuzzled her back, a nose to her temple. Then a kiss pressed there, too. “Ophelia, wake up, love. You’re home.”

Not a boat. Not a dream. A Devil Doctor.

She startled awake and found herself cradled in his arms. The coach rested silent behind them, and Hades smiled softly down at her through the silky dusk air. A cold wind whipped at them, but he held her tighter, shared his warmth.

“Can I put you down?” he asked.

“Must you?” A response without thought. She popped her hands over her mouth.

His smile widened into a cheeky grin. “No. I suppose not. But if I put you back in the coach and take you home with me, my mother will have some very strong words for the both of us. Your father might, as well.”

“Not likely. He ordered us. Remember.”

“I remember. You sound awake.”

She nodded, regretting her growing cognizance as he placed her on her feet. So nice to be hazy and warm in his arms, so cold to be... otherwise, the whipping wind cutting between them and at her exposed skin. She wrapped her arms around her to save what she could of his remaining warmth.

He clasped his hands behind his back. “I know today was a test. Have I passed?”

She licked her lips, drew in a shaky breath. She knew what she should say—no. Cold and calm, a simple, one-syllable answer. No. Because she knew better than to trust *any* man.

But this man... How many ways had he shown her today he could be trusted? He'd seduced her, as he'd said he would, but not in the way he had intended, so her lips formed the shape of “Yes” instead of a no. She rolled her lips between her teeth and squeezed her eyes closed, waiting for the blow that would surely come from trusting a man like this in such a primal way.

No blow came, only the strength of his arms, loose yet supportive, around her and the sweet, soft press of his lips against her forehead. “Shall we marry, Ophelia?”

It was the first time he'd used only her given name, and it sounded entirely right in his deep timbre. And though her father had ordered her to marry him to begin with, Hades had asked, put the choice before her. Another reason to trust him?

She nodded. "Yes, I believe we shall."

"No more tests?"

"No more tests."

He rested his forehead against hers. "I've never felt like this before. It's absurd, isn't it? To meet a soul and know in an instant you want to know every corner of it."

She shivered, and he held her tighter. He did not speak of love. He spoke of attraction. And she felt the same. Would attraction and trust be enough to form a happy marriage? Her parents had one but not the other. And she could not tell if they were happy. Surely not if her father sought out other beds and her mother languished in illness half the time.

"I should want to enact some sort of revenge on you, I suppose," he said. "For stealing my coat and ruining my reputation. But I find myself impressed with you instead. Your courage, your principles. I will try to earn your trust."

He already was. Unbelievable that. Had someone told her a fortnight ago she'd come to trust a man so quickly, she'd have laughed them into the Thames.

"I'll return tomorrow," he said. "To take you for a walk in Hyde Park. We should have a proper courtship."

She inhaled deeply, the chill of the night air waking her even more. "You wish to court me? I thought you'd procure a special license and have it done with."

"Oh no." He stepped closer. "We must do this the right way, the proper way. Courtship, bans, a big wedding everyone will attend for gossip's sake." He took another step, and his chest brushed against her as he inhaled.

"Yes. To restore your reputation." She shivered, hugging herself more tightly.

He rubbed his palms up and down her arms. “Among other things. Now, will you let me court you properly? Or will I be forced to seduce you? To, possibly, abduct you and take you away to—”

“Your harem?”

“Gretna Green.” Lightning struck blue and dangerous in his eyes, and his hand grasped her own, raised it to brush his lips across her knuckles. The lightning jumped from him to her, startling every inch of her body into life the way his touch between her legs had earlier.

She laughed, a breathy thing, as he studied her over the mountains of her knuckles. “You would never. That would risk everything, ruin the entire reason for our marrying. We cannot create more scandal.” On impulse, she rocked toward him, cupped his cheek, and stroked her thumb over his sharp cheekbone. “You are, impossibly, helping me. And I will help you. We will be... partners. Yes?”

He flipped her hand, uncurled her fingers, and kissed the sensitive palm. “Yes. Partners. I like that.”

So did she.

He released her, stepped away from her embrace, and nodded toward the door. “Go. It is much too cold outside. Your nose will freeze off. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She did, glancing once more over her shoulder as she slipped through the door into her home, turning quickly to peer at him from the doorway. He stood just outside the coach, watching her. He’d pulled his hat on and tugged the brim low so she could not see his eyes, but she felt his gaze nonetheless, as gentle and sure as his heated touch.

She closed the door slowly, inch by inch, peeking through the narrowing space until she could no longer see him watching her. Then she turned to face the candle-yellow foyer and yelped, jumped.

“Father! *Pudding!* You scared me.”

He stood quite close, his fists on his hips, his elbows jutting out at violent angles, and his face an inky storm cloud.

“Ophelia. Where have you been?”

“I told you I was visiting Dr. Jones’s mother and sister today.”

“You were away *all day*. And, once more, you left your maid at home.”

“With Mrs. Jones, I was in no need of another chaperone. That was her father’s coach just now, returning me home.”

“Her father. Viscount Springwell. I remember when that woman made a spectacle of herself, thought that randy marquess would marry her just because she was with child. Ha. More unbelievable than that, her own father—a *viscount*—welcomed her and the child with open arms. Had a husband ready and waiting for her in the wings.” His mouth curled with disgust.

“I found Mrs. Jones delightful. A wonderful woman, and I am happy to one day soon be her daughter-in-law.”

He grimaced and took off down the hall. “You’ve visitors, and you’re late.”

“Me? No one visits me.” She followed him, and when she stepped into the parlor—travel-weary, sleepy-eyed, and ruffled—a roomful of men turned to stare.

“It’s a militia,” she said. “And they’ve set up camp in our home. Father, tell them to leave. Immediately.”

He took her arm and wheeled her farther into the room. “Please be civil to our guests, Ophelia. They’re all... particular friends of mine.”

“Me? All of these men? There’s only one of me, Father.” Perhaps she was the one to have the harem. She almost giggled. She’d have to tell Hades that.

“They’re all interested in your hand. In marriage.” Her father spoke in the soothing tones that came so naturally to Hades, but they did not sound natural at all on her father’s tongue.

She jerked her arm from his hold. “Why?”

“I merely wish you to have options. What kind of father would I be if I forced you to wed a man they call the Devil Doctor, after all?” He seemed all wide-eyed and good-natured innocence. She didn’t believe him for a moment. He was up to something, the old scoundrel. “Come meet Viscount Martins.” He nodded at an approaching gentleman.

*Gentleman* was being generous. He likely did not have to shave. He bumbled a bow and looked for the exits as he stood up, barely glancing at her face. He did not want to be here.

No matter. She did not either.

After brief introductions, she gave a small curtsy. “Good evening, Lord Martins. I am... er... sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“No worries. Your father’s wine is good.” Lord Martins’s pink cheeks and glassy gaze bore testament to that fact. “I’ll wait as long as I need to, within reason, for a dowry like yours.”

Her mouth dropped open, but she soon snapped it shut and narrowed her eyes. “How old are you?”

“Old enough.” He sniffed and pulled up tall, swayed a bit. Still shorter than her. Perhaps he’d hit a growth spurt in a few years.

She was about to tell him so when her father hauled her away and into the purview of another of the unwanted marriageable militia currently commandeering their parlor.

“This is Lord Makenzie,” he said. “He abides in Scotland most of the time but has come south purposefully to find a wife. Isn’t that right, my lord?”

Lord Makenzie was little more than a bushy yellow beard and thick brows over chilly blue eyes. “Aye.”

“How do you like London?” she asked.

“Not at all. I’ll be leaving as soon as I’ve a wife. How are you with the cold?”

“I dislike it.”



He grunted and turned from her, finding better conversation with another man.

Her father barely noticed, merely whisked her away. “And you remember Lord Hawkston?” They stopped before an older gentleman. Much older. Her grandfather’s age.

“I know you,” she said. “You walk with my grandpapa in the park each Sunday.”

Lord Hawkston chuckled, his bald head so shiny it reflected the candlelight glittering above them. “It’s been a pleasure to have watched you grow up, Lady Ophelia, and now—”

“No!” Hm. That had come out louder and more aggressive than she’d meant it.

Lord Hawkston flinched and froze mid bow, looking up at her through his thin brows.

She took a deep breath. She could regale all these gentlemen with a description of exactly what Hades had done to her that afternoon in the Hawthorne House library. Or perhaps tell them all that she was the one secreting women out of London, not the Devil Doctor. Either revelation would certainly send these men scattering.

But she could not make a scene. Because she was being proper. And polite. For Hades.

*Pudding.*

She shook off her father and backed toward the hallway. “Thank you all for coming this evening. I hope you enjoy one another’s company, but I am afraid I’m rather tired from my jaunt out of the city today. And I have a meeting in Hyde Park tomorrow that I must recover for. I am not good company for such an... exalted group as all of you combined provide. I hope you do not think ill of me if I find my bedchamber for a bit of... a bit of beauty rest?” She sank a bit against the doorframe to show her exhaustion. She fluttered her eyelashes for good measure.

Ophelia was rewarded with a chorus of masculine agreement. She must retire for the evening. In fact, they were

just going. They all filed toward the door, this one winking and that one wagging his eyebrows. What was wrong with them? Perhaps they all needed Dr. Jones's services.

Lord Hawkston was the last out. He paused before her, his gaze trailing down from her face and stopping at her hips. He made a thoughtful noise. "Quite good, Lady Ophelia. I've always thought so."

She ducked her head and snagged his gaze. "Really? No one has ever thought me quite good in my life. Quite unpredictable, perhaps. Quite frustrating, absolutely. But quite good?" She shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

He snapped his gaze to her hips once more and chuckled. "They just don't know where to look, my dear." Then he disappeared into the hallway.

"Blech. That was... uncomfortable." She turned to her father and found his gaze heavy on her. "What is this all about?"

"Options, as I said."

"I scared you earlier when I said I would run. That's it, isn't it? Well, I won't run. I decided that today." She patted her father's arm. "No need for options. I'm fine with the first one."

He opened his mouth to speak, but her yawn silenced him. "Go upstairs," he said. "I'll take care of everything."

She didn't trust him, but she did as he said because tomorrow she'd meet a man she was growing to trust in Hyde Park. He planned to court her, and it was the only courtship she'd ever looked forward to. She made it halfway up the stairs before Hapard called her name.

"Yes?" She descended and met him in the foyer where he held a large, flat box.

"This arrived for you just now," he said, holding it out. "From Mrs. Jones."

"Ah, yes. I was expecting it. Thank you."

She carried it to her room and locked her bedroom door. Kneeling before the blazing fire in the grate, she opened it up and freed the folds of material inside. She held it up before her. Hades' coat. Mrs. Jones had promised her to send it, and she must have done so as soon as she'd returned home, sent a footman in all haste to get it to Ophelia so soon.

She pooled the coat in her lap and searched the sleeve for the slash she knew she'd find. Ah—just there. An easy fix. She retrieved her sewing box and crawled closer to the fire for better light. She set her first stitch and then another, and before long, the cut had been mended, made better, even.

Excellent. Hades would need the coat tomorrow. They needed everyone to see them together, to see that coat, and to know without a doubt that the man wearing it would never hurt her.

She folded the coat, dressed for bed, plaited her hair, and climbed into bed. Her body fizzed with memories of Hades' touch, memories of what he'd said about pleasure, and she put her hand where his had been, stroked lightly, mimicking his movements, imagining it was him who touched her so, and as her body buzzed into higher waves, she closed her eyes and thought of him and crashed into the diamond-like universe once more. Just as Hades had said, it could be done alone.

Though... she had not truly been alone, despite it being her hand that had brought her to this sleepy, satisfied shore. His voice and grin in her memory had helped, and her last thought before drifting off to sleep was, apparently, the doctor *was* always right.

# Nine



*March 4, 1820*

She was wearing his coat. Again.

Hades dropped the reins and rubbed his face with a groan. If he were the type of man to accost a woman in broad daylight, ravish her senseless regardless of the passersby on every side, he would do so at this very moment.

Who knew the sight of Lady Ophelia Howard drowning in his too-large coat would wind him tight and make him hard?

He closed his eyes and thought of the very worst wounds he'd ever seen. Blood and infections and leeches and—there. That killed his lust quick enough. Safe from shocking the entire neighborhood, he jumped down from the phaeton and trotted toward her, offered her his arm.

“How did you get my coat?” he asked, helping her up into the conveyance.

“I asked your mother to send it to me while we were at Hawthorne House yesterday, and she did so almost immediately. She’s quite dependable. Wait.” She stepped back down and pulled the coat off, revealing a perfectly fitted pelisse of dark green that turned her gray eyes into a forest of thick fog. “I wanted to mend it for you.” She held it out. “Put it on.”

“I thought we’d all agreed I was never to wear the coat again.”

“It’s important you wear it today. The ton must see you in that coat courting me with all propriety.”

He took the coat and slipped it on.

She hummed, a disapproving sound. “A phaeton? How unexpected.” A risky and dangerous bit of equipage. “But perhaps not. You do carry a sword cane.”

“Do you disapprove of my conveyance?”

“Not at all. In fact. I adore a phaeton.”

He helped her up and sat beside her, their legs so close he felt the singeing heat of her body. “You *would* adore a phaeton.” His finger picked at the coat sleeve, running down the green stitches she’d put there. “Green.”

She nodded. “I did not have any gray.”

“I like it. But ...”

“You’re opposed to my... creativity?” She reached for his arm and traced the shape she’d stitched into his sleeve. “I suppose it is not masculine to wear a heart on one’s sleeve.”

He caught her hand and held it tight. “It’s perfect. Thank you. Shall we be off now?”

