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always a witty delight!"*

—LENORA BELL,
USA Today bestselling author

THE
DUKE
AND THE
DRESSMAKER
ONCE UPON A
WALLFLOWER SERIES

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*For Esaul and my wonderful boys who always believe. Love is always the
answer.*

And you, thank you for always guiding me, even when I'm afraid.

Chapter One

If another young woman stuffed a hairpin in his pocket, accidentally dropped a jewel before him, or allowed a handkerchief to flutter in front of his boots, James Blakefield, the new Duke of Ashbridge, was going to go mad.

Quite frankly, he'd had enough.

The machinations of the English aristocracy were a thing to behold. He was fairly certain that if the mamas of the ton had been put in charge of the English army during the Revolution, the Americans never would've had a chance, and that was saying something.

James had been chased, cornered, and manipulated by those infernal mamas. The attempts to get him into a private room or behind a hedgerow was shocking, and he was not easily shocked.

Sea captains seldom were.

Now, granted, he was not a usual sea captain. After all, he had been born in Boston not long after the Revolution. He had a host of ships and sailed the world, running his company.

But an inheritance had come: an English dukedom. It astonished him, but he had not turned it down. Turning such power down would be sheer foolishness.

London had called, and he had come. Whereupon he had discovered that the running of the vast estates of a dukedom was, for all intents and purposes, similar to running a large company. Or a small country.

But the darkest part of the entire thing was the way in which every single English mama seemed certain that he was in want of a wife.

He was not in want of a wife; he had no desire to marry. He'd seen the way marriage could ruin people, and he had no desire to add to the misery of another person by marrying them.

Still, attendance of balls was necessary. He was trying to garner support for

his goals in London: one, to open a shipping office here; and two, to go, if not to war, then at least into opposition with the East India Company and its bloodstained hands.

That beast of a company controlled most of the seas and far too many lands. It needed to be restricted, and as a duke, he had some power and the ability to say what should and should not be done with it. He could have sway if he wished it, but only if he attended events such as these blasted balls.

The Earl of Derby smirked at him. "You look as if you're drowning."

"I *am* drowning," he agreed. "In lace, perfume, and ridiculous chatter."

"It's not so very terrible," Derby said unconvincingly.

James snorted. "Then why don't I see you out there on the dance floor?"

"Because the right ladies have not shown up yet. I don't dance with debutantes."

"No?" He arched a brow.

Derby shuddered. "No, I have no wish to marry at present. The mamas know this. I'm only here as your friend and ally to guide you through the storms of society."

"Very good of you," James drawled.

"Isn't it?" Derby replied, his lips twitching.

Their fathers had been friends years ago, and the previous Earl of Derby had been on the side of the Americans in the American Revolution, urging Parliament to simply let the colonies go. Of course, that had not occurred. Derby now was supporter of philosophers, writers, and artists. One wouldn't know it by looking, though; he seemed a rake to almost everyone.

Still, Derby was a good sort and one of the only English people James could tolerate.

The ton was full of rules. Stuffy, impossible rules like how many times he could dance with someone; who was to enter a room first, and how; who could sit where at a table; and who was to speak and have precedence. The rules were similar to those on a sailing ship, only there was really no purpose to them except to maintain a sense of control.

Now, that was also why there were rules on a sailing ship, but the control on a ship was to make certain that the ship reached its destination. The rules in the ton were simply to ensure that no one left their place, and James did not approve of such a thing.

He was just about to say so to Derby when a bevy of mamas rushed at him.

“Good God, they’ve spotted me,” he groaned.

“Indeed they have,” Derby said with undisguised amusement. “I’m tempted to let them have at you.”

He piped a sound of dismay. “We have already been here for two hours. I have danced with fifteen young ladies, made compliments about their hair, their clothes, and have talked about spaniels more than I ever knew was possible.”

“You request rescue, then,” Derby said.

He blurted out another note of dismay.

“Right,” Derby said. “I know a place. Let’s go.”

There was a cry of alarm as he and Derby whirled from the ballroom and headed out into the cool hall.

“Your Grace! Your Grace!” they called in chorus.

“You cannot possibly be leaving?” another called.

He turned and clasped his hands behind his back, unwilling to be deliberately rude, even though he wished to be.

Lady Barlow smiled at him and batted her fan. “My daughter Calliope would adore the opportunity to converse with you, Your Grace.”

“I have conversed with Calliope,” he ventured as politely as he could, given the way in which Calliope had cornered him earlier this evening. “While she knows a great deal about botany and I admire her admiration of the tulip, I find I must depart.”

Her mother beamed. “You simply must visit us tomorrow, Your Grace, and she can show you her collection. Each bulb is worth a fortune.”

He gave a quick bow, turned, and headed off with Derby. “Is that to be the extent of a duke’s life?” he said under his breath. “Making polite conversation over tulip bulbs?”

Derby laughed, then mocked, “It’s a hard life.”

“Fine,” he said. “I realize it is the price one pays for power. Now, take me wherever the hell you want to take me. Anything would be better than this.”

...

James gazed about the bar room of the Maiden’s Jig Tavern and sighed in relief. It wasn’t that he didn’t know what to do in a ballroom, but unlike the people here laughing and chatting merrily, ton conversation was ridiculous, venturing on painful.

They restricted themselves to dogs, the weather, and the races.

And tulips. He mustn't forget tulips.

Unlike those who ruled this isle, he was going to settle his business in this town and get out before they could pull him into their web.

In six weeks, he'd be gone.

Still, as he gazed around the London tavern, the scene was a wonder. The occupants who were crushed in on benches and chairs about rough tables had clearly not washed in days. Not a single one of them had access to good water. Frankly, he was surprised that most of them had not dropped dead with disease from the state of their part of town.

There were bugs everywhere. Cats—lamp-eyed, fearsome creatures—chased rats. Said rats gnawed upon the bones left on the floor, and dogs were everywhere, sleeping at the feet of their masters both inside and out.

This was life at its most raw.

A fiddler and button accordion player sat in the corner of the room, playing a lively reel. Several men and women in ill-fitting but colorful garb were up dancing about together, whirling and twirling around better than any sailor doing the hornpipe.

James looked to the Earl of Derby, who easily downed half a glass of gin.

“Bloody hell,” the earl said merrily. “This stuff will burn a hole through a man's esophagus. Isn't it marvelous?”

Derby took down another drink, his blue eyes flashing with glee and horror at once.

Truthfully, James liked the clear liquid. It burned. And he needed a good burn because, if he was going to face the next few weeks, well, this would at least take some of the tension off after surviving hours in the mind-dulling company of the ton.

And then there was the damned important but also damned annoying fact he had to find a girl.

A girl, of all things!

Not just any girl—his ward. His men had been tracking down her whereabouts. The most recent report had found she lived in this part of town, but they had yet to seize upon the exact location.

They'd know soon. There was a rumor she lived above a French woman's dress shop, and there were only so many of those around.

Once she was found, James would fetch her himself. Nothing was well done if one did not do it themselves or at least oversee the matter. And he did not trust any man to take care of his ward.

A ward, for God's sake.

How had he inherited a ward and a title?

He was not entirely sure. He'd need pins, string, and a complex, point-by-point explanation of the family tree to understand how an American sailor was now an English duke.

He leaned back on the rough-hewn board that doubled as a chair, sprawling his arm out. The fact that the girl lived near this hellhole made him wonder how the devil his ward had been put in such circumstances.

It did seem as if his predecessor, the old Duke of Ashbridge, had been a bit of an arse.

More than a bit.

He'd been a cruel bastard.

From what he'd gathered from the old duke's unpleasant butler, Davidson, the duke had kicked out his own daughter, making her flee to Europe with the love of her life. And when the two of them had kicked off in Paris, the then duke had abandoned his daughter's children.

James couldn't imagine it.

Well, that wasn't quite right.

He could imagine being abandoned—but not like that. Not because someone wasn't damned fancy enough.

James had clawed and fought to survive, alone after first his father's and then his mother's death. He knew the pain of having no parents and being adrift in a world that ate children up as if they were chocolates.

No, he would not think of it tonight. If he did, he'd down the entire bottle of gin, and that would do him no favors.

He needed to have his wits about him.

A new ship was going to be launched in Boston in ten weeks, and he'd be there. His business in London would be done in six weeks, which allowed a month for the crossing. He was always there when a new ship of his line took to the sea. They were the only children he'd ever had, or ever wanted.

And then there was the fact his father had hated London.

But tonight? He was damned glad Derby had brought him here for a bit of freedom. He needed it. The sort of freedom he experienced on his ship, the *Dauntless*.

But this part of town was not like a ship.

There was no order. There were no rules. And as he swung his gaze around, he realized that a fight could break out at any moment.

He felt on edge, ready for anything.

Derby seemed to sense it. The man winked at him and waved a barmaid over. The young woman's dark brown hair was billowing about a heart-shaped face as she swung her full tray up onto a barely covered shoulder. Her linen bodice was low, and her tightly cinched waist only emphasized her curves. Still, she looked as though, if someone put their hand in the wrong place, she'd happily cosh them over the head with one of the mugs at her disposal.

"Another gin for myself and my friend, lass," Derby said, slipping her a coin.

"Keep the coin coming, me lord, and the gin will flow all night." She tucked the coin between her bosom then rushed off through the thick crowd, easily dancing around men who tried to grab her, and two of those men began to shout at each other.

As James pulled his gaze from the fight, something caught his attention across the room. The flourish of a rose-colored cloak and the stiffened stance of a young woman.

Derby tossed back another drink of gin. "I told you this was just the place."

He nodded, only half listening.

The girl was arguing passionately with an older woman.

No, she was not a girl. She was a woman, but she was slight, as if she did not eat nearly enough. Her soft blond hair was coiled atop her head, her cloak was ratty about her frame, and she was arguing most intensely. But the older woman, whose hair was curled and powdered white, kept shaking her head. Her gnarled hands went to her hips, and then she had what seemed to be the temerity to reach up and tweak the other woman on the chin.

The young woman pulled back, and then the older woman swung away and marched off, her white hair flapping about her face. And in her place stood a large brute who stared down at the young lady as if he was either going to crush her into the floor or drag her into the hallway and show her what a brute he was.

It wasn't something James would tolerate.

This woman was bold. He could tell that. But he could not bear to see her suffer as so many women did. Perhaps it was her spark, and he knew how easy it was to snuff such a thing out.

James took a swallow of gin, then banged the glass down on the table and stood. "I'll be right back."

Derby grew quiet, then ground out, “If you want to keep your teeth, sit down.”

But he would not.

Doing this would at least give him a moment’s peace, a moment’s respite from the memories that had been crashing in on him of late. And from the fact that he was in London, a place he loathed and could not wait to tear down.

He crossed the room easily, eyes locked on his target. He was a captain, and captains were supposed to have cool heads, but he could not bear when the strong preyed on the weak. James prided himself in the fact that he rose to the defense of others quickly. Because nothing got past him.

No injustice, no cruelty.

He’d crush it before it could crush them.

Chapter Two

How had all her ambition come to this?

Lily's hands curled into fists. She hid them in the folds of her worn skirts as she stood arguing with Mother Maggie. *Mother Maggie*, indeed.

Such a name made the woman standing across from her sound as benign as a mother hen. Mother Maggie was as vicious as a she-wolf and would happily sink her rotting teeth into Lily's back haunches and tear a piece out of them.

"I promise I will get you the rest of the funds," Lily said, her heart hammering. Waves of panic rose up in her, and it was all she could do to stay composed. But she refused to let the old woman see her fear.

Mother Maggie rolled her yellowed eyes. Eyes which had no doubt seen too much wine over the years, but the old woman was as sharp as a tack.

"Gel," she lilted in surprisingly plummy tones. "I loaned you a sum of ten pound, and you have not repaid me as you said you would."

"I know." Lily licked her dry lips. "But it has been most difficult. I am not getting as much work as I thought I would. You see, I am not allowed to do any extra jobs outside of Madame's shop and—"

"I am not interested in your excuses," Mother Maggie snapped, then her rouged lips parted in a deceptively sweet grin. "My dear, the only way for you to achieve your dreams is to get a protector, and I know many of those. I would happily arrange a meeting with someone for you."

"I am not interested in that line of work." Lily's stomach coiled at the thought of taking up the oldest trade.

"My goodness." Mother Maggie clucked, all sweetness, still, even as her eyes flashed. "High and mighty, aren't we?"

But then her smile dimmed and she leaned forward, the scent of rose perfume wafting around her, drifting out from her green silk gown. "I own

you, gel. From the top of your head to the tips of your toes and the piece between.” She clapped her hands together, causing her rings to wink in the glow of the lamps. “So, you need to understand that if I decide that you do *that kind* of work, you will.”

Lily held back a groan of frustration. She was supposed to be standing on her own two feet. She was supposed to be protecting her sister, Violet, and all she’d had was one dream.

A dress shop of her own, where she could sell her original designs.

She had been working toward it for a decade now. But between the madame of the dress shop, who worked her hands to the bone all hours of the day and night, and now Mother Maggie, to whom she owed money, her dreams were slipping away faster than sand through a glass.

Lily willed herself to stand strong. She had seen the hell of Paris in 1789. And then she’d seen regimes change and an empire rise where her parents had chosen the wrong side. She’d found herself returned to London with no one to look after herself and Violet...and the knowledge that being on the wrong side meant death.

Her grandfather was a duke and had refused to help, no matter how she begged, and now she could not bear to ask for charity from anyone. But owing a debt, she realized too late, was no better.

“I only ask for a little bit more time to get the money that you require,” she rushed to explain. “I will be able to do so once I—”

Mother Maggie laughed, then wiped her eyes as if terribly amused before she propped her hands on her padded hips. “I have heard that so many times. It never turns out to be true.”

It had to be true. She’d been so certain she could get the money. So certain...

The older woman pursed her lips. “I shall give you extra time to repay me, but I’ll start adding interest to it as well. The longer it takes you to get the coin, the more you owe.” Her frighteningly convincing kind smile returned, and she pinched Lily’s chin. “Now, I shall make certain that John takes you home. One wouldn’t want anything to happen to you, now would they?”

“No,” she replied, fighting the tightness in her throat.

And with that, Mother Maggie turned on her painted red heel and headed into the thick crowd. John, who was Maggie’s favorite tough, stepped forward. He was a big, broad-shouldered fellow who made Lily’s skin crawl, but at least she wouldn’t get in any trouble at this hour of night if he walked

her home.

He gave her a quick look up and down, his lips parting lasciviously.

“Allo, darling,” he said, his hamlike arms straining his poorly cut coat. “Seems like you’ve upset my mistress. You know you really should do whatever you can to please her, else she’ll make your life quite rough in the future.”

“I have no interest in pleasing your mistress,” she returned, though she did not doubt him. “I only wish to pay her back.”

“Then you’re a silly piece,” he said.

“I am not,” she countered. “A dreamer, perhaps. Hopeful, perhaps.”

“That makes you a right silly piece.” He grabbed her arm. “Come on, then. Let’s go—”

A fist shot out of nowhere, cracked against John’s cheek, and sent him hurtling backward.

Lily let out a cry of shock before she spotted her would-be rescuer. A giant of a fellow with long, dark hair cascading over his broad shoulders launched himself onto John.

His black coat embroidered with silver leaves and lined with silver buttons swung about his powerful frame as he tackled the tough as if he were nothing but an irritating fly.

No! This was a disaster.

She was already in trouble with Mother Maggie! And if this man assaulted John on her behalf, she could not imagine how much worse things would get for her.

She darted forward, ready to grab him from behind, but then another pair of hands shot out and seized hold of her.

“Step aside, miss,” a polished voice said in low but cheerful rumbles. “We’ll take care of him for you.”

“I don’t want you to take care of him,” she bellowed, kicking and trying to wrestle free.

“What? Why?”

“He’s not bothering me,” she gritted out.

“He clearly *is* bothering you,” he said with amusement. “Or rather, he was. And James is going to make sure he never does that again.”

Good God. They were going to ruin her life rescuing her. She tried again to free herself of his grasp, and again she failed. “Please make him stop.”

“No one can make the American stop once he’s started, miss. Or so I’ve

found.”

American?

“Well, perhaps I can,” she retorted. She elbowed the man, and he let out a startled whoosh of air, loosening his grip. Lily darted forward. “Cease this at once!”

In all her life, she’d never seen anyone attack one of Mother Maggie’s men. It was the most harrowing thing she’d ever witnessed; then, suddenly, the man named James stopped and swung around to face her.

He arched a single dark brow, looking completely, wickedly alive. His cheekbones were two slashes, his jaw a hard square, and his eyes danced as if this brawl was the most thrilling thing he’d ever done.

She doubted it, though.

She had a terrible feeling he was accustomed to such moments.

His wide, broad chest pumped up and down, straining his linen shirt. It was well tailored, and he was a magnificent specimen. His breeches clung to hard, tree trunk–like legs, and he took a step toward her.

John lay prostrate on the floor, groaning, not dead or knocked out but wise enough not to try standing.

James gave her a slow smile. “He won’t bother you again, miss.”

“*You* are the one bothering me,” she ground out.

His wicked gaze dazzled, but a strange look furrowed his brow. “You’re not pleased by what I’ve done,” he stated.

“Oh, look!” she mocked, barely able to contain her frustration. “You *can* listen. Well done,” she said, applauding slowly.

His smile dimmed. “I protected you.”

“Your *protection* has made my life worse,” she groaned.

His gaze narrowed as he asked in that frustratingly compelling, brandy-warm voice, “How in God’s name could pounding this fellow into the ground make your life worse?”

“Because you will leave this place tonight,” she explained through gritted teeth. “You are an American, as your friend and your accent made clear, and you live nowhere near here, as your clothing and general demeanor have made clear. Whereas I live in this part of town and I shall have to deal with this man’s fury and his employer’s fury *every day*.”

He paused at that.

She sucked in a breath, feeling horrifically conflicted. All she wanted was to get home to Violet now, sink into her bed, and pray that an answer to all

her problems would come to her. Or better yet, those problems would solve themselves by morning. “Now, good evening to you, sir. Do not follow.”

And with that, she whirled on her heel and started for the door, ready to forget this night.

But the images kept flashing through her head.

The massive, beautiful giant of a man, eyes flashing, driving John into the ground.

How she longed to love it! She wished she could! John deserved it. He’d made many a young woman’s life hell. But she couldn’t stop the rising panic and dread.

She was going to have to do so much work to fix the damage that American had caused. She didn’t even know where to begin. With Mother Maggie? Marvelous. More interest, no doubt. Or the doctor’s bill.

Oh, dear heaven! The very idea sent a chill through her veins.

She muttered to herself as she headed out into the street, weaving through the tightly packed web of London’s rabbit warrens. Drunks staggered everywhere, some clutching bottles, but most of them had already consumed the portion of alcohol that they could afford for the night and were waiting merely to go to sleep from it.

Others laughed and sang at the top of their lungs, and some danced and sold hot soup, punch, and every possible used item one could imagine.

She quickly averted her eyes from anyone exchanging the skin trade in the alleyways. It was one of the riskier parts of this side of town, seeing the strangest things at this hour of night, but it wasn’t exactly as if street girls had offices. Most shared rooms with dozens of others to make ends meet.

They had to sell their wares where they could. And just as she was about to turn down another alley, praying it was empty, a hand reached out and grabbed her.

She let out a scream, whirled around, and brought up her knee, as she’d learned how to do, and stomped down hard upon the man’s foot.

He let out a muffled grunt of dismay and tensed against her. But he let go of her immediately. “Hell’s bells, woman,” he bit out. “You’re good at that.”

She was tempted to dart off, but she realized it was the same big man as before, that devil who had gazed at her and looked so pleased with himself. “You’re following me,” she said. “I told you not to.”

“I owe you an apology,” he said.

She squared her shoulders but refused to believe that all he wished was to

apologize.

“You’d make an excellent captain of a ship if given half the chance.” His smile, his heart-wrenchingly beautiful smile, lit his eyes with charm. “Are you looking for a job?” he teased.

“No,” she said. “I am looking to repay that man’s employer, and you’ve now likely added to my debt.”

“What?” he asked. “How?”

“I owe the woman I was speaking to money, and he’s her hired tough. No doubt you thought that you could step in and solve it all with your fists.”

He let out a sigh. “I did, rather.”

She folded her arms under her breasts, the chill air stealing through her thin cloak. “Is everything so simple where you’re from that you just solve things with your fists?”

“No,” he said honestly. “But fists do often come in handy, especially with men like that.”

She did not doubt it. “Well, you misread the situation.”

“I see. Forgive me,” he said with shocking earnestness. “It was badly done of me. I did not mean to cause you more trouble. My whole wish is to stop injustice, not further it.”

“Well, I...” She paused, then swallowed. She did not know where to look. Her anger had been holding her together, and now that he was speaking so gently, so honestly, she felt tears coming.

She cleared her throat and dug her nails into her palms. “Thank you,” she said, lifting her chin.

And then he let out a slow breath. “Hell’s bells,” he said. “She’s got you on the hook, hasn’t she?”

“Pardon?”

“Your debt,” he pointed out. “She’s going to call it in, and then you’ll have to work for her.”

She frowned at how quickly he understood her situation. “How do you know about these sorts of things if you’re an American?”

“London is not the only place that has sin, though it seems that London has mastered it.”

She winced, unable to argue.

“I’ll give you the money,” he said. “Whatever you owe the woman.”

She let out a laugh, but it was not amusement. It was shock. “And what if I owed her a hundred pounds?”

“That’s not so very bad,” he said with a shrug as if the rough part of London—its coal soaking the air, its people pushing and shoving—was nothing to him.

Her jaw dropped. “My God. What are you made of? Money?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice firm.

She blinked. “And you’d just give it to me?”

“Yes,” he repeated, this time with a hint of amusement as that single-syllable word slipped past his sensual lips again.

“You’re mad if you think that I would believe you.” She eyed him warily. “What would you want in return?”

“Your freedom.” He gazed down at her with dark eyes that bespoke a confidence she’d never seen before.

She gasped. “Do not jest.”

“I am not in jest,” he replied as his brows drew together. “No one should feel imprisoned by debt.”

Those words struck her so hard she could not speak for a moment and let her gaze drift to the people milling on the pavement, rough people who were giving the American a wide berth. Likely due to his posh clothes and his formidable bearing. “Who are you?”

“The Duke of Ashbridge,” he said.

She pulled back as if confronted by a ghost. “No, you’re not.”

He gave a tight nod. “I am.”

She recoiled and started to back away, her feet slipping over the filthy cobbles. “Don’t follow me. I, I…”

“What’s the matter?” he demanded as he caught her elbow with his hard but careful grasp.

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing is the matter. Only, you can’t possibly be the Duke of Ashbridge. He’s old.”

“Oh,” he said, understanding dawning. He held her elbow for a moment longer. Just a touch too long as his eyes searched her face before gently releasing her. “The old duke died. How do you know him?”

His face grew grim, clearly fearing some painful history. And in the dark streets where no lamplights lingered, his face became a mask of shadows.

She swallowed. “He was my grandfather.”

And then his eyes flared. “You,” he said with awe. “Impossible.”

“Me, what?” she pressed.

He stared at her, his gaze locking with hers. “You are the one I’m looking

for.”

She swallowed hard. If that was the truth, she was in a great deal of trouble indeed.

Chapter Three

In a city of countless people, James had found her.

He stared at the young woman, stunned. There was a maturity about her that argued whether this could truly be the girl he sought. Her soft blond hair curled about her face, and in the dark night of London, her blue eyes stared back at him as though he were a ghost. Yet, she stood firm. Unafraid.

Carefully, he crossed to her, urging her out of the busy way and nearer to the side of the brick buildings. "Violet?" he prompted.

"No," she said, frowning. "Violet is my sister."

He nodded. This woman before him was no minor. "A young lady named Violet is my ward, and it is my duty to look after her. I assume she lives with you, if you are her sister?"

"She does." Her throat worked, a long, elegant line as she swallowed. "But she cannot possibly be your ward."

"Indeed, she is, miss. She is my responsibility, and I was to collect her on the morrow." He paused. "No one mentioned she was in the care of a sister."

And he found himself rather glad of it. The idea that he would have to have care over this young woman when he could not stop himself from noticing her beauty was a damned relief.

"Well, she is in my care, sir, and I really must return to her now so she doesn't worry."

How terribly convenient. "I shall accompany you, then," he said. "Take me to her."

She looked at him as if he'd lost his wits. "A woman does not simply *take* a strange man to her rooms!"

"But I am not a strange man," he countered. "I am a man of honor. And a duke."

"So you've said." She narrowed her eyes. "But how might I know for sure

that you are the new Duke of Ashbridge?”

James liked her well in that moment. She wasn't a fool. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small ring with his seal, then showed it to her. “Is this good enough for you?”

Her eyes widened, which he took to mean she now saw him for truth. “You don't wear it?” she asked. “Do you not wish to be recognized?”

He scowled, eyeing the falcon-and-ivy signet before returning it to his pocket.

“I can't stand the whole family and what it represents,” he admitted. “I am so distantly related to the old man it is laughable. My connection to the family tree is barely a twig. A fleck of bark is more apt. But here I am now, owning everything, and I will take up the power it comes with—and the responsibilities,” he added.

“You can't tolerate the family, and yet you are the Duke of Ashbridge?” She laughed, a bell-like melody, then quickly covered her mouth. “Forgive me, Your Grace.”

“No need for apology,” he said and couldn't help but smile. “The whole infernal system of English inheritance really is damn absurd.”

“That is a good point,” she agreed. “Few of us who live here even like it. After all, I would've inherited a good deal of money if that primogeniture nonsense didn't exist.”

“No one took care of you?” he said, his heart wrenching at the realization.

“No one took care of me,” she affirmed. “And it's certainly not your business to take care of me now.”

He shook his head. “As the Duke of Ashbridge, regardless of how distant the blood relation, the title has made it my duty to take care of your sister *and you.*”

“You said I am not your ward,” she pointed out.

“That is correct.” He gave her a firm nod. “And you do not need to be to accept my help.”

“Well, let me explain something to you, Your Grace. I will not have you be another Mother Maggie in my life.” She leaned toward him, her face hard. “The moment I take your help, I become in your debt. I will owe you, Your Grace, and that is a position I refuse to put myself in again.”

He cursed inwardly. How much hell had she seen? From her face, one would assume none. She looked innocent, young, perfect. But when he glanced down at her hands, he noticed how calloused they were. Her

fingertips had been worked to the bone.