He picked up the reins and soon they were flying. The bright sun overhead took the biting chill out of the air and made their flight enjoyable. Ophelia held onto her bonnet, and he leaned into the wind, cautious but daring, wanting to amuse her and keep her safe at the same time. When they arrived at Hyde Park, he handed the reins to the footman who had perched on the back and helped Ophelia down.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“To show our faces, marry, then not disappear in order to prove you are not a devil? Hm. Yes, I think so. Are *you*?”

He nodded and offered his arm; she took it, and they faced the ton. The rich and titled strolled everywhere and hung over the sides of gleaming barouches or posed from atop the finest horseflesh seen in England.

The entire population of Hyde Park did not immediately go quiet and stare their way, but it certainly felt like it. Though she supported herself on his arm, he kept her at a distance from his body, all quite proper for an engaged couple. A few stared, whispering to their friends behind their hands with sly, narrow gazes flaying Hades. And Ophelia.

He grinned. Sometimes smiling proved a better weapon than the sword hidden in his cane.

As they walked, he could not look away from the green stitched heart on his coat sleeve. Did she... did she love him? She *was* a virgin, and he had heard that they fell quickly. And hard. Particularly when introduced to the amorous arts.

Had the pleasure he'd brought her in the Hawthorne House library gone straight to her heart? He'd not meant it to. He was a virgin, too, and *he* wasn't falling in love. Was he? He did feel rather odd. When he'd dressed this morning, he'd fussed not with worry over his reputation but with worry over *her*. He'd asked her if she would survive marriage to him, and all he asked her to be, and she'd said yes. But had she told the truth? If she had... her answer made him feel... fluttery, as if his heart had wings.

Bother.

And she'd actually taken the time to *care* for him, stitching up his coat. A cannon to the gut, that.

"This is not too horrid," she said.

"No. We'll tame the ton in no time. Do you see anyone you know?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. The ladies are looking at you."

"Are they?" He gazed over the crowd as if he looked at nothing in particular. But he saw all, the parasols dipped low over tipped-up lips, the wide eyes fluttering over gloved hands, a widow or two who winked. "Ah. It's been this way since the blasted column came out. Either they avoid me or... pursue me."

“They won’t like me, then. I caught you with no pursuit at all.”

“*I caught you.* At sword point, if you remember.”

“My father caught us both,” she grumbled. She stopped, then, and peered up at him. “Do you know, I think if the circumstances of your birth had been different, you would have, truly, been a rake.”

He raised a brow. “You think so? And why’s that?” She was wrong, of course, but he was curious.

“That sword hidden in your cane. Your phaeton. Your smile makes women fifty paces away swoon. You ravage ladies in libraries. Yes.” She sounded quite pleased with herself. “Had you not learned with your mother’s milk to be a cautious fellow, you would have been the rakiest rake to have ever raked about London. A true devil-may-care scoundrel. A lothario. A—”

“Yes, well. I’m a physician, and glad for it.”

She sighed. “As am I. But I cannot help but think the world has been denied a perfect rakish specimen.” She strolled forward once more, tugging him along like a baby duckling. “Those looks are wasted on such a moral soul as you.”

If she only knew how little morality had mattered to him of late, how often his mind had strayed to sensual sins—seduction, ruination, ravishment.

“Why did you become a doctor?” she asked.

An unexpected question. He smoothed the wrinkles between his brow and tried for a lighthearted tone. “Because I was not well-off enough to be a rake.”

She slapped his forearm. “Serious answers only, please.”

“Very well.” He swung his cane back and forth at his side, a perfect rhythm for thinking. “Several reasons. I like a challenge, and the human body is a never-ending mystery. Even cadavers don’t offer much in the way of solving it. The life has gone out, the processes of the body are no longer in motion. It’s like exploring an abandoned home in order to

understand how the family who evacuated lived. There are signs, clues, hints left behind, but no clear answers.”

“I like a challenge as well.”

“I’m aware.”

“What is another reason?” she asked.

He sighed. “It’s a respectable career, and I wanted to”—he swallowed hard, forcing the words out—“bring respect to my family for once.” Everything he’d done in his life had been for that reason.

“Because ...” The hand not holding onto his arm wrapped around her body and reached for him, traced, lightly, the stitching on his sleeve. “Because you think your birth ...”

“Precisely.” His mere existence had brought ignominy to his mother, his family, and still they loved him. Living an honored, respectable life was, as far as he could tell, the best way to make up for it. “I soon realized I enjoyed it, though.”

“The challenge.”

“Yes. And it seemed a victory. Becoming so good that the very people who shunned my mother invited me into their homes, lavished me with praise. I felt it was not me they were praising, but my mother, my family. They deserve it.”

“*Pudding*,” she breathed. “You’re right—you can’t be a rake.”

He chuckled. “I’ve heard you say that before. An expletive of sorts. Why pudding?”

“Because I do not like pudding.”

“None of it?”

She shivered. “Especially those with raisins.” She stopped. “Oh, *pudding*.”

“With raisins?”

She tugged his arm. “Do you see that young fellow over there by the tree? With the dog?”

“Yes.”



“He was at my father’s house last night when I returned. And that man over there by the barouche.”

“The one with the beard?”

She nodded. “He too was at my father’s house, as was the one coming down the path toward us and the other strolling behind us.” Hades flashed a glance over his shoulder. “No,” she screeched. “Do not look.”

He continued looking. “Are you talking about the man with the cane?”

“I told you not to look!” She reached up and pulled his head so it faced forward again. “I suppose he didn’t see you, though. He’s quite nearsighted. Happens at his age, you know. Of course you know. You’re a doctor.”

“Friends of your father’s?”

“No,” she said, “*options*.”

His hand tightened on the knob of his cane. “The *options* appear to be closing in on us.”

“Yes. That does appear to be happening.”

He shifted his cane so it slashed across the front of his body, ready for use.

Her hands on his arm tightened like claws. “You’re not going to run them through, are you?”

“Ophelia.” Need she ask? He was not, after all, that ideal rake he might have been in a different life.

She looked at him with wide eyes, questioning. “What? Oh! Yes, of course. We cannot make a scandal. No running anyone through.”

“Even if there *could* be a scandal, I wouldn’t run them through. I stitch people up, not gut them open.”

“Not what it looked like that night in the alley,” she mumbled.

“That was an exception.”

“They’re closing in, Hades.” She pressed her body to his side. “But why?”

“What did you mean by options?” he countered, a hiss.

“My father has decided I should have opportunities for marriage outside of a single man. As if I haven’t had those very options for years. And rejected them all.”

“Eleven proposals. Yes, I remember. I was shocked when your father ordered you to marry me. Logical he’s come to his senses and regrets his actions.”

“Don’t worry, though,” she said hastily. “I’ve not changed my mind. Besides, the candidates he paraded before me last night are less than acceptable. As you can see.”

The four men coming at them from all sides had them trapped now, and Hades forced his doctor’s smile, though it felt like a rip across his face, and his hand on the top of his cane caressed the mechanism that would release the blade. No gutting. But better safe than sorry.

One of the men—not the bearded giant, not the boy with the dog, and not the elderly gentleman still strolling toward them at a distance—stopped before them. He wore a jolly grin and bowed so low his nose almost pecked his knees.

“Lady Ophelia,” he said as he popped back up, “well met, I hope.”

Ophelia’s smile seemed even more forced than Hades’ own. She leaned into him and spoke, somehow without moving her lips. “Do I have to talk with them?”

“We must be polite.” Hades patted her hand and bowed. “I am Dr. Hades Jones. And you are?”

But the jovial fellow who could bend himself in half did not get to answer because the boy with the dog on a lead stepped between them.

“Lady Ophelia!” the boy cried, his voice cracking. “Good afternoon.”

“Lord Martins.” Ophelia curtsied. “Is that... your hound?”

“Is he an option?” Hades hissed in her ear.

Lord Martins didn't hear. “I suppose it is. Do you like it?” He beamed.

The dog ran circles around him, yapping, wrapping the lead in tight spirals around the young viscount's legs. The dog was a tiny fluffball, but his paws were huge. He'd be a giant when he matured. Hades had spent all his childhood in the country, and he knew the signs, the types. Likely this young man, boy really, did not.

“He's... cute,” Ophelia said.

“He's new. Just procured him this morning. Thought you'd like him.”

“How old are you?” Hades asked.

The viscount wrinkled his nose. “How old are you, Grandfather Devil Doctor?”

“Grandfather?” Hades sputtered.

“Why does it matter if *I* like the dog?” Ophelia asked.

“Pardon me,” a Scottish brogue said from the side. Everyone looked up, including the dog. The bearded Scotsman tipped his hat to Ophelia. “Your father said you'd be here.” He offered his arm. “Come along, then.”

“Pardon *me!*” Ophelia snorted. “You can't simply order me about.”

“I got here first,” the nameless jovial fellow said, bumping the young viscount to the side and out of the way.

The viscount didn't teeter or totter. He fell like a tree, all at once and with a thunk that shook Hyde Park, the pup's lead wrapped tight about his legs. He yelped, then he groaned, trying to push to his feet. Impossible. The pup bounded onto his chest and sat, his tongue lolling out and into the viscount's face. “Bloody hell.”

“No cursing in front of the lady,” Hades reminded him. He reached down and removed the lead from the pup's neck, held him tight under one arm.

“Are you hurt?” Ophelia asked, squatting to help him up.

Martins waved her off and unwrapped his body, his face beet red and the movements of his hands, jerky, furious. He stood and held his arms out. “Give me my dog.”

“What’s its name?” Hades asked.

Martins’s mouth opened. Then shut. “Spot.”

Hades snorted.

“He’s got no spots.” The jovial man behind the viscount chortled.

“If you’re done with this silliness, Lady Ophelia,” the Scot said, “I’m waiting.” He held out his arm once more.

“*Pudding*,” Ophelia muttered. “What a man.”

“I hope you mean that in a disparaging way,” Hades said.

She scowled.

He suppressed a grin.

“What’s going on here?” The grainy voice from behind sent them both whirling around.

“Lord Hawkston,” Ophelia said. “It’s... lovely to see you here.”

“Finally,” Hades added.

“What’s that, son?” Hawkston frowned.

“Nothing. Just clearing my throat.” Hades bowed. “We’ve not met. I’m Dr. Hades Jones. I assume you’re an option.”

“I’m the Earl of Hawkston. And you’re a scoundrel.”

“That’s what I hear, yes.”

Ophelia growled, scowling up at Hades. “You are not a scoundrel, and he is not an option.” She cupped her face in her hands for a heavy, head-shaking breath before dropping her arms to her sides once more.

Hawkston certainly was not an option. None of these men were, and the more Hades considered it, the more he realized he wanted to narrow Ophelia’s *options*. Not particularly

sporting of him, but he was feeling growly. Perhaps even possessive. He, after all, was the man with Ophelia's heart on his sleeve.

Ophelia released her hold on his arm and stepped toward the line of men facing them. "I am afraid, gentlemen, that I am already engaged"—she held both arms out toward Hades as if he were a prize stallion—"to Dr. Jones. I am sorry, but you've wasted your time here. I do wish you all the best of luck in finding the perfect wives. I, sad to say, am not she. For any of you."

A masterful little speech to stifle the growing gossip gathering around them.

The little lordling pouted, dusting his pants off and scowling at the dog still held beneath Hades' arm. The Scotsman... where the devil was he? He must have bored and left. Good riddance.

Lord Hawkston frowned, then patted Ophelia's shoulder. "As it suits you, my dear. As it suits you. Although... I'd like one more child before I go, and you do"—a sigh—"have *excellent* hips."

Ophelia had stopped breathing, her mouth quirked into a curl of distaste. Hades patted her back, and she lurched back into life. "Thank you, my lord, for the... compliment, but no thank you for the offer."

He sighed again. "There are other hips just as suitable, I suppose." He eyed a barouche in the distance. "Lady Petunia's hips are quite bounteous." He ambled off in her direction. The lady in question would have plenty of time to escape before being cornered, thankfully.

The jolly man without a name stopped before Ophelia. "You sure?" he asked, his yellow hair slick against his skull. "I'm rich." He grinned.

"What a lovely thing for you," Ophelia said, tapping her toe and crossing her arms, as little amused, it seemed, as Hades.

“I’m good at marital relations,” the man said. “I assume. I’ve never been married. But it must be the same as fornicating with—”

“Lord Whatever Your Name Is,” Hades said, steel in his voice, “please desist.”

The man shrugged and stepped backward onto his toe to turn around.

“May I give you some advice?” Ophelia said, holding a hand out, stopping him mid-turn. Another shrug, a lift of both his brows. “Do not start off your next marriage proposal with a half-hearted description of your marital prowess.”

“Excellent observation,” Hades said. His own strategy had been much more convincing. He grinned. He’d not told her he might be good; he’d shown her.

Lord Possibly Good In The Marital Bed shrugged a third time then disappeared down the path.

“I want my dog back,” the young Lord Martins said with a huff.

“What’s his name?” Hades asked.

Lord Martins looked left. Lord Martins looked right. Lord Martins stuck the tip of his tongue out of the corner of his mouth and studied the clouds above. When he returned his attention to them, he said, “Dog?”

The dog snapped at the young man, growled.

“I’m keeping him,” Hades said. He waved a hand down the path. “Go.”

“Didn’t care for him anyway.” Lord Martins kicked at the dirt, but he left.

And then they were alone. With the dog.

“What should I name him?” Hades asked, turning to Ophelia.

“You’re going to just... take it?”

“As you said, he’s cute. And smart.”

Ophelia's lips trembled into a smile, and she reached to stroke the fur behind the pup's ears. "That was unexpected. I do apologize. I had no idea that—"

"No apology necessary. Here." He held out the pup. "Take her. You need comforting."

She pulled the puppy into her arms and nuzzled its neck with a happy sigh. "Thank you."

"The dog is mine."

Ophelia's head popped up. "Pardon?"

He'd not meant to say that or anything like it, and his mouth poured forth more unplanned words. "I'm keeping her as security. You can't have her until you marry me."

"A bribe?"

"A wedding gift."

She laughed, restarting their stroll that had been so rudely interrupted. "Do not worry, Dr. Jones. I'll marry you. I told you that last night."

He stepped into an easy gait at her side. "I'm not worried."

"No? Then what has you looking as if you need the puppy more than I do? No, don't answer. You'll only give me stiff-upper-lip answers, and I'll have none of them. You need comforting, Dr. Jones, as much as anyone else. Tell me, who takes care of the good doctor when he is so busy caring for everyone else? No, don't answer that either. Because from now on, the answer is *me*."

They walked in silence, the crunch of gravel beneath their boots the only sound despite the whispers that followed them. The stitched heart on his sleeve seemed to warm and flame and singe his skin through wool and linen. The February chill did not freeze the flame. It became a part of him, and though he tried and failed to say many things, the only words that finally found the wind and the world were, "You're an unusual woman, Lady Ophelia Howard."

She cringed. "So I've been told. Many times. It's my greatest fault." Small words, a gentle tone.

He stopped her with a hand to her arm and pulled her closer. “Not a fault. Not a fault at all.”

Her lips parted on a breath, and every one of her good qualities rose to his own. They’d tumble out, wouldn’t they, and she’d know... she’d know that he—

Her eyes widened, and her body jerked. The pup leaped up to lick Hades’ face, bashing her chin with his rock-hard skull. She screamed, a small thing, and dropped the pup, who danced around them, yapping. Her eyes slammed closed, and his arms slammed around her. Where was a damn bench when you needed one. There. He picked her up.

“Hades!” Her arms flew around his neck, clung tight.

He strode for the bench.

“You should probably put me down.” A moan. “*Pudding*, that hurts. Her head is so *hard*.”

He set her down on the wood planks, and her hands flew immediately to her chin. He waved them away and tipped her chin up so he could see it, kneeling before her to gain a better look.

“It’s fine.” She pulled his hands away from her face.

He switched their grips and pinned her hands to her thighs. “Look up.”

She froze, then she did as he’d asked. Commanded, really.

“You’ll be bruised,” he said. “Does it hurt anywhere else? Temple? Jaw? Cheek?”

“No.” Her voice a rough rasp against his senses.

Which all jolted to life as his panic subsided. The warmth of her hands under his palms, the soft velvet of her pelisse on his fingertips, the hint of curved thigh beneath. They were close, so close he could feel the shush of her breath and the rise of her chest, feel the lust rising in him with each movement, each breathy inch they moved closer to one another.



In front of the entire population of Hyde Park at its most popular hour. His hands on her thighs. His hips parting her knees. Their lips closer than they should be in such a public place.

He jumped to his feet, and she did too. They strode in opposite directions, and when he turned to stride back toward her, he found her pacing his way, wringing her hands, her face contorted in confusion, worry.

He stopped before her. "Look at me. It's fine."

"It's not fine," she hissed. "That was not at all proper."

No arguing that. "The important thing is you don't disappear after the wedding. This is nothing. This is fine."

She groaned, hid her face in her palms.

"Let's go." He nodded down the path the way they'd come toward the waiting phaeton.

They traversed the distance more quickly than they had before, and soon he was helping her up into the seat, handing up the pup, and taking the reins. They reached her home, and he helped her down while the pup waited on the seat. Then, he was walking through the door of his own home, raking his hands through his hair, the pup at his heels.

He collapsed into the chair behind his desk in his study, the pup jumped into his lap, and he scratched the dog's scruff. "You need a name." He sighed. "How about... Catastrophe?" The dog wrinkled its nose. "Scandal?" The dog huffed. "How about—"

"Hades!" Lucy skidded around the corner and into the room on stockinged feet. "You're home. Excellent. Mother needs to see you. Oh. A dog." She squealed. "He's adorable!"

"She's." Hades stood, rounded the desk, and dropped the pup in her arms. "Where's mother."

"Abed. What's the pup's name?"

"Doesn't have one yet. I'm open to suggestions."

“Perhaps you should name her after the queen. To show everyone you’re not a blackguard. Then they’ll ask you back, and—”

“Mother’s in bed? At this time of day?”

“She’s not feeling well. That’s why she wants to see you.”

Hades picked up speed.

Lucy followed. “It’s just a cold, I’m sure.”

But it wasn’t just a cold. It was a fever.

“Do not worry, Hades,” his mother said, patting his hand. “I’ll be a picture of health in a week’s time and perfectly able to help Mrs. Fairchild.”

Mrs. Fairchild? Ah, yes. The woman they were scheduled to secret out of London and to Hawthorne House. His morning with Ophelia had quite swept the woman from his mind.

“You don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll figure something else out if you’re still unwell.”

He returned to his study tired. Quite, quite tired. He closed the door, sat at his desk, and opened a drawer. He stared at the blank paper there, the pen and ink. He should write Ophelia, tell her the new development.

No. She’d only worry, and he didn’t want that. And his mother was right, no doubt. She’d be well in enough time. There was no need to worry Ophelia. He closed the door and fell back into his chair, only then realizing he still wore his greatcoat when he saw the flash of rich green lining. The stitched heart on the sleeve winked up at him. It seemed to glow, and he cupped his other hand over it, hiding it.

What to do about Lady Ophelia Howard? She’d sent the suitors scurrying, but still... she had *options*. Her father knew it, or he would not have sent them after her. To tempt her. To seduce her away from Hades with beards, brawn, winks, and puppy dogs.

Seduction.

A bad idea but... *not* a bad idea. He traced her stitches with his forefinger. She'd already given him her heart, why not convince her to give him her body? More than she already had. Rakish, yes. But she already knew that in his heart of hearts, Hades Jones was just that. Why not act like one and ensure her options were narrowed down to him. Only him. Because he needed her title to rebuild his reputation, not because...

The little green heart winked again.

If Hades Jones cursed, he'd use up his entire supply of expletives in a single heartbeat because it beat to the rhythm of Ophelia's name.

# Ten



The window jolted open, and a shiver of night air, cold and fresh, slipped through. Ophelia, heart hammering, reached for the knife she kept behind the table beside her bed. She'd made many women disappear, and several of their men were not happy about it. She knew the risks she took, and she took care to protect herself.

Keeping the blade away from her body, she melted off the side of the bed opposite the window, and crouched low, hidden, waiting.

A shadow slipped through, and the thunk of boots on carpet sent her pulse into a crazed waltz. The shadow—a man—towered over her bed, and a wind from the window blew the light curtains aside so moonlight, partially hidden before, could flood her room. And shine on the man.

“Hades?” She popped to her feet, flattening her free hand against her chest to push her heart back down. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you holding a knife?”

“You terrified me!”

He held out a hand. “Let me see it.”

“Do you plan to lodge it in my gut?”

His mouth twisted to the side, and one golden eyebrow flew upward. “Yes, naturally. Then drag you, bleeding, to my harem where I intend to heal you first, then—”

“Yes, yes. You’re not a villain.” She handed over the knife and collapsed onto her bed with a groan. “I might not ever recover.”

He sat on the edge of her mattress, turning the blade over in the pale moonlight. “You will. I’ll make sure of it.”

“So good to be engaged to a doctor.”

He frowned at the blade and set it on the table. “It’s not adequate for your purposes. I’ll get you a new one.”

She blinked, all movement, thought, breathing—over, done for, impossible. He planned to get her another *knife*. What man would... *pudding*. More romantic than diamonds. For her at least. She was... was she? Yes, certainly. She was a little bit in love after that.

Hades leaned back, draping the long, lean length of himself across her mattress and propping his weight on a bent elbow. He bent over her with a grin she could see even as the moonlight dimmed. From curtain or passing cloud, she did not know. All that mattered, all that existed in the world was her, on her back on her bed, and him, grinning down at her.

“A wedding present?” she asked.

“If you like.” He leaned closer, used his free arm to push a lock of hair off her face and dipped even closer. A kiss. She inhaled. He smelled of wind and winter, and she parted her lips for the kiss, but when it came it was a soft, lingering, chaste affair placed upon her forehead that made her heart flip and flip again, learning a new dance to the music of his tenderness.

“W-why are you here?” she asked, shyness creeping in as her hands crept to her belly and marched themselves into a prayer position, a two-handed fist to keep her body pinned to the bed when it wanted to float up, up, up.

He lifted enough to peer down at her. “To continue our lessons. From the library.”

“Ah. Yes.” She looked to the door. The hallway beyond had been quiet for hours now, but still... if someone heard them...

Was she truly considering this? Apparently so. Would she put up no fight, no pretense, even, of disagreement? Apparently not.

She untangled her hands and lifted her fingers to trace the outline of his face, teasing through the silky strands of hair that hung rakishly over his temples.

“What lesson am I to learn this evening?”

His catlike, lounging body shifted, tensed with the appearance of a predatory gleam in his eye, and then he was on top of her, his hands on either side of her head, his knees bracketing her hips, his mouth taking hers as if it was his.

It was.

He left her lips to kiss her jaw. “Last time I had you in my clutches—”

“Clutches?”

“I found out exactly what you like.”

“What?” More breath than word.

“You like me to kiss you right here, love.” His hand crept between her legs as he tugged her earlobe between his teeth.

Yes, she liked that.

“And you like my tongue on your breast.”

She liked all of it.

He scattered kisses along her neck, making his way downward, but she caught him and pulled him back to her lips, wanting to taste his words on *her* tongue.

But he chuckled and pulled away, sitting back on his heels, leaving her breathless, flustered, wanting more.

“I know what you like, so tonight,” he said, “you learn about me.”

She curled her fingers into her palms. “Am I to sit and hear a lecture?”

“You’re to lead the pursuit of knowledge.”

“How do—”

“Touch me. Kiss me. Learn me.” He leaned into her once more, parting her lips with his tongue, and finding her own. One hand cupped the back of her head, and his body—hard and hot—melted into her. Then he rolled them both so that she lay atop him, every one of her curves and angles draped against him like wet linen. He released her and clasped his hands behind his head. A clear message that left her yearning. Her turn.

Learn him. Kiss him. Touch him. She wanted nothing more. But how could she when he was still fully dressed. She took off his cravat first, pulling him to standing and going up on tiptoe to reveal the strong, column of his throat. Then his greatcoat, waistcoat, and shirt became three puddles on the floor, and he stood before her, chest bared for her exploration. She admired first the breadth of his shoulders, the bunched muscles of his arms, the way his torso tapered toward lean hips. His back was as delicious as his front, and as he glanced over his shoulder to watch her circle him, she enjoyed the shifting of muscle beneath his skin.

“Will you just look?” he asked.

She touched, setting her fingertips to the rounded part of his shoulder, trailed them down his arm as she continued her inspection. She explored the hard muscled planes of his chest and the grooves between the muscles of his abdomen. He was hard and soft, warm and sharp, and he caused such heady contradictions in her own body. Her throat dry, the space between her legs wet. Her heart speeding like a racing phaeton’s wheels, time slowing to a honey trickle.

With so much time, undoing the buttons of his fall should prove easy indeed. But with the trembling of her body, the shaking of her fingers, it did not. His hands joined hers and flicked the buttons loose with the efficiency she’d come to expect from him, and she hooked her fingers beneath the waist of his trousers and tugged them down, let them fall, watched him step out of them, and swallowed hard when he stood entirely bared and aroused before her.

She stroked a finger down his ribs, his abdomen, stopping to cup her hand around his hip. He hissed and closed his eyes as her thumb swept lower from that anchored spot.

“Did you like that?” she queried.

“I’ve liked it everywhere you’ve touched me.”

What did she like? Perhaps he’d like the same. She went up on tiptoe, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed his chin, his jaw, nipped on his earlobe as he had done to her earlier. She found his mouth and parted his lips with her tongue. His arms became bands of steel about her, hugging her tight as he pressed her head back in a hard kiss that made her legs weak.

Yes, he liked that. So did she.

“What else do you like? Tell me,” she demanded. Exploration was good and well, but her body hummed, wanted more, wanted quicker, wanted new and hotter.

He dragged his lips across her cheek to her ear and whispered, “Kiss me as I kissed you. In the library.” He rolled his hips against her, pressing the hot length of his shaft into her belly.

The library. He’d rocked such pleasure through her while taking none for himself. Very well. His turn.

Slowly, she hit her knees, her nails scraping down his body. A flash of embarrassment when she came eye to... eye with his member, but a hotter flash of desire when she ran her hands behind his body, cupped his backside to hold herself steady. She kissed him first, then tasted the full length of him. She stroked and played, learning what made him hiss and moan and dig his fingers into her hair, tighten, groan the endearment she was coming to find so familiar—love.

But something was missing. He was not writhing and begging as she had been. She licked her lips and looked up at him. “I don’t think I’m doing it right.”

“You are. There’s more. Take me into your mouth.”

Oh. My. Well.



*Pudding.*

He was quite large, but... she would try.

As her mouth closed around him, his hands in her hair tightened. Tingles of pleasure sparked along her scalp and traveled down her spine then throughout her body. His hand on her head pushed her gently, sliding her mouth along his length, and he jerked. He liked that, then. She pulled away to do it again and found he liked that, too. And as she made a rhythm of the sliding, his hand helping her, she realized she was powerful. No matter how big he was, how small she was in comparison, she could make this man shake and beg and—

He urged her up and away, and before she could ask if she was doing it wrong, she was in his arms, lifted into the air and thrown onto the bed with a bounce. His hands wrapped around her hip, hot and branding as heated iron, and he dragged her toward the edge of the bed. He hit his knees before her and wrapped one hand around his shaft. Stroking himself, he pressed her legs apart with his shoulders. His unoccupied hand found the same wonderful place they'd found before, in the library, and then his mouth was there instead, kissing her in the most intimate way she could imagine. Would not have imagined before him. Belinda had never said...