“When was the last time you ate?” he asked gently.

She stiffened. “That is none of your business.”

“When was the last time you ate?” he asked again.

“That is none of your business,” she repeated louder.

He ground his teeth. He was not used to anyone speaking so defiantly to him. Everyone bowed and scraped to him as a duke here, even though he was American. And aboard his ship? As captain, his word was law.

James eyed her carefully. “All right, you don’t wish me to take care of you. But what of your sister, Violet?”

Some emotion crossed her face he could not read. But it felt akin to shame.

“Send money and leave us alone,” she gritted.

He blew out a breath. “If you think that I will entrust my ward to the way you are living, you are mistaken.”

Her jaw dropped, and she looked upon him with indignation. “Excuse me, Your Grace? I have taken care of my sister all her life, and I have ensured that she is safe, warm, and loved, which is more than I can say for...”

“Who?” he pressed.

Her face tensed, and her mouth formed a thin line.

“Take me to meet Violet,” he urged. “I will make her life better.”

She blew out a breath, her shoulders dropping. Looking as if she had no choice. Which was unfortunately true, but he had no intention of strong-arming her into doing his will. “Why should I trust you?” she asked. “Why do you care?”

“Unlike my predecessor, I give a great deal of importance to duty,” he said. “And to be clear, I only followed you to apologize and make certain you went home safely. I had no idea you were Violet’s sister, and now that I do, I only desire to find her and do right by her.”

But that wasn’t completely true. He did desire this woman as well. From her fierce bravery to her independent spirit... She did something inexplicable to him.

“I see,” she said, nodding slowly. “I will take you to meet her, but if you try to seduce me, I’ll stomp on you again.”

His lips twitched. “Duly noted.”

“Come then.” She gathered her skirts and turned. “Let’s get this over with.”

He snorted at that. He admired her spirit. “Lead on, lady.”

“Not a lady,” she corrected. “Simply Miss Lily, if you must.”

“Miss Lily.” The name suited her. Vibrant, alive, bold.

He followed her through the dark alleys, keeping his hands on his rapier and the pistol tucked at his back. He was accustomed to trouble in this part of town. For it looked as if trouble could leap out of every shadow.

Keeping behind her, he noticed again that she was dressed simply. Her cloak was faded but cut well. “How do you earn your bread, Miss Lily?” he asked.

She slowed enough to bring them side by side, and her gaze swung to him. “I design dresses and do some stitching,” she said. “My mistress adores my designs, as I saw so much in Paris. Her customers love them, too.”

“I see,” he said. “I’m quite capable with a needle, myself, if you must know.”

“You can’t be serious?” she scoffed.

He smiled at that. “A sailor has to know how to sew. If he doesn’t, he won’t get very far.”

She shot a glance at him, carefully picking her way along wooden boards and through the mud. “I had no idea.”

“Who else mends the sails but a sailor? It’s not as if we keep a tailor aboard.”

“I suppose not.” She laughed, shaking her head. “A duke who sews. What is the world coming to?”

“Some would say the end,” he declared. “After all, England is certainly on its way out.”

She let out another laugh. “You should go to France. You’d like it there immensely.”

“And you don’t?” he countered lightly.

She stopped, and her eyes swung to him. “I don’t,” she said, her tone fierce.

He’d struck a nerve, and so said nothing at that, but he noticed they’d stopped in front of a dressmaking shop. He lifted his gaze to the upper stories. There wasn’t even a candle lit.

“Is your sister asleep this early?” he asked.

“No,” she replied tightly.

“But it’s dark,” he said.

“Madame does not allow us to have candles. Unless we are working on a gown.”

“Your mistress sounds like a devil,” he observed. “And that is why you are

in debt to Mother Maggie? To escape?”

She gave a simple nod, said nothing, and led him through yet more mud to a rear door.

And suddenly, James found himself rather wishing he could tear the world down for Lily. If only she'd give him the chance. But she'd already made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him or what he could offer, and he'd no doubt she'd give him hell to pay if he didn't respect that.

Chapter Four

Lily led him through the back of the dressmaking shop. A shop on the border of the more dangerous parts of London. It was located in a place that allowed for important clientele to come by day, not far from Bond Street. But far enough that the rents were lower and going out at night could be dangerous, as the men who liked to wander off Covent Garden were not to be trusted.

It had been her home for the last decade, if one could call such a place “home.”

She’d not had enough money to live anywhere else, and a few of the girls were forced to live upstairs. They could afford to live nowhere else.

And besides, the mistress of the establishment had them working all hours.

She often wore her eyes out, and her fingers, too, by candlelight when she was not laboring at her designs. After all, she had to come up with a whole array of collections for the various clients that came to the prestigious place. She made drawings for each lady for every dress that they wished to acquire, for their approval, before any needle pulled a thread to it.

It was something that kept her up sometimes night after night, long past the midnight hour, as she struggled to make certain that every lady would look her best, would be proud, beautiful, and desirable in Lily’s imaginings. And every one of them would own a custom-made design. No lady would purchase a Lily Martín original and fear walking into a ballroom to find she wore the same dress as another woman—and wonder who wore it better.

It was not always easy, but she gave her all. She bestowed each item the same attention and care she’d give her own clothing.

She shoved such thoughts aside as she kept her steps quiet as they crept into the establishment.

The Duke of Ashbridge followed her.

Perhaps she was being a fool for taking him into the house, but...

She knew in her bones that he wouldn't hurt her.

It fairly emanated off of him, his sense of justice.

No, he was a man of honor, if he was odd.

He followed her quietly up the creaking back stairs, the part of the dressmaking shop that was not well-appointed. Downstairs, it was beautiful—brocade walls, perfectly appointed settees, cushions everywhere, silks, feathers...but up here? Where the girls who worked down below lived? There wasn't a hint of creature comfort. And yet, she knew she was lucky that her mistress let Violet live there with her.

Most wouldn't. It was a testament to Lily's skill that Violet was allowed to stay, since Violet was barely old enough to do more than make buttons.

"Stop," she said as they stood paused in the hall. "I don't want her to be afraid, and I don't want her to think"—she swallowed and winced—"that I've brought a man back to..."

"To pay your debt?" the duke supplied.

She gave a tight nod. "And also, please be quiet. I don't want the mistress of the house waking up. She certainly won't believe any story I say, bringing you upstairs."

"But your sister is here," he said.

"Do you think that would stop some girls who are desperate?"

His mouth pressed into a tight line. "Of course not. Forgive my foolishness."

And with that, she gently opened the door and strode inside. "Violet," she whispered.

Violet sat by the window, her face pressed toward it, a book angled, trying to gather any bit of moonlight she could to read the words.

Violet turned to them, her bright face full of delight at her sister's return. "You're home early," she observed before spotting the man behind her. She stilled.

"My business was concluded," Lily soothed. "And I brought someone to meet you."

Violet narrowed her eyes. "Who?"

Lily bit her lip, then said tightly, "The new Duke of Ashbridge."

"I am your protector," he said softly, keeping his voice just above a whisper to stay quiet.

Lily held back a tart reply. She didn't want him making false promises to Violet. After all, they'd supposedly had a protector before—one who'd

thrown them out just like he'd thrown their mother out.

She did not trust *protectors*, and she did not trust gentlemen, title or not. She only trusted coin and contracts.

Violet drew back. "I don't understand."

"I'm the new Duke of Ashbridge, as your sister said, and legally you are my ward. I'm to take care of you now."

Violet swung her gaze back and forth, her hands tensing on the book.

"You're frightening her," Lily said firmly.

His brow furrowed. "Why would that frighten her? I'm here to help."

For such a smart man, he really had little idea of the way the lives of young women worked. "Because she thinks you're going to take her away from me."

"I see," he said, his face softening, and then he took a step forward. "Forgive me, Violet. That was not my intention. I have no wish to separate you from your sister."

Violet's eyes remained wide. "Then why are you here?"

He drew in a long breath, clearly choosing his words carefully. "I wanted to meet you and secure you a good education, perhaps a school?"

"No," Violet rushed, fear pitching her tone up. "I have no desire to go to school. I only wish to help Lily run her dress shop."

The duke blinked. "Your sister owns a dress shop?"

"Not yet," Violet admitted, abashed.

"Ah," he breathed, understanding transforming his visage as he swung his gaze to Lily. "The money. That's what it's for?"

Lily gave a tight nod. "My designs are excellent. Many clients will come."

He cocked his head to the side, causing his wild, dark hair to tumble over his shoulder. "And your mistress here will not be angry if you take those clients away?"

She swallowed and fisted her hands. "It is something I am willing to risk. I have been here for many years, and there is no room for advancement. If I stay, our lives will be never-ending drudgery. I will be old and still earning pennies. I want more for our lives than survival."

He nodded, taking in the faint moonlight spilling through the window. "This is a dark room with little furnishing, not even a candle, and both of you look as if you are allowed perhaps a slice of bread and a hunk of cheese a day."

"Milk, too," Violet said innocently.

“Violet,” Lily warned. It was embarrassing, allowing this man, who thought one hundred pounds was mere pocket change, to know just how badly off they were.

Ashbridge stared at her. “How can you educate Violet in these circumstances?”

She narrowed her gaze at him. He thought her unintelligent simply because she was poor? “My mother was a lady, and my father was an art tutor. Both of us are educated. Both of us play instruments. I know how to speak three languages and dance every dance there is. My mother did not neglect my education just because she’d been shoved away from her home. They were happy and respected in Paris. They were important in small artist circles, and they...”

Her throat tightened, for inevitably, no matter how accomplished her parents were, the story always came to their gruesome end.

“It all went terribly wrong, though,” she finished.

“I see,” he said, his gaze softening.

“No, you don’t,” she stated.

He hesitated before allowing, “Forgive me. You’re right. How very arrogant of me to imply that I understood. I was but a boy when the Revolution occurred in the colonies, and we saw no reign of terror there. Nor any dictators after.”

She held his gaze, determined not to flinch. Determined not to let him see the horrors she knew could linger in her own eyes. For Paris was supposed to be a city of frivolity, beauty, and culture. But she still remembered the days when mobs had torn people limb from limb and the cobbles had run red with blood. And then the war and factions...

He drew in a long breath as he contemplated her. “Violet does not want to leave you, and she needs to be taken care of,” he pointed out plainly. “You are in debt, and you need that alleviated.”

“Yes,” she said, uneasy. He was working his way toward something, building his case, and her body began to hum with nerves. “But I’ve already established I do not believe that you will simply pay off my debt. You will want something from me.”

“You’re absolutely correct,” he said. “I want something from you. Very badly.”

Oh dear...why did those words, coming from that man, make her want to shiver?

“And what is that?” she said, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin.

He met her gaze with one that burned with surprising intensity. “You will give up this position and come with me to raise your sister and see to her education. She must feel safe and loved and must never feel abandoned or hungry as you have.”

Was he...ordering her? She was not one of his sailors aboard his ship! “I beg your pardon?”

“You are going to work your fingers to the bone dressing the ton,” he continued. “And you will struggle, even if you do find a way to open your own shop. Violet will suffer.”

Now he was insulting her? “It is the one way I know that I can make money honorably,” she replied, fighting the urge to grit her teeth. Living in London was exceedingly expensive, and the truth was, keeping off the streets was a very difficult affair, for there was little work that they could take that would not have them dead before a decade was out, for one reason or another.

Lily had, at one dark moment, contemplated becoming a girl on the game. After all, it seemed like girls on the street had the best gowns, ate cake for breakfast, and had abundant opportunities around them. But then she’d seen the other side of it, the bruises, the disease, the poverty, and the fact that, after a while, the girls were no longer popular and gone through like last year’s fabric. She would not have that sort of life for herself or for Violet.

The duke leveled her with a hard stare. “It is time for us to both do our duties. You and your sister will come and live at my house, where you shall want nothing. And there is an end to it.”

The finality of his words shocked her. “How do you know I will do as you say?”

Violet’s gaze swung between them, like those of a crowd watching a tennis match.

“Because you love your sister,” he said simply.

Her shoulders slumped. He was right, about all of it.

And with that, he gave her the strangest of bows, his hand on his rapier, his head inclined, and he twirled his other hand. The bow was deep, dramatic, a punctuation to his speech. “I will not trouble you further now, Miss Lily, but know this: my coach will arrive in the morning. And you will both get in it. Your sister is my ward—the law is on my side for that. I cannot leave her in a place where Mother Maggies roam; nor can I leave you. It would be cruel to

Violet and dishonorable on my part. And I trust you know what is right.”

He turned on his booted heel and headed out, down the hall, and back to the stairs. In another few moments, there was no sound of him at all.

“He is very strange,” Violet said, inching toward the edge of her seat. “But I believed him when he spoke. He wants to help us.”

She gaped at her. “I met him in the tavern! What kind of duke lingers in a tavern?”

“Most of the aristocracy,” Violet pointed out.

Her sister was too wise for her young years. Violet was only just ten and already she knew so much about the world. And yet Lily wished she could keep her from knowing it, the cruelty of it and what it would demand of her.

In this part of town, the world came fast and hard and brutally to a girl if she was not careful, and sometimes even if she was.

And that was why she would not so easily be taken in by the Duke of Ashbridge, even if he promised his help and professed his love of duty.

Oh, he had come to her aid, surely, but that did not mean he was a man of pure heart.

Such men—except perhaps her father—did not exist. And even so, a pure heart had not helped her father protect her mother when hell had come.

No. It was better not to put one’s trust in a man at all.

She lifted her chin and drew in a breath. She could not throw herself into the hands of that man, that beautiful, rugged man who had come to her defense so swiftly and then threatened to take Violet. For that was what he had done, even if it was out of duty.

Besides, they were not the sorts honorable men cared about. Her mother had been cast out, ruined, and they had been laughed at by all society. She and Violet were a scandal. The very idea that he would wish to whisk them away to safety? It had to be a lie. There was some scheme in it. For no one had protected her. Not ever.

It made her want to laugh and cry at once, because if things had been different, Violet would have had such a beautiful life and so many chances.

And the only thing that both of them could hope for was independence.

The independence of a thriving shop.

Lily could be an excellent businesswoman. She was sure of it. She had all the drawings. She was ready. And she knew that they could make a go of it. Yes, she’d dreamed of this almost since leaving Paris. And she would not allow a cruel employer and a duke—an American—to steal those dreams

from her.

She would have to find a way to get coin for Mother Maggie without his help, though she did not know how yet. Perhaps... Perhaps she could make a dress privately for Elizabeth and that would take care of it. She was a duchess, after all, and her dearest friend.

She was loath to ask Elizabeth for money. It felt wrong to take such liberties with a friend, but she was going to have to. She would have to swallow her pride and just do it...

She would not trust her and Violet's fate to a stranger. Not when she knew how cruel this life could be.

Chapter Five

Dawn had not even broken through Lily's moth-eaten curtains when the door burst open and her mistress charged in.

She blinked rapidly, her whole body racing with alarm as the sound of stomping and anger crashed toward her.

Stunned, still half asleep, she immediately thought of Violet and protecting her.

But before Lily could swing her bare feet to the wood floor, sharp, determined hands grabbed her and yanked her from the bed. Lily caught her mistress's perfume drifting about them and flinched with fear. What was happening? Her mistress was harsh but had never dragged her out of bed before.

Lily stumbled, and her knees slammed into the floorboards. She stifled a cry as panic began to charge through her, but when her hands slammed into the rough wood, splinters jabbed into her palms and a whimper slipped past her lips.

"Get up," Madame Josephine hissed, whose real name was Sally Baker, for she had not a jot of French in her. "You've made this into a bawdy house, and I will not have you here another moment."

Lily swung her gaze to her little sister as desperation mixed with her panic.

Violet cowered on her bed, pulling her knees up to her chest under her thin night rail.

Frantic, Lily longed to assure Violet, but Madame Josephine pinched her arm. "Look at me, my girl."

She did. "What are you accusing me of?"

Madame Josephine folded her bony arms over her purple wool-clad bosom, a gown which kept her warm while most of her seamstresses shivered. "What do you take me for, a bumble-headed git?" she bit out, her

rookery accent slipping out in her anger. “I saw the cull come in last night, and then I saw him go.” She snorted. “I did not want to make a ruckus of it last night because I would not have the night watch at our door nor scandal upon the lips of every person who lives adjacent to this place.”

Her stomach suddenly twisted, and she was afraid she’d cast up her accounts.

Madame Josephine’s lip curled. “But if you think that someone else did not see, you are a great fool, my girl. You will take your sister and you will go, but you will leave all your drawings behind and you will pay your rent that you owe.”

Lily forced herself to swallow back the wave of nausea before she stated, “They belong to me.”

Stepping forward, Madame Josephine bent down and looked her in the eyes with such malice that Lily was half afraid the woman would murder her on the spot.

“You thought you could go and borrow money from Mother Maggie without me finding out?” she spat. “You thought you could go into competition with me?”

A sliver of terror danced through her, for the fury of Madame Josephine’s face was a fierce sight to behold.

Shaking her head as her eyes narrowed, Madame Josephine hissed, “Stupid girl. After all I’ve done for you. You have been an asset to this place. But if you are going to spread your legs for gentlemen to make extra coin to fund a dress shop? I cannot have you here. I should take your poor sister from you and give her to the workhouse, what with your morals.”

Fear seized her then. She’d known Madame Josephine was hard, but she had not anticipated this sort of cruelty. “He’s not a cull,” she rushed. “He’s a relation.”

“A relation?” Madame Josephine laughed, baring a few dark teeth. “Do I look a complete and total idiot? That is the oldest excuse in the books.” And then she stood and pointed at the door. “You will go and I will not see you again, but you will not take a single scrap of paper or tool of the trade from this place.”

She gasped. “You cannot possibly—”

“Oh, I can,” Madame Josephine countered. “You’ll be out in ten minutes. And if you’ve taken anything, I’ll set the watch on you.” She strode out into the hall, slamming the thin door behind her.

Lily lingered on the floor, aghast. Tears stung her eyes, and splinters stung her palms. All she'd wanted was to improve their lives. All she'd wanted was a bit more... A bit of happiness. A promise there was something more to life than working day in and out for scraps.

Or being at the control of someone else, always doing their bidding for her keep.

Violet still hugged her knees, shaking on the bed. "What are we to do?"

"I don't know," she said honestly as she quickly dashed the tears from her eyes, for she would not let Violet see her fears. She had to be strong for her sister now as she had always been.

This would not be the first time Madame had thrown a girl out onto the streets. All the girls in the shop knew what happened to those outcasts. No one took care of them, no one took them in, and none of them had the coin to save themselves.

Sometimes she saw them on street corners and alleys, their gowns muddy, their hair wild, and their eyes blank from gin.

That fate would not be hers or Violet's.

She had already planned to go to her friend Elizabeth today to inquire about making her a dress. She'd just have to add that she now also needed a place to live. Elizabeth would take her in, wouldn't she? Her husband was kind. But for how long? Could she live with Elizabeth forever? Could she bear that kind of charity?

For her sister she could, but there was still one dilemma.

She did not have legal authority over her sister anymore; the Duke of Ashbridge did. And he had made it plain he meant to wield it.

...

The walk from the north side of Covent Garden and the dress shop to the affluent part of West London was no small undertaking, especially with her sister in tow.

But Lily supposed she had the blessing and curse of absolutely no luggage to bring.

Being chucked onto the street before dawn had barely touched the sky had been harrowing.

The duke's coach had not yet been sent at that early hour. And perhaps he would not send it at all. She did not know and did not trust him. But she was now in a position of desperation.

They could not afford a hackney or a sedan chair, and so they wove their way through the teeming crowd along Fleet Street and out toward Hyde Park.

It was not a taxing distance, but given the emotional exhaustion of the morning, each step felt like a heavy blow. They strode past Speakers' Corner and the exclusive houses that lined the park. After marching past beautifully attired members of the ton and those who longed to be a part of the ton, holding coin if not pedigree, she and Violet kept heading west until, at last, they came up before the beautiful house where her dear friend Elizabeth lived.

Elizabeth's husband, the Duke of Montrose, was a good man, kind, strong, when all of London had thought him to be a beast!

It was almost laughable, for in his darkness and in his power, the duke had managed to do great things, good things, and he had seen Elizabeth for the jewel that she was.

Lily was so glad for her friend to have found love, to have found more than the darkness that she had dwelt in at the bookshop her father had so terribly mismanaged. Now, with Elizabeth in charge, that bookshop was thriving.

But as Lily held Violet's hand, both with empty bellies, and led her past houses that positively wafted the scent of freshly baked bread and rashers, she winced.

Around her was wealth and power, silk, velvets, brocade, coaches that cost more than she could ever dream to make in a lifetime. Those coaches were lacquered in the most beautiful colors and led by horses who lived and ate better than she ever had.

With head high and heart pounding, Lily climbed the steps to the house and drummed the brass knocker, then took a step back and waited.

After several moments, the door slowly opened and the butler appeared. His brow furrowed as he smiled at her, for she had made an appearance many times at this door. He gazed at her with easy welcome.

"May I help you, Miss Lily?" he asked, his silvery wig glinting in the morning light.

"I've come to see the duchess," she said, a statement that should have been easy but tripped on her lips.

The butler frowned. "I am sorry to tell you she is not here."

Her stomach twisted. "When will she return?"

"Not for weeks. She has gone away with the duke to Scotland."

"Scotland," she echoed. Her voice felt foreign as her stomach dropped

hard, for in that word all her hopes slipped away.

“Indeed, miss. They are considering buying a property up there, an estate in the Highlands. As you know, they both enjoy their novels about the clans.”

She let out a slow exhale, then bit her lip. Why hadn’t Elizabeth told her? Perhaps she had tried, though, and Lily had been too busy working to see her.

“The invitation was rather sudden,” the butler explained. “A Lord Lennox invited them up. You see, he is considering selling, and they both decided it would be advantageous. She did leave a note for you if you came to call.”

Her heart plummeted.

“Her Grace cares greatly about you, as you know. And she did not wish you to be dismayed if you came. They left just yesterday.” He produced the note from his pocket.

Just yesterday. Was the universe having a laugh at her?

Her one hope at possibility and rescue, aside from the Duke of Ashbridge, was gone.

“Thank you,” Lily said, taking the note.

And with that, she and her sister headed back down the steps to the pavement.

They had nowhere to stay. Well, almost nowhere.

There was really only one place to go.

It would take just as long to go back to the dress shop to see if his carriage had been sent as it would to simply go to his home. And if she returned to find he hadn’t sent it after all? No, she couldn’t risk that. He’d made a promise to her, and he would take her in now whether he wanted to or not. She would make sure of it.

She met Violet’s gaze and declared, “I do not know what is to come, but we must go to him.”

“The Duke of Ashbridge?” Violet asked, her eyes wide.

She gave a tight nod. “He says he is a man of duty.”

She took her sister’s hand and headed toward her grandfather’s house, a place she had only been to before in moments of desperation, and it had never ended well.

As they headed swiftly along the street, she felt her whole body begin to vibrate like a tuning fork that had been struck as bile rose up in her throat.

“I don’t want to go there,” Violet said.

“I know,” Lily assured her, “but we are strong. We are capable.”

Violet nodded. “You’re right, but I still don’t like it.”

She looked down at her sister and said as kindly and as firmly as she could, “We do not have to like it. We must simply do it.”

And before long, they had turned the corner to stand before the Duke of Ashbridge’s London home. Massive Doric columns held up its beautiful, Grecian-inspired facade. The windows gleamed like diamonds in the early morning sunlight. It was a place meant to intimidate, to establish power, and it had certainly worked. The beautiful stone courtyard before it was most impressive.

The atmosphere wasn’t particularly welcoming. As a matter of fact, the edifice seemed to discourage anyone who was not a member of the most powerful set to call. For surely, a person would feel exceedingly insignificant standing under that imposing portico.

But not Lily. Not this time.

The last time she’d been here with Violet, they had just returned from Paris with practically nothing, with scraps, with only her skills as a seamstress and her visions of dresses in her head...and the nightmares of her mother and father’s demise.

Together, shivering in clothes well suited for a warm Paris spring but gave no warmth in the damp of London, little Violet tucked in Lily’s arms, they had come to their grandfather. He had not even come to the door himself to see them, but sent word through his butler that he did not accept them.

The exact words had been: *send the brats out.*

It had been clear the old man thought that they would do better in a workhouse, because his blood was not to be tainted with that of a French tutor’s. He meant her father, the most loving man Lily had ever known.

Tainted. That’s what their grandfather had said, as if they carried some sort of sickness, as if their father had been a disease passed down to his children.

She was proud of her father. He had been an artist and a great man. He and her mother had died while still in love. And her grandfather had died alone and bitter.

Now, she and her sister were in almost as much danger as in the days when they’d first come from Paris. She lifted her hand and pounded the brass knocker, praying that all would be well, praying that they would gain admittance this time.

The door swung open, and the butler peered at them. This one did not appear nearly as kind as Elizabeth’s. And her teeth gritted, swallowing back a dramatic gasp.

She knew him. Good God, it was still the same man as all those years ago!

“I have come to see the Duke of Ashbridge,” she said with forced confidence, refusing to feel cowed.

The butler peered at her for a long moment before his nostrils flared as if he had caught a foul stench, then literally looked down his nose at her. “I remember you.”

“Do you?” she queried innocently.

“You are not to stand on this step,” he declared. “It was made clear to you before that you are not welcome here. Not then, not now. Not ever.”

Instead of backing away, she leaned forward. “That was made clear by the former Duke of Ashbridge. This new duke is different.”

He had to be. Or she was truly without a speck of hope.

“No Duke of Ashbridge wants anyone such as yourself here; that is for certain.” He waved his fingers at the street. “Turn about and go.”

“I will not,” she said, fighting the urge to stomp her foot on him. “The Duke of Ashbridge sought me and my sister out last night. We have an appointment.”

“I highly doubt that,” he scoffed. “He would’ve informed me if he’d invited you.”

“Would he?” She arched a brow. “Does he care so very much about your opinion, sir?”

He flinched, and she knew that she had hit a mark.

The Duke of Ashbridge, the *American*, did not care about this butler’s snobbish opinions. Perhaps this new duke *was* different. Perhaps he simply had yet to let go of this bully who guarded his door and kept away people who needed help.

She lifted her chin. “You will inform him at once that we are here.”