No room for her father's mistress here. There existed only Hades spiraling pleasure across every inch of her. She gripped the quilt, arched, moaned as she reached for his hair to tug it as he had done hers. She watched him all the while, the play of shadows across the moving muscles of his back arching the sensations in her body higher, teetering her near an edge.

Then falling over into a shattering sky of delight. She raked her fingernails across his shoulders, wanting him closer, needing the heat of him surrounding her, but once her shudders stopped, his head fell back. He worked his hand up and down his shaft, his other arm, clenching her waist, caressing her breasts, pulling her down to him for a long, sensuous kiss.

She slid from the bed, becoming an Ophelia puddle between his legs, kissing him everywhere she could touch

while he worked his hand up and down, faster and faster, and when she wrapped her hand beneath his to help, he jerked, groaned, and crushed her body to him.

Heavy breaths and beating hearts. A ruined shift and his teeth a gentle bite on her shoulder.

They collapsed into one another's arms and melted into the floor, floating, clinging, kissing until peace settled around them and he lifted her on the bed, pulled her shift from her body, laid her softly on the pillows, and curved his body around her, the hard, muscled front of him nestled against her back. He stroked a line down her abdomen from breasts to curls and back up, placing light, petal-soft kisses everywhere he could reach without much movement.

When she found speech once more, in the hazy shadows of her brain, she said, "You've ruined me."

"Not quite. Just enough."

"Just enough? For what?"

He rolled on top of her, kissed her soft and slow then lifted with a gleam in his eye. "To demolish all other options."

"You rake!"

"That's what they say."

He rested his chin on her shoulder, his breath caressing her cheek, and she wrapped his arms around her with her own.

"My father is up to something, but I cannot be sure what."

He nuzzled his nose on her neck. "He merely wants what's best for his daughter."

She snorted. "He values his daughters, his family, no more than any other man. Which is not at all."

Hades propped his head up with an elbow, leaning his head onto his fist. "I am not excusing his actions, but you cannot assume—"

"I can. You've seen my mother. He did that to her."

He dropped his nose and lips to the back of her head, inhaled deeply, placed a kiss in her hair. “Yes. An excitable woman, prone to attacks of nerves and melancholy. Often convinced of other illness that—”

“Do not really exist.”

He dropped his head to the pillow behind her and hugged her more tightly.

“She was not that way when I was younger. She was attentive and loving and... and filled with joy. Then she lost a child, a baby boy, and Papa yelled at her. For many nights in a row. And then Papa... disappeared. For a fortnight. She told us he was in the country, but I’ve my doubts, because when he returned home, he smelled like London. Not a whiff of fresh air on him, and he continued to disappear. Never spent a night at home. The less we saw him, the more Mama deteriorated. Smiles disappeared except for when Papa returned. And sometimes the only thing that would bring him home was news his wife was deathly ill. I know she’s not really, but—”

“She is. Just not in a way I can diagnose very clearly.”

“I’m sorry she’s a bother to you.”

“Not a bother at all. Everyone deserves to be treated with careful respect, their ailments listened to and taken seriously, no matter if they are of the body or of the spirit.”

She turned in his arms. “You truly believe that? Papa tells her, and us, that she’s ridiculous.” She rested her forehead on his chest, hiding her face. Why did she tell him all this? Why trust him with her fears and wounds? That famous bedside manner she’d heard so much about? Or something else that opened up only between them? “I apologize. I do not know why I’m saying such things. You have no interest in—”

“I do.” His hand appeared between their bodies, and nudged her chin up with his knuckles until she was looking into his eyes, glowing blue in the dimly lit dark. He frowned, the usual laugh lines around his eyes disappearing into emotion of a different sort. “I want to know what sends you

into danger when you should be safe at home. And I want to know how I can help you.”

“You want to diagnose and cure me.”

“Perhaps. Yes. Ophelia, your mother is not ridiculous. She is sad. And lonely. And your father should be flayed for saying such things. But... he always calls me to attend to her when she’s feeling ill, and he demands I report my findings to him, whether her illness can be observed with visible symptoms or not. I think he cares in his own way.

“Perhaps that’s what he’s doing with these options that are no longer options.” He grinned and dropped a kiss to her forehead. “Showing you he cares.”

“No. He just wants to be rid of me. You heard him in his office.” Something sour ran through her, displacing the stardust he’d dripped into her veins when he’d brought her such pleasure. She turned, shrugged out of his embrace, and swung her feet to the floor. “You should go. We cannot be caught. I might find escape through marriage to you if we were, but it would do nothing for your reputation.”

Stillness behind her for several beats, then the shifting mattress and creak of the bed.

“Yes,” he said. “You’re right.”

From over her shoulder, she watched him fix his fall and tuck in his shirt, button his waistcoat.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

She nodded, and he slipped into his greatcoat with a grin and swung out of the window. With him gone, the room felt empty. Of everything. As if he’d taken all life with him. She wanted it back. Wanted him back. Hated that talk of her father had made her push him away.

She jumped from the bed, pulling the quilt with her to wrap around her body. My, he was good at climbing. He was halfway down already. Not much to work with, either. No ivy or branches, just bricks and brute strength.

It seemed he could scale any wall to get to her, even those she'd constructed herself around her heart. She fell back into bed with a sigh. The quilt smelled of Hades, like winter winds and soap and something minty, and she fell toward sleep wrapped in his scent and wrapped in something warmer, too. Growing trust... or something else she could not quite grasp. Silly little seedling of an emotion. He'd crept into her bedroom, of course she should not trust him. But she'd done nothing she had not wanted. And he was as kind to her mother in his words tonight as he'd always been in his actions to her in the past.

Ophelia hauled the quilt closer and filled her lungs, let go, and let herself fall.

# Eleven



*March 14, 1820*

Courtship was proving more exhausting than Ophelia had expected. She had not wanted to leave her bed that morning, and the woman staring at her from the looking glass seemed paler than before. But not without a rosy glow. She yawned. She'd been traipsing, chaperoned, about London with Hades for almost a fortnight—Gunter's, the theatre, Hyde Park every afternoon at the fashionable hour, trips to Hatchards, and Vauxhall Gardens for fireworks last night.

They'd laughed and learned one another and made plans for helping the women at Hawthorne House. She'd enjoyed every moment of it, but she was weary, too. Her father scowled every time he saw her, and a new gossip column had appeared, detailing her intimate embrace with Hades in Hyde Park what seemed like ages ago now. Why wasn't it old news yet? It should be, but any news of the Devil Doctor lasted longer than usual.

And, in two days' time, they were to sneak Mrs. Fairchild out of her horrible marriage, and into the safe haven of Hawthorne House.

She wouldn't physically do so, of course. She'd promised Hades. But she would not be shunted to the side either. She would spend the day gathering what Mrs. Fairchild might need for the journey, for when she arrived. Provisions and comforts, a basket full of kindness and hope.

She dressed quickly and hurried to the family dining room to break her fast.

“Ophelia,” her father said, looking up from a paper when she slouched into the room with another yawn.

Her sisters and mother looked up to, all with various foods lifted partway to their open mouths.

“Good morning,” Ophelia said brightly.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Her father stood, scooting the chair back with a screech of wood against wood.

Her sisters’ mouths snapped closed, and they looked at their plates.

*Pudding.* They knew something.

Ophelia backed toward the door. “I... uh... have somewhere I must be. I’m afraid I can’t stay to chat, Father. I—”

“First, we will talk.” He rounded the table, caught her arm, and hauled her down the hall to his study.

The dining room erupted with loud whispers and the clatter of silver against china, all of which faded as the study door closed behind her. No escaping the chat, whatever it was about.

“Hawkston paid me a visit last night.” Her father rounded his desk and sat, his focus riveted on her.

“Oh?” She wandered around the edges of the room, picking at the books on shelves and the small knickknacks arranged on the fireplace mantel. She picked up a little porcelain shepherdess and traced the fine details of her skirt.

“He says you and Dr. Jones were seen in Hyde Park ...” A flood of crimson rushed across his cheeks. “*In flagrante delicto.*”

The statue slipped from her fingers and crashed into uncountable bits around her feet. “Oh!” She knelt to pick up the pieces. *In flagrante delicto?* Where had the earl gotten such a notion? They’d done no such thing! How absurd. But the

gossip column had also intimated as such. She'd so far kept the document from her family, but... she'd known it could not last.

“Get up from there,” her father demanded. As she stood, he swept across the room and tugged on a bell pull. “A maid will clean it.”

“Yes, of course. Father”—she stepped gingerly over the shards—“you must know that is a flagrant falsehood.”

“Said he saw it with his own eyes. Said you were on a bench and the man had his... his hands on you... and hell, Ophelia, before that, you told your suitors you were engaged to marry Dr. Jones!”

She groaned. She had been on a bench and Hades' hands had been on her, inappropriately, but to get from that to... *Pudding*.

“I told them that because it's true.”

“But I gave you options.” He dropped back into the chair behind his desk, his last word almost a wail. “You were supposed to pick one of them. That was the plan all along.” He dropped his face into a weary palm. “Threaten you with marriage to a villain, throw better options—”

“Better?”

“Before you, you choose one of those, then you're married and to a man of my choosing.”

Ophelia gripped the back of a chair, needing it to steady her wobbly limbs. “So... you never meant for me to marry Hades?”

“*Dr. Jones*. And no, I did not. How could I?”

“You lied?” Why was she shocked? She knew what kind of man her father was. “You attempted to trick me?”

He shrugged. “The point is not to marry the Devil Doctor, but to simply *marry*, Ophelia. Now, come, choose a suitable fellow who doesn't ravage you in broad daylight before the entire ton.”



“He didn’t ravage me! It’s a gross exaggeration. And I am marrying him.” Even if she did not want to, the amount of gossip surrounding them would be enough to chain them together. And after the night he’d snuck into her bedchamber... she very much wanted to marry him.

“Is he blackmailing you, Ophelia?”

“No!”

“Is he threatening you in some other way?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why in heaven’s name are you agreeing to marry him?”

Because he excited her. Because he listened to her. Because he shared her purpose, or at least supported it. She would have to curtail her midnight activities, but doing so might make them safer for the women she helped. She was agreeing to marry him, mostly, because he was the first man she’d trusted in a long time, and the man before her now gave her every reason to never trust at all.

“Will you order me not to marry him?” she asked, the words heavy on her tongue.

Her father’s jaw twitched, and the vein in his temple popped. “He’s not a rake, Ophelia. He’s worse. His mother is a whore who married a farmer, and he’s a bastard. It would shame our family were you to marry him. I thought you’d feel that shame and choose more wisely. But he’s clearly seduced you. In the end, he’s as much a scoundrel as his father was. No, I will not allow you to marry Dr. Hades Jones.”

She backed toward the door. “His mother is perfectly lovely. And he is the first man I’ve met whom I feel I can trust, and—”

“You think he’s not lying to you? You think he won’t do the same as I have, as we all have, as is our right, and take another woman when the notion strikes him as desirable? You’re quite naïve if you think that, daughter. He wants your title, your connections, for his own reasons, to elevate himself. And what do you get? Nothing. A brat in your belly and the

loss of all your acquaintances because no one will receive you after you wed the Devil Doctor.”

She leaned against the door, her hand a white-knuckled fist on the handle. Breath came hard, as if her lungs were too full of something heavy and dark for cleansing air to fit in, as if her throat were closing up.

Marry another man. She couldn't. She couldn't because...

*Pudding!* It shouldn't matter. Hades Jones was just a man, and they were, as her father reminded her, all the same. The very same. It shouldn't matter that she couldn't marry him, but... it did. It hurt like a knife in her gut, twisting, pushing, ripping her open.

“You're not to see him again,” her father said, his hands gripping the edges of his chair.

She nodded and fled. Right out the front door.

Men were not the only ones who could lie, and she had work to do. Besides, she knew one man who would not lie to her, and no matter what her father demanded, she would marry him.

# Twelve



Ophelia was not wearing his coat this time. Naturally. Hades had it, after all, slung over the low-backed chair nearest the door in his study so he could easily grab it as he left. This evening, standing on Hades' doorstep, Ophelia wore a fur-lined cloak over a velvet pelisse, and she was so wrapped up to guard against the cold, he could see only the tip of her nose—red—and the ice-blooming apples of her cheeks. The cloak hung so low it hid her eyes, but her lips, pink and curved into a smile were all he needed for lust to shoot through his body like a well-aimed arrow.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, pulling her inside.

She pushed her cloak back but looked over her shoulder at the closing door. “Can you have a footman bring in my packages?”

He nodded to the hovering butler then turned back to her. “What packages?”

“We must talk.” Her smile fell.

Damn. Something was wrong. But good thing she'd come, no matter what had brought her here. He'd been about to write to her, but now he would not have to.

“Follow me,” he said, clasping her hand in his and guiding her up the stairs.

“I see I have no option but to do so.”

He squeezed her hand and, because he could not stop himself, pressed a short kiss to her temple. “You're cold.” He

chaffed her hand between his as he led her to his mother's room. "Mother has a fire crackling in the grate. You'll soon be warm." Before she could speak, he'd pushed open the bedchamber door. "I've brought you a visitor, Mother."

From her bed, propped up on a pile of pillows, his mother grinned. "Ophelia. Welcome."

Lucy bounced in her seat and snapped her book shut. "How lovely!"

Hades sat Ophelia near the roaring fire and leaned against the mantel, facing her. He liked just looking at her, liked better having her in his home, circled with his family round his fire. They must be slow and methodical and proper when they were in public. His too-intense intimacy with her in Hyde Park had already proved a mistake, and he'd kept a proper distance since, but he'd rather have fast and passionate and *now*, a special license and a wife in his bed, his home.

Yet... she did not seem comfortable here. Had seemed more so that first day she'd barged into the drawing room. Stiff shoulders, hard jaw, cold eyes. What ailed her? He'd find out and fix it. Where was the damn dog? He could perch her in her lap and have her smiling in an instant. Puppies cured most ailments, no doctor needed. Ah, there, on the end of his mother's bed. He picked up the ball of fluff and plopped her in Ophelia's lap. Her thin lips broke into a smile, and she dug her fingers into the pup's fur, cooing.

Excellent.

"I was about to write you," he said, satisfied now. "We've a snag in our plans for Mrs. Fairchild. Do not worry, though. I've got a new plan already in motion."

Lips slightly parted, Ophelia's gaze swept over the room, from his mother in her bed, cheery and warm and no longer feverish thank God, to Lucy grinning from her seat, and finally to Hades. She'd forgotten the puppy, and her stiffness had returned.

"I believe," she said, "I need a slower, more detailed accounting of what has brought me to this room."

“Of course.” His mother folded her hands over her belly. “Hades can be a bit too perfunctory sometimes. Let us start with the facts. I am a bit ill at the moment. I am recovering nicely, Hades says, but I will not be able to help Mrs. Fairchild tomorrow night as we’d originally planned.”

“And I have rearranged everything,” Hades said, “for a more convenient day a week from now.” There. *That* should put her at ease.

“A week from now?” Ophelia’s brow furrowed. “That... that’s too far away. It must be done sooner.”

“It cannot be done sooner.”

Ophelia pressed her fingertips to her temples. “Were you going to tell me?”

“I was just sitting down to write.”

“When did you know?” A snap of a question like an unexpected winter wind.

“I suspected a few days ago, but I became sure of it this morning.”

“You did not wait for my input?” She curled her fingers around the edge of the chair arms, and the puppy whined and jumped to the floor, returned to her perch on Hades’ mother’s bed.

“You are not a doctor, Ophelia.” He spoke more sharply than he’d intended, and he took a deep breath, closed his eyes.

A tiny squeak from the vicinity of the bed popped them open again. His mother shook her head slightly, eyes wide. Now what did that mean?

Hades strode for the door. “Let us speak in private, Ophelia.”

Ophelia rose and followed. “Yes, let’s.”

“Hades,” his mother called as they entered the hall. “Please do remember you’re not in charge of everything.”

He waved a hand and shut her door. She needed to keep the warmth in. He opened the door to his personal study, a

small corner room attached to his bedchamber. Curtained windows on either side of the adjoining corner walls let pale rectangle of light filter into the space. It contained a small writing desk, a warm rug, and books. Books on all the walls and surfaces. His downstairs study was organized for the public, for anyone who came to visit him in a professional capacity. It was large and free of clutter and fashionable. This room was cozy and cluttered, and no one but him had ever set foot inside it.

Until now.

The space seemed even smaller with Ophelia here, but in the best possible way. He liked it. And if she weren't annoyed with him, if some unknown ailment did not plague her, he'd like it even more. He pulled open a curtain to flood the room with light then turned to her.

"You're angry with me."

"I am. And you are highhanded."

"I am. If I know how a thing is done, I see no reason not to do it."

"I do not wish to be wed to a man who, like my father, will think he can dictate the movements of my life.

Hades shoved his fingers through his hair and took several steps toward her, stopping just before her. "I did not want to send news if I did not know exactly what was happening. You're being unreasonable."

She gave a harsh bark of laughter. "Something men always say to control women."

"I'm not trying to control you. But time is of the essence, and I had to make arrangements before I could hear from you. It would be different were we living together."

"You're saying you would take my thoughts into consideration had you more time?"

"Would your input have made any difference in my plans?" he asked.

“Yes! We should not leave Mrs. Fairchild in her situation for another week. Too much time can be a dangerous thing. Men like her husband use time as opportunity.”

“It was the only arrangement we could make. We must strike when her husband is *away* from the house. My mother is going in there!” He heaved a breath and mastered his passion, his rising anger. “Mr. Fairchild will be away tomorrow and in a week. Would you have made different plans?”

She huffed, turned away from him. “That is not the point.”

“What is the point?”

“That I will not marry a man who seeks to control me, who does not take my thoughts and happiness into consideration.” She shook her head. “Perhaps my father was right. Perhaps you are like all the other men.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“A liar.”

He flinched, the word like a wound in his chest. Just above his heart. He strode away from her, and when he reached the end of the room he swung around and held his arms out wide. “*That* is your estimation of me? You promised to leave these issues in my hands, and I promised you that I would do your bidding in them.”

“You did not ask *my* bidding.” The pain in her voice in her eyes, too.

“What do you intend to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you intend to go back on your word? Are you refusing to marry me?” Perhaps... it was for the best. This showed him something new, something he should have realized. They didn’t know one another. No matter his heart seemed to recognize her, and his body loved her touch, his mind admired her bravery, and—

“No! I do not mean that at all.” The pain in her voice had been replaced with panic. “In fact, I’ve come to tell you that we must marry as soon as possible.”

Hades' head was spinning. "You wish to marry a man you think a liar?"

She groped for his desk then his chair and she pulled it out and dropped into it. "My head is muddled. I think I must marry you no matter what I think. After all that has happened."

And wasn't that why he'd gone to her bedroom the other night? So that she had no other options? An excellent plan he'd thought at the time. But now... Had he been wrong? He'd pushed her, thinking only of his reputation. He'd made a selfish bargain with a woman whose wounds were deeper than she liked to show. Poor physician he was. Scared soul, she seemed. Hated that. Scored him bone deep. He had to stop her pain, to help her heal. Her wholeness... more important than a reputation.

Hell. When had that happened? When had lust and appreciation turned into something softer, clear as dawn and twice as bright, warming him. He could rave at her for her fears, for calling him a liar. Or he could teach her to trust. One final seduction—of her heart.

Her face was pale and taut, and her hands trembled. He sighed and crossed the room to kneel before her. He took her hands in his and rubbed them.

"Still cold," he said. "Ophelia..." He kept his voice soft and gentle. "I think I am coming to love you. I know it is fast. I know in many ways we barely know one another. But in deep, rock-steady ways, I know everything about you I need to know. You have a spine of steel and a heart full of courage. You are intelligent, but you are scared not of back alleys and mean men but of giving too much of yourself to someone who does not deserve it." He shook his head and rubbed his hands up her arms to her shoulders. "I do not know if I deserve it, but I will try to. Will you let me show you?"

He slipped his hand behind her neck and pulled her down for the softest kiss he knew how to give. He poured every single one of his burgeoning feelings into the kiss so that she knew how raw she made him feel, how unprotected, how new. And by the time he was done kissing her, he knew he never



wanted to stop. He lifted her in his arms and held her tight as he made his way to the door, not the door that led out into the hall but the one that led to his bedchamber. It was open just a crack, and he used the toe of his boot to pull it open wider and march through. He continued kissing her as he carried her, and he continued kissing her as he laid her gently on the mattress where he'd imagined laying her since meeting her.

She pushed to sitting, her eyes wide as he knelt at her feet and undid her walking boots, smoothed his hands up her legs beneath her skirts and untied her garters. He rolled her stockings down and pulled them from her feet.

She had not yet said a word, so he stroked his hands up and down her legs up to her warm thighs and back down to her delicate ankles, then he slipped them out from under her dress and cupped her face, met her gaze, and held it steady. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

Her breath caught. "I do not know." She pressed her eyes closed tight. "I loved my father. I trusted him. Until—"

He nodded. "I know."

She pulled in a ragged, shuddering breath.

"Keep your eyes closed, love, and let me tell you all the reasons you should trust me. First"—he brushed his thumb across her bottom lip—"I will keep your secrets. And I will tell you all of mine." He tugged on her earlobe. "And I will listen when you tell me I am wrong. And I will try to do better. I want a partner, not a maid, and I see in you a woman equal to if not better than me."

She chuckled. "You have a very high opinion of yourself."

"Yes, and of you, too." He trailed his lips along her jawline. "I will protect you with my dying breath, and I will champion your causes because they are mine, too. I feel as if I have found my heart's match in you. Everything you do delights and frustrates me and makes me want *more*." That last word a growl, a wild promise. "I understand I cannot expect you to trust me this very moment just because I say so."

“Trust must be earned through year after year of action. But perhaps I can tell you the truth now. To help you see.” He took her hands and held them lightly in his own, his forearms resting on her thighs. “I have so far attempted to seduce you to deny you those options your father wishes you to have so that you would have to marry me. I did so to fix my reputation. I could do that right now. I have brought you to my bedchamber and sat you on my bed and began to undress you. And you have let me. I could seduce you and ruin you fully, so that I was your only choice.

“Or I could step away, leave this room, let you dress yourself, let you walk away from me forever. There is, at this point, no chance of a child. You could live as you want, and I will perhaps move to the Americas where no one knows me. Restart my career there.” He stood, rocking back on his heels and stepping away from her as he clasped his arms behind his back. “This is your choice. I want to lay you back on that bed and sink into your body and touch and kiss every delectable inch of you. But I will not do so if you do not wish it. Whatever you desire is what I desire, too.”

He held his breath. Her face was entirely composed. No emotion betrayed her thoughts, hinted at what she would do or how she would respond. But one thing had become abundantly clear as he’d put his choice, her choice, before her. He’d meant every word. At some point in the last whirlwind fortnight, he’d grown to care deeply for her, and he’d rather walk into oblivion than hurt her. He held her gaze and waited for her to seal their future. By making a choice.



He’d attempted to seduce her. No, Ophelia could not use the word *attempt*. He *had* seduced her. And with very little work on his part. But his confession of seduction bubbled a laugh within her. Did he think he confessed to something she did not know? He’d revealed his *dastardly* plan every step of the way. In the Hawthorne House library. In her bedroom. Always placing before her his intentions, and always following

through. In delicious ways that curled her toes, even now with the anger and fear not fully banished by the light of laughter building up inside her.

*Pudding.* A little laugh escaped. “I’ve been a little fool, haven’t I?”

He shook his head. “No. I understand. I have tried to manipulate you, and—”

“Is it manipulation if you tell me your intentions?”

“My motives were selfish.”

“That I understand. Mine have been as well. This entire bargain has been us... clinging to our own desires. Is that so wrong?”

He looked away. “I do not know. There is more to it now. For me. And knowing your fears as I know them, I understand if my highhandedness has turned you away from me.”

But that was it, wasn’t it. He always tried to *understand*. Even now. And she’d repaid him by jumping to conclusions, throwing away every bit of truth she knew of him in the face of fear, and plotting to further mire his reputation in the mud. The one thing he asked for her help with—restoring that reputation—she’d been ready to throw away, to take what she wanted most no matter what it cost him.

She placed her hands on her thighs and curled and uncurled her fingers, dropping her gaze from Hades to her hands and skirts.

He had been attempting to manipulate her into doing as he desired from the very beginning. But what he wanted had turned into what *she wanted* too. And now he offered her the power to choose. Her father had never done that. He had continued lying until it became clear he was not going to get what he wanted. Only then had he told the truth, and only to demand she do as he pleased.

Hades wanted to seduce her, to ruin her, to make her his so she could not back out of their bargain.

She did not want to back out.

She stood and took a few precarious steps toward him, then she turned around and showed him her back.

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Undress me?”

A tremor rocked him, and his hands were on her in an instant, his mouth hot on her neck beneath her ear. “A-are you sure?” A tremor in his voice, too.

She nodded. “But no more teaching. Just you and me. Equals. In everything.”

He touched his forehead to hers briefly, his eyes shuttering, and when he pulled away and opened them, his gaze was a like a forest fire—raging. He nudged her head so that she faced forward. When she could no longer see him, he loosened the tapes at the back of her gown until she had to clutch at the bodice to keep it from slipping off her shoulders.

Another kiss to her neck. “Let it go, love.”

She did, and her flannel petticoat soon followed, pooling around her feet. He worked slowly, methodically, to remove her stays, brushing kisses along the back of her neck, her shoulders, until she shivered with molten need. And when only her shift remained, he plucked it from her body with ease. As it wafted to the floor, he rounded her, stood before her, gazed down at her for one hot second of connection, and then he picked her up and crashed his mouth to hers with a kiss. Ophelia clung, her arms around his neck, her legs around his hard waist, her mouth opening for his exploration as he rested her on the bed, brushing hair away from her face once she was safely nestled.

“You want to do this slowly, don’t you?” she asked, propping herself up on her elbows.

He nodded. “I want to worship you.”

She tucked a finger beneath the top of his cravat. “That is not what I want.”

He nipped at her bottom lip. “What do you want, my brazen heart?”

His words unraveled her. “Ravish me.” She tore at his cravat, his waistcoat buttons, undoing halfway before the desire to have him free and open to her delight moved her onto the next barrier between their bodies.

When his hands joined in, they made quicker work, frantic work with panting breaths, until his clothes lay heaped atop hers and his body fell onto hers once more.

She flattened her palms on his chest and smoothed her hands up and down his body, his arms, everywhere she could reach.

“I liked it when you touched me,” she breathed.

“Where?” His voice a heavy rasp.

She tangled her fingers with his and moved his hand where she wanted it. “Here.”

He chuckled, a throaty sound she felt in her bones, and his fingers worked deftly between her legs.