“I will not. Your grandfather’s wishes were plain,” the butler hissed. “You are not to come here. Go back to the East End and the gutters to which you belong.”

Violet let out a gasp, and it was all Lily could do not to use some of the tricks she had learned in the East End to remove the smug superiority from the butler’s face.

“The duke was to send for us this morning,” she countered. “Step back.”

“I shall not,” he said haughtily. “You are clearly mad. No doubt a pox has fallen on you and taken your brain. Soon you shall be in the Lock and your little sister—”

“You push me too far,” she said, her voice shockingly strong to her own ears. “It is time I pushed back.”

And so, she quite literally did. Lily shoved her way past the butler, dragging Violet into the house that should have been theirs.

Chapter Six

James had miscalculated.

He sat at the long, polished cherrywood breakfast table and poured out more coffee.

He was tempted to put his head into his hands and rail at the complicated nature of life.

But he did not allow himself to become dismayed by the state of the world. No, he was one who went out and conquered. He protected. He cut through the morass of difficulty. He did not become bogged down by it.

He relied on discipline and action.

One could not allow themselves to be pulled down by the weight of the calamity that occurred across the globe. If they did, they'd never get out of bed. And frankly, he had no desire to stay within the linen sheets of the monstrosity upstairs, though romping in it with a young lady was an appealing consideration.

A young lady like Miss Lily.

He'd been unable to put her out of his thoughts, as well as the severe miscalculation that he had taken.

He did not know why he had assumed that she would immediately jump at his offer to come here to reside with her sister. But then again it was no easy thing to put dreams aside. He knew. He had put them aside when he had scattered dirt upon his mother's coffin...

No doubt her dream of the dress shop had kept her going. But it would not keep her and Violet safe.

He could do that. And he would.

As a duke, his power had only increased, but his American family was a powerful one, even if he was the last of it now. They had been for a hundred years. His ships sailed around the world, and people generally did what he

said.

Lily had not.

He let out a low groan.

Derby, who had shown up twenty minutes ago, eager to hear the tale of the previous night's events, poured out coffee for himself and observed, "You did not drink enough last night to warrant such a sound."

"It isn't the drink," James replied.

"Then what is it?" Derby asked, looking ridiculously well for a man who had barely slept and likely debauched himself.

"A lady," he said.

"*Her?*" he drawled, waggling his brows as he snatched up a piece of toast and buttered it. Derby's lips curled with amusement. "That girl has you in twists. You barely talked to her. You walked her home, and what happened there? I must know."

"She is my ward's sister," he confessed.

Derby's mouth dropped open. "Did you—"

"Get your mind out of the gutter," he snapped.

Derby tsked. "I adore the gutter. You should spend more time there. Now, what happened?"

James snorted as he tore apart a bun. Truthfully, he didn't want to explain the calamity that had occurred. It was so odd. But he had felt a melancholy in that place, that cold, hard dress shop that should have been her refuge if she was indeed so talented at making gowns.

But it was clear it wasn't a refuge.

It was a prison, and she and Violet were held there. He'd wanted to free her. He *could* free them. If she would but see that he wasn't going to misuse her.

He decided to turn the tables on his friend to avoid the details of the night. "Did the barmaid pick your pockets?"

Derby gave a look of mock outrage. "What do you take me for, some innocent fool?"

"Innocent? No."

"No need to get into insults before I've had my coffee," Derby said with a wink. "It's not fair to battle with men who are not prepared."

"Ah," James disagreed. "That is absolutely the best time to battle with them. After all, I'm interested in winning, not coming in an honorable second."

Derby rolled his eyes. “And that is why, despite being an American, you are going to be ruler of the world. That’s the only reason I tolerate you.”

He sighed. “I’m not going to be the ruler of the world if the East India Company still has the power that it does,” James pointed out.

“You need more support.”

“Agreed.”

Derby eyed the stack of invitations beside James’s place. “How many of those bloody things do you have to go to?”

James groaned. “All of them.”

“All of them?” Derby echoed, his lips twitching. “But mamas and their darling daughters make you break out in hives.”

James scowled at the exaggeration. “I’ll do my damned duty until I leave in six weeks.”

“Duty is so exhausting,” returned Derby. And just as he opened his mouth to expostulate on the subject, there was a loud rising of voices outside the hall.

James’s butler, Davidson—whom he inherited along with the estate, could barely tolerate, and who enjoyed making his life difficult—cried out in alarm from the front of the house.

It was the first time he had ever heard Davidson make such a noise, and James stood quickly, knowing he was about to have to sort out the situation.

“Bloody hell, is there some sort of battle in the foyer?” Derby asked, swinging his gaze to the doorway.

“Who knows in this damned country?” he said.

Derby smirked. “Let’s go see who wins.”

They headed out toward the checkered black-and-white marble floor of the entry hall—

James stopped in his tracks, for there stood Lily in fiery glory. Her hair tumbled about her face, wild. Her eyes were wide like twin saucers of fury. Her thin cloak was dancing over her frame. Her hands were akimbo with frustration, and her sister stood a few feet behind.

And James suddenly felt a strange mix of relief, anger, and confusion.

The butler was demanding, “Get out. You are not welcome. You have had no invitation. No lady would—”

She huffed, “I absolutely have had invitation. Your master made it clear that we are to live here.”

She came. She had actually come to him. James could scarce believe it.

The butler snorted as he shooed at her. “That is not an invitation, and likely he had been drinking too much gin. The Duke of Ashbridge would never ask a person like *you* to take up this abode—”

“Davidson,” James ground out. “Be careful what you say next. For you are greatly mistaken about my character.”

The butler stopped, his entire body tensed, and he looked back at James so quickly and with such utter horror that his white wig swung off-kilter. “Your Grace?” he queried, his voice pitching up.

James clasped his hands behind his back. “I did indeed invite this young lady and her sister to live here. As is their right.”

“But she is—” The butler stopped himself.

James cocked his head to the side. “Yes?”

Davidson looked as if he was about to collapse.

“Do you require smelling salts?” James asked, his gaze narrowing.

Derby laughed. “Do you have smelling salts?” he asked the butler.

Davidson pulled a vial from his pocket, opened it, and wafted it under his nose, then said, “Where would you like me to take the young *lady* and her sister, Your Grace?”

The butler gestured toward them, his entire stance beleaguered as if he had been thrown out into the Thames like a diseased rat.

Lily and her sister smoothed the fronts of their gowns. Violet was beaming with childish glee, as if the whole thing she’d just witnessed was a play put on for her entertainment.

Then his gaze met Lily’s, and the look in those orbs nearly undid him.

For the relief in them spoke volumes. And in that instant, he knew he would never let anyone hurt her or make her feel afraid again.

James leveled Davidson with a hard stare. “Please take my ward and her sister to their rooms. I think the pink and blue would be the most suitable for them. They’re adjacent and very well appointed. And you will treat the *ladies* with respect due to those under the protection of the Duke of Ashbridge.”

Davidson’s face turned ashen. He bowed. “Of course, Your Grace. This way, young ladies.” The butler headed for the stairs, gesturing for Violet and Lily to join him.

Still, Lily paused, turning to him with wide, imploring eyes. “We need to discuss—”

“And we will,” James cut in gently, feeling her apprehension. “But your sister has had quite a morning, I think, as have you. Perhaps you would like

to take a moment to get accustomed to your surroundings, to rest. I'm sure that Violet needs a repast and a moment to collect herself. I will have something sent up to break your fast, and then, in a few hours, we shall meet and discuss the future. Does that sound amenable to you?"

She looked as if she was ready to argue, but then she stared at Violet, who appeared rather wan. "Yes," Lily relented. "Thank you."

And with that, she took her sister's hand and headed up the stairs with the butler, who was now treating them as if they were members of the royal house.

James watched the two ascend, rather pleased to have set Davidson straight and relieved that the girls were safe now. A strange feeling danced over him as he realized they were well and truly here.

"You're in for it, old boy," Derby said, clapping him on the back.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" he snorted.

"If you don't know, I shan't tell you," Derby replied.

James rolled his eyes and, without another word, turned on his booted heel and headed for the servants' door in the corner of the foyer.

"Where are we going?" Derby called.

"You may stay at breakfast if you wish, but I am to the kitchens."

Derby followed, his boots thudding on the marble. "The kitchens? Why in God's name?"

"Because I like to see to certain things myself," he informed him as he headed down the spiral stairs into the lower part of the house.

The kitchen was abuzz with activity, and he called out, "Mrs. Mason, a tray is needed for two very hungry young ladies."

Mrs. Mason paused in overseeing one of her scullery maids, wiped her gnarled hands on her aprons, and turned to face him. "Guests, Your Grace?"

He shook his head. "The granddaughters of the old duke."

Mrs. Mason gasped, and her eyes lit with amazement. "Will they be staying long?"

"Permanently, yes. So, we must take care of them."

"Indeed, we must!" she exclaimed as she clapped her hands together.

"Bread, butter—"

"Your Grace, I can do better than that," she cut in with enthusiasm.

"I'm glad to hear it," he replied. "We must make them feel most welcome."

"They always should have been welcome," she said.

"I heartily agree," he replied, pleased at her response.

Mrs. Mason nodded, then spurred the kitchen into a flurry of activity. And he gazed on, damned proud that Lily would be treated as she deserved. “You best be careful,” Derby said.

He arched a brow. “What do you mean by that?”

Derby paused. “The young lady—I saw how you looked at her.”

He tsked, adjusting one of the flower-painted cups that a maid had placed on a tray on the long work table before him. “I am merely relieved that she’s here and no longer living close to one of the most dangerous parts of London,” he said.

“Is that truly all?” Derby challenged.

He shot Derby a hard stare. “Of course it is. She’s the sister of my ward, and she’s under my protection.”

“There’s nothing in the will that says you need to protect her,” Derby pointed out.

“I’d be a cad if I didn’t, and her sister would never feel at ease.”

He gave Mrs. Mason a nod of approval as beautiful fruited buns were placed on the silver tray along with cheese and fruit.

“True,” Derby agreed. “I just want to make certain that you are going to be able to handle that firebrand in your house.”

Firebrand. It was an apt word.

“Why shouldn’t I be capable?” he queried, but even he had a moment’s pause.

Lily was a remarkable creature, but she was about to turn his world upside down. Of that, he had no doubt.

“Just as long as you know what you are about,” Derby replied.

Of course he did. He was a sea captain, he was formidable, he could handle anything...even long nights with a beautiful, passionate woman under his roof. Yes, he was made of stern stuff and wouldn’t be shaken by her presence. Truly.

Mrs. Mason clapped her hands again as soon as the tray was full to the brim with her treats and a piping-hot pot of tea. A perfectly starched maid swept it up into her arms and headed toward the back stairs.

“Thank you, Mrs. Mason,” James said.

She seemed quite overcome with the fact that the girls were back in their proper home and gave a quick nod and smile, then immediately turned and began scrubbing a pot.

Derby cleared his throat and gave him a skeptical stare.

“Look, Derby, if I can handle a squall in the Atlantic, surely I can handle such a vibrant young lady.”

At last, Derby’s lips twitched. “If you say so, old boy. If you say so.”

And he did say so. But he also knew this storm was going to be unlike any he’d ever experienced.

Chapter Seven

In the duke's massive London townhouse, Lily felt in awe of the wealth everywhere she looked. This was the kind of wealth that had meant death for a man in France. Those who had properties such as this had lost their heads.

Thousands had tried to quench Madame Guillotine's thirst. They had not succeeded.

She could not even imagine living in a place like this, though her earliest years had been comfortable.

This had been her mother's London home. She had often told Lily about it and all her privileges. About the houses with many, many rooms—how empty they were, how unpleasant, how unloving and yet beautiful. Her mother had never showed regret, not once, for their loss.

But she did always point out that they were made and decorated by great artists.

Artists like her father had hoped to be—and he had almost succeeded in Paris before the Terror.

Lily had understood then that one could realize the privilege of having such houses and disliking the owners while still admiring the artists who had made them.

Ashbridge House was truly a perfect example. Towering, beautiful, made in the fashion of the seventeenth century. The foyer was a soaring reflection of an era gone by. With its dark wood and beautiful frescoes, it stole her breath away, even if it was a tad dark.

Tapestries of the most beautiful depictions of Greek mythology were hung upon the walls. The beauty of them stole her breath.

And the duke was staring at her as if she was Persephone and he was Hades, and he could not wait to take her to his underworld.

It made her knees turn to jelly for a moment.

“Let us go,” he commanded, his voice a low hum. Delicious, dark, tempting.

He gestured to a hall, and she found herself doing exactly as he wished with Violet in tow. In truth, she was quite on edge. This was not familiar ground to her. In the East End, it had been far easier for her to have a conversation with him, when she’d felt she’d had the power and the understanding of the lay of the land.

But here, this was *his* home. He held the power.

She stared at his broad shoulders and the way he all but prowled with barely contained energy. His long, dark hair teased his shoulders like an obsidian mantle. In daylight, his eyes shone like dark stones in his tan face, which was completely unlike an Englishman’s. No doubt from all those hours at sea, at the mercy of the blazing sun.

And his body... It did the strangest things to her own. Something warm and thrilling tingled inside her at his nearness.

He did not have a coat on, just a waistcoat and his linen shirt, his breeches and boots. He was the picture of male perfection. Half the doxies in the East End would have done anything they could to get him in their corner and secure a position as his mistress.

When they reached a room that appeared to be his study, the duke stopped. “Perhaps your sister would care to go downstairs to the kitchens and meet Mrs. Mason, our cook, while you and I discuss the future.”

She stilled. She was going to be alone with him? The idea was both thrilling and rather shocking. She turned her gaze to Violet. “Would you like that?”

Violet gave a small nod.

“You must thank her for the lovely tray,” Lily urged, for it had satiated their hunger in a way that neither had known in years. If ever, since the death of their parents.

Ashbridge smiled, then called, “Mary, don’t be afraid. You can emerge.”

A maid darted out of the study with a brush and bucket in hand. “I’m so sorry, Your Grace. I got behind in me work today and I just finished—”

“Do not apologize,” he said. “Your presence is fortuitous. You can take Violet downstairs.”

Mary bobbed a quick curtsy, her perfectly pressed mob cap fluttering about her pink cheeks. She gave the duke a relieved and grateful smile before turning to Violet. “This way, miss.”

Lily gave her sister an assuring nod before Violet and the maid slipped off down the hall.

And with that, she was left alone with the duke.

It was a risk, but for all intents and purposes, she'd been alone with him on the street the night before and had not felt afraid. No, she'd merely felt off-center because he was unlike any man she'd ever known.

He was most definitely not like a typical duke. There was nothing distant or imperious about him, and as she strode into the study, her hands wound before her, she looked about.

The surroundings did not match him. There were dark shadows and paintings of dead pheasants...

"This room," she began.

"Yes." He let out a sigh. "It was my predecessor's, and frankly, I don't like it."

She swung her gaze to his. "Why?"

"Because it's cold, with not a hint of genuine emotion in it." He trailed his rough fingertips over a set of leather-bound books with gold embossments.

"I don't think he read much." A muscle tightened in his jaw. "The books appear unloved, and the topics are very limited in scope and understanding."

She shuddered. "How terrible."

"You like books?" he queried, his tone hopeful.

She smiled. "Yes. You see, my dearest friend runs a bookshop. It's called Sharpe and Sons."

His eyes widened at that. "Indeed. That's rather good to have, a friend who runs a bookshop."

"Yes." She nodded as she tried to slow her breathing in his presence. "It has allowed me to continue Violet's education."

"And on that subject," he said, his voice firming with his determination. "You shall take up rooms with Violet, and you shall ensure she is educated. I shall put whatever resources you require at your disposal."

She hesitated, but she could not look away from his obsidian eyes, which seemed to hook her soul as he gazed at her. Did he mean it? Could he?

"But I shall require a detailed timetable," he continued. "Everything should be run to the bell."

"What bell?"

"I have one that Davidson has learned to use. I brought it from the ship, and it helps the house keep track of time and schedule. It is rung on every

hour, at the least,” he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “At six bells, I rise. At seven bells, breakfast. At eight bells, a long walk, and so on.”

“You wish to bring life at sea to land?” she asked, trying to suppress her skepticism.

“It will do you both a world of good to have structure. It makes one feel... safe.”

Any temptation to voice suspicion at his bell evaporated, for as he uttered the word *safe*, she could have sworn she saw the small boy he had once been. And he was giving them so much.

Still, it felt austere and rigid. “Surely such a thing is not necessary for a small girl.”

His eyes narrowed. “The younger one is when one learns discipline in emotion and duty, the better.”

He was so generous, she hated to argue, but this rankled. They had escaped the rules of the dress shop. She wanted to protect Violet. “I agree to an extent, but one must also practice understanding and kindness—”

A muscle tightened in his jaw. “One can be understanding and kind *and* have discipline. And I have seen the effects of lack of schedule and discipline firsthand. I promise, Violet will be happier for it.”

She opened her mouth to argue but realized it would be better to hold back and come back to this another day. It seemed embedded deep within him, this need for the bell and schedule. “A bell it is.”

“Good.”

She nodded. “And now we must discuss the subject of my keep.”

“Your keep?” he queried, frowning.

“Yes indeed,” she affirmed. “I cannot live on your charity, Your Grace.”

He frowned again, which only made his shockingly handsome face more so. “It’s not charity. It is my duty to support you.”

“No, it is not,” she returned swiftly. “I am sure that there is nothing in my grandfather’s will that suggests so. Am I mistaken?”

This time, he scowled, his distaste for the deceased duke clear.

She swallowed back the last of her disappointment. “Ah, I am not mistaken. I know full well he had no love for me. As a matter of fact, I think he loathed me. I was a reminder of the loss of my mother, his darling daughter, to France. So let us be plain: you owe me nothing. You support Violet, and I am very glad, but I cannot live here without doing something to

maintain my keep. I have for the last decade run my own life, and the idea of being under your power, Your Grace, is—”

“Under my power?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

She cleared her throat, surprised by the effect that rumble had on her. “Yes, well that’s what I would be if I did not have a salary or if I did not supply you with some work in exchange for my living.”

“I see,” he said with a sigh. “I confess I must respect you in this, your desire to have independence away from me, and that I cannot dictate every aspect of your life.”

She felt her muscles release a degree of tension at his words. “I am glad you understand so very well, Your Grace. I was not certain you’d be easily convinced.”

“Easily convinced?” he scoffed. “I am not easily convinced. How do you propose that you earn your keep? For there are very few ways for a woman to do so.” A look of chagrin crossed his face. “Forgive me, I do not mean to intimate—”

“I do not think you are intimating anything, Your Grace,” she cut in. “I think you are stating facts. Some women must turn to men and the comfort of arms for employment, but I have fortunately been trained with other skills. I propose that you reimburse me for the education of Violet and that you appoint me your chatelaine.”

“Chatelaine?” he echoed. “Explain.”

“Yes, your housekeeper.” She licked her lips, then readied herself to launch into her proposal. “I shall arrange everything in this house, and not only that, I think that you should consider reappointing the furnishings.”

He looked about him. “It’s rather dreary, isn’t it?”

“It’s old, unpleasant, and permeated with my grandfather’s foul nature, and you know it,” she said plainly.

“Agreed.” He gave a firm nod. “I think it an excellent plan. I give you free rein and access to all the funds you need to make it happen.”

She blinked, stunned by how quickly he agreed, then mentally shook herself. It was his nature to act with efficiency, she was already learning, and she rather liked that about him. It was the reason they’d met, after all, and the reason her life had changed so dramatically in the last twenty-four hours. “Now,” she said, “tell me the style in which you would like the house done.”

“Style?” He shook his head. “I beg your pardon?”

She grinned. “Surely there are styles of ships.”

He laughed. "Indeed. There are many various styles of ships, from galleons to sleek smugglers. I suggest that we have a sort of galleon, but more of the American style and less of the Spanish."

She hid her dismay. "You are hoping for austerity. I have read about Puritanism."

"Not Puritanism," he blurted. "I don't have a desire to sit on a wooden bench for hours at a time."

A laugh rippled past her lips, and it felt good. "May I suggest the French style? It can be very simple but absolutely beautiful."

"Perhaps there is a meeting in the middle," he ventured. "After all, the Americans and the French were allies for many years. Perhaps the simplicity of American colonial style with some of the pleasures of the French."

She beamed, ideas beginning to dance through her head. "It sounds like a merry meeting, an ideal one."

"Doesn't it?" he said softly.

She swallowed. "Well then, I shall take it underway immediately. Do you have a room with which you'd like me to start?"

"Your rooms, of course," he said quickly. "They should be done to your liking. And this study. If I am honest, it is a horrible state of affairs, with dead birds everywhere. What will you do with the money that you earn?"

She smiled slowly. "I will take the money that I earn and do with it as I please."

"Fair play, Miss Lily," he said. "I ask only that I am not forced to gaze upon bleeding animals. I don't mind a hunt, but not if it's only for sport. I believe one should eat what one kills."

She stared at him for a long moment. She felt her heart softening then. He was such an enigmatic figure. Terse, strong, a man of action and yet not of cruelty.

"You will be pleased," she declared boldly.

He arched a dark brow. "I'm not easily pleased, Lily, so be careful making such a promise."

"I promise," she said, determined to succeed. For her future and her dreams depended on her success.

Chapter Eight

As James quickly scanned the reports at the breakfast table the next morning, he picked up the bell he'd sent for from his ship—an extra—and rang it seven times, just as the French clock over the mantel dinged the hour of seven.

He'd been up for two hours already, for he always rose with the sun. The first bell had been rung at six, but he had not invaded the young ladies' privacy.

Besides, he'd been making note of which ships would dock in London this year before traveling the world.

He'd have to go down to the docks later today and converse with his men to make certain the new offices were going to be ready to open in a few weeks' time. And then he could get out of London.

It would be a great relief.

He refused to miss the launch of his new ship in Boston. And he couldn't neglect the head office for longer than a few more weeks.

Though he still felt some unease about who was going to run his ducal estates in England. He didn't trust the English land agents.

They were skilled at their jobs, but giving all of his lands and power over to a hired man who could easily wield that power to harm gave him pause. He'd always had a strong hand in all his domain, and now it felt difficult to let it go.

It did not matter that he didn't care about the English aristocracy. He was in charge of the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of people with his vast lands and concerns now.

"Look at all of that," a voice piped from the doorway, only moments after the last bell note traveled through the house.

He snapped his gaze up from his reports.

Violet stood in the doorway in her simple gown, her blue eyes huge in her

pale, thin, heart-shaped face. She was staring at the table with its silver dishes upon it, filled to the brim with all sorts of savories.

Violet swung her gaze to him, hesitating.

“Come in, then,” he urged, putting his report down. “It’s all here for you, you know.”

“For me?” Violet gaped and darted into the room and dashed onto a seat. She scanned the table like a child before a sweet shop.

Lily entered at a slightly more sedate pace, but her eyes were equally round. “This is all for us?”

He gave a quick nod. “Indeed. I asked Cook to make certain there was a good breakfast. Violet needs her strength, as do you, if you are to go on your walk.”

“I like walking,” Violet said, clearly trying not to grab at the food and maintain her manners. “But there’s never a chance to do it where I’m from. The streets are far too muddy, and there are too many dodgy people about.”

“I think you shall greatly enjoy Hyde Park,” he said, turning back to his papers.

Violet studied the perfectly toasted bread, but before taking anything, she said, “Would you take us to the Serpentine this morning?”

The duke froze. “You wish me to go with you?”

“Yes, please!” Violet took a bite, chewed furiously, then added, “We’ve never been to such an exclusive park!”

Lily rushed, “Surely His Grace is far too busy.”

“Oh, do come, Your Grace,” Violet protested. “It is our first day with your suggested schedule.”

He looked to the thick stack of papers but then glanced back to Violet’s hopeful face. “One must take their responsibilities and duties seriously.”

Violet’s face dropped with disappointment “Of course, Your Grace. I understand—”

But then he winked at Violet. “I am here to ensure that Violet grows into a sound young woman.”

“I thought that was my role,” Lily said with a smile.

“It is,” he agreed. “But there’s nothing wrong with supervising and making certain that it all goes to order. That’s what a captain does, after all.”

“So, what does that make me?” Lily teased, her gaze turning playful. “Your first mate?”

A laugh boomed out of him. “Quite possibly. Now you must sit, Lily.”

And she did, easing herself down into the chair next to his and across from Violet.

Her calming scent of lavender wafted toward him, but the effect wasn't calming at all. His entire body seemed to crackle with a hum of desire, and as he glanced at her, some wild part of him longed to reach out and take her hand in his.

"I don't know where to begin," Violet breathed with awe as she studied the food.

Thankful she pulled his attention away from Lily, he leaned in toward Violet and said with all seriousness, "I suggest the rashers. They're absolutely delicious. And the toast is quite marvelous. Cook bakes the best bread, and the butter is sent down from the country."

Violet let out a sigh of pleasure and snatched one of everything, putting it all onto her plate. She buttered the toast and then took a bite. She let out a heavenly sound. "I cannot recall the last time I had butter."

Lily smiled. "We are very fortunate to have so much, Your Gr— *James*. Thank you."

He looked at the table through their eyes and realized, yes, they did have so much. How little had Lily and her sister made do over the years? It was a bit shocking to understand that so many in this part of town had more than those in the East End could ever dream of.

"Eat," he said. "You look as if you have been on the sort of rations when one has been at sea too long."

"Yes, Captain," she teased, then picked up a slice of toast, buttered it, and took a more delicate bite than Violet. Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment. The ecstasy he saw there caused him to tighten his hands on his papers.

He would not think of it. No. He was simply going to go on a walk with them because he wished to make certain that Violet was in good health. And that they followed his regimen. Setting up an established schedule was important. Yes, that was all. But he could not help himself from looking back to Lily, who was enjoying the toast immensely.

"What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"I am going through the reports of my business," he said. "And then I'm going to have to go through my estate agent's reports as well."

"That seems like a great deal of work," she observed as she poured herself a cup of tea. "I'm accustomed to doing books, you know. If you'd like me to look at any of them—"

“You’re accustomed to doing books?” he cut in, surprised.

“Madame Josephine was terrible with any sort of reports, and I ran most of the shop for her...as well as doing most of the designing.”

“And that is likely why you feel that you would be a successful dress shop owner,” he observed. “Because you are capable of not just making the dresses, but running the actual shop?”