“Yes.” She arched against him.

“And I like it, love—”

“Yes?”

“When you do this.” He moved his free hand to hers and guided her hand until it wrapped around his shaft.

She liked that, too, feeling him pulse at her touch, knowing how much power she had over a man as strong as he. As she worked her hand up and down, he slipped first one and then another finger deep inside her, making her body writhe, making the world turn lightning bright. She knew where she wanted him. That one place she’d sworn never to take a man, and she positioned him there, between her legs, and arched into him, removing her hand from his shaft to grip his muscled shoulders, dig her fingertips in and pull herself up to meet his lips with her own.

“Are you sure?” he asked, the question a hesitation between kisses.

“Yes. Ruin me.”

He eased into her with a smooth thrust, and she gave a little cry at the tightness, the sensation of pain already fading. His hands cradled her head as he lay atop her, still and silent, his gaze fixed on her with something soft and deep making the blue of his eyes seem like never-ending skies on a cloudless day.

It did not feel like ruination. It felt as if a bit of her heart had hopped out of her chest and into his. It felt like the sharp prick of sorrow behind the eyes and like the champagne bubble of full-throated laughter. It felt like sunset and sunrise inside her body and like the world shrinking. No gossip columns. No greatcoats. Nothing but a man with kind heart and wicked tongue and a hard body. And her, a woman who did not trust easily, but who could... try.

He began to move, pulling almost entirely out and then thrusting in once more. This time, no pain, just a gently building sensation, a wave of pleasure rolling high and crashing hard and sending shocks of sensation throughout her body. She clawed at his back and arched to meet his thrusts, and then his body jerked, tightened, and he hissed, a sound that meandered into a moan. Her name the syllables of his pleasure. And when he collapsed atop her, sweating and panting, she wrapped her arms tight, barely able to hold on, but wanting to nonetheless, because it would be a shame, a terrible tragedy, to lose hold of him.

He rolled off her, and she rolled to her side, feeling like a rag doll, to face him. He traced his fingers down her ribs, into the dip of her waist, and over the curve of her hip. Then he grinned and slapped her backside.

“Hades!” She slapped his chest, and he caught her wrist and pulled her hard against him, taking her mouth in a kiss that tasted better, somehow, than the rest because it felt like one of many kisses, not the first or last, but part of a long string of them they’d work together to amass.

“Hades?” *Knock, knock, knock.*

They bolted upright, looking at one another with shocked eyes.

“My mother,” he hissed.

Ophelia bolted over the side of the bed.

The bed creaked, and he appeared over the edge of the mattress. “What are you doing?”

“Hiding.” She jerked the quilt that hung off the bed, but his weight pinned it better than glue. She could roll beneath the bed... Not an appealing idea with absolutely no clothes on, but—

“Get dressed,” Hades said. “No hiding.” He swung his feet to the floor and began to do as he’d suggested she do.

“Hades, open up. Now.” His mother’s voice bordered on panic.

Ophelia flew to the other side of the bed and threw her shift on, her stays. “Lace me up, please.” She turned her back to Hades, and he soon had her, more or less, laced up, and she stepped into her gown.

“A moment, please, Mother.” He fastened Ophelia’s tapes and as soon as his fingers had finished their task, he was striding for the door, dressed only in his trousers and shirt. When he opened the door, his mother grabbed his arms and pulled him into the hallway.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

“It’s Lucy.” His mother looked like a ghost, pale and trembling. “She’s gone.”

Hades’ face became stone. “What do you mean? Where’s she gone to?”

“She heard you arguing, and she came to me, told me you and Lady Ophelia would not wed because of the new arrangements. She was dressed in your clothes, found your *cane*, Hades, and put on your greatcoat. I told her not to go, but she would not listen. Marched right out the door.”

“Go where?” Ophelia asked, walking on numb legs to stand beside Hades.

“To Mrs. Fairchild. To take her to Hawthorne House.”

“Why would she do that?” Hades asked, his voice ice.

“But the house is not empty tonight,” Ophelia said. Now two small hands clutched Hades’ arm, and one of them was Ophelia’s. She needed his strength to stand up. Lucy, young and bright and brave apparently, was throwing herself into danger. “Why?”

Mrs. Jones shook her head. “I could not stop her. She just said she wanted you to be happy. She wanted you to have the life you deserve, and that she could not bear it if it didn’t work out.”

“If what didn’t work out?” he asked.

But Ophelia knew. “Us.” *Pudding*. “We have to go after her.”



# Thirteen



Silence had swallowed them whole. Ophelia sat across the coach from him, looking out the window. He wanted her beside him, so he could give comfort. And take it. But he'd likely ruined them, as Lucy feared, because he'd done what he should never have done. She could be with child, and he would marry her, but was that what she truly wanted? She'd given herself freely, yes. A precious gift knowing what he did of her. and he must earn it, deserve it. But how? When their agreement, their marriage, would limit her, restrict her to only the most proper activities. Sewing. Parties. Fashion. These things held little interest for her. And he liked the her who preferred action to waiting, who confronted the hardships of life with a wicked grin, sharp tongue, and determined spirit.

He shouldn't be worried about any of that, not with Lucy missing, but she'd disappeared into the gathering night because of him, them. Good doctors did not ignore clear connections, obvious cause-and-effect relationships. And he was a good doctor. He tried to be at least.

"Do you think I'm..." He chewed the words over. Difficult to say, but he needed to know. "Do you think I'm an unhappy sort of fellow?" He didn't feel unhappy when he was with Ophelia.

She turned away from the window to look at him. "I would say you are... seriously displeased with the current circumstances. Most of the time. At least since I've known you. And it's understandable. Your life has been upended. By me."

He moved across the swaying coach to sit next to her. “I’ve not felt as angry since meeting you. At least since Hawthorne House. I think that’s why Lucy is so worried. Knowing you has made me... lighter. She’s afraid I’ll go all morose again. If you leave me.” She needed to be able to trust him. Had he ruined any chance of that by bedding her, making love to her?

“I came to speak to you tonight about my father. He is demanding I throw you over. He wants me to marry one of the others. I... I do not know what he will do. I had come to ask you to run away with me.” Her gaze dropped to her lap, her hands clenched tight into her skirts there. “But I see... it was a foolish plan. You cannot run away. The entire reason for marrying was to stop the whispers of scandal, but we’ve only fanned them higher. I don’t know—”

“You make me happy, Ophelia.” He rested his hand atop hers. “I did not know I was unhappy until I met you. I used words like *focused* and *determined*, but I had little joy in my life. Until I entered an alley and found a woman in my greatcoat. Even before the scandal sheet and rumors. Now, every damn scandal is an amusement, not an annoyance.” He’d do anything for her, even ruin his reputation. It was time she knew. That heart she’d stitched upon his sleeve had taken up lodging in his chest.

“The coach has slowed.” Ophelia turned away from his confessions and back to the window, pulling her hands from his grasp. The townhouse the coach rolled slowly past was blazing with light, the windows illuminating revelry within. Who knew how many men so deep in their cups they were likely drowning. The coach rounded the corner and stopped outside the alley behind the row of houses that housed the mews.

“How do we find Lucy?” he asked. If she was here. Anything could have happened to her before arriving. “There are too many men inside. We cannot go in ourselves.”

“It would be a horrid risk, yes.”

A back door in the alley opened, spilling yellow light into the darkness. Two figures snuck out, making shadows in the spill of light and becoming darkness itself as the door shut behind them.

“That’s Lucy and Mrs. Fairshild,” Ophelia said, standing and opening the door.

“How can you know?”

“I’ve spent enough time dressing as a man and skulking about the shadows to know another when I see her.” She jumped from the coach onto the street below.

Hades followed, quickly overtaking her. “Stay behind me until we are entirely certain.”

Perhaps they should have been quieter, but worry splashed their feet through puddles, and as they rounded the door into the mews, silver glinted in the barely-there moonlight. A cold steel tip nicked Hades’ neck.

He stopped, no other option if he didn’t want to die, and Ophelia slammed into this back, knocking him forward into the blade’s point. He grunted at the slice of pain and jerked away. He should have taken the time to don a cravat before leaving the house.

“Stay away. Don’t come any closer.” Lucy’s voice from the shadows at the other end of the blade, strong and fearless.

“It’s Hades,” he scratched out.

The blade clattered to the ground, and his sister’s arms wrapped around him tight. She buried her face in his chest. Her hair was loose and flowing down her back, and he stroked a hand down it, anger gone in a rush of gratitude. She was safe.

“Hades,” she breathed.

“What happened to your hat? Your disguise is—”

“Ruined. Everything is. A man discovered us. He was quite drunk, though. I hit him over the head with a vase. He’s not dead, but we tied him up and stashed him in a closet, and I lost my hat and—”

“Shh. Calm down. Do you think they recognized you?”

Lucy shook her head. “I’m not sure when I lost my hat. I think after I bludgeoned the fellow. I don’t know though. Hades, something is wrong with the harness. Of Mr. Fairchild’s horse. I can’t get it on right, and we must leave. I have your Lucifer, but Mrs. Fairchild will need a mount.”

“Miss Jones ...” Another woman’s voice, shaky, unsure, floated out from the shadows.

Ophelia stepped around Hades and farther into the mews. “Mrs. Fairchild. I’m Mistress Charity, and I am friends with your sister.”

“What’s he doing here?” The unsure voice quavered, and its owner stepped into the light.

Ophelia approached her cautiously. “He’s my intended. He will not harm you. He’s here to ensure your safety.”

“I just escaped a house of vile rogues, I’ll not be thrown into the arms of another.”

Ophelia took another step forward.

Hades caught her arm. “Pick up the sword.”

She blinked at him over her shoulder.

He nodded, and she seemed to understand what he did—they needed the blade, but he would not touch it with this woman so frightened before them.

She knelt down, reaching for the sword.

“I hope it will not be necessary, love,” he said, “but if it is, swing with caution and aim with precision.”

She stood, holding the sword at her side. “If it is necessary, I’m handing the thing off to you.” She took another step toward Mrs. Fairchild, offered a small smile. “I trust him. And if anyone tries to hurt you or take you from us, I promise you he will defend you. But, if it will make you feel better, until then, I’ll keep this.” Her gaze fell to the blade at her side briefly.

Mrs. Fairchild's face broke into a thousand pieces before she covered it with her palms, silencing a body-shaking sob.

"Hades," Lucy hissed, "the *horse*. Its *tack*."

"No time for that," Hades said. "Get her in the coach. We must make haste."

"But your horse is in there," Lucy cried. "We can't leave Lucifer."

"*Pudding*," Hades said.

Lucy disappeared into the dark mews and reappeared with Lucifer.

Hades took his reins. "Lucy, escort Mrs. Fairchild to the coach and tell Paulson to drive some ways down the street and wait somewhere inconspicuous for me. I'll take Lucifer and—"

The door to the townhouse swung open, painting a square of light on the ground. Sound spilled out into the night, loud, off-key voices singing a bawdy song, and a man emerged, singing loudly at first then, as he unbuttoned his fall and leaned a forearm against the wall to the side of the door, quietly, a barely coherent mumble. The unmistakable sound of a stream of piss hitting the wall joined the man's gibberish.

The man had not seen them yet. Expecting an empty alley, his drink-muddled brainbox had likely glossed over the unusual group standing a short distance from him.

Hades waved his arms for the coach, telling them without words what they must do—go. Now.

Lucy and Mrs. Fairchild ran for it. Right through a puddle. It was the splashes that did it, so different from the steady splashing the man himself was making.

He looked up, a mere beat before he turned.

And discovered them.

Lucy and Mrs. Fairchild had stopped. They should have run. The moon shone bright now, the clouds having rolled away as if the very moon had requested they shove off,

desiring a good farce for its own entertainment. And surely the moon did laugh. A man in the middle of a piss blinking at a horse, another man with a sword, and three women, one dressed as a lad, her golden hair spilling down her back.

Hell and damnation. What now?

“Oi!” The man finished his business and buttoned his fall. “What’s this all about? Is that Henry’s horse? Is that his... his wife?” His words were slurred, and his eyes narrowed, but then they widened round as saucers. “You’re the Devil Doctor!”

Hell. Well and truly ruined now. And if he were going to clear his name, he’d have to give up information about Hawthorne House. He had two choices. Give up Ophelia and Hawthorne House. Or give up the one thing, the only thing he’d cared about for so long. His ambition, his need to join those who’d thrown his mother away because of him. To prove to them...

Ophelia stood like a statue beside him, her arms spread wide to protect the two women behind her. She mattered to him now. More than the fickle goodwill of the ton.

Earn the ton’s goodwill? Or earn Ophelia’s trust?

Truly, he had no choice at all.

Hades snatched the sword from Ophelia’s limp grasp and flourished it before him as he strode toward the man, stopping just enough distance from him to hold the sword at arm’s length with its tip an inch away from the man’s gut.

“Yes, it is I, the Devil Doctor. And before morning comes, your friend’s wife will make a delightful new addition to my harem, and—”

“No.” Ophelia stood at his side, her hands tight on his loose arm. “No, Hades.”

“Yes, Ophelia. I won’t put everyone else at risk.”

“But you would give everything up? For *me*?” Her hand squeezed as her voice dropped, her power of body and soul

melting from her voice into that small point of contact between them.

It strengthened him, reassured him. “Yes, for you.” He lifted his face to the man, found his most rakish grin. “You can tell your friend his wife is mine now. No need to go looking for her. He’ll never—”

“No!” The single word dropped from Ophelia’s lips like a stomped foot. “He’s lying.”

“I’m leaving.” A soft voice from the shadows silenced Ophelia and silenced the further dramatics on Hades’ own tongue.