“That is correct,” she agreed, puffing her chest out a bit. “My mother and father were extremely skilled in all they did. My father had his own art gallery in Paris and was modestly successful. Mama made certain that I understood mathematics, organization, and the running of a household.”

“Did she indeed?” His mind was beginning to spin; with what, he wasn’t certain. But he felt sure that there was something in what she was saying. Something that might benefit them both.

She gestured to the breakfast room. “Nothing so vast as your estates, but it did take a great deal of skill.”

His thoughts sped apace as he considered her. If she could run things... No, he would not even begin to think it. He could not ask more of her than he already had.

She looked at the stack of invitations by his teacup. “Heavens!” she exclaimed. “Will you be attending all of those?”

He groaned. Derby had made a similar observation just the day before. The invitations never relented. “They arrived this morning. I have to make acquaintances so that I have political influence in this country. Apparently, I can’t just receive what I wish because I wish it.”

Her lips twitched. “How interesting. I rather would’ve thought that you did. You have such an air about you.”

He coughed on a sip of tea before he continued. “As a captain, I am used to telling people what to do, it’s true. I also know, as a captain, that gaining people’s favor definitely helps influence how they think about you. If they will do what you ask with ease or reluctance.”

He ground his teeth before he added, “And right now, they see me as an American invading their realm of power, taking up a position that should have been theirs.”

Lily narrowed her eyes. “How frustrating,” she declared. “Even as a duke, you are not quite seen as—”

“Belonging,” he cut in.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Perhaps that is something that we have in

common.”

Perhaps they had many things in common. It was an interesting thought.

How had she survived so long, so alone?

He had been alone, too, most of his life. It had been hard and lonely, but at least he'd had the wealth of his family. She'd had none of that, and now he wanted to give it to her.

He wanted to see her not just survive but live fully, to see the pain and suffering that occasionally crossed her face disappear.

“Do you like being a captain?” Violet asked around a bit of rasher, breaking his reverie.

Lily tsked. “Do not speak whilst you are eating.”

Violet swallowed, then grinned.

“You'd fit in well with my sailors,” James teased. “But to answer your question, yes. I do like being a captain.”

Violet tilted her head to the side, her eyes lit with questions. “Is it difficult to sail a ship?”

“Not so very hard if you know what you're doing. Experience makes anything easy.” He took up a blank piece of paper from his reports and began to fold it.

“What are you doing?” Violet asked.

Lily leaned forward, looking intrigued as well, and he found he quite liked being the object of her interest. Her gaze made him feel warm, alive, as if anything was possible.

“I am making you a ship,” he replied. “And you shall sail it today.”

“Shall I?” Violet exclaimed, beaming.

He caught Lily's gaze on him. The look in her eyes—it stole his breath. And for one moment, he was certain he'd never be able to look away, but rather he'd fall into those depths, where he would either drown...or find himself.

“Indeed,” he said to Violet, though he could still feel Lily watching him. “And I will teach you how to be a great captain.”

Chapter Nine

“Right. Mrs. Mason,” Lily began, taking a deep breath as she stood in the immaculate and very busy kitchen. “A veritable army of tradesmen and shopkeepers shall be descending upon the house today to begin work. I have written them all several letters in detail, telling them exactly what is necessary.”

Mrs. Mason’s eyes widened, but she was rapt, as if feeling the first hints of excitement in years.

Heartened by her attention and burgeoning enthusiasm, Lily continued. “Boxes, crates, and furnishings shall also be arriving. We must be prepared for them.” Lily gave the cook a bright smile. “This is where you become essential, Mrs. Mason. We must have copious amounts of tea, coffee, sandwiches, cheese, and fruits. We want them to be delighted and never have a moment’s negativity or ill thought about them so that the house is turned on its head and infused with pleasure and good feeling.”

Mrs. Mason blinked at her. Tears shone in those orbs for a moment before she dabbed them with the end of her stiff apron. “What a marvelous idea, Miss Lily. How you are like your mother.”

“Am I?” she echoed, astonished and pleased. It was the strangest reply to her rather long list of requests. Though she had made those requests with a merry soul, she hoped. One that would do her mother proud.

Mrs. Mason stared at her with those misty blue eyes, her silver hair pulled back rather tightly from her face, with a mob cap bouncing upon it. Her austere kitchen outfit was pristine. Not a single stain upon it. She did not know how Mrs. Mason managed such a feat. It was most impressive.

“You are,” Mrs. Mason affirmed. “Your enthusiasm, your joy, and your love of beautiful things and food. The way you just spoke to me. It was as if your mother was here again.”

“You knew her well,” Lily said, her throat tightening.

Mrs. Mason gave a nod. “Very. She used to come down to the kitchen, and I would give her lemon biscuits and milk. We would have the most wonderful chats about the flowers she had found and the poetry that she’d read. I didn’t understand a great deal of it, but I was happy to listen to her and provide her with sweets.”

“It sounds like she had someone who cared about her,” Lily said, her throat still tight.

Oh, what a different life her mother had led!

“Your grandfather? He spoiled her, you know,” Mrs. Mason said with a note of sorrow. “Anything she wished, she could have, but he had had his eyes on a grand marriage for her, you see, with a duke and nothing less. Your mother? Well, she always had her own ideas and went her own way. Your grandfather loved that...until he did not.”

“I’m rather proud of her,” Lily said.

“You should be.” Mrs. Mason wound her gnarled hands together. “And you are here today. You would not be if your mother had not acted so boldly. When I found out that the duke had insisted you come here, child, I could not tell you the joy that danced through my heart.”

“Oh, Mrs. Mason,” Lily declared, full of emotion for a moment. “Then, let’s just do everything we can to make the duke’s house perfection for him. Let’s show the world that the Duke of Ashbridge can be gracious with a home that is beautiful and wonderful and full of art, and not hate and hiding away and bad humor.”

Mrs. Mason clapped her hands together. “If you tell me that we are to start having dinners of twenty again, I shall be positively thrilled.”

“Then, Mrs. Mason, we must,” Lily enthused.

The door knocker pounded vigorously.

No doubt Davidson was about to get that.

“Now, we shall strive to have no more darkness in this house,” she said to Mrs. Mason.

“No,” the older woman agreed. “It spoils the milk.”

She laughed, and with that, she whirled on her heel and headed up the stairs.

Davidson looked quite perplexed as he opened the door and tradesman after tradesman came in with their slightly rough accents but well-appointed outfits. She was always interested in the tailoring of the middle class. They

couldn't afford the sumptuous fabrics and jewels of the upper classes, but many of them still had quite good garments, and everything was either made to order or bought recently used.

"Good day, good day," she said to each of them as they came in, giving them smiles and nods. "Please bring in everything right away."

The tradesmen smiled to her, obviously eager to be in the employ of a duke.

Immediately, their eyes were turning up to the foyer, to the soaring ceiling, and she felt her spirits lighten because the house was about to be transformed to what it should be.

Violet bounced down the stairs, smiling, clearly happy from a good breakfast and reading her morning materials. Her new tutor in the classics and Latin would be arriving on the morrow and she was striving to be prepared.

"Who are all these people?" her sister exclaimed.

Lily drew in an excited breath. "They're the people that the duke asked me to hire so that we can transform his house into a home."

Violet beamed. "How exciting!" Then her smile faded. "But I'm to have lessons all day."

Lily winked at her and held out her hand. "You shall come with me because there shall be plenty of lessons in the various styles of art and architecture. The duke has had a most interesting idea about the combination of American aestheticism with French pleasure, and I like it. So we shall make everything simple but absolutely beautiful."

This was a new day and a new opportunity. Violet took her sister's hand as Lily felt her spirits lift with anticipation. "Come along."

Violet nibbled her lower lip, then ventured, "If we do, do you think he'll be interested in lingering about more?"

"Would you want that?" she asked softly.

Violet nodded. "Yes. I quite like him."

Lily wanted to reply that truthfully, she liked him, too, but it seemed far too daring a thing to admit, as she was not an innocent young girl like Violet, and so she would not.

"Follow me," she urged, waving to several of the tradesmen who followed her like eager puppies down the hall and into the duke's study.

She'd been making long lists of the things that she wanted. Most of them were in wagons outside already. She liked to plan, and she liked to prepare.

There was no point in wasting time.

“Right, let’s start taking things down at once.”

The tradesmen’s eyes widened at the vast task.

“You brought boys, did you not?” she queried.

“Of course,” one of them said. “Several lads, as you requested. What would you like us to do with these things?”

She lifted her gaze to her grandfather’s possessions, his bitterness all but wafting off of them. “Take them out to your wagons, resell them, and donate the money to charity.”

Something good could come of those bad memories.

She only prayed the duke would approve.

...

“Darrow, I want lists of all the coordinated dockings for the next year,” James instructed. “It is essential that we have this as close to perfect as possible.”

Darrow, a young but very capable clerk, nodded most seriously. “Of course, Your Grace. I shall have it cross-referenced for you and have multiple copies of the various ledgers given out to everyone in the office.”

James pulled on his gloves. “Good, Darrow. I’m glad to know that you will be able to handle things when I am gone.”

Darrow had been a sailor, a captain in the British Navy, and had spent some time too on private merchantmen. He had then studied. Over the last few weeks, he’d proven daily that running the shipping office in London for James’s company would not overtax him.

The offices were four stories high, gleaming, and everything in them brand new. Darrow had seen to that, and James had been consumed with the proper hiring of the clerks who would run the lists of cargo that filled the ships, the names of the ships, the comings and goings, the ports, the dockings, the crew, and the procurement of captains and their mates. It was no small thing, the coordination of sailings all about the globe.

“I shall see you tomorrow,” James said. “You should go have dinner, Darrow.”

Darrow blew out a breath but looked quite on top of things. “I will go and have oysters, Your Grace, as soon as I have finished for the evening and not a moment before.”

“Whatever you say, Darrow. In this, I trust you.” And James did. With that,

he turned from the offices buzzing with activity with men going back and forth, making certain that the London docks would be ready for the arrival of a fleet of American ships.

James headed out to the busy street, full of life, full of sailors, full of merchantmen, full of people from all around the world come to the great port city. England was not his favorite place, but it was still a sight to behold, this teeming mass of humanity all come together in the vast network of shipping.

He turned toward the west. When he was on a ship, he could not go for long walks except for about his decks. This was an opportunity he could not pass up, and so he strode through the city, going up Fleet Street, back toward the wealthy, prestigious parks.

It had been a long day, a fruitful one but exhausting, and as he spotted his house, he realized that there were builders departing, their supplies and tools—many he recognized—under their arms.

“Good day, Your Grace,” some called.

“Good day to you,” he said amiably.

They all looked surprised and quite pleased that he spoke to them. James could not ever see himself above working men. He didn’t really understand why English people felt the need for such ranking.

As he crossed into the foyer, he caught sight of Lily.

She was whirling about, books in her arms. “You’re here!” she gasped.

“Indeed I am.”

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes bright as her curls danced against her cheek. “I’m glad of it! There is more to do, but you shall see what we have accomplished.”

And the truth was seeing her, well, it did something to him. It made him feel as though he longed for this to be home.

“Come,” she said. “I have something to show you.”

“I have had quite a long day, Lily. I think I should go up and take a bath and—”

“No,” she countered firmly. “You must come with me.”

Her forcefulness astonished him, and he found he liked it. “Lead on, then, Miss Lily.”

And she turned quickly, her skirt swaying about her perfect body. He found himself enamored. No, he would not let his mind go to the curve of her hips beneath her gown. He lifted his gaze higher to the tendrils at her neck. Worse, he imagined sweeping those tendrils aside, gently caressing his fingertips

down the nape and pressing his lips to the tender curve.

“Look!” she exclaimed.

He blinked, yanking his thoughts away from sensuality as he stepped into his study.

“What have you done?” he gasped.

She halted. “Oh dear. You weren’t jesting. You aren’t easily pleased.”

“No, Lily, this is...” He gazed around, unable to articulate his wonder. It was so different than what he had left in the morning. “How did you do this in a day?”

She smiled, clearly relieved. “I told you that you would be pleased. I am a worker of miracles,” she teased.

“And you are,” he breathed, turning slowly to take it all in. “I should have hired you to run my shipping offices.”

“Perhaps you should try that next,” she said.

“Perhaps I will, though Darrow will be most upset to be out of a job.”

“Oh, I would not delight to take away something from an eager young man,” she rushed. “I far prefer this sort of work.”

He laughed at that. “I can imagine you on a ship, though, running everything and telling people where to go.”

“One day perhaps I’ll get to try it,” she said, though she seemed skeptical. “I prefer pins and silk and walls and paintings.”

“I can see that,” he said.

As he strode about the study, he found himself full of awe. Gone were the old things. Paintings filled the green silk-covered walls—paintings of ships: vast, beautiful galleons and sleek two-masters going across the sea in the mist, the most beautiful colors, unlike anything he’d ever seen.

They lacked the formality of the older paintings that he was accustomed to. “Who did these?”

“A young artist,” she informed. “He is quite the thing at the Royal Academy. I sent word and said that we needed several pieces and, well, he had some in stock, of course, because young artists do have trouble selling sometimes, and he was happy to part with them for a good fee.”

“I am happy to support young artists,” he said. “People should be paid for their work.”

And he was mystified by how suddenly the room had changed. It felt as if he was about to be transported with its beauty. The furniture had been changed to a cherrywood. It was no longer dark and oppressive but bright and

inviting. Maps from every corner of the globe were on every surface.

Globes themselves, and astro globes, were positioned about the room.

Representations of the stars hung from the ceiling, and he found himself gasping in amazement.

How had she understood that his life was governed by the stars? The pole star, Cassiopeia, Orion...

He had to know them all to make certain that he brought his ship safely into port.

The books that lined the shelves were all treatises on philosophy, on the possibilities of humankind. He spotted Burke and Montaigne and Voltaire. "It's as if you have looked into my very soul," he whispered.

She blushed. "Well, I had some good ideas about you from the conversations that we have had."

"Am I so very transparent?" he murmured.

"You are not transparent at all, but somehow," she said, "somehow I knew that this was you. It is a gift I have for seeing people and what would be good for them, but this...this was different. I knew that this is who you are. Stars and ships and maps and bright, beautiful things."

Stars and ships and bright, beautiful things. For a moment he could not speak at her summation of him.

"Well done, Lily," he managed to breathe.

"Are you pleased?" she queried softly.

He shook his head, struggling to find words. "I cannot even begin to express how much."

"Try," she teased, and he laughed.

"I did the right thing," he said, "putting this all into your hands, didn't I?"

"You did, indeed," she agreed, beaming.

And he knew that she was going to be able to look after so much when he was gone. The thought caused a painful ache in his heart, and he gazed down at her, a part of him wishing that he would never have to leave.

Chapter Ten

“I have a dilemma, Your Grace,” Lily ventured, though it was quite difficult to admit. Only one week into her new role here as house manager, and already she was encountering a need to hesitate, lest she supersede his wishes.

He tensed and groaned, “You do not need to call me Your Grace. Can you not at least call me Ashbridge? Or James, preferably?”

“James...” she said slowly, the name rolling off her tongue.

How she adored it. It was a good name, a strong name, and it matched him. She studied his broad shoulders and stared at his hard face. There was something about him, something captivating and infuriating all at once.

As if he might be able to solve her problems but also create a ream of new ones.

“I fear I am spending too much, and I need you to take a quick look over the numbers. I should hate to gain your displeasure.”

“I told you to spend freely.”

“Yes, but the funds are not mine. So, I wish to have your approval.”

He turned to his desk, pulled the brandy stopper from his decanter, and poured them two drinks.

“It is rather early,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but I think we both can use a fortifying moment.”

“That bad, is it?” she asked ruefully, concerned he was already displeased.

“Frankly? Yes,” he ground out. “For you do not yet trust your place here and my word. Would you rather I ask for champagne? Instead of cursing life, we can celebrate your future here?”

“No,” she countered, eyeing the amber-hued liquid sloshing around the cut crystal decanter. The truth was, she could not trust him or his word. She was no fool, nor was she naive...even if she liked him. “Brandy seems more

suitable. Given my position.”

He then took the snifters up and brought one to her. “Show me the figures.”

She nodded, then turned toward the small book on the table. She flipped it open. “Here.”

He perused the columns and let out a sigh, which caused her stomach to tighten.

“Spend more,” he stated.

“More?” she asked, astonished.

“Yes, because I want you to understand that I meant it. You must trust yourself in your new role. And me. I will not castigate you for following instructions.”

Pointedly, he handed over the crystal. She reached out for it, and for a moment their fingertips brushed.

Her pulse leaped in her throat, and her eyes widened as a sensation of hunger—not for the brandy, but for him—slid up her arm.

Quickly, she pulled back and focused on the expensive glass.

One of those crystal cut items could pay her rent for a year. Just one.

“Whatever you need,” he said, “I shall supply. Clothes, books, personal items.” He took a long drink of brandy, which left a sheen on his lower lip.

A sheen she wished to taste with her tongue—

My goodness... Suddenly she could not quite catch her breath.

She eyed her brandy, lifted it, and drank half in one go.

She coughed at the intensity. Unlike many of the young women from her part of town, she truly avoided the liquid. Of any kind. She’d seen the road it led down. No gutters for her, or trading herself for a drink, thank you very much.

The alcohol burned down her throat much like the desire that had just laced through her as she considered her body entwining with his.

The act that girls said made a man lose his wits and worship a girl like a goddess... For a few moments.

And though she had never engaged in those acts herself, she suddenly wondered what they would be like with *him*. Her cheeks flushed as she looked up at him, and his mouth parted.

Those sensual lips... She wondered what they would be like upon hers, and if he planned on doing as she imagined.

He said nothing, but he smiled so slowly.

There was something sinful about that smile, and she felt it warm her very

core.

Perhaps it was the strain of the last hours, but if he pulled her into his arms right now, she would not resist. Fool or no. She wanted to know what his body felt like against her own.

It was dangerous, this sudden feeling inside her.

So, she blew out a breath and ignored that bloody seductive smile.

Lily clutched the snifter so hard she could feel the pattern cut into the crystal pressing into her palm, determined to focus on the necessities rather than the pleasures. "I am not accustomed to people giving to us. Just..."

"I have no desire to harm or take from you, Lily," he said, his voice a soft rumble.

She gazed up at him and wanted to believe him. He had no desire to hurt her, to take from her, or to use her.

But how could she truly trust that?

"If that is true," she began, "then you will not mind if I still pursue my dress shop. It is my..."

"Dream," he finished softly.

She lifted her chin and dared to declare, "It is."

His gaze traced over her visage. "Then of course you must."

She gasped. "You agree so easily?"

"I am a man of trade," he pointed out. "Why should I stop you?"

And whether it was the moment, or the brandy, or some strange force she could not understand, she parted her lips, shocked at the sparks dancing in her body...

Sparks mirrored in his eyes.

Chapter Eleven

If James had told her he did not desire her, it would be the lie of all lies. So, he kept his mouth shut as they both swayed toward each other for a single instant.

Desire wasn't even the right word, as he took in her face. He hungered for her. It was a tantalizing ache. A longing...

He felt an affinity to her, a need to be one with her...

It was the power in her, the defiance, the way she stood against society, and the way she had defended herself and her sister. The way she had not easily taken up his rescue, that she wanted to rescue herself.

That fire inside her left him with embers of need in his body. Embers ready to be fanned to flame. He felt the heat lace through his blood, and so despite the discipline that usually ruled his life, he enveloped her in his arms, lowered his mouth to hers, and took her in a fiery kiss.

James tilted her back, devouring her mouth, consumed by a need to consume her and be consumed by her. He did not allow himself to think of anything but this moment.

He wanted to awaken the pleasure within her because clearly she had known little.

It seemed she had toiled away her entire life without getting anything in return. And he could give her so much—not just money, not just power, but pleasure. He could give her a life the likes of which she had never even dreamed.

And that filled him with such hunger, such need, that he did not want to stop. The kiss turned wild as his breath turned ragged. He teased the line of her lips with his tongue. She gasped against his mouth, and he let his tongue slip between her lips. Their tongues tangled. His hands roved over her back, and he pulled her hips up toward him.

He wanted to take her there. To devour her.

He wanted to take her to his desk and show her exactly what pleasure could happen between a man and a woman in that moment.

That it wasn't just a quick exchange or a transaction of coin or power. Something she'd likely learned in the East End.

But he knew he was going too fast, too hard, and he would overwhelm her with it.

There was also the fact she might hate him if he was ruled by passion instead of honor. For though she was not legally under his protection, he did not want to take advantage of his position.

And though it nearly killed him, he pulled away slowly, breaking the tension in the chamber. What was he doing? He knew the danger of intimacy.

He'd been damned careful to keep his heart cold and free from the temptations of love.

Love? Love tempted people down roads from which they could not return. Love tempted them to lose themselves, as his mother had done.

She'd given herself entirely to love and lost herself on a road that took her to misery. That desperate love for his father had destroyed her. And him.

Good God, he'd barely survived the year after his father died. He'd barely survived the way his mother had succumbed to grief and misery.

She had turned her face away from him and never looked back, and he had never...

No, he would not think of that now; he could not. That way lay sorrow and pain and bitterness, and he did not let himself be ruled by those things. No. He chose action, strength, discipline.

Those were the only things that mattered in this life.

The rest? The rest was the path to despair.

"I have to go out," he said abruptly. "I'm sure that you have a great deal of work to do. The sooner your new gowns are completed, the more content you and Violet shall feel."

She flinched. "I am sorry that I am not up to your standards, Your Grace."

He wanted to kick himself, and he cupped her cheek. "Damn it all, that's not what I meant. You deserve so much. And I'm going to make sure you get it. But the kiss... I should not have done it."

"We," she whispered. "We should not have done it. I refuse to apologize for it, but now I am afraid you will not think well of me. My sister and I..."

He caught her chin and locked gazes with her, determined to alleviate some

of her load. “Your sister and you have survived. And I admire you greatly for that.”

Even now, as he slowly drew himself back, his hands protested. For they longed to pull her skirts up to her hips, to wander, to tease her, to give her pleasure and show her exactly what could happen between them.

But not today, not now. Surely, not ever.

He could not lose focus on exactly what he was here for. A London office and support to stop the East India Company. And debauching his ward’s sister was the last thing he should do.

And with that, he turned on his heel and headed for the door. But something stopped him at the doorway. He paused and gazed back at her, taking in her curls tumbling about her face, her eyes wide and her lips parted.

He gripped the doorframe and said, “All will be well. Truly.”

A shadow crossed her face then, for clearly, life had taught her that even if all would be well, much pain could ensue in the process.

James strode out into the hall, determined to keep ahold of himself, because in her arms he had felt the slight tugging of a thread, and it gave him alarm. If that thread was pulled, pulled too hard, it might unravel him.

...

Lily could barely breathe as she tried to untangle her thoughts.

In all her life, she’d experienced nothing like the power of his kiss. She stood in the center of the study, amazed.

All the books, all the plays, all the poems, bawdy songs, or stories by the firelight, never could have prepared her for the wild, raw power of the Duke of Ashbridge.

His body, dear heaven! It had been hard and strong, completely alive and vital, and that power had slipped into her blood. She’d not wanted the kiss to end. She’d wanted him to take her in his arms, devour her, make her his. It had been the most irrational moment of her life.

She had never succumbed to anything like it before. And oh how she’d wanted to give in to the feeling.

She had never given way, and she still would not. The dangers were too serious, and she’d never forget that. She squeezed her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palms, willing any weakness away.

And though the kiss had felt like heaven, his lips perfectly made for her own, she cursed herself for a thousand fools for letting him kiss her.

Let? She'd all but demanded it!

Oh, she'd wanted it, and oh, how she'd reveled in it. But what if he had tried more? Would she have been able to stop him? Would she have wanted him to?

It had been like an intoxicating force.

But she had no desire to be intoxicated by anything or anyone.

She wanted to stay in control.

She *had* to stay in control. She could not lose herself with him, because if she did, she could lose sight of everything else.

Chapter Twelve

“And we launch our good ship, the *Lady Relentless!*” the Duke of Ashbridge called out with a cheer as the small paper boat went out onto the Serpentine in Hyde Park.

The daily ritual of a walk after the eight o’clock bell and the ever more impressive paper boats was now achieved without fail. It had been two weeks now, and every day, they went out together. The duke was constantly busy. He was constantly gone during the day, but he never missed a single morning walk.

Lily could not state the effect this had had upon Violet. And, dare she say, herself. The strength of his presence, the turn of his lips in humor, and the kindness he showed to Violet... It filled her heart with something she could not name.

There were many moments when they walked along Rotten Row in which she wished she could slip her hand into his and feel the comfort of that warm, strong hold.

Instead, they walked closely together, side by side, their gloved fingertips brushing.

Violet ran ahead, dancing along the bank of the Serpentine, skipping and cheering as her boat headed toward Kensington Gardens.

They went merrily along, the duke happily watching Violet. For such a powerful man, he had a kindness that surprised Lily.

“You seem to know children very well,” she said.

He kept his gaze trained on Violet. “I’ve had many aboard ship. They often serve as young as eight years of age.”

“Eight?” she exclaimed.

“It is tradition,” he replied. “Only boys, though, not girls.”

“But who cares for them?” Her insides twisted as she recalled having to

become both mother and father to Violet.

“The captain,” he explained. “Sometimes the first mate, and they do very well.”

“I would imagine it depends on the captain,” she replied.

“I won’t disagree there, but isn’t that true of life?” he pointed out, his long coat brushing against her skirts as they followed the path. “A child’s life depends on the parents, it depends on the teachers, and it depends on the world they are born in. I did not have such an easy beginning with my parents.”

His face hardened for a moment, and as though the words were hard to say, he rumbled, “I was glad to go to sea. I finally felt as if I was secure, as if I had a place once I was aboard.”

“I suppose I can understand,” she said, surprised by his conviction. A wave of envy hit her, and she frowned.

“Did you never find that?” he asked and gazed down at her.

“No,” she stated. “I never found belonging or a place. Not really. But I did find some contentment when I was working with the other girls, sewing.”

“And do you miss it?”

“Madame Josephine’s?” She let out a little laugh. “No.”

“Not the place or the work,” he explained. “Do you miss the companionship you’ve lost?”

“Well, I have you,” she mused. “So I’ve not lost it.”

He seemed to startle at that. “You...have me?” he queried.

“Our daily walks.” She brushed the ribbons of her bonnet over her shoulder. “You are my company and my conversation now.”

“Only me?” he said. “Surely, now that you have normal working hours, you shall have more opportunity to socialize and make many friends.”

She shook her head, surprised by his naïveté. “I will never be included in society. But it will improve once Elizabeth returns.”

“Your friend,” he said.

“Exactly,” she said. “She was my light in the darkness, and I hers.”

Her gaze swung to the people staring at them. Ladies in their feathered hats spoke swiftly behind their fans, from their perches in their lavish open carriages. She licked her lips, a hint of discomfort whispering through her. “Have you noticed?” she asked. “How everyone watches us?”

“We are an odd pairing,” he said with a shrug. “A duke and a dressmaker.” She laughed. “I suppose that’s true.”

But despite their lighthearted words, he was scanning the crowd now. “They are staring,” he said, his brow furrowing.

“You did not notice before?”

“Why would I observe sheep?” he said.

She groaned. “Oh, to have the lofty privilege of someone who can ignore others.”

“You have lived your life without paying attention to the judgment of the ton,” he pointed out.

“No,” she corrected, “I have never been let in. There is a vast difference.”

“Would you care for their opinion if you were part of them?” he asked.

“I suppose I could ignore them. Don’t you find that you can ignore them because of the power that you have?”

A strange look danced over his face as he studied her. “Have you ever wanted to be a duchess?”

What an odd question.

“The opportunity will never arise,” she pointed out. “I will never go out into society. I will not be presented at court, and I am not the kind of young lady to marry a duke. I have neither a fortune nor the pedigree. I suppose you could argue that because my mother was a lady, I might, but my father was so low in the sight of English society, it’ll never happen.”

“I see,” he said. “And that is why they watch us?”

She nodded. “They can’t imagine why you would ever step out with someone like me.”

“Someone like you,” he repeated, his gaze narrowing as a muscle tightened in his jaw. “I don’t like the implications of that.”

She sighed. “You may not like it, but it’s the truth.”

He stopped suddenly, and she nearly ran into him.

“You should speak better of yourself, Lily,” he said firmly. Not a command but a *demand*. “You’re worth more than all of them put together. I’ve seen the way you are with Violet. You love her.”

A shadow passed over his visage as he locked gazes with her and declared with passion, “I would’ve given anything for someone to care so much about me when I was small.”

The words came out of him gruff and resonating with pain, an admission that he looked as if he wished he had not made.

“I’m sorry for it,” she said, longing to comfort him with a touch but not daring to risk scandal.

He sighed. "Don't feel sorry for me. It made me who I am today."

"You are quite a formidable person, and a good one," she agreed.

His face softened, and he began to walk again, his gaze slipping to Violet. He inclined his head. "I appreciate that. But now, we must return. I have work to do."

"Of course," she said. There was always work.

"Do you not wish," he said, "that you had inherited all of this?"

"All of London?" she teased.

"No, the dukedom that is rightfully yours."

She shook her head, though a bitter note whispered through her as she considered what it would have been like to be raised in safety with Violet. And be beholden to none. "It was never truly mine to inherit. I wasn't a boy. Mama was not a boy—"

"But surely," he cut in with surprising intensity, "if she had not been cast out, she would have been given a large dowry, possibly vast estates. If—"

"*If, if, if*, Your Grace," she rushed, not wishing the pain of imagining things that could not and would never be. "*If* only causes suffering."

"James," he reminded softly.

"I should not call you James. Certainly not in public," she whispered, the closeness between them a painful pleasure. For as she walked with him, her body called out for his embrace, and to embrace him in turn. Yet, she knew such a thing was impossible.

"I don't give a damn what they think," he countered. "And I don't think you should, either. If—"

She shook her head, refusing to entertain his words. "Once again, the privilege of your position. *If* is a very dangerous way to live. It will only cause such sadness. *If* I was the owner of a dress shop, I would be independent. *If* I had been born a lady, I would be free. I do not know the truth of either of those things. All I can do is accept what I have here and be with you."

"With me," he whispered. He blinked, straightened his broad shoulders, and then he turned away from her and strode along the Serpentine, calling out to Violet. "To the starboard, Violet, to the starboard. Do not let the ship go off course."

And as Lily stared at Violet and James, she found her heart desperate for the security and place that he had spoken of. Longing to feel at ease, longing to feel love.

But life was cruel, and the brutal truth was that she had been born to little, had become a dressmaker, and she would fight for her own shop—her dream—for love was very unlikely indeed.

Chapter Thirteen

James adjusted the package of books under his arm. He strode down the long hall where paintings of battles and mythology hung on the walls.

He still had much work to do this night, coordinating docking dates, routes, and ensuring space for his ships at the busiest port in the world, but he had a delivery to make.

As he neared the small chamber attached to Violet and Lily's rooms, he slowed his steps.

He had been keeping them company on their walks every morning and eating breakfast with them. It was his duty as Violet's guardian. He needed to make certain that she was adapting well to her new life.

Or so he kept insisting, but he could not lie entirely to himself.

There was something about Lily and Violet's company, something that made him feel different than he had before, something which promised him the possibility of joy.

It was a dangerous feeling.

James peered into the comfortable room adjacent to the young ladies' bedchambers.

Lily sat by the fire, sewing, and Violet sat at her feet, reading before the crackling flames. The two were such a perfect pair of domestic bliss. They seemed so content in each other's company, as if nothing could harm them as long as they were together.

He nearly staggered back.

The pain of it struck at his heart.

He had known nothing like that as a child. His mother had been too absorbed with his father's absences, and he had spent most of his childhood going from room to room, searching for someone to pay attention to him yet never finding anyone.

As if she could sense him, Lily glanced up and smiled. “James,” she exclaimed. “Do come in.”

Lily’s eyes were a dark blue in the low light, and in those depths, he felt himself pulled into the room. He strode up before the fire and crouched down before her little sister.

“These are for you, Violet,” he said, passing over the stack of books.

Violet let out a cry of joy. “Thank you! I just finished this book. How did you know?”

He grinned at her pure happiness at his gift. “I noticed how quickly you read, and of course there is a library here, but I thought you might like a new collection.”

“And where did you purchase them from?” Lily asked, her eyes dancing.

He laughed. She had regaled him with the tale of her friend Elizabeth and the shop she had striven to save and her love of books. “Where else but Sharpe and Sons?”

“Good,” she replied with a wink. “I am proud of you.”

Violet tore open the packaging and held the leather-bound books as if there was no greater treasure in the world. “Look at all of these things, Lily,” she exclaimed. She traced her fingers over the title of *An Adventure Through the World’s Greatest Sights* by Arthur H. Penderghast.

“I’ve been to many of those places,” he said as he sat down beside Violet.

She flipped through the pages carefully, looking at different countries and sketches of buildings and landscapes.

“It’s the pyramids,” she whispered in awe, her gaze studying the pictures voraciously. “Have you been there, James?”

He extended one leg and leaned back on his palm. “That is a place I have not been, but one day perhaps I will.”

Violet returned to her book, lost in its pages now.

He shifted his gaze to Lily, whose fingers were working swiftly, carefully, along the linen of a new gown. “For Violet?” he queried.

She gave a nod. “Yes, this is the last one, and then all shall be made. At least for this year. No doubt Violet will grow again soon, but I am quite pleased with the outcome.”

She held up the garment for him to inspect.

He knew little about girls’ gowns, but this was beautifully made, and he could tell the stitches were fine. “Look at that,” he said, daring to allow his fingertips to trail along the edging where the sleeve met the bodice. “You do

beautiful work.”

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes alight with pleasure at his praise. “I’ve spent many hours perfecting my stitches. Would you like me to show you?”

His heart began to pound slowly in his chest, humming against his ribs at her nearness. At the idea of her showing him anything she cared about. “I would like nothing better.”

And with that, she began to carefully show him how she threaded the needle through the fabric, pulled the string tight, and then she stopped. “Oh, dear, James! You’re jesting with me, aren’t you?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

She grinned. “You already know how to do this, don’t you?”

He shook his head. “I could not make a gown like that. Not for anything, but I do know that stitch. For I have darned many a garment at sea and mended many a sail.”

She arched a brow. “Show me,” she urged.

“I don’t wish to mar the gown.”

She tsked as she held the needle out to him. “If you do, I will simply pick it out again.”

“All right.” He took the sleeve and bodice gently from her grasp, and their fingertips brushed. His breath caught, for it was more than a mere touch of skin. Warmth and desire pulsed between them as he dared to let his fingers linger against hers.

Their eyes locked, and her lips parted ever so slightly before she licked them. The gesture nearly undid him. How he longed to trace her now-glistening lips with his own.

She blinked and pulled back. “Go on.”

And then, oh so attentively, he studied the fabric, noted where she’d pinned it, and very carefully drew a stitch in. As if the room had not crackled with the intensity of their connection but a moment before, Violet applauded and cheered. James popped his head up to see her beaming at him, and his chest swelled with pride.

“Well done. Well done,” Lily said grandly, though her breath was coming quickly, pressing her breasts against the line of the bodice of her gown. “Who knew the duke could be such an excellent dressmaker?”

He passed the fabric back and gave a quick bow of his head and a dramatic twirl of his hand. “I will never be a dressmaker, but I am proud to say that I have contributed a single stitch to such a masterful work of art.”

Lily's face transformed at his words. "You're not like anyone else."

"Is that an insult or a compliment?" he queried, unable to look away from her.

"What do you think?" she whispered.

James swallowed back the wave of emotion that rushed through him. The force of it startled him, and he stood quickly. "I must go. Much business to do."

She nodded, straightening her shoulders. "Thank you for the visit," she said.

"Perhaps you could visit us every night," Violet piped.

He paused before the fire, knowing he should say no. But he would only have the pleasure of their company for a few more weeks. What harm could it do?

"If that's what you'd like," he said.

Lily's lips tilted up in a smile. "Shall we say every night at eight bells?"

He could not stop his own smile as he promised, "As you wish, Lily."

And then he strode from the room, cursing himself, for he felt Lily's eyes upon his back as he went. All he wanted to do was turn around, take her up in his arms, and never let her go.

But he was going to go. He had to. And soon.

Chapter Fourteen

“Everyone is saying she’s your mistress.” The Earl of Derby’s words cut through the boxing ring at the exclusive club off Pall Mall.

James gaped at him and did not see the right hook coming. He should have, but he was so entirely flummoxed by the fact that his good deed was now being twisted and turned into something vile that the blow rang right into his jaw.

His head snapped back. His teeth clacked together, and he staggered.

Swiftly, he lifted his fists, tucking his elbows into his sides, circling. “Say that again.”

“I don’t think I shall,” Derby drawled. “I like my face the way it is.”

“I’m certain I can improve it if you come a bit closer,” James ground out.

“I shall decline now that I’ve got your attention.” Derby began to circle left, then darted in.

James mirrored his movements, attempting to jab him straight to the nose. Derby swung round and slammed a fist into James’s kidneys.

He winced, and his knee tried to buckle, but he drew upon years of fighting in dockside taverns around the world to keep him upright. He was distracted.

She was a distraction.

He had not realized that having her live in his house was going to do things to his entire body and brain that would set him on a course that he’d not foreseen.

In a way, she’d tried to warn him. *Everyone watches us*, she’d said. And he’d told her to ignore them. No wonder she’d snorted.

But would he willingly give up her company? Because of the wagging tongues of the ton?

The walks they took every day, the way they sat together in the evening as Violet read by the fire and she worked on Violet’s and her own new gowns—

they whispered to his heart and soul that he could dare to want something more.

That the thing that had eluded him all throughout childhood and his entire adult life thus far was a possibility. But the risk... The pain...

Hell, the pain he had experienced when his mother died, being so entirely alone—he could not face that sort of thing again. He had built himself up and protected himself for years. Love was dangerous. One might not recover if love was taken away or if something happened to the person one loved.

This was not anecdotal. This was something he had seen.

“What are you going to do?” Derby demanded bluntly, circling.

James tucked his fists by his chin. “It’s a lie,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a lie,” Derby countered. “The ton is beginning to whisper and not quietly. She lives in your house. You are seen walking together. She is a young lady with no one to protect her.”

“I am protecting her,” James ground out.

“Exactly,” he said, “but you are not family.”

“She is the sister of my ward,” James retorted, searching for an in to break Derby’s guard.

Derby shook his head as he danced on the balls of his feet and tried to deliver a blow to James’s middle. But James spun round, tucked low, and slammed his fist into Derby’s stomach.

Derby let out a whoosh of air.

“So what you’re saying is doing the right thing can look bad.”

“You need to either buy them a house of their own...” Derby wheezed, straightening.

“Or what?” James growled, wiping sweat from his eyes.

“The lady’s reputation is going to be ruined.”

“How can I possibly ruin her reputation?” he bit out. “She is—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Derby cut in. “I understand you thought you were doing something good, but you have misread the circumstance. Her mother caused a scandal when she married that Frenchman, and now everyone assumes the daughter will do the same.”

“The English are asses,” he declared, darting to the right.

“I won’t disagree with you on that point,” Derby said. “But I don’t think the Americans can exactly be accused of cool and calm heads. Didn’t you have a witch trial just because some girls were out in the fields?”

He narrowed his eyes. He couldn’t argue with that. “So what is it that you

suggest I do?"

Derby arched a brow and gave him a fairly terrifying smile.

And then he realized exactly what Derby was suggesting.

"Marry her?" he said as the idea hit him.

"It would resolve two problems at once, would it not?"

Marriage. The word slipped into his veins. As did the idea of Lily in his bed and his arms, with nothing to stop their hunger for each other.

He lowered his fists and went to the rope around the ring. He jumped out. "You're speaking foolishness."

"Am I?" Derby asked. "If you marry her, there will be no scandal, and you'll have someone to look after your ward when you're gone. You're leaving soon, aren't you?"

"A few more weeks," he affirmed. "I still haven't found the right people to back me against the East India Company. But I will not stay just because the English cannot be moved. I have other duties abroad."

Derby nodded as he, too, followed him out of the ring and to the benches where linen towels had been placed for them.

"It's going to be damn difficult," Derby confessed. "Too many people get too much money from it."

"Money," James gritted out. "It is a glorious thing, but it makes people do the worst."

Someone to look after his ward, he mused. The truth was, every day had shown him just how capable Lily was in every regard.

She hated ifs, but he did not. What if... What if he left her in charge while he was away?

"The mamas are angry," Derby said, returning to the subject of scandal. "They thought they were going to get you and a duchess's coronet, not some girl who was living above a dress shop just weeks ago. Someone whose mama was a traitor to the class."

"A traitor to the class," he mocked, disgusted. "We just left the ring, but I can still punch you here."

"Good," Derby returned seriously. "I'm glad you feel strongly about it. I was hoping you would."

He let out a slow breath and then began to think rapidly. Lily was skilled and not easily flummoxed. She had survived war, political upheaval, escaping with her sister from France, and living in a difficult situation.

She'd made the best of it.

And then he put his thoughts into words. “Do you think she could run the dukedom while I’m gone? Would people accept it?”

“They would have to, if she was your duchess,” he said. “And she might be able to carry it off with your support. You two would become the oddities of London. Quirky, strange, but with the kind of money and power you have? Undeniable.”

He blinked, then breathed, a strange feeling of synchronicity coming over him. “It would be the right thing,” he said to himself.

“Yes. To avoid a scandal.”

“No, not that,” he replied with an impatient shake of his head. “Everything was taken away from her and her mother just because of the old duke. He made their lives hell, just because he could. But I? I could change their lives forever. For the better.” The words felt so right. “I could give her back what’s hers—because I can.”

“Whatever makes you do it, old boy.” Derby clapped him on the shoulder.

“I don’t know if she’ll say yes,” he admitted.

“The only way to find out is to ask,” his friend replied. “And she’d be mad to turn down being a duchess.”

“With Lily, I’m not entirely certain,” he replied ruefully. She had her dreams of a dress shop and a dedication to independence as fierce as his own.

But Derby was right. It was ingenious, really. This wasn’t about love or even intimacy. This was a deal. He would make her the Duchess of Ashbridge, as she deserved, and he would leave her to run everything when he was gone. He’d be able to leave without worry, knowing that his duty to his ward and his English estate was handled properly, and that he had given Lily what she was due.

As a duchess, she’d have money to do whatever she pleased and she would be beholden to none. She’d have the place that always should have been hers. And there would be nothing to hold her back from owning not just one but as many successful dress shops as her heart desired.

Chapter Fifteen

Lily sketched furiously, drawing in the skirts of a ballgown on the piece of paper atop her lap desk.

She had so much to catch up on with her drawings gone. It was brutally hard that she'd lost all of her work, all of her dreams, but here in the darkness after Violet had gone to sleep, sitting in her own private sitting room—something she never could have even dreamed of a few weeks before—she worked.

There was the house, its renovation, and her role as housekeeper.

She read. She sketched. She looked after her sister and made certain that her sister's education was continuing apace lest she lose favor with James. Though the reasonable part of her assured her that James would never abandon them.

But in her heart, she knew that every time she'd known hope and security, it had been taken.

She felt so alone, much of the time, except for at breakfast, on their walks, or before the fire at night, when he joined them. Oh, of course, she had Violet, but her loneliness stemmed from being strong for so long and having no one to whom she could entrust her heart.

In the quiet of the room, her heart ached.

But that did not mean she had to stop sketching, and so carefully she drew in a ruffle for the edge of the skirt that was not too ostentatious but would make whatever young lady wore it feel happy and flirtatious.

No young lady would wear it anytime soon, of course.

Perhaps Violet would in a few years. Lily could design Violet's gowns when she came out.

"What are you working on?"

She startled, whipping her gaze to him. She let out a sigh of relief,

shockingly pleased to see him in the doorway.

“You see, when Violet and I came here, we lost all of our possessions,” she admitted, each word a painful barb as she had to confess how she’d failed Violet.

His brow furrowed. “I beg your pardon?”

She pressed her lips together. It was so hard to admit the truth. But she had to. “Madame Josephine has kept all of our things. She was quite vile.” Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to shed them. “Especially my designs.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. A muscle tightened in his jaw. “Damnation. I am sorry for it.”

“Thank you. I am accustomed to the vagaries of life. But your sentiments are appreciated.” She sighed. “So, I’m sketching, trying to replace all my designs and creating new ones...for when I open my shop.”

“I see. May I come in?” he asked.

“Of course.” She smoothed a lock of hair back from her cheek. “It is your house.”

“Yes,” he said, “but these are your rooms and I would not wish to invade upon them.”

“You cannot possibly invade,” she assured. “You have been too good to us. Please do come in.”

As he entered the chamber, the shadows from the fire and the candles danced over his hard frame.

How she wished that things were different. How she wished she’d been born a grand lady, and then perhaps she might have an opportunity to pursue him.

It sounded mad.

She shouldn’t wish to pursue him. She should only wish for her independence. But she could not stop thinking about that kiss or the way their fingers brushed on the walks or how he had gazed upon her as he had done that stitch before the fire.

“We need to discuss something,” he said, his tone grave.

Her stomach tightened. “Oh dear,” she said. “That sounds rather ominous.”

“Perhaps it is, depending on your point of view.” He sighed. “It has been brought to my attention that you and I are causing a scandal, and it could affect Violet.”

“What?” she gasped. “What kind of scandal?”

“You are a young woman living in my house unchaperoned,” he said, “and

apparently tongues are wagging.”

She put her drawing down and stood. “That is outrageous. We have done nothing.”

“We have done something,” he reminded gently.

She wound her hands together as fear coursed through her. “One kiss does not a scandal make.”

“It could,” he said. “Marriages have been forced from far less.”

“What are you saying?” she rushed, her voice strained to her ears. “Are you casting us out? I know that your work is important to you, but a scandal—”

His eyes flared, and he crossed to her, taking her hands in his. “Of course I’m not casting you out, Lily.”

She swallowed, staring at his strong hands enveloping her own. Tears burned her eyes.

“Forgive me,” he urged, his own voice rough with emotion. “I should not have spoken thus. I did not mean to make you feel afraid.”

She forced herself to speak, though her throat was tight. “I am used to my life changing swiftly and being...”

“Abandoned?” he finished.

“Yes, that’s it,” she said.

“I have no desire to abandon you,” he assured. “As a matter of fact, I have come here with an entirely different prospect.”

He paused, hesitant. The waiting, if only for a moment, was pure agony.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“Marry me,” he said just as softly.

She blinked, and though she felt her heart beating faster at the very idea of being this man’s wife, a laugh burst past her lips. Surely, he was joking, only trying to make her smile as penance for scaring her.

But his face was serious.

“Marry you?” she queried, trying to make sense of it.

He drew her closer to him, his hands warm around hers. “It will secure your position. The scandal will be gone. And you will be able to look after my estates when I travel. Moreover, you will have legal authority over Lily as the Duchess of Ashbridge. She will be *our* ward, not just mine.”

Suddenly, opportunities were dancing before her as she lifted her gaze to his. “You cannot possibly mean it,” she said, afraid to hope.

“Your mother should have had a vast inheritance,” he said as he lifted a hand and gently cupped her cheek. “Now what I say to you is: *claim it*. It will

make me feel better.”

She shook her head, confused. “Marrying you will make you feel better?”

“Indeed,” he said. “I will feel better about inheriting all this power if I know you have equal share in it.”

“You mean it,” she breathed, reeling.

“Indeed, I do.”

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes. It will infuriate the ton, of course, which will be a delicious bonus.” His sensual lips turned upward in a tempting grin. “Don’t you think it will be fun to make them outraged?”

She laughed, a half groan. “I don’t know if ‘fun’ is the correct word.”

His grin dimmed. “They cast you out, Lily. And you could be a duchess. I think there’s a great deal of petty fun in that.”

She smiled slowly, even as unease warred inside her. “Perhaps you are right, but I know the dangers of class and I know the dangers of being on the wrong side.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” he vowed firmly.

“You can’t promise that,” she returned.

“As a duchess in this country, you will have a great deal of power and wealth,” he countered. “If you want to open a dress shop, Lily, you can—as soon as you want to. All you need to do is put it in action. No more waiting for your ship to come in—it’s already here. Your shop will be seen as an eccentricity. You can do whatever you want as a duchess. You can hold salons. You can—”

“I could,” she realized, her fears beginning to disappear before the possibilities. “I could open a dozen dress shops and appoint as many girls as I wanted to work in safe conditions. I could change their lives.”

She thought of the young ladies trapped in the East End, working in the dark, their fingers worn to the bone, barely eating as they struggled to make ends meet. “You are offering me so much I would be a fool to say no.”

“Then don’t say no,” he returned easily, gently tracing his fingertips along her chin. “It is the perfect solution.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Do you think so much of me?”

“Indeed I do,” he said. “I’ve seen the way you take so much care with your sister, the organization you have. You weren’t jesting. You know how to organize. You know how to make things happen. You’ve already transformed my study into a haven. And the way you design clothing...” He glanced at

her drawings. "I am sorry you lost them all," he said.

She swallowed. "As am I. But I must ask: what will happen between us?"

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"What will you expect of me as your wife?"

"I would expect you to fulfill the duties of any duchess."

"Even the ones in your bed?" she asked bluntly.

A spark flared in his eyes, and his hand gentled along her jaw. "I never thought to have an English wife. I'd heard that all they do is close their eyes and think of England until the act is done."

She laughed at his rather cheeky response, which she felt certain was meant to ease the tension in her body. "Not all English girls close their eyes and think of England," she added with a slow smile. "At least not the ones that I know. The kiss we shared... I certainly was not thinking of England then."

Slowly, he tilted her head back, and she shivered at his touch. "Then," he said, "would it be so very terrible to be married to me?"

She licked her lips. "I can think of so many worse things, so many more dangerous things, but..."

"But what?"

"Is this to be strictly business?"

He raised a brow. "Aren't most marriages here business?"

She inclined her head. "Yes, I suppose they are."

"Then, are you not a good businesswoman?"

"I am," she said, decision made. "So, yes, I will marry you."

"Good," he replied with finality. "We shall do it immediately. There's no reason to wait. And soon all of England will take notice. All those mamas who were eager to disparage you? They shall have to curtsy to you and follow you into rooms."

She laughed, but she did not necessarily feel humor. She felt a wave of apprehension. It was as though all her dreams, which she'd been so certain were waiting for her on a distant horizon, were galloping straight toward her now. But she knew the cost of hope, and she was not certain she could afford to pay it.

This plan seemed perfect, except nothing was ever perfect, and she couldn't help wondering when—not *if*—it would all be taken away. For it always was.

Chapter Sixteen

The special license was tucked in James's greatcoat pocket.

The Archbishop of London had looked as if he was swallowing bile as he had agreed to it. But of course, the fee had helped, and James had added a significant bribe on top of that.

There was little to stop them.

After all, she was of age. And he was a duke.

No one with a shred of intelligence would contest the wishes of the Duke of Ashbridge. It was one of the most powerful dukedoms in the country, owning half of the North of England.

Still, the archbishop had looked as if the idea of having to deal with an American was the most painful experience he'd had in his entire life.

And given the wealth of his home, the gold about him, and the ornateness of his clothes, perhaps having to deal with an American *was* the worst thing he'd ever experienced. Unless, of course, it was a badly done cut of meat.

Still, the wedding would take place in but a few hours, and he found himself eager for it.

If James could have, he would've immediately escorted Lily before a clergyman and had done. But that seemed a bit rushed, and the archbishop had said he would need to get himself ready.

No doubt the man needed to make certain his lace was pressed.

Even so, with just the Earl of Derby and Violet in attendance, they were to be married in the cathedral with no fanfare.

James did not think that Lily had anyone she would wish to invite. He could not know for certain, but first he had something to do before he went back and told her that all was going as planned.

He would never forget the look on her face as she had told him what had happened at the dress shop the morning she'd been cast out. His entire body

had been racked with guilt. For his foolish decisions. He'd always considered himself a man of good action and one who did as little harm as possible.

But if she had not been related to his ward, he could easily have wrecked her life with his blundering.

After all, the only reason they were still connected was Violet.

No doubt, if she had just been a stranger, he never would've seen her again after that night. She would've had to deal with her troubles without the power of the Duke of Ashbridge behind her.

The very idea that he could harm someone so greatly shot pain through his veins. Sorrow and hardship lingered in the shadows of everyone's lives, and the idea that he could cause it... He swallowed.

She had taught him a great lesson about charging in without thinking to do what he believed was right.

But now he could do what was right.

He was the Duke of Ashbridge. He was James Blakefield.