Mrs. Fairchild stepped into the light, Lucy at her side. “Rupert, you may tell Henry that I am not coming back. He may consider me dead if he pleases. He does not want me anyway. He’s used up all my money, and I’ve given him no children. It will cost money for him to find me, and he has little left. I’m sure he’d rather spend it on drink and women. You may remind him of that, Rupert.” Her voice had started small but grew in strength and courage, and when she turned from the open-mouthed Rupert, she walked away with purpose in each stride and her head held high.

“*Pudding,*” Ophelia breathed. “That was perfection.”

Hades kept the sword tip trained on Rupert.

Rupert scratched his neck, barely aware of the danger posed to his gut. “So no one’s stealing Henry’s horse, then?”

“No,” Ophelia and Hades said at once.

Rupert shrugged. “Ah, well, better let you go about your business, then.” He scuttled to the side to avoid the sword point then turned with a stumble as he opened the door and fell inside the house. He lay on the floor, eyes closed, and waved at them. “Just close the door. I’ll rest here for a bit.”

Hades slammed the door closed and handed the sword off to Ophelia. He grabbed her wrist in one hand and Lucifer’s reins in the other. “In the damn coach now!” He pulled horse and woman forward, and they all ran. Rupert seemed unlikely to alert Mr. Fairchild anytime soon, but better to be careful.

The man Lucy had tied up and shoved in a closet could already be awake and making a ruckus.

The coach waited for them at the end of the alley, and Hades helped the woman into it.

Ophelia stopped on the first step, turning to him. “There’s a ball nearby. Lady Buckner is hosting, and we can lose ourselves in the crush of carriages until we know what to do next.”

He nodded, squeezed her hand. “Go there. I’ll follow on Lucifer.”

She grinned and raised a brow. “Lucifer? You named him, I suppose?”

He nodded. “A devil for a devil.”

“Shall I tease you for it?”

“For the rest of my life.” He kissed her, wrapping his hand around the back of her neck, and parting her lips with a searching, seeking, possessive kiss. He wanted to discover every amazing, unexpected bit of her, and he wanted to spend all his days doing so. But he pulled back, loving the dazed look in her eyes, the slack, open O of her mouth.

She blinked, nodded, still dazed, and he helped her into the coach and shut the door.

He mounted Lucifer and followed the coach to Lady Buckner’s ball. He’d wanted to possess Ophelia with that kiss. He’d been trying to possess her with every kiss. But she was no bird with clipped wings, no tame pet to coddle. She’d stepped up to save him tonight, though letting him act the part of the Devil Doctor would have better fit her own desires. Not the first time she’d sought to protect him, soothe him. As he wished to do for her. No, he did not want to possess her. Unless she possessed him, too. A partnership of protection and pleasure, and, yes, love.

Every window of the Buckner house was illuminated with flickering candles, and a long line of conveyances clogged the streets. An excellent hiding place until they decided what to do



next. Someone must take Mrs. Fairchild to Hawthorne House. But who?

Hades dismounted Lucifer and opened the coach door. Three women peered at him.

“What now?” Lucy asked, swamped in his greatcoat.

“Now,” he said, “you return home.”

She pouted. “This is my rescue mission, and—”

“I agree with your brother,” Ophelia said, stepping down from the coach. “You must go home, and so must I.” She held the coach door open. “Come along.”

Lucy grumbled, but she obeyed, and Mrs. Fairchild looked down at them from her seat, her face pale and shadowed.

“Shall I go alone, then, to Hawthorne House?”

“No,” Ophelia said. “You must allow Dr. Jones to escort you.”

Mrs. Fairchild’s face became pinched. Her lip trembled.

Ophelia reached up and folded the other woman’s hand between her own. “Dr. Jones risked his reputation to save you tonight. And he’s met your sister. He gave her a remedy for her neck pain that I hear is helping quite well.”

“She did say that in her last letter.” But Mrs. Fairchild’s tone remained hesitant.

“He will ride his horse and escort you from outside of the coach. Does that help?”

“Why can’t you come?” she asked.

“She can.” Hades stepped closer. “Ophelia, it’s clear you must go. I know I said you should not anymore, but this is more important. She needs you.” He turned to Lucy. “May I have a moment with Lady Ophelia?”

“Oh! Yes. Of course.” She clambered back up onto the coach and snapped the door shut.

Hades led Ophelia some ways off, her hand held gently in his own. He wanted to get this just right. For her. And when he

stopped them in the shadows of an empty carriage, he pulled her into his arms, letting their bodies rest against one another, hold one another up.

“I want you to see that I trust you, Hades,” she mumbled against his chest. “And that I can be the wife you need to save your reputation. I have been selfish from the start, but no more. I can change, and—”

“Please don’t.”

She stared at him, slack-jawed, head slightly tilted, gray eyes filled with the shadows of the night. “Don’t... change?”

He held her out at arm’s length and bowed a bit to look her in the face. “Precisely. I like you just the way you are.” The corner of his mouth quirked up, and he pushed a lock of fallen hair behind her ear. “You’re utter perfection. If I still wanted what I wanted when we met, then your sacrifices would wear you down. I do not wish for that. I couldn’t stand it if you were not so bright as you are now.”

“I’ll frustrate you. I do not trust readily, and... and I want to show you that I do trust you.”

“Then go with Mrs. Fairchild.”

She looked at the coach, the temptation clear in her eyes, the way she chewed her bottom lip.

“Ophelia.” He nudged her chin to regain her gaze. “I’ll be here when you return. You’re the only thing I want. In my bed every morning and night, in the crook of my shoulder while napping, in my phaeton on sunny days, in my study to lecture me, and in my greatcoat whenever you wish. But you, do *you* want—”

“I’ll hunt you down, Hades Jones, if you do not make me your wife.”

“I’ll make it easy for you, then. I’ll be waiting for you to return.” He grinned. “In your bed.”

“You devil.” She swiped her thumb across his bottom lip, her face lighting with a happiness that did not last nearly long

enough. “I feel as if I’m more the winner in our bargain than you.”

He kissed her, making promises he’d damn well keep with each sweep of his lips against hers, hiding the sinking darkness in the pit of his belly. He would give up everything he’d worked for. He wanted to. For her. Yet still it sat heavy as stone in his chest.

He forced a smile. “We’ll figure it out.” He took her hand and walked her back to the coach. “This is why I love you, Ophelia Howard. You are brave, and you have purpose, and you help others without question. You are everything I aspire to be—good and kind and courageous.” He whispered the words so only she could hear.

At the door to the coach, she hugged him once more and burrowed her face in his chest. He thought she might have said something. Her lips moved against the lawn of his shirt, and the subtle vibrations of her voice sent waves of awareness through him, but she pulled away, and smiled up at him, and he must have imagined it. As she took a seat inside the coach, Lucy alighted, and with a wave and promises to be safe, the coach pulled out of the line of conveyances and rumbled south out of London.

Hades helped Lucy mount Lucifer, and he led them slowly toward home. For several minutes, the only sound was the clip-clop of Lucifer’s feet against the street.

“I should not have gone alone,” Lucy finally said. She was curved into his greatcoat, which she had tucked her long hair into.

“No, you should not have.” He wanted to rail at her. But he was too tired. And he more than he wanted to scare her, he wanted to understand. “Why did you?”

“Several reasons, I suppose.” She took a heavy breath. “I did not wish to leave Mrs. Fairchild without our protection so long as we had to. Now that I think on it, I should have waited until tomorrow night, when we planned to help her to begin with. I’m afraid I was not thinking clearly. Just... acting. Reacting, really. I heard you arguing with Lady Ophelia. And I

suppose I thought if I took care of the problem, you would have no reason to argue. Mrs. Fairchild would be safe, which is what Lady Ophelia wished, and neither Mama nor Lady Ophelia would have to risk themselves to make it happen. Which is what you wished.”

“It was not your problem to fix, Lucy.”

“But you fix others’ problems all the time.”

“I’m a physician. I’m paid to do so. Or to try at least.”

She gave another heavy breath, but this one sounded more like a huff than a sigh. “I suppose. I... I just want you to be happy. I know it is difficult... for people like us. I am an earl’s granddaughter, but I will never have a come-out. You are a marquess’s son, but you will never be welcome by his peers. You were welcomed. You’d made your way into your rightful sphere by your own hard work and skill, and ...” She looked down at her hands on the pommel. “I ruined it. The coat I bought you ruined it. It was my place to fix it. However I could.”

Hell.

He stopped the horse and touched her knee so she would look down at him, all the love he’d ever felt for her flooded into him, choking his words. He found them and set them afloat anyway. Because it was important he right the wrongs he’d done her.

“None of this—the Belle, my profession, my marriage—is your responsibility, Lucy. You have caused not a single worry for me in my life. And I’m not a marquess’s son, no matter who sired me. I’m a gentleman farmer’s son. And that is the best thing I could ever be. I am proud that your father chose to be my father, too. I am proud you are my sister.”

“But you’ve wanted so badly to be more than that. To have the approval of the ton, and—”

“*Pudding*,” he hissed, and though dawn was hours away, the sun rose within him, illuminating everything he’d gotten wrong. “Not any longer. I don’t want that anymore.” Not if it meant stifling Ophelia. Not if it meant silently telling Lucy the

life she must lead in the country was not good enough, she was not good enough. “I’m sorry, Lu. I never meant for you to think I wanted all that over you, Mother and Father, our family. I don’t.” Not anymore. He’d let some odd sense of revenge move him. And while it had brought him to a profession he loved, a calling that was important, there were other ways to use it than for the privileged few.

“What do you want, then? What will you do?” she asked.

He started Lucifer back into motion. The chains of his own expectations had broken, fallen, leaving him lighter.

What did he want? Ophelia. His family’s happiness. To do good in the world. To be the kind of man who protected those goals no matter what.

He knew exactly what he would do now.

## Fourteen



When Ophelia climbed through her bedroom window in the hour before dawn, she fell onto her bed expecting to fall in Hades' arms.

But he was not there.

She sat upright, disappointment sizzling through her. He'd said he would be. But perhaps it had been a quip. He valued his respectability above all else, after all, and after last night's run-in with the drunk in the alley, he could afford no wiggle room for rakishness.

She undressed and cleaned herself using the washbasin—she'd have a longer bath later—and donned a clean shift before returning to her bed, tired enough to sleep for days, but too awash with nervous excitement to close her eyes.

But somehow, they did close, and darkness swamped her, and time slipped away.

Until a large *thunk* brought her eyes open and her body upright with a jerk and a gasp.

“Apologies,” Hades said, pushing a rakish lock of hair off his forehead as he turned to grin at her. I dropped it.” He held up her hairbrush then shoved it into a valise. “Good thing you’re awake, though I was going to let you sleep more. In fact, go back to sleep. I’ll wake you when you’re packed.”

She slung her feet to the floor. “Packed? I don’t understand.”

He opened her wardrobe and put his hands on his hips as he considered her clothing in the burgeoning morning light. “Do you have any favorites? Practical, I think. And warm. It will be colder in Scotland.”

“Hades, explain. Scotland?” Her veins buzzed with questions, with excitement.

“Mrs. Fairchild arrived safely at Hawthorne House, I assume,” he said, selecting three gowns and folding them before placing them in the valise. They didn’t quite fit, and he shoved a fist down into them to stuff them farther inside. “You need a bigger valise. I’ll get you one. But after this trip, it will likely be a long while before we can take another.”

She wrapped both hands around his forearm, stopping his movements. He pecked her on the lips. “Good morning. How do you feel about a trip to Gretna Green?”

“Right now?”

He nodded, looked about the room. “What else do you need? Hm.”

“But we can’t. We must stay here and fight the gossip.”

He shrugged. “Only if the people who dismiss me based on an anonymous gossip column matter more to me than you do, more than my family does. And they do not.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “I want you to be happy and free, and I want to be happy with you. Elope with me? I hear Gretna Green is lovely this time of year.”

She wanted to stay and fix this for him. “I want everything to be perfect for you, as it was before... before me.”

“It was not perfect. It was wrong. All wrong. But you are right. And if your father will not let me have you, I’m afraid I’ll have to abduct you. Now.” He stepped back from her and pinned her with a rakish stare. “Will you come peacefully?”

She laughed. “Only because I do not wish to cause a scene.”

“*Another* scene.”

They grinned and packed her valise with only what they'd need on their way to Scotland and back, and they climbed out of her window one at a time and into the waiting coach around the corner. He settled into the squabs, and she settled against him, reveling in the warmth of his body, in the hard comfort of the muscled arm he draped across her shoulders.

"I've packed everything," he said as the coach rolled away, "that you brought to the house the other day. It seems either you thought to elope first or you were well prepared for Mrs. Fairchild's trip south."

"Both." She loved his grin, the easy way it slanted across his face, the way it made the impossibly handsome man approachable and glorious at the same time. She kissed his jaw and laid her head into the crook of his arm. "Are you sure this is what you want?" she asked.

"Absolutely. It's what I do, is it not? Secreting women out of London. But this time, I'm taking you north."

She sighed. "No harems there?"

"None that I know of. But... then... I was thinking after I make you my wife, we *should* go south."

"Really? Why?" She should tease, but she was tired, and she wanted to lean into him and love him with ease.

"There's a village close to Hawthorne House. I'm sure they need a physician."

She put her hands to his chest and pushed upright to look at him. His grin had turned shy, his gaze soft, and he gazed on her as if he could see the future in her face. "I love you."

He inhaled sharply and held the breath, and she traced the contours of his face. "I was hoping to hear those words soon, love."

"I love you, I love you, I love you." She kissed each word into his adorable face—his cheeks, his forehead, his lips.

"Does that mean you approve my plan?" he laughed, hugging her to him tightly.