As he'd taken in Lily sketching by candlelight, he could not stop thinking of how the dress shop owner had assumed the worst about her. That he'd been a cull, come to tup the young lady and pay her for it.

She'd lost all of her drawings. All of her things. And he wouldn't stand for it.

He wanted to grab the French dressmaker and shake her at her cruelty. But he would not do that. No. He would settle for the drawings instead.

So, he made his way back to the dress shop and stood at the front of the door in the daylight.

The street was quite busy.

Weeks ago, in the night, it had been full of drunks, fiddle players, and rats being chased by cats.

Today, it was quite different. Today, people hawked ribbons in the road and wealthy people came by in their coaches.

After all, the dressmaker's shop was a prestigious one. All evidence of last night's sin had been washed away from the muddy street in the morning light.

Ladies traversed the pavement alongside the street in their beautiful gowns, accompanied by their maids and footmen. Stacks of boxes and rolls of fabric were everywhere to be seen. Feathers and fans danced around like a sea of fripperies.

It was a place of clear consumption.

He stopped before the glass window, peered in, and wondered what the bloody hell he was going to do.

He wanted to cause a scene, but causing a scene would not necessarily be helpful to anyone. And so, he opened the door and walked into the place of feminine lavishness.

Immediately, as he entered, there was a titter of gossip and giggles. And then everyone stopped, looked to him, and many of the girls went quickly back to their work.

An older lady whom he could only presume was Madame Josephine caught sight of him, smiled broadly, and flounced toward him. Her perfectly pressed house bonnet of fine muslin teased her curled, sausage-like hair about her face.

Her dress was beautiful, simply cut, and hugged her body to perfection. And he wondered if it was Lily's design. He rather thought it was. It bespoke her vision of the world, beautiful and yet elegantly simple.

Madame Josephine held her hands out to him, beaming. "Ah, monsieur. Welcome to my establishment. Are you here to find a dress for a young lady?"

"No," he stated.

"Non?" she queried, her French accent thick and, to his ear, clearly fake. "Ah, monsieur, perhaps a dress for someone else," she said a little bit more slyly. "Let me escort you into one of our adjoining rooms and we can discuss what it is that you need."

He said nothing as he followed her, and he felt the eyes of several of the ladies in the room, who were there to select fabric and styles, traipsing after him.

He also knew he was a subject of gossip of the women of the ton. Many of them, while they found his heredity appalling, seemed to quite like the idea of someone that was a bit different, rougher, and more direct than their toffee-nosed husbands with their coiffured wigs and lace handkerchiefs.

Yes, he was a man of action, not pomp, and the ladies of London seemed to hunger for that.

His long greatcoat swung about his legs as he followed Madame Josephine into her small office, and he found himself eager to get the change done.

"Monsieur, please." She gestured to a delicate French-style chair.

He eyed the spindly ivory-and-pink-silk affair. "I prefer to stand," he said.

"But of course," she said, still beaming. "Would you care for a brandy

while we discuss what I can do to help you?”

“No,” he said.

“Monsieur,” she said. “I am French, and I like the practicality of the English. But I see you are a man of few words and clarity. Much more like the French. Like me.”

“That’s not what I understand,” he countered.

Her eyebrows rose. “Monsieur. I do not know what you—”

“You lead a very good game, Madame Josephine,” he said, his voice low, “in tricking the world to believe that you are kind to your girls, that you run a lovely establishment. But the truth is that you are a coldhearted taskmaster, aren’t you?”

“Monsieur?” she queried, her hand flying to her bosom in faux shock. “You are... S’il vous plaît. I am confused. Who are you?”

“Yes, you are confused,” he said flatly. “I am the Duke of Ashbridge.”

“Ah, Your Grace. Forgive me,” she said, tittering like a schoolgirl. “I have not been addressing you properly. I have heard about you. You are new to town.”

“I am new to town,” he agreed.

“And you are an American. Très intéressant! The French people love the Americans.”

“Yes,” he drawled, feeling coated in her sugary sweetness. “They do. And the Americans love the French as well, though we no longer get along quite as well as we did before.”

“But then you and I shall be great friends!” she enthused.

He snorted. “No, madame, we shall not. And you are not French. You are definitely English.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I beg your pardon.”

He was done with these ugly pleasantries. “You have something that belongs to my intended.”

“What?” she said. “How could I possibly have anything that belongs to your intended?”

“Drawings,” he said tightly.

She stilled. All of the joviality drained from her face. “Drawings?”

“You will give me the future Duchess of Ashbridge’s designs.”

Her hands tightened on the back of her chair. “And who is this person, Your Grace?”

“You know her,” he said with a cold smile. “You kicked her out of your

establishment not long ago, calling her a whore and a thief.”

Her face now paled. “No, monsieur, it is not possible.”

“It is possible. Lily Martín will be my duchess,” he informed as though telling of his preference for linen over cotton. “And you clearly did not know that Lily’s sister, Violet, is now my ward.”

She scoffed, but her eyes widened with a hint of fear. “No. Monsieur, if she was your ward, surely you would have come to collect her years ago. You would not have left her to live on my charity.”

“Your *charity*?” Bloody hell, the woman was a demon.

She let out a beleaguered sigh, staring up at him through her soot-lined lashes. “I took care of them out of the goodness of my heart. I fed them. I clothed them. I gave them a roof over their head when none would—”

“And you lived off the benefit of Lily’s designs,” he cut in ruthlessly. “Did you not? She lived in Paris for years, unlike you. She knew the French designs, the fashions, and you used her to make your shop stand apart. You see, I did a bit of research this afternoon. This shop has not existed for much longer than Lily has been in London. And I think that you have used her since she was but a girl, to climb, while you have kept her down and in immense poverty and cruelty.”

He tightened his gloved hands, determined to stay in control of the fury traveling through him. “I saw Lily’s frame with her worn clothes on, though you seem to think that is not the case.”

Madame’s eyes widened, and her cheeks burned red.

“She had not had a good meal until she came to my house,” he bit out. “And Violet had not, either. My dear woman, do not think you can fool me.”

James cocked his head to the side and took a warning step toward her. He would not do violence. He did not need to. But she needed to know he saw through her. “I’m used to people of your trade. You convince the world of one thing whilst in reality you are a cruel leech, draining your workers dry and pushing them into early graves.”

She gasped, but there was a look of hate in her eyes. “You will not say such a thing.”

“You have taken her work,” he continued without hesitation. “You have grown an establishment for yourself. You live in comfort and dress well, but you keep all of your girls in rags. Now, give me the designs, or I will expose you to all of London—that you are not Madame Josephine; you are an Englishwoman who has scratched her way up, not caring whom she hurt

along the way.”

He paused as he studied her. It was hell. And bloody unfair that people who came from darkness often grew into twisted hearts and souls. For that was the ground in which they were sown. But he could not excuse her for what she had done.

“I do commend you for escaping your own hell, but you will not use your girls anymore, and you certainly will not use my future wife.” He extended his black-gloved hand. “Give them over.”

“I do not have them,” she huffed.

He leaned in, pretending he had misheard. “You do not *what*?”

“I do not have the designs,” she said, pursing her lips. “I burned them.”

He laughed. “I don’t believe you. And it’s unfortunate you think that I’m so foolish as to do so. Now you’ll produce them,” he said. “Or I will have your shop closed within a week. I shall start a rumor. It will be easy to do. What shall I say?” he mused. “That you run a back room with an illicit trade?”

Her eyes widened with horror.

“You shall be the talk of the town. But not for the reasons you wish,” he warned.

Her lips pressed together before she spat, “I hate men of power.”

“I do too,” he replied honestly. “And yet we must play by the rules of the game. Must we not, madame?”

“If you know about the rules of the game, monsieur, then you cannot dislike me for how I have played.”

He nodded. “Oh, I understand how you have played, but I do not have to like it. And that is why I’m not going to burn you to the ground. But I will be checking on you,” he said. “Take care of your girls better. And now, give me my wife’s designs.”

Her face like thunder, she pulled open a drawer and took out a large ream of papers. “Here,” she said as she threw them down on top of her desk. “Take them. They were never that good to begin with.”

His brows rose. “Then you shall not be sorry to part with them.”

He picked them up, then dropped a bag of coins on the desk. “Buy better clothes for your seamstresses, improve their rooms, and feed them. I will be sending my man to check with you every week. If you do not do as I’ve asked, you know what will happen. And madame,” he added, “I think you’ll be surprised to find that your girls do better when you do not work them to

the bone.”

With the drawings in his coat, he turned and strode out into the city, ready to make his wife truly free.

Chapter Seventeen

The last weeks felt almost like a dream. For the first time since they were small, Lily and Violet knew comfort. Comfort without fear of having it stolen away.

Everyone deserved to be safe. Everyone deserved to be warm, and everyone deserved to have beauty about them. Lily felt that in her very bones. But the way the world had been set up, most would never achieve such things no matter how some strove against the injustices of it.

Now, here in England, so many starved and shivered in cold rooms, huddled in with others, desperate to live, even when they could barely afford a small space in which to lay down. And yet, here in this sumptuous part of London, Violet had a room to herself as big as the dress shop itself. So did Lily.

The ceiling soared overhead, painted with a mural of Venus being praised by dryads. The walls were covered in a beautiful soft pink watered silk; roses were painted onto it. Beautiful white plasterwork of feathers and flowers covered the walls. The wood floor was warmed by an Axminster rug of soft ivory, with lavender and sage accents. A gold-edged mirror hung above the vast fireplace, reflecting the light from the windows, making the room seem one full of delight.

It was a candy box of a room, one that would make the heart feel full of joy when they awoke in the morning. It was so different from the darkness of where they had lived these last ten years, it almost did not feel real. She had become accustomed to a vast, beautiful house visiting her friend Elizabeth in her own ducal abode.

But this was different. This was going to be *her* house now. She was not going to be seen as a servant, a companion, her sister's educator, a visitor, or as a dressmaker. She was going to be the *mistress* of it.

Tears stung her eyes. Tears of relief, and yet she did not know the full price she would pay for this sort of security. She could only hope beyond hope that it would be worth it. And as Violet sat before the small pianoforte tucked into the corner of the room, tracing her hands over the ivory keys, Lily's heart soared.

Violet, even when she had been but five years old, had loved to play the pianoforte. She'd had the best music teachers. Some had even said she should have toured all of Europe and played for the heads of state. Some had said she would be as welcomed as Mozart's sister, but poverty and fear had thrust them into darkness.

They had not had a pianoforte to practice upon since Paris.

But here, Violet sat at her own instrument and touched the keys reverently.

Memories crashed back onto Lily, and she pressed her hand to her lips.

Lily crossed over to the pianoforte, tracing the painted wood as her sister played. It was the most beautiful instrument she had ever seen, and she wondered...had it been her mother's instrument?

It was very possible that her mother had played on this very pianoforte years ago. It certainly looked old enough. The idea that her mother had grown up in this room, spending her first London season here, filled her with the strangest sensation.

It was like an echo in her heart. One of the deepest longing.

Had her mother been happy here? She did not know if she had been the pampered little pet of her father. It might explain his intense bitterness over his daughter's choice of husband.

But all care and luxury had been seized from Lily's mother when she'd fallen in love with her art tutor and decided to run away with him. Had her mother regretted it? Lily did not think so.

She'd never seen regret on her mother's serene face, only love for her father. But love was not the answer to everything. Love had not protected Lily and Violet when their parents' death had come, when poverty had come, and when they'd had to flee to find safety aboard a leaking ship bound for England.

She turned away from the pianoforte, her heart feeling the ease of Violet relaxing and finding comfort in this room. She would not allow her memories to take that from Violet, for she wanted Violet to feel safe. And here, under the duke's kind guardianship, perhaps Violet at last could.

She would be safe too. Would she not?

Lily was going to be the Duchess of Ashbridge. She was going to have command over Violet's future, and she would have the funds to ensure that Violet could lead whatever life Violet wanted. If Violet wanted to marry, she could. If Violet wanted to be a pianist and travel the world playing for full houses, she could. She would not stand in Violet's way, and even if the Duke of Ashbridge tried, well, as a duchess, she would have some position to resist.

But she had a feeling that James would not stand in the way, for he was different than the aristocrats she'd met. Clearly, he had made a great deal of his own fortune. He had fought for his own reputation and his independence, and he did not seem inclined to wish ladies to be reliant entirely on men. Something that she liked about him.

Violet's fingers suddenly paused over the keys.

Lily tensed, closed her eyes, and braced herself. Slowly, she turned and smiled. "What is it, my dear?"

Violet gazed at her with eyes full of far too much wisdom for one so young. "You are really going to marry him, aren't you?"

"I am," she said.

"Aren't you afraid to give up your freedom?"

Lily blinked, astonished at her sister's observations, though she should not have been surprised. Violet had always been terribly clever.

"How am I free *without* him?" she countered. "Free to be poor, free to have nothing, free to claw my way through the mire? I have been doing that for a decade and have not been able to come to the top." She stood a little straighter, convincing herself as she declared, "But with him, I will. We will. For I will always be by your side, and I shall have a position of respect."

Violet drew in a shaking breath. "You are sure? I don't want you to betray yourself for me."

"It is not a betrayal of myself," she rushed.

She was making a deal; there was no question. The Duke of Ashbridge wanted to protect them from scandal and to set the past right.

Besides, she was merely continuing the tradition of marriage, not flouting it.

All marriage had been about business before the silly idea of love had come along. Truly, all marriages were a contract between a woman and a man, usually drawn up by their families.

Without love, but with duty, a woman would agree to give a man an heir, and he would give her security.

And that was what her mother had rebelled against—marriage without love.

What would her mother say to her Lily choosing what she had fought?

Her throat tightened.

Though her mother had eloped, she had never starved. Her mother had not lived without coal. Her mother had not had to...

She drew in a steadying breath and looked back to the window.

It was rather strange that her mother had been able to rebel so much and had so few consequences for it...until the end. She had died, but death had been surprisingly swift, whereas her children's suffering had gone on for years. Lily wanted that suffering to stop, at least for Violet, and if she were married, she could make certain that it would.

Forever.

The money, the security, the contract that he had promised would be drawn up to protect her and Violet's interests? That was a freedom she'd never known.

She turned to her sister and smiled. "Do not be afraid for me. I am happy. We will have no worries—not anymore. We will never be separated when I am his duchess."

Violet gave a nod. "We will never have to be worried about dark alleys, or grasping hands, or..."

She gazed with growing horror. She'd tried so hard to shield her little sister, and she'd failed. "How do you know..."

Violet looked away. "I have seen it," she said. "I have seen the girls who have no choice but to be manhandled and to—" She sat straighter at the pianoforte and plucked out a tune. "Well, some of them make a good go of it, don't they? But they seem to suffer terribly for it in the end."

Lily thought of *A Harlot's Progress*, the set of prints that Hogarth had made so many years before of the brilliant rise of a young woman who chose the life of a mistress, and the ignominious end.

She and her sister would not face that. All because of James's sense of duty.

Yes, that was why what she was choosing now was the right thing. The wise thing.

It was better to choose being a duchess, and money, and a house like this, than risk the cruelty of an end like the ones she had seen.

"We must rejoice," she declared, curling her arms about her sister's

shoulders. She gently pressed her cheek atop Violet's head. "We are lucky, so fortunate. Think of all the people we can help."

Violet pulled away slightly, looked up at her, and beamed. "I didn't think of that. It's more than just us, isn't it?"

She gave a nod. "That's right. We shall open a dress shop, and we shall hire many seamstresses. We shall treat them very well. They shall never know worn fingers, or starving bellies, or cold rooms, or candles so poor that their eyes are destroyed by the night."

All the anger, the injustice of the years, welled up in her, but she clung to the fact she could make so much change for the better now. Now, she was about to have power.

Violet smiled, a smile so dazzling Lily's heart hurt. "Indeed," Violet said. "Perhaps we could create rooms where young ladies can stay. We can make certain that they are safe and warm and not hungry."

"Oh, Violet," she said. "You have such a beautiful heart."

"As do you, you know," she said easily.

Lily did not know. She was uncertain of her own heart at times. It wasn't as good as Violet's, but that was perhaps because Lily had been fighting against the impracticalities of this world for so very long.

And yet, she had been so hopeful for her friend, for Elizabeth. She had encouraged her friend to experience joy, and pleasure, and to take from life what she could because one never knew when life might end or toss one back into the cruel sea of ignominy.

And so that's what Lily was going to do now.

She was going to take her own advice. She was going to seize opportunity and enjoy her life. That? That she could do so without risking her heart? She was certain.

Chapter Eighteen

Contracts and documents.

It felt so cold to think that the world was run by contracts, and now Lily's future, her life, her security, all of it was dictated by a name signed upon a page of a license.

The wedding was done, the names in the book, the license taken care of. As she stood in her new chambers, the *duchess's* chambers, in the darkness of a London night, the fire crackling, bathing her in its golden hue, she did not know exactly what was coming.

But given the kiss they had shared? Her skin heated just like the flames.

She stood in the massive chamber, excitement growing inside her, even as she was amazed by the ever-changing nature of her fortunes. It felt so strange to be surrounded by such beautiful things, knowing that they were now *hers*.

She was not a guest but mistress of it all.

The vast bed stood like a promise, its four posters carved from the most beautiful mahogany. Its soft blue brocade curtains were festooned with tassels, and the bed looked as if it was as soft as a cloud.

She'd slept on a board without a mattress for the last decade. For the last weeks, she'd had a beautiful soft bed in her own chamber. And now, this sumptuous concoction would be shared with her beautiful, powerful *husband*. She could not even imagine climbing into such a thing and being enveloped by the sheets within and his embrace.

Her bared feet stood on lush Axminster carpet. Her night rail was simple but beautiful. She'd been working on her own new clothes these last weeks.

She was used to making such beautiful clothes, but she was not accustomed to wearing them, and now she knew as a duchess, it would be not only her right but the expectation for her to dress in the sort of luxurious dresses that she designed. She wasn't certain what she thought about that.

Would she finally be able to live in the creations that she thought of in her head?

She turned to face the quiet room. There was a silver tray with wine and goblets on it. She wanted to drink, and that was the very reason why she did not go over to it. It was tempting, she knew, to numb one's faculties when one was afraid, but she was not that kind of person. She would not dull herself.

No, she wanted to remain alert and ready. Would he come to her tonight? A voice within her whispered, *I hope so.*

As if to answer her very question, the door opened and he slipped through, a taper in his hand. He'd already removed his coat and waistcoat. He crossed to her slowly, his pale linen shirt open at the neck.

His dark breeches clung to his hard body, and his boots shone ever so slightly in the dim candlelight. His face was hard and beautiful, like an untouchable statue, and his dark hair shone almost blue-black in the soft light.

Silvery moonbeams spilled through the towering windows, and she almost gasped at the sight of him. He was so unlike the gentlemen she was used to seeing in Madame Josephine's shop. They all appeared so polished in their pristine clothes, their powdered wigs or their curled hair, all of them so careful about what they said. Mincing, prancing, practiced in their speech and the way they held their canes, they were men of pretense.

James seemed to cut through life with purpose, not caring what anyone thought of him. She rather liked it. She liked his boldness and the way he took action.

He crossed to her. "I have something for you," he said.

And she realized he was holding a box in his hand. "A wedding gift?"

He hesitated. "If you want to call it that."

She wondered what he might think was a suitable wedding gift. She knew so many men bought their wives jewels, something cold, dug up from the earth and presented in a pretty box.

She took the book-shaped present, wrapped in simple pale paper, tied with a blue ribbon, forcing her hand to be steady.

He was quiet as he waited for her to open it.

Slowly, she tugged at the ribbon and let it slip free. She waited to see the shimmer of jewels, but as she lifted the lid...

There was no cold gleam. She let out a cry of astonishment.

Not jewels. *Paper!* Her designs!

She swung her widened gaze to him. "How did you...?"

His eyes were trained on her face, studying her response. "I went this afternoon and demanded what was yours. You must understand now. As the Duchess of Ashbridge, as my wife, no one will stop you in the pursuit of your dreams. No one will take what is yours from you."

Her eyes stung with tears, and her whole body seemed to come alive at the power of his proclamation, because all her life, people had been taking things from her. She'd had to fight so hard to keep anything that was hers, and it had felt like an uphill battle that she would never win.

Like Sisyphus, ever pushing the rock up the hill only to see it roll back down again.

"I don't know what to say," she said softly, touching the drawings, drawings she had made, drawings that had given her happiness and gotten her through the cold, dark hours of many a night of the cruel, never-ending work that had been laid out before her.

"You don't have to say anything," he told her. "They're yours."

"You're wrong," she protested, her hands tracing over the paper as if they had found familiar friends. "Just because they're mine doesn't mean... People have been taking what is mine all my life."

"That ends now," he said.

Did she dare to believe him? Did she dare to let herself hope?

"Thank you." She swiped at her eyes.

He nodded. "I'm glad I am able to return them to their rightful owner. Now, rest," he said gently before he turned and headed back for the door.

"Wait," she cried out.

He stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. "You wish me to stay?"

"Yes, I do." She bit her lower lip, stunned by the emotions and the slow spark of desire warming her. "After giving me this, you cannot simply go."

"Why do you want me to stay?" he asked, his voice a low rumble. "Because of the drawings? You owe me nothing, Lily."

"Because you're my husband and I want to know you. We've had so little time together."

"But this is a business arrangement," he reminded her.

"Even so, I want to know you," she rushed. "You are going to guide my sister's life, and..."

"Is that all?" he enquired, his voice low.

She took a step forward. “You know it is not. You know there is something between us, something more, and I...”

“What?” he asked softly.

“This life is too short to deny it.”

He blew out a slow breath. “I cannot disagree with you there. One never knows when it could be taken.”

“So let us not be silly about this. I have had so little opportunity to live,” she said, “locked up in a room, doing everything I could just for survival. Well, I’m done with surviving,” she declared. “Show me. Show me what it is to live to the full.”

His chest expanded against his linen shirt. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“I don’t want to wait,” she proclaimed. “I have waited my whole life, and I am ready to start living now, and I want you to be the one to show me.”

His chest expanded again, a magnificent display of sinew. “I want you,” he said. “I wanted you from the moment I saw you in the tavern. Your fiery stance, your bold determination to stand up for yourself. I hated the fact that I could see that you were struggling. I wanted to burn the world for you in that moment, to go over and crush Mother Maggie and that brute. I wanted to lay waste to anyone who might stop you in your quest.”

“That’s what you have done,” she said, in awe of the power of his words and how they swept her up.

He slid his hand to the nape of her neck, his fingers twining into her curls. “I’ll never cease. I will get in the way of anyone who wants to stop your dreams.”

“Why?” she breathed.

“Because I can see it in you, the hunger for more. I can see that you have fought alone, and I know what it is like to be alone. That will not befall you anymore, Lily,” he said. “You have me.”

Then he lowered his mouth to hers. She parted her lips, shocked at the power of his kiss.

How did he make her feel so much? She barely knew him, and yet it was like he was an echo of her own soul.

Dear God. It was as if he knew her, from her bones to her blood, to her sinew, to her dreams. How was that possible?

Yet, she recognized in him too that lost soul fighting, fighting for more. He knew her in a way no other could. She felt her heart, her dammed heart,

trying to open to him. But she could not, and so she shoved that aside as he slid her hands up his shoulders, holding tight, pulling him down.

She offered herself up to him in that moment, but not her heart.

Her heart was something she had to keep.

Chapter Nineteen

Lily surrendered to the pleasure he wanted to give her as he pulled her to him.

His hands roamed over her breasts, her ribs.

He pulled the night rail from her shoulders, inching it down her body, leaving her nude before him in the firelight. She had never been naked before anyone, not in her whole life, and she felt completely exposed. Not just physically, but vulnerable to him in every way imaginable.

She longed to cover herself, but she forced herself to be bold under his gaze. She stood proudly, and his eyes lowered to her breasts.

“So beautiful,” he said softly. He lowered his mouth and took one of her nipples into his mouth. She gasped, sudden, fierce, and wondrous sensations flooding through her. He teased it with his tongue until it was a hard peak as he palmed and massaged her other breast. She drove her hands into his hair, hardly believing that such a thing could cause such delight in her.

Then his hands stroked down over her hips, and he took his booted foot and parted her feet ever so slightly.

Much to her shock, he lowered himself down before her to his knees. As he did so, he kissed her stomach, her hips. He traced his hands over her legs, parting them a little farther, and then he skimmed his fingertips up her inner thighs.

He looked up and locked gazes with her. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

“You have been kissing me, you foolish man.” She smiled.

A wolfish smile tilted his lips. “Yes, but this will be different.”

“Oh,” she breathed.

He tilted her hips toward his face, and he took her core in his mouth. She gasped inaudibly this time—for he’d literally stolen her breath—and nearly tumbled to the floor, but he held her upright, locking his arm around her

body. He teased her folds with his tongue, unrelenting in his pursuit.

She'd never felt anything like it before. It was strange, bizarre, and for a moment she wanted to push him away, but then...

Oh, then her body gave in.

Waves of pleasure began to shudder through her body, pitching up from her lower belly, washing through her, and then he seemed to find a special spot. He circled his tongue over it, over and over again. He held her tight in place so she could not move as he urged her toward her peak.

Her hands went to his shoulders, and then she was crying out in bliss. Ripple after ripple of pleasure crashed through her.

He moaned against her skin, savoring her bliss as if it was a prize he'd won hard.

As she tried to catch her breath, he stood, sweeping her into his arms. He carried her to the bed and lowered her down. Quickly he divested himself of his clothes and boots and climbed up on the goose down beside her.

His long hair teased over her shoulders, and she gazed up at him in amazement. "That was... That was... I cannot believe how I feel."

He stroked his fingertips along her arm. "I assume that means it felt good."

She blew out a breath. "'Good' is not the word," she replied. "There is more, though?" she asked, apprehensive but wanting to keep going.

"Yes," he rumbled. "There is more. Are you ready?"

She nodded up at him, and then she noticed his hard body. She looked at his chest, the sinew and bone, the hard valleys and planes of it.

She stroked her fingertips along his skin, and then lower over his hips. She caught sight of his sex and stared.

He smiled at her.

"It is most...odd," she said.

He laughed. "Yes, I suppose, if you have not seen one before."

"Oh, I have seen one," she replied. "When you live near a questionable part of town, it's almost impossible not to." She frowned. "Men are quite odd in their habits."

He groaned, "I can't disagree with you there, as long as it wasn't unpleasant."

She shook her head. "No, nothing happened to me. I was most fortunate." She studied his sex, trying to make sense of it. "It looks so hard," she observed. "But somehow also...silky."

She reached out tentatively and met his gaze.

He nodded, his eyes drunken with desire for her. “You can touch it. If you wish.”

And so she did. She stroked her fingers along the hot, hard, long surface, and he let out a moan.

She yanked her hand back. “Did that hurt?”

“No, Lily. It did not hurt,” he assured. “It felt good.”

And then he rolled her onto her back. He kissed her again, parted her thighs, and placed himself at her opening. He rocked the head of his sex up and down her core, sliding over the slick evidence of her body readying for him. She stared up at him, amazed, and she held on to him, uncertain what was to come next.

Oh, she knew the bits and pieces of it. But she did not know how she would feel.

And when he thrust deep inside her, she yelped.

He paused. “I’m sorry,” he gritted out.

“It hurts,” she panted.

“I should have told you that it might,” he said, drawing in slow breaths. He looked as if he was consumed in a battle for concentration. “The pain won’t last for long,” he assured.

“Are you certain?” She strained to accommodate him. Not bothering with more words, he slipped his hand between them, stroking her most sensitive spot.

And then he lowered his mouth to hers, kissing slowly, passionately, until she began to relax. As he’d said, all the pain drifted away, replaced by the pleasure of his mouth and his fingers between them. James began to rock against her again. Pleasure was building as he stroked her within. His hard body moved in and over hers, a poetic motion. It was a beautiful thing, the way he made love to her.

She felt awkward at first, but then she began to move with him, finding a rhythm, finding their rhythm.

And then he seemed to find a delicious spot *inside* her. His hard sex caressed it. The next thing she knew, she could hold back no longer as she was being pitched over the edge of reason and into sheer bliss. She cried out his name, and her pleasure only seemed to drive him wild with desire.

His hips rocked fast against hers, and then he thrust home, holding on tightly to her, as if he’d been lost in a storm and she the safe port.

With that, he lowered his body to hers, kissing her softly, and she knew

that she had begun the greatest adventure of her life.

Chapter Twenty

The way in which Lily seized her new life stunned even James. The entire house seemed to be a whirlwind of activity, now that she was mistress of it. He was so amazed, he could scarce make sense of north, south, east, or west, with a compass, without, or with the Dog Star to guide his way.

Her glorious fervor was a sight to behold. She turned the house upside down.

And to his surprise, he found himself enjoying it immensely.

She had summoned a veritable team of seamstresses for herself to work in the house so that a host of gowns could be made quickly for her as his duchess. Not just the few she had made for herself in the last weeks.

She kept the young seamstresses in tea, cakes, bread, cheese, and cold meats, and Violet played the pianoforte for them to cheer their work.

The sound of musical notes drifting through the house was a revelation.

The last weeks with Lily and Violet had been one awakening after another.

And James realized he had not allowed himself much pleasure or kindness in his life. He was a creature of work. Relentless work.

But now? Every day was full of laughter and moments of joy between himself and his wife and his ward.

And then...she had begun to manage *him!*

She had taken up several of the most important tailors from Savile Row. A new wardrobe for him was apparently needed.

In her opinion, he needed a more commanding set of clothes, with brighter colors, simple but bold, which shocked him, for he had wanted to please her and agreed to her expertise. Her choices were a surprise because he had assumed she was going to dress him as sagely and boringly as the new mode of dress required. Black, white, and little else.

She had rolled her eyes at that and had declared, "Beau Brummell might

command London that way, but you? Shan't."

She'd gazed at him then with an appreciation that had done the strangest things to his insides.

Pride. He'd adored having her look on him with such pleasure.

She'd tilted her head to the side and observed, "Especially you, Your Grace. You must make them all understand who you are."

It was tempting to tell her he was quite capable on his own, but he did not, for her work as a dressmaker had given her insights into the secret lives of the ton that most might never know. And as she sat at the table in the long salon now, with its gold silk walls, going through invitations at the speed of lightning, he was amazed again.

She had taken the dozens of invitations coming in from the ton and the city daily and put them into several stacks.

At long last, she blew out a breath and lifted her gaze to his. She pointed to a smaller stack as she explained, "These are the most desirable in terms of importance to gain you influence in your intentions." She then pointed to the largest stack. "These are the ones who desperately want your attention, and you should not give it to them. They will have little interest in you, your business, or improving the world. They want introduction to you strictly to improve their own station. Which of course you can do when you have time."

Time. It struck him then how little time he had. His deadline to return to Boston was fast approaching, and he had not yet made mention of it to Lily. He needed to, and yet every time he began, the words turned to bitter ash on his tongue.

A scowl turned her lips, and her nose wrinkled as if she smelled something terrible steaming up from the next group of invitations. "These are the ones who should be ignored because they're terrible people."

Her scowl transformed into a rueful smile as she looked to the last, smallest stack. "And these are the ones who are lovely people but have little power. Which list of invitations shall we start attending first?"

He looked at the invitations, wishing, for her sake, that they could only take up the pleasant, good people. But pleasant, good people did not often control the world. "We should focus on the most powerful first. Let's get it out of the way, and then, of course, we can go on to the lovely people...if you like."

If they had time. But he took heart knowing that when he was gone, she would have duties and companionship beyond Violet to give her purpose.

“It is probably good to have an amalgamation of both. But this pile,” she said, picking up the stack from the most powerful members of the ton as her smile dimmed. “This is the one you shall want to conquer. This is the one that will take one look at me and laugh.” She arched her brow. “And snigger behind their fans.”

“They’re damn well not going to laugh at you,” he ground out.

“They might,” she said. “But as I said, it will be behind their fans.”

“What can I do to stop it?” he asked in all seriousness.

“You can’t,” she said with a shrug. “They think they are the most important people in the entire world. What they say is the arbiter of society. And truthfully, they aren’t mistaken. They do control a great deal of the world.”

He snorted. “They know little of the real world.”

She hesitated, then reached out to him, gently touching the back of his hand. “That’s perhaps true, but London is one of the most important cities on the globe, and the ton cannot be ignored. Isn’t that why you asked me to marry you?”

He let out a sigh. “Fine,” he conceded. “You speak the truth.”

“I know, my darling,” she teased.

Much to his horror, he thrilled at the endearment. Had she just called him “my darling”?

He should not like it. That feeling whispering through him should be cast out quickly, and yet he could not bring himself to do it.

He moved around the polished table, pulled her up from the chair, and took her into his arms. Her eyes widened with surprise and anticipation as he angled her head, then kissed her slowly.

“Say it again,” he murmured against her lips.

“What?” she breathed.

“Call me ‘darling.’”

“Darling,” she repeated before she laughed.

“Why does it make you laugh?” he drawled, loving the feel of her body against his.

“Saying such things is so odd to me...”

He stroked his thumb along her cheek as he considered how little affection she had known.

“Let’s fix that,” he growled softly before he picked her up and sat her down on top of the table, and slowly, he began kissing along the line of her throat, drinking in her scent.

“What if we just threw all the invitations in the fire?” he suggested, only half joking.

She grasped his shoulders as she dropped her head back, exposing the curve of her neck. “Wouldn’t that rather defeat the point of your dukedom?”

He groaned, tasting her soft skin. “I suppose so.”

She wove her hands into his hair, holding him close. “We should attend the Carrow ball. It is tomorrow night, and my seamstresses are all working apace. My gown will be ready.”

“Tomorrow night,” he echoed, wanting to take her to bed and keep her there. “Must we?”

She laughed, a sound of half pleasure, half agony as he teased her body to life with his kisses. “For one who seemed so determined to take on society, you are now balking at it.”

Yes, and he knew why.

Much to his amazement, he wanted to keep her to himself, especially since he was leaving soon. It was a rather dangerous realization, but he liked her company. He liked it so well, and he loved her in his arms. He never wanted to let her out of bed. He never wanted to emerge from the safety of his bedchamber, where he could explore her, mind, body, and soul.

And yet he had a vast deal of things to accomplish before he sailed back to Boston.

He wished that he could take her with him wherever he went, down to the docks, to the House of Lords, into his offices...

Yes, he liked having her beside him. She was so different than anyone he had ever met, and he found that difference to be refreshing.

But she had her duties with Violet and as a duchess now. A duchess who would soon be in command of his estates and several dress shops.

“If there is a ball tomorrow night, do you have any suggestion for me on how to win that lot over, with your singular insight?” he rumbled as he kissed her breast bone.

She arched against him. “There are so few things I can teach you, but one can always make corrections. And I can certainly help you understand them so that you might gain what you desire. Tonight...let us have a lesson of sorts in what I know that most aristocrats might not.”

She was what he desired.

He paused his kissing and gazed down on her face. “Do you promise to treat me with ease?”

She eyed him with a surprised air. "Is that what you are looking for? Ease? I didn't think that's what you were renowned for, my dear James." She smiled slowly. "I understood you like things rather hard."

"Did you, then?" he said, and he waggled his brows at her. He parted her thighs, angling his body between them.

Her eyes flared with desire before she began to protest. "No, no," she said, "we do not have time to be distracted."

"Of course we do," he returned, stroking his hand up her thigh.

And with that, he pulled her into his arms again, wanting to show her exactly what he had in mind. She was so beautiful, and he wanted her so much. He eased her back on the table, pushing aside papers and books.

He slid her skirts up her body as she stared at him with desire.

James loved making love to Lily. He had not had any idea that when he had chosen this he would become so entirely lost in her, consumed by his need for her, and he only hoped that she felt as intensely for him.

She seemed to as she gazed up at him. Slowly, she stroked his face with the back of her hand, gently, almost lovingly.

"I want you," she urged. "I want you now."

He smiled as his breathing grew ragged. "It is my duty to oblige my beautiful wife," he said. He undid the buttons of his breeches and stepped between her legs, baring her beautiful sex. The sight was sheer bliss. He teased her most intimate spot with the head of his cock, and she moaned, her eyes closing as she arched her back.

"I don't want to wait," she whispered. "Don't wait."

And so he did exactly as his duchess required, and he thrust deep into her hot, welcoming body. The power of it nearly undid him. She was so passionate beneath him. He loved to see how she welcomed him. How she wanted him as he wanted her.

The sight of her face alight with desire tossed him to new heights of pleasure.

She gripped him, and he rocked against her until he could bear it no longer, and just as he thought he could take no more, her body rippled around his and she cried out.

She bit the back of her hand as her release swept through her. And her whole body tensed for a moment, before she relaxed and she let out a long breath of satisfaction.

It was that breath, the sound of the completion of her desire that sent him

over the edge.

James thrust home, the pleasure of it so intense, he could think of nothing but her, think of nothing but the way that she was transforming him.

...

That evening, Violet played on the pianoforte, having made good friends with the Earl of Derby, James's only friend in London. The earl turned the pages and teased her kindly.

Lily stood gazing at her sister, who was laughing as the earl leaned down and began to play in harmony with her quite spontaneously. Violet seemed so at ease in both the duke and Derby's company. Laughter was now such a marvelous part of their lives. Something that had been stolen from them.

But they were most definitely not English gentlemen.

Soon, she was to help her husband with her knowledge. What would Derby think? So far, he had been kind and had made her feel as if she belonged.

She truly believed that she could help James in ways Derby could not.

She knew so many details about so many of the families. She knew all their secrets. Oh yes, she knew the gossip. She knew about the affairs. For ladies often were loose-lipped around their seamstresses.

How she longed to help *him*. He'd helped her so much!

"Now," she said, "shall we begin?"

From the look on James's face, he was rather enjoying having her be his schoolmistress.

She wondered about that, but she would come back to that idea later.

She folded her hands before her. "There are some things that you simply must know about conversation, about address, about—"

"Damnation, rules," James drawled.

"Yes, rules," she agreed, her lips twitching. "You like bells; you should love rules."

Derby snorted, but he continued to play by Violet as they switched to a frothy Mozart.

He scowled. "Yes, but not those kinds of rules."

She tsked playfully. "You have to obey the rules of the captain. The ton is no different. If you commit mutiny upon a ship, what will happen to you?"

Derby laughed and supplied with drama, "You will die."

"Exactly," she declared.

"Are you suggesting we are all in danger of walking the plank?" James

jested.

She drew in a steady breath as she prepared herself to educate these big, capable men. “Members of the ton insist their conversations must be dull at balls and so on.”

Derby lifted his hands and declared, “I could never be dull, nor would I ever advise anyone to be. The audacity of such a thing!”

“Yes, but you are a legend in the ton, Derby,” she declared, for even she knew of his bon vivant reputation. Many ladies had come to Madame Josephine hoping to purchase a frock that would catch his eyes.

“Nothing interesting,” she insisted. “Just the weather, horses, dogs—that kind of thing.”

“And tulips,” Derby added.

Lily wasn’t sure why he said tulips specifically instead of just “flowers” or “gardening,” but James seemed to get a good laugh out of it.

“I did notice an odd propensity for a limited amount of conversation,” James said. “Doesn’t anybody have any sort of interest in politics, or literature, or the theater?”

She choked on a laugh, and Violet plunked out a wrong note on the pianoforte.

“Oh, if they have interest in it, they keep it to themselves, at least for the most part,” Derby drawled.

“Especially at the events that you are going to.” She gave him a wry smile. “The more banal you can be, the better.”

James plunged his big hand through his wild, dark hair. “No wonder this has been hell,” he said. “Much as you fear, they are likely laughing behind their fans at me, too.”

“It’s only hell if you let it be,” she pointed out. “Surely, you’re made of sterner stuff than that.” For she had little sympathy for drama. She’d known hell, and this was not it. “You could have a merry time with them if you want,” she added.

“I don’t see how,” James said, frowning, clearly appalled by having to waste his time poncing about by the punch bowl.

She bit her lower lip, then explained, “Well, if you think they could be laughing at you for your American ways, go ahead and laugh right back at them. And know that they are all rather boring. You are vastly superior in my opinion. And sometimes you can put in a quip they won’t even understand. Have fun with them.”

James's lips curled at that. "Ah. Keelhaul them with the wits."

She beamed at him. "Exactly. Now, when you are at dinner, you must change who you are speaking to with each course. That way, no one gets stuck with any one conversation partner for too long."

"Oh, this is actually rather handy," James said with relief. His brow furrowed. "Why didn't you tell me this, Derby?"

The earl winked at Violet and plunked out a cheerful duet with her. "I forget how many rules there actually are! I've been spoon-fed them since birth. The ton is just a bunch of sheep."

Lily laughed. She couldn't stop herself.

The truth was, so many of the ton had nothing interesting to say, and they were all just a product of long lines and wealth. None of them had worked hard for their position. Education was not deemed to be important to members of the ton. Though some attended exclusive institutions, many studied at home and found a dedication to learning to be quite middle class.

"The other thing that you must understand is precedence," she began, dreading trying to explain the intricate tangle of English hierarchy. "Obviously, James, you are a duke. You have the highest precedence here, and I, as your wife, will have a significant amount of precedence, as well. Derby would be next. Whenever we walk into a room, people will behave in a very specific way toward us, not because they want to, but because they must, or they risk being cast out of the ton. And, of course, we will be seated at the top of the table."

"So my dinner companion is strictly based on chance of birth."

"Yes," Derby groaned, as if fully seeing the absurdity of it.

"Oh God," James said, "this is why I should go back across the Atlantic now and have nothing to do with all this exhausting nonsense. Who has time for all of this?"

She paused. She'd never considered that he might wish to go back to the Americas. After all, he was an all-powerful duke here in England. A wave of nerves passed through her at the very idea he might abandon her here. But then she shoved it aside. He'd said nothing of the kind, and she'd not let fear rule her. Not now, when all was going so well.

"Well, it does feel like nonsense," she agreed, "because the rules have all been made up with a specific end in mind."

"How so?" James said.

"Just like at Versailles..." She swallowed, thinking for a moment on how

that had ended in blood and how France was still dealing with the bloody effects of so much instability. “The rules of the ton are made to keep others out. All of these rules are intended to make certain that the ton is exclusive, because if you don’t know the rules and you don’t obey them, everyone immediately knows that you don’t belong.”

James scowled. “It’s a damned good tactic.”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s just an excellent plan on their part to keep out anyone interesting.”

Derby choked on a beleaguered note. “How true.”

She lifted her chin and teased, “We shall be in this together. Just because I know the rules doesn’t mean that I will be liked. No doubt, I shall be the subject of much conjecture! You and Derby might need to rescue me from time to time.”

“You? Need to be rescued?” Derby declared brightly before he let out a laugh. “I don’t believe it.”

“Oh, I have a strong feeling that there will be many slights,” she pointed out. “Lots of references to art, tutors, and France. The English hate a scandal—unless, of course, they’re reading about it.”

James groaned, “Enough now. Let us do something more pleasurable. Violet, would you play a dance? I assume you know how to dance?” he ventured softly as he crossed to her.

“I should be asking that of you,” she returned with a wink. “Of course I know how to dance.”

“Well then, wife, you best show me how it is done.”

She swallowed, for when she was in his arms? She could not think of rules, or dress shops, or dance steps, or anything but the way he made her feel so very alive.

She could not lose herself in his arms. For surely, for him, such a feeling was customary.

Lily cleared her throat. “The most popular dance in London right now is the waltz. If you are permitted to do it. At Almack’s you must have permission...and you must do it a certain way.”

James laughed. “Of course you must. What way?”

“If you dance too scandalously, you shall be kicked out of Almack’s and never asked to return. Do not upset the likes of the Duchess of Marlborough and her ilk,” she warned. “It will not go well for you.”

James gave her a mischievous grin. “I shouldn’t like to upset a duchess,”

he said as he crossed to her and slowly took her in his arms. “Especially my duchess.”

She swallowed. His duchess. Was she? Was she truly? No.

They had an arrangement. Their entire marriage was based on lines scribbled on parchment. Not love.

“Too close,” she warned.

He leaned down and whispered against her ear, “Never close enough, sweetheart.”

Her lips parted with the most delicious shock. That word, and the feel of his lips against her ear? They caused her heart to do the most alarming things!

No, she would not allow it. It was only a word, just like “darling.” And those sorts of endearments would not elicit anything from her, except a mere pleasure that their marriage was going so well. As opposed to so many ton marriages, they could, at least, stand each other.

That had to be enough.

But, as Lily began the waltz and he began to slowly sway her back and forth, finding the timing of the dance, she knew that she was on dangerous ground, and she’d have to be very careful, indeed.

Chapter Twenty-One

As the coach rolled up before the Duke and Duchess of Carrow's formidable London house, James could not take his eyes off his wife.

She looked like a queen.

The emeralds about her throat shone with the most beautiful deep-green hue. A blue fire danced in them, matching her eyes. Her green silk gown was mere wisps over her arms and her breasts. The silk fabric skimmed her body like an intimate caress, and he wanted to take her back to their abode and devour her.

Or perhaps he would not wait and he could rend the thin fabric here in the coach, baring her pale skin, and then he would show her the delicious pleasure of excitement and making love as they traversed London.

As she waited for the coach door to open, her pulse leaped at her neck and she took her train, embroidered with gold leaves, into her gloved hand.

She looked like a Greek goddess.

His goddess. How could the world not have seen it? He dared to believe that he had. He'd seen the power in her, and now that she was dressed for the part, he did not see how anyone would not bow before her. Yes, it seemed as if she had stepped down from Mount Olympus to bless mere mortals with her presence.

Her hair was coiled atop her head and laced with emeralds and sapphires.

But then she looked back to him, and he could see it in her eyes.

Fear.

There was fear there.

She was going back to the people that her mother was from, the people who had cast her out, and they did not know the extent to which this scandal would go.

But that, of course, was why she was there.

Suddenly, he was furious with himself and it was all he could do not to pound on the roof, head hell for leather back to the house, collect her sister, and retreat to his ship, where he could take her out into vast seas and keep her safe from the world's unkindness.

He had put her in this position. Hell, he'd chosen it.

He'd wanted to make London furious with his marriage—it was a delicious perk to their perfect arrangement—but what if they were cruel to her?

He swallowed back bile. In all his clever planning, he'd not considered this. But she had seemed so strong, so fierce, as if nothing could shake her. Certainly not a few barb-tongued members of the ton.

But what if...

He leaned forward and offered his white-gloved hand to her. "We could go back now."

She frowned at him, confused. "Why?"

He drew in a breath, willing her to understand. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

She looked at him, her gaze crackling with anticipation that pushed her fear away. "I have been looking forward to this moment. Do not try to take it back now. There is no retreat for the likes of us."

"Ever forward?" he queried, stunned by her forceful speech and also wondering why he'd ever feared she might quail under the eyes of the ton.

She'd faced a bloody revolution and the rise of Napoleon. A few tart words from some lace-bedecked old trouts would be nothing.

Still, the fierce need to protect her shocked him.

And then, she leaned forward and winked. "James," she said, her voice lovely and powerful like a deep river cutting its way through stone, "God is not on the side of the big battalions, but on the side of the best shots."

"Voltaire," he said, and his lips curled into a smile as he realized just how formidable his wife was. And to think he'd feared for her.

"Exactly," she said with a nod, then checked her gown. "Now let us go and deliver those best shots to those big guns."

The coach stopped in front of the pavement, which had been prepared with a red runner that went all the way up the granite steps to the towering house.

A footman in ivory and gold-trimmed livery opened the door. James jumped down, and he felt a horde of eyes turn his way. For hundreds of people were descending on the Carrow house, in sedan chairs, by coach, and some by foot, having left their vehicles in the crush some way back. Others

were already making their way up to the house but paused to look at him.

He was an oddity. And now, with his duchess? He was even more so.

Gazes took them in slowly. Eyes widened. Lips parted.

Ladies looked on lasciviously and gentlemen with envy or irritation at the way the women of the ton were considering him.

And it was all Lily's doing.

She had chosen tight black stockings and breeches for him, but that was the end of the austerity of his clothes. His black waistcoat and linen shirt were embroidered with silver flowers.

But the most decadent thing was his long black coat, which clung to his body but made all the other men about him look like sad little birds in the face of a hawk.

It was elaborately embroidered with more silver leaves and lilies...as if she was declaring to the world that she was his.

He felt like some sort of dark prince in it—he wondered now whether that was her intent. His long, dark hair had been brushed to a sheen and teased his shoulders. Still a bit wild, for it did take to curl in the damp air.

From the top of his head to the tips of his boots, he was dressed in black, unlike so many of the men about him, who were either in the fashions of the last century or in brightly hued colors. Many had coats cut tight but embroidered brashly with flowers all over them. Their satin breeches ended at their white stockings.

Others were in the fashion that Beau Brummell favored: brutally tight black coats and breeches that looked like they would split at any moment. Then there were the white cravats that looked as if they had been tortured within an inch of their lives to achieve impossible features.

James wanted to laugh at them, because for all the appearance that they'd put *little* effort into their outfits, he knew it took hours to achieve that. James had warned Lily that he would never try such a thing, to which his wife had said, "Thank heavens. That fool doesn't have a brain and is the most terrible of friends."

He'd wondered at that comment.

Already, his wife had proved to be a font of information. Many men of Brummell's set were gamblers and in deep debt. She knew the debts of many more lords and the scandals of them, too.

As they swept up the steps, he wondered if that might cause a stir as well, because when she entered, all the ladies who had attended the dress shop she

worked at... They would know that Lily knew where the proverbial bodies were buried. They climbed up the stairs, her hand on top of his, passing lanterns that sent light dancing over the guests and caused their jewels to sparkle as they entered the foyer of the grand house.

Dozens of footmen also lined the way, ready to assist.

They joined the crush of guests who were gossiping as they awaited entry into the ballroom that sounded as if it was already full to the brim. The mix of voices as well as the notes of the orchestra from within was quite a cacophony.

It was a long line of people, but before the Duke and Duchess of Ashbridge, the line quickly gave way. In fact, whether in awe or in horror, the crowd was parting for them.

“Who is that?” someone whispered.

“Dear God, is that his wife?” another hissed.

“Yes! It is her!”

“The old duke’s granddaughter!”

“Art tutor! Can you imagine!”

“*French.*”

The voices whirled about them sotto voce.

He carefully glanced her way and was amazed to see her incredible defiance. Her posture was perfection, and she surveyed the room as if every person there should kiss her toes.

It was an excellent line of defense, for it felt like an *offense* instead.

Their union had been printed in the newssheets, as had a reminder that Lily’s mother had run off to France with a mere monsieur who lived in a small set of rooms, not a chateau.

A low rumble of gossip began to envelop them until, at last, they stood before the Duke and Duchess of Carrow. They both greeted them with a slight bow and curtsy. The imperious duke and duchess, who came from a title of considerable age, stared at them and said little.

“How do you do?” the Duchess of Carrow said, her expression barely changing.

“Very well,” James replied before adding, “We are having very fine weather.”

Lily appeared to bite back a laugh. Perhaps because the conversation really was absurd.

The duchess eyed him oddly, and then the duke gave a slight nod of his

silvery head. “Do you have any horses running at Newmarket?”

James cleared his throat. “No. I have a fleet of ships.”

The Duke of Carrow blinked, and for the first time there was a hint of curiosity in his eyes. “Sounds like a bloody fine adventure.”

The Duchess of Carrow gestured them toward the ballroom.

James leaned down and asked Lily, “Did I do well? It felt damned uncomfortable, though I think Carrow has fantasies about running off and joining a pirate crew.”

“You talked about the weather well,” she assured with a smile.

The crowd stared at them from behind waving fans, quizzing glasses, and barely concealed curiosity. Lily lifted her chin. “Come,” she urged. “Come with me.”

With that, she started leading him deep into the ballroom, right out onto the empty dance floor. She didn’t stop until they stood face-to-face at the center of everyone’s attention.

The dark notes of a waltz had begun. She picked up the loop that held her train, and she whispered intently, “Look at me and hold me too close.”

He frowned. “But that is exactly the opposite of what we are supposed to do. You said—”

“This isn’t Almack’s,” she rushed. “It’s not a terrible disaster if we are too close. Now, do what I say.”

James hesitated for but a moment, then swept her into his arms, pulling her body tight to his. Bloody hell, how he loved the feel of her curves pressed to him.

He drank that in and focused on her as her free hand came to rest on his shoulder. The notes of the waltz began, and he rocked them back and forth, then took off in long, smooth strides and swirled them about the room.