"I do, I do, I do, I do!"



She'd always thought she'd have to make a choice—what she believed to be her calling and what everyone thought her good for, helping others *or* marriage. But the man before her found other choices to set before her.

She kissed him. She tugged at his cravat. She ran her hands through his silky hair and parted his lips with her tongue as his fingers found all her sensitive places.

“If I were the sort of man to ravage a woman in a carriage ...”

She held his nape so that they were nose to nose, his blues staring into her own. “You are. Now ravage me, my rake.”

Then, in the slow, methodical, thoroughly pleasurable way she'd come to know as purely Hades, he did. And in an impatient, passionate, whirlwind manner, the only way she knew how to do anything, she ravaged him right back.

# Epilogue



*February 1, 1825*

Dawn brightened the night sky around the edges when the weathered traveling coach creaked to a stop before Hawthorne House. After a moment of stillness, the door opened, and a young gentleman in a greatcoat and top hat jumped down, held his hand out, and helped a young woman to descend.

Standing at a ground floor window, Hades grinned. He took a final look at the woman and newborn cuddled together, sleeping in the bed behind him, resting after the long ordeal of birth. They would be well. He'd check on them in a day's time or so.

Time to greet the newcomer. And the "gentleman" in the greatcoat. He tried not to run, but once he picked up speed, he could not stop it, and soon he found himself throwing the front door of the large country house open, his boots crunching across the gravel.

The "gentleman" in the greatcoat looked up from the luggage being unloaded from the carriage by an industrious footman and strode toward Hades. When they reached one another, Hades ripped off the top hat and grinned into the face of his wife. He crashed her to him and kissed her hard, welcoming her home.

A gasp. "Hades," Ophelia said, wiggling her arms between their bodies, pressing her palms flat against his chest to push him slightly away. "You'll upset our new guest. Behave please."

“You’re well?” He studied her from scuffed men’s boots to tangled hair, knotted firmly at the base of her skull. No injuries. Visible ones at least. “As is your charge?”

She nodded. “But we should go inside.

“Where is Peggy?” he asked.

The actress had taken to wearing a very outlandish and recognizable red greatcoat on her midnight excursions to the city. She’d become Ophelia’s partner on their missions. As had two outriders they always took with them, burly men who knew well how to watch after their charges. They carried sword canes, which Hades had taught them how to use, and they knew well how to use the weapons of their fists.

“Asleep in the coach,” Ophelia said. “Somehow she can drop off whenever she wishes, and the excitement never keeps her awake as it does me.”

The coach rattled and another body stepped forth. To the casual onlooker, this one also would appear a man draped in a heavy greatcoat, a very red greatcoat. “Here already?” She ambled toward them. “Why’re we all standing around outside?”

Hades wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist, then they led their new guest indoors and introduced her to the Becketts, who swept her upstairs to a room just for her where she could sleep and think about her future.

Ophelia yawned.

“Time to sleep.” Hades wrapped an arm around her shoulders and dragged her toward the door. “Home with you.”

She nodded and leaned into the shelter of his arm.

Peggy followed them outside where the pink glow of sunrise filled the circular drive. “That was quite exciting.”

Hades narrowed his eyes. “Exciting in what way? Everything went as planned, yes?”

“Not... quite,” Ophelia admitted.

Peggy chuckled. “No, not quite, but also not as exciting as the night that you brought me here, Mrs. C. That Devil Doctor.” She shook her head. “I wonder where he is these days. Perhaps he’s retired to his harem. You never hear anything about him anymore.”

Ophelia rolled her eyes. “Peggy, the Devil Doctor is right here.” She patted Hades’ chest. “Remember? I married him, and he was never a devil to begin with. It was a misunderstanding. The greatcoat?”

Peggy chuckled again. “Oh yes, I remember now.” She reached out and pinched Hades’ cheek, shook it. “It’s so difficult to remember when you’re just so sweet.”

Hell. He shrugged away and rubbed his cheek where she’d tortured it. “Thank you, Peggy. Now, if you do not mind, I intend to steal my wife home. It is not a harem, but I prefer it to all other places.”

“Go, go,” Peggy said with yawn, waving them away.

And they went, arms wrapped around one another, cutting their way through grass and fog. Their home was not far, in a small village nearby where Hades had set up a practice.

“Do you think the children will already be awake?” Ophelia asked.

“Susannah most likely.” At two years old, she seemed to never need sleep. “But there’s a chance Matilda is still abed.” Matilda liked to be cozy and warm, and had since her birth four years ago. “If the girls awake, my mother can play with them and care for them. We need sleep. Even if Susannah does not.”

Ophelia nodded, yawned again, and leaned more into him, giving her weight to his strength to carry. “Should I tell you what happened tonight?”

“Later.” He kissed the top of her head. “I trust whatever it was, you took care of it.”

She stopped, tugged him to a stop, too, and looked up at. Her face was pale with exhaustion but glowed in the dim dawn light. With love. So much love. She reached up to cup his face

and pulled him down for a kiss of the kind he knew so well now—slow and giving and sighing. He gave everything he was to her in that moment, as he had every moment since meeting her in that dark London alley.

When she pulled back, she took his hand and kissed his knuckles. Such softness whispered across his skin, all hers, and all his, theirs together. He pulled the edges of the greatcoat tighter together in front and popped the collar high to protect her neck. The coat was his. Tailored for his frame, bought with his money, and all for her. Not silk lined or brass buttoned, but she did not leave for London at a midnight hour without it, without his scent enveloping her, without his wool keeping her warm.

She sighed and leaned against him. “I’m glad to be home.”

“As am I.” He worried. But he would not stop her, not if it was what she wanted. He tugged her back onto the path toward home, and they set their steps to the same pace. “We’ll feed you then put you to bed, then—”

“First, Hades ...”

“Yes?”

“Ravish me?”

“You never have to ask, love. You married a rake, remember? A Devil Doctor.”

She tightened her hold on his arm. “Perhaps in another life you could have been so illustrious. But in this one, you’re something better.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Mine.”

A truth. And in the yellow-pink glow of a new day, he blessed coat thieves and gossip columnists and held tight to the woman he loved.



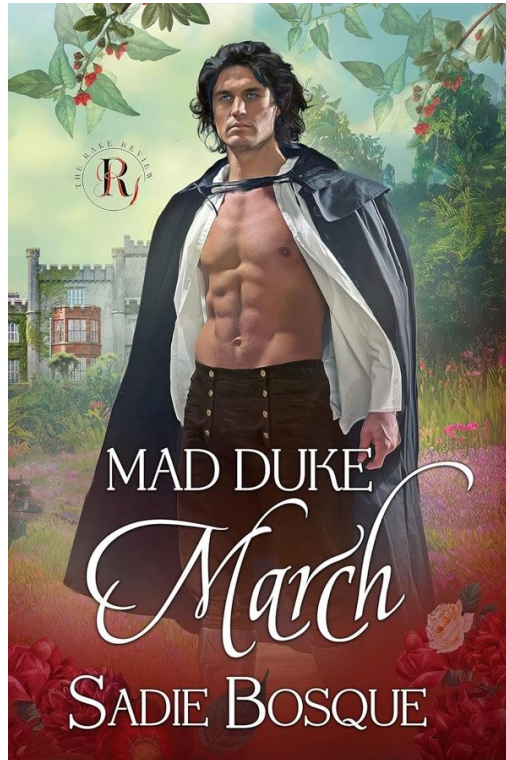
## Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed Hades and Ophelia's story! There are ten more rakes to go in 2024. Next up, Sadie Bosque's *Mad Duke March* ...

Emily Fitzwilliam isn't scared of London's wildest rake, but he should be scared of her. A drunken wastrel, a fiery lady, an unwanted marriage destined to ignite their passions. [Pre-order Mad Duke March now](#) and turn the page for a sneak peek!

# Coming Soon

Book 3 in the The Rake Review, *Mad Duke March* by Sadie Bosque.



***Whisky. Plenty of it. Keep it coming...***

That's all that Alexander Blackwood, the notorious "Mad Duke" of London, desires. Determined to waste his life away, he manages to offend even his closest friends. But when he carelessly ruins Miss Emily Fitzwilliam while in a drunken stupor, he finds himself chained to the only woman in England who refuses to fear or fawn over him.

***It was the best day of her life... Until it wasn't.***

Emily Fitzwilliam loses everything when she is scandalously ruined by the most notorious rake London has ever known. And worst of all, the bounder refuses to marry her! But the wicked Duke who destroyed her life is about to discover that *payback is hell.*

*A hasty marriage neither party wanted is about to become a passionate battle of wills as two warring hearts are destined to become one flesh... whether they like it or not.*

*Keep reading for a sneak peek at March's mad duke rake!*



## **Prologue**

*Ireland*

*September 1819*

This place reeked of anguish, despair, and misery.

Neither the warm glow cast by the towering, candle-filled chandelier nor the light filtering through the tall windows could drive away the chill that permeated anyone daring to step inside the house. For despite its beauty and luxury, darkness had taken up residence within these walls.

Alexander Blackwood, the new Duke of Tyrone, paused at the base of the grand staircase of his ancestral home.

The air hung heavy with the scent of aged wooden floors, flickering candles, and ancient oil paintings.

Bile rose in his throat, though it had nothing to do with the smell. It was the place itself.

He unhurriedly ascended the steps, his gloved fingers gliding over the mahogany banister, each step accompanied by the creak of the stairs.

His stomach twisted as he traversed the first-floor corridor. Everything was as he remembered it—the disapproving gazes of previous dukes followed him from the faded tapestries, the clicks of his heels were muted by the crimson Turkish carpet, and the benches between doors invited him to sit and contemplate what trouble he had gotten himself into before entering the lion's den.

A little boy—an apparition—appeared before his eyes, if only for a moment. There he was, sitting on that bench, his hands clasped close to his stomach as he rocked back and forth, mumbling—no, praying—to himself.



As the vision disappeared, he opened the door to his father's study and peered inside.

The desk stood in the middle of the room, its polished surface ready for the master to come in and resume his work. Two wingback chairs flanked an empty hearth, a chess game arranged on a little table between them as if someone was about to sit down and play.

*"Look at me when I talk to you!"* the voice reverberated through his mind, causing him to shudder. *"You useless little idiot! You can't do anything right!"*

The sound of clattering chess pieces across the floor followed as the chessboard flew toward him. He raised his arms instinctively, only to realize that he was shielding himself from his memories. His breathing labored, he shook his head before storming out of the room.

Taking two steps at a time, he climbed to the second floor and stalked toward the most familiar room. He pushed the door open, and his entire body went rigid.

Nothing had changed there either.

It was as if he'd never left.

A sturdy oak four-poster bed stood in the center, with a faded green coverlet on top. A desk nestled in the corner, flanked by book-filled shelves.

Even his little trunk still stood by the window.

The boy's apparition reappeared, perched on the trunk, gazing out the window, a glimmer of hope smoldering within.

*"She is not coming back, you useless loiter-sack! And it's all because of you,"* the slurred ghostly voice of his father echoed, followed by a string of hurtful insults, until eventually, the duke would express his rage by replacing words with objects hurled through the air, aimed at his son's head. Soon his fists and cane would join the list of things crashing into his son's shaking body.

"Tyrone!"

He tensed before realizing this wasn't a memory. It was his ginger-haired friend, the Earl of Sutton, calling him from the other end of the corridor.

*Will I ever get used to being addressed by this wretched title?*

It had been two months since he inherited the title, but it still rang hollow to his ears. No, it struck fear and loathing into his heart.

Sutton approached him, pausing only a few paces away. "What do you want to do now?"

Throwing one last glance at his former room, his gaze lingered at the little trunk by the window that tugged at his heart. "Sell everything valuable," he said, before turning away from the room and walking resolutely away. "Burn the rest."

He paused on the staircase landing overlooking the hall. "And then we shall have a drink."



[Pre-order Sadie Bosque's Mad Duke March and continue this fiery story on March 1!](#)

# *Also by Charlie Lane*

## **The Gentleman's Guide to Courtship**

*Never Woo the Wrong Lady*

## **The Art of Love (in Kindle Unlimited)**

*Portraits, Passion, and Other Pastimes*

*Forgery, Love, and Other Lies*

*His Mistress, His Muse, and Other madness*

*Silhouette of a Spinster and Other Seductions*

*The Lord Who Adored her and Other love Songs*



## **The Cavendish Family (in Kindle Unlimited)**

*Leave a Widow Wanting More*

*Teach a Rogue New Tricks*

*Bring a Boxer to His Knees*

*Love a Lady at Midnight*

*Scandalizing the Scoundrel*



## **The Debutante Dares** (with WOLF Press)

*Daring the Duke*

*A Dare Too Far*

*Kiss or Dare*

*Don't You Dare, My Dear*

*Only Rakes Would Dare*

*Daring Done Right*



## **London Secrets (in Kindle Unlimited)**

*(See the entire series here!)*

*The Secret Seduction*

*A Secret Desire*

*Sinning in Secret*  
*Keep No Secrets*  
*Secrets Between Lovers*



**Miscellaneous**

*The Fake February Rake*  
*Dukes and Diamonds, a multi-author anthology series*

## *About the Author*

CHARLIE LANE traded in academic databases and scholarly journals for writing steamy Regency romcoms like the ones she's always loved to read. When she's not writing humorous conversations, dramatic confrontations, or sexy times, she's flying high in the air as a circus-obsessed acrobat.

If you want more lighthearted and hot fun, [sign up for Charlie's newsletter here](#) and receive a London Secrets novella! You'll also receive a twice-monthly epistle straight to your inbox with book news, deals, and behind-the-scenes peeks into Charlie's books.