There would be no tentative mincing from them. No, everyone would get out of their way. And he quickly realized that was how she was leading this...leading him.

They would not be mice, eager for the crumbs of the ton’s approval.

No. They would seize their place.

And how he adored her for it.

He loved this dance. For the waltz made him feel as if he was flying, just like when his ship was full sheets and coursing over the waves.

Their bodies, just as in the bedchamber, moved as one, never missing a beat or a turn.

They swept about the room, circling and arcing.

Though he was consumed in the moment with her, his gaze barely able to move from hers, he realized other couples had not dared to join them.

They were alone on the floor. Everyone was staring at them. Everyone was agog, and she? His duchess was smiling.

“Do not take your eyes off me,” she whispered. “You must look at me as if I am your queen, your goddess divine.”

He gazed down at her with wonder. “But you *are* my queen, my goddess divine.”

“Goodness,” she breathed, the emotion in her eyes deep but unreadable. “Then you shan’t have to pretend. Look at me as if you want to have your way with me right here on the dance floor.”

He laughed and tilted his head down toward her, his lips skimming her perfectly coiffured hair. “I do.”

She gasped at that, and he lowered his head so that he was almost kissing her, but he left enough room to tantalize.

The entire room seemed to hold their breath as they watched the new duke and duchess.

The entire room was hanging on their every move.

His long coat swung about his legs as he led her around, their slippers and boots lightly skimming the polished floor. Then finally, just as the music came to a crescendo, he twirled her under his arm and then held her still, the bells of her skirt whipping against her legs.

There was a long moment of silence.

Then she said, “Now take me off the floor and look as if you are one of the most powerful men in all the world. For you are.”

He did as she instructed, and when they stood surrounded by a sea of people who seemed enraptured by their boldness, she said softly, “Stop trying to be an Englishman. I was mistaken to suggest you should even try. You’ll never be one. Be yourself. Be a devil-may-care rogue of a duke, and they will all fall to your feet.”

He blinked. “That is your plan? For me to be myself?”

“I was a fool not to see it before. We will never be truly like them. But they will be in awe of you—of *us*—if we refuse to bow to them.”

He stared down at her for a long moment, and then he threw back his head and laughed. The deep tones of it rocked the room, and if everyone was staring before, they now seemed captivated, longing to know what could

make such a beautiful, powerful man laugh so.

Was his duchess so very charming?

She was perfect and glorious and in command.

James knew she was absolutely correct. After that dance, people were now staring at him, not with disdain but curiosity.

Whenever he had tried to act like the English, they had not liked him well for it. It was an interesting idea to just be himself. And that Lily seemed to *like* him for himself. An emotion coursed through him that he couldn't define, for it was wholly foreign to him...but wholly welcome, as well.

Chapter Twenty-Two

She was the subject of every gossip.

It was exactly as they had anticipated, but now he found himself damned angry about it.

He did not like the fact that while many were embracing him as a roguish American, they made slighting remarks about her birth and her life as a seamstress before they wed.

The truth was that he loved the fact that she was a self-made woman. She had seen the hells of Paris and London. She had more skills than most could ever dream of obtaining.

And she had acted boldly. With the funds he had given her, to ensure her independence as a duchess, she had already bought a shop on Bond Street. Immediately, she had hired builders to strip out the inside and furnish it simply and sumptuously. She had then appointed the seamstresses that had made her gowns to the running of the shop. And while she had seen to Violet's education every day, she was designing every day as well.

He loved this about her.

She had not looked back. Though she came to every ball, rout, fete, and party that he wished her to, she let her heart revel in her dreams, too.

Her true passion was in Bond Street and in her notebooks and in helping the seamstresses who worked in so many of the shops. Marriage to him had given her what she desired, and he was glad. Her dress shop would soon open its doors to the public, and half of London was clamoring to make appointments.

A duchess's shop! How odd! How eccentric! How exciting!

The five young ladies that Lily had hired were also given comfortable rooms above the shop. Lily had taken very good care to ensure that it was stocked with beautiful beds, linens—all the supplies that young ladies could

possibly need—and that there would be a stipend for their clothing. They were also brought food from the shops about town. Hot, fresh, delicious treats.

And much to his surprise, Lily had hired a young girl who had come over from France around the same time she had. Madame Sophie. She was to run the front of the shop.

And he realized that though the shop was her passion, Lily understood the power she now wielded and how many people she could help as a duchess.

As he poured himself a cup of steaming hot coffee, he studied her sketching away at the breakfast table until he at last ventured, “Wouldn’t you rather run the shop yourself?”

As captain of his ship, he couldn’t imagine giving such power over to anyone.

“No,” she said easily, still focused on her drawing.

He longed for her to look up, but she was consumed. They sat in silence for a few moments before he added, “You would be excellent at it.”

She pursed her lips before sketching another set of lines. “Duchesses don’t run the front of shops. And I don’t actually like speaking with the customers. I just like creating the designs.”

He blinked at her. “I don’t actually like speaking with people, either. They drive me positively mad.”

At that, she looked up. “I never would’ve guessed that. You seem so good with others.”

“I’ve worked very hard at seeming so,” he informed her, oddly thrilled that she was now speaking directly to him, given how consumed she had been. “Now, will you be coming out this evening with me?”

“If you wish it,” she said, immediately turning back to her drawing.

His heart sank. He was thrilled for her work and how dedicated she was to making the shop a success. Of course she had to focus on it.

Besides, he knew this feeling. He’d felt it long ago. Though he was often needed, he knew what it was to be looked over for more important things. The cold whisper of a dark night, his mother staring out to sea—the memories rose up in him, but he shook them away quickly and grabbed a piece of toast. “To the theater tonight, I think,” he said.

“I am determined to excel at a duchess’s duty,” she said swiftly as her brow furrowed with concentration.

Duty. That was what this marriage was to her. What *he* was to her. And he

wincing. Good God, when had he become such a fool?

His new butler, for the old was simply too appalling for words, knocked at the door. “A card has been left for you, Your Grace,” he said to Lily. “The Duchess of Montrose.”

“Elizabeth is back in town?” she gasped, dropping her charcoal.

The butler nodded. “Her maid indicated that she has only just returned, but she hopes to call upon you when she’s feeling a little bit better. She is under the weather at present.”

His wife sucked in a sharp breath. “Then I must go to her.” Lily jumped up from the table, collected her sketches, and headed for the door.

Leaving him alone at the table.

She paused at the door and said quickly, “I shall return before the theater.” Then she wagged a finger at him and said playfully, “Don’t get up to any trouble while I’m gone, unless, of course, it is for a very good cause.”

His heart lifted, and he hated that he was literally hanging on the merest notice from her. “I will endeavor,” he said.

But the truth was he ached at the fact that she was leaving him. He liked being with her every day, but she was quite content to go about her life without him.

“May I come?” he suddenly called.

She paused. “To see my friend Elizabeth?”

“What about her husband?” he said. “Could I meet him?”

Her lips parted in a smile. “What a wonderful idea. Yes, do come along,” she said.

And with that, he went with her, feeling rather overjoyed that she’d allowed it and rather hating himself that he felt such joy at it.

It slipped through him, then—all those years ago when he had been small, so entirely alone, no one noticing him as his mother waited for his father to return.

She’d had no time for him, and he had so desperately wanted her to notice him, desperately wanted to be cared for, desperately wanted to be loved and seen, but he never had.

Instead, he had taken all that neglect and tried to protect himself from it by never needing help...or love.

But the hollow ache inside him had never been filled.

He blinked, appalled by his own self-pity.

No, he did not need to worry about being seen now. He did not need to. He

was a man, fully grown. He had his own interests, his own ideas.

He did not need Lily's love. She clearly did not need his.

But it would be a good thing to meet her friend's husband, surely.

They gathered their things, swept out of the house, and walked to the Duke and Duchess of Montrose's establishment.

"How very shocking that we're walking upon the pavement," she observed.

"Yes," he said, "Londoners do seem to think that odd. They think that I should ride a horse everywhere."

"It's because it costs a great deal of money to maintain a horse," she said. "It's a standard of importance."

"Not to me," he said.

"That's because you've had wealth and power all your life."

"I suppose you are correct."

"I am almost always correct," she said mischievously.

"Indeed you are."

He hooked his arm through hers, guiding her carefully along the pavement, easing their way in and out of people until, at last, they stood before the Montrose house.

They hurried up the steps, and when the door opened, James was surprised to see that the butler looked overjoyed.

"Miss Lily," the older man exclaimed, and then he stopped and beamed, looking back and forth from James to Lily. "Not Miss Lily now. The Duchess of Ashbridge," he declared as he backed up, gesturing for them to enter.

"Her Grace is in the morning room," the butler said. "Do you both wish to go in?"

"Is she well enough to see us?" Lily asked.

The care in Lily's voice struck him. She was a remarkable woman. And he found himself longing to be the subject of such care.

The butler smiled kindly. "They were very exhausted from their travels coming back from Scotland, but you would be an excellent tonic for her." He easily led them down the painting-lined hall into a brightly appointed room.

The Duchess of Montrose, with her fiery hair and intelligent gaze, sat up straight in her chair and exclaimed, "Lily! My dear friend, you have come!"

Lily tsked as she rushed across the room and took her friend's hands in her own. "How could I not come and see you, if you are not well after returning from Scotland? I have been longing to see you," Lily exclaimed.

"And I you," the Duchess of Montrose said, pulling Lily into an embrace.

“I had no idea that things were about to be so topsy-turvy in your world. If I had known, I never would’ve left.”

“If you had stayed, it might never have happened,” Lily countered.

James shifted from boot to boot, not certain what to say in the face of such obvious female friendship.

At Lily’s comment, Elizabeth stilled. “Did you marry him because you had to?” She swung her gaze to look at James as if he was the devil himself.

And in that moment, he was genuinely concerned that he might expire and be consumed by Elizabeth’s fiery gaze. Elizabeth was a good, fierce friend of Lily’s, and he immediately admired her heartily.

“Well, I did indeed have to marry him,” Lily said, and at her friend’s tart expression, she rushed, “but it was all for a very good cause.”

“He didn’t ruin you, did he?” Elizabeth bit out.

At the word “ruin,” the Duke of Montrose, tall and looking as if he didn’t give a damn about what anyone thought of him, strode into the room. “Who’s ruined who?” he growled.

“Nobody, my darling. Nobody, it seems,” Elizabeth declared, her face transforming with love at the sight of her husband. Then she swung a withering glance back to James. “Although this fellow does look as if he’s capable of it.”

James dared a smile. “Just because I look like a pirate doesn’t mean I am one,” he replied.

Elizabeth cocked her head to the side. “You do look like a pirate.”

And then the Duke of Montrose groaned, “Devil take it. You’re that shipping magnate from Boston, aren’t you?”

“The very one,” he agreed.

“I don’t dislike Americans,” Montrose drawled as he crossed to his wife. “But do you have to be in my morning room so early?”

He let out a low snort at that. “It doesn’t sound as if you like Americans.”

Montrose arched a dark brow. “They’re always causing a mess,” he said.

“We didn’t do as badly as France,” he pointed out.

“That’s not saying a great deal, now, is it?” Montrose replied and took his wife’s hand.

“You’re one of those,” James said evenly.

“One of what?”

“A toffee-nosed aristocrat who has no interest in ideas.”

Elizabeth coughed. “I wouldn’t agree with that supposition,” she said.

And then Lily laughed. “Nor I. You’re barking up the wrong tree, my love. This duke loves ideas.”

“He does? Then why is he so annoyed an American has made entry to his morning room?”

“Because,” Montrose said, “they’re loud and opinionated.”

“And you are not loud and opinionated?” he asked, arching his own brow.

Montrose stared at him for a long moment and then erupted into laughter. “Touché,” he said. “I am loud, and I am opinionated. So where does that leave us?”

“I think it leaves us as allies.”

“Too fast and too early, old boy,” the duke replied, though his gaze was merry now. “Elizabeth, would you like our company or—”

“No, no,” Elizabeth cut in quickly, “you two may go off. I need to speak to Lily privately, to make certain that this fellow did not do anything he should not to gain her hand.”

“I promise you he did not,” Lily said firmly.

With her declaration still in the air, James said, “I am lucky to have her hand.”

“Our marriage is an arrangement,” she said gently.

“Yes,” he agreed, unable to tear his gaze away from her. “And I am very lucky for it. I’m still not sure if you feel the same.”

“How else could I feel?” she protested easily. “You have given me everything, including my dreams and Violet’s security. What more could I want?”

She had all that she wanted, and he felt his heart soar before it crashed.

He was not one of the things that she wanted; of that, he was certain. Oh, she desired him, but *wanted*, truly wanted to keep? No, she did not need him, and he should be glad of it. But as he walked with Montrose into his library, away from his wife and her dear friend, he found himself suddenly lost, suddenly uncertain of what to do.

Because he had never imagined that he might want his wife to want him, too. He’d been so certain that he’d be able to leave without looking back, and now, as he began to understand that she would never need or want him the way he was beginning to need and want her?

He did long to leave. And soon he would, thank God. He would no longer have to feel these strange pangs. No, he would shove his emotions back down where they belonged.

Yes, London was beginning to grow painful. Not because of the rules, or the lords, or the ton, but because it had never occurred to him that he would wish that *she* would wish him to stay.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Damnation, man. Is this your study?” James asked, stunned by the sight before him.

“Yes,” Montrose said.

James stared in awe. “It’s the biggest library I’ve seen in London.”

“Yes,” Montrose repeated before adding with a smile, “My wife has helped to secure most of the titles in this room. I love them. They fill me with a great deal of joy.”

Was this a duke speaking to him? An English duke speaking about love and enjoyment of books? And his love for his wife was so evident it permeated the room.

Montrose rolled his eyes. “I can see it, old man. You’re making assumptions about English people just like I made assumptions about Americans.”

“Am I?” James queried.

“You’re thinking right now that I’m speaking in effusive terms. That English people resist enthusiasm. I am painfully enthusiastic about things... just not people. Do you fancy boxing?”

“I beg your pardon?” James said, not quite following the turn of conversation. “Is this an excuse to start another war with my country?”

“I’ve been sitting in a coach for five days,” the duke informed him. “The ride back from Scotland was exhausting. I’m used to a great deal of activity. I force myself to it. If I don’t, my brain goes positively riot. I’ve sat for far too long and cannot endure more of it. So, what do you say?”

“I shall happily match you if you are prepared for it, Your Grace. I can go easier on you if you prefer.”

“Bloody hell,” Montrose breathed. “This is what I’m talking about. Americans. You’re so arrogant. Don’t you think that I practice?”

James gave him a grin. "I have no idea if you do, Your Grace. You do look like you might, but you also have proclaimed that you spend most of your time in this library."

"Do you not crack open a book?"

"I crack open several," James replied. "I think they're rather vital to keeping one from making horrific errors."

"Ah. At last we are in agreement." Then a mysterious look crossed Montrose's face. "I know about you."

He blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

A knowing smile tilted Montrose's lips. "Come along."

And with that, the duke was off. James followed him, and as they headed swiftly down the hall, he realized he did not need his wife to teach him how to behave in society.

She was quite right. He did not need to act like an English person.

The Duke of Montrose clearly was not overly fond of the English, either, though he was English.

And then it struck him that his wife had done something far better than teach him etiquette. She had just introduced him to one of the most powerful men in England. He had not talked about the weather or minced. And it had gotten him an invitation to box. A door was open before him, and he damned well better walk through it.

"Queensbury Rules?" James asked, embracing this moment.

"You know Queensbury Rules?" the duke mocked.

He grinned, eager to begin. "I know fighting."

"Glad to hear it," Montrose said. "You're clearly going to need that skill."

They strode down a long hall.

"Do you not leave the house?" James asked as they walked into a room with a boxing ring in the center of it.

"Not really. No," Montrose replied without apology. "I don't like people. I only go out when I have to. My wife has changed that a little bit. I like her company, and for her, I'll do a vast many things." The duke paused and studied him. "You're like that, too."

"Why would you say that?" James asked, swallowing.

"The look on your face," Montrose observed as he unpinned then unwound his cravat. "I don't think you like people much, either, though you're gregarious. And like me, you're willing to do things for Lily, aren't you? She's quite a treasure, that one."

“She is,” he agreed.

“She was my wife’s only friend.”

“And yet, you abandoned her to London,” he pointed out, surprised at his anger on his wife’s behalf that she had been so unprotected.

“I beg your pardon?” the duke queried, taken aback.

James tugged off his own cravat and coat. “Did you not know the kind of trouble that she was in?”

“No,” Montrose said honestly, dismayed. “Was she in trouble? She seemed happy in her work.”

He snorted. “Happy, impoverished, driven, and the woman who runs that dress shop is a devil. Not a bit of French to her, either.”

The duke winced, looking horrified. “She did not tell Elizabeth. I’m sorry for it. I would’ve done whatever I could to help her.”

James stared at the man and realized that he was in absolute earnestness. “Hell’s bells,” he ground out. “She’s as bad as me.”

“What does that mean?” the duke asked as he pulled his linen shirt over his head.

“Nothing,” he replied, not quite willing to bare his soul to Montrose. Or Lily’s, for that matter. But the truth was he and his wife were as bad as the other. Neither of them wanted to ask others for help. They both thought that they needed to do things entirely on their own.

But he wasn’t entirely certain, now, that doing so was actually possible.

He’d been operating under a total fallacy that he had to be alone and to pretend to be someone that he wasn’t.

And in some ways...he’d been doing that his whole life, desperately looking for the power and approval he’d been denied.

The duke headed into the arena, stretching his muscled neck and shoulders. “Come along, then.”

James dropped items of clothing on the simple wood-backed chair beside him.

And as if the man could anticipate his master’s every need, the butler raced in.

“Will you keep points?” Montrose asked, bouncing back and forth.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler said swiftly as he stood beside the ring. “Indeed I shall.”

James eyed the massive Duke of Montrose. They were matched evenly in size, but he wondered if they were matched evenly in temperament. The beast

of a duke seemed rather growly, grumpy, brusque.

James was more gregarious. He took life as it came, like a storm. He liked to laugh into the wind.

After all, if one did not laugh, one would break...and be swallowed up in despair.

They circled each other slowly, fists up. James eyed the man, looking for weaknesses. There didn't appear to be any. Montrose was patient.

That was a challenge.

Patient men were dangerous men, and it made him like the duke all the more and hope for his alliance.

"The East India Company," James began.

"What of it?" Montrose asked.

"You're aware of it?"

"The whole bloody world is aware of it," the duke drawled. "Don't be boring."

James stepped forward and jabbed. The duke quickly arced away. James found himself quite surprised—and irritated—that this English duke was doing so well against him.

In his experience, Englishmen were quite polished and spent a great deal of time at Gentleman Jackson's. But, if it came down to it, none of them would survive a street brawl or an attack on a ship. This duke was different. He looked as if he knew how to fight below the belt if necessary.

"Right," James said. "I want the East India Company stopped."

"Good luck with that," the duke returned, circling. But then, he hesitated. And that was, of course, when James thrust forward, his fist striking the duke's chin.

Montrose blinked, adjusting his jaw. "That was a low blow."

James danced away. "And why would you think that I would not choose such blows? I am not troubled by that English sense of noblesse oblige that is so damned bothersome."

The duke let out a laugh. "What makes you think I care about noblesse oblige?"

"A great deal," James replied.

They eyed each other again, fists up, carefully bobbing in and out, dancing back and forth, looking for an in until, at last, James feigned to the right.

The duke swooped in, and James whirled around, slamming his fist in a hammer-like gesture into the man's kidney.

Montrose nearly fell to a knee, groaned, and picked himself back up.

“That was a bit of a sneak attack,” he ground out, clearly pleased.

James gave him a slight bow. “You’re too good to go straight at.”

The duke laughed again. “Compliments will get you nowhere with me. I’m barraged by them.”

“You’re different, then,” James pointed out. “As far as I can tell, London lords adore compliments.”

“London lords are tossers,” Montrose said.

“We are again in agreement,” James observed.

“So it seems,” Montrose returned. “I’m going to have to learn to deal with you, I suppose.”

“Why?” he asked.

“First, because you’re Lily’s husband and my wife cannot do without Lily. And second, because we’re going to change the world together, aren’t we?”

“I beg your pardon?” James said, his fists lowering for a moment.

It was a mistake.

Montrose barreled his fist into James’s gut.

Air whooshed out of his lungs as he staggered back.

Montrose gave him a knowing grin. “Turnabout is fair play and all that.”

“So it is,” he wheezed.

“Look, Ashbridge, you’re here in this room now, with me. It’s why you walked away from your wife. You realized who I am.”

“Well, now who sounds arrogant?” James asked.

The duke laughed heartily. “I’m the bloody Duke of Montrose. And you’re the Duke of Ashbridge, and you’re also a shipping magnate. Together, you and I have incredible power, and there’s not a lot that people can do to stop us if we work together.”

“What are you saying?” James breathed, hardly daring to believe he’d found an exceptionally powerful Englishman willing to listen to him. Finally. After all this time.

“I thought that you were intelligent and liked to read,” the duke said as he wiped sweat from his brow. “Do I need to explain myself more carefully?”

James narrowed his gaze. “On this one, I’m going to actually need you to state your intent. I’m not going to guess at it.”

The duke gave him a slow, devil-may-care smile. “It’s time for the Americans and the English to work together, because I’m done waiting for the other English lords to figure out that our society is going to the bloody

devil, and we're going to go the way of France if we don't sort this out. But there's one thing."

"What?" James ground out. Of course there was a catch. There was always a catch.

The duke stilled. "I've heard you can't wait to leave."

"London?" he queried, and the duke nodded. "It's true. I can't wait to leave."

Montrose shrugged. "Then no one's going to listen to you."

"I beg your pardon?" James challenged.

"No one's going to want to work with someone who's going to cut and run," he insisted. "It's not interesting. It's not helpful and certainly not trustworthy. Why would I put myself out on a limb to make a change with you? To risk a great deal when you are just going to walk away?"

James stilled, and he drew a slow breath. He hadn't thought of that.

"And you're going to leave your wife," Montrose mused, "because I can't see her going to the United States. Her dreams are here. Does she know you plan to leave her in the lurch, caring for your estates and your ward by herself?"

The droll challenge felt like a gut punch, and suddenly he realized how damned selfish his "brilliant" plan sounded.

"She's my wife in name only," James said softly, unwilling to admit to more.

Montrose blew out a derisive breath. "I don't believe that for a moment. I've seen the way you look at her."

He winced, hating that it was so obvious.

But he noted Montrose did not say she looked at him the same way.

James lifted his fist and said, "What if I don't go? What then?"

The duke smiled slowly. "Then we're talking."

Chapter Twenty-Four

“What the blazes happened? I left London, and now you’re a duchess!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

Lily laughed. “I can’t explain it easily,” she said, “except I was shoved into a corner and he was the only one who could help me.”

“A duke?” her friend breathed, shaking her head. “An American duke? It is most confusing. And my darling friend, my heart breaks to think you were in desperate circumstances. Could you not ask me for help?”

“I couldn’t. Not at first. You see, I am so used to cheering up others, to being independent, I couldn’t bear to tell you. You were already adapting to so very much.”

Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears, and she pulled Lily into her embrace. “Please know you have given me a great deal. It would be an honor to help you in return.”

She hugged her friend back, holding on tight, only just realizing how tense she had been. She adored being with James, but she had been holding herself rigid. Refusing to give in to her growing feelings.

“I did come to you for help, eventually,” she whispered. “I’m sure your butler told you.”

“He has not mentioned it, but we have barely been home. I planned to come and see you later, because, you see...” Elizabeth pulled back and took Lily’s hands in her own. “I’ve been feeling rather ill as of late.”

Fear leaped in her heart, and she leaned forward, sitting on the edge of the burgundy settee. “Is anything amiss?” she asked swiftly.

She could not bear the idea that anything might befall her dear friend Elizabeth. After all, Elizabeth was the only person that she’d had to care about besides Violet for years.

“Nothing is wrong,” Elizabeth assured before she beamed. “Exactly the

opposite. I am with child.”

“What?” Lily gasped.

“With child,” her friend repeated playfully. “As in, a small person is growing inside me and eventually will make itself known to all of us with a grand entrance in about nine months’ time.”

Lily took the news in, stunned. “I am over the moon for you,” she cried.

“Thank you. I’m rather excited about it myself, but it makes me exhausted,” Elizabeth confessed. “And traveling in the coach was horrid. And we couldn’t stay in Scotland any longer because I was feeling positively miserable.”

She gaped at her friend. “So you thought a long coach trip back to London was a good idea?”

Elizabeth tsked. “I like London and the bookshop. You know that. It makes me feel secure.”

“I’m glad you are here now,” Lily said, her heart swelling. “I missed you, and it’s been very strange having no one to talk to about my life.”

“You never really talked a great deal about your life to begin with,” Elizabeth pointed out. “You were my friend and kind and supportive and strong, and I’m glad that we had each other, but now, when I really, truly think about it, you kept yourself from me.”

Lily nibbled her lower lip, longing for Elizabeth to understand her predicament. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“You do not need to be so strong,” Elizabeth said gently. “You always make me feel better. Now allow me to help you. Do I need to go murder that man who is with my husband? Garrett is very clever. It could be arranged easily, and you’d make a magnificent widow.”

“Have done!” she cried, her eyes filling with tears of laughter. “No. Do not kill him. The world would suffer for it.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, still suspicious. “He did not put you into a position where you had to marry him?”

“No. Absolutely not. He’s Violet’s guardian.”

“I beg your pardon?” Elizabeth asked, her jaw all but dropping.

“It’s a great deal to catch up on,” she agreed. “Despite the fact that we’d have to trace our way back to the Tudors to find any connection, he has inherited my grandfather’s dukedom and...appalling as it is, he inherited care of Violet, and that is how we came to meet.” She shrugged, at a loss at how to explain the last weeks. “And society decided to think ill of us when I took

up rooms in his house to help with Violet. And he was determined to see what he says should have been mine returned to me.”

“My goodness. He’s a good sort, then?” Elizabeth concluded.

Emotion tightened her throat as she took in how her life had changed so quickly. “I’ve gotten everything that I’ve ever wanted.”

Elizabeth grinned. “Most people cannot say that.”

“But you can,” Lily reminded her, clearing her throat, determined not to wish for more. For the sort of love that Elizabeth had found.

“It was a near thing,” Elizabeth said softly.

That was true. Lily could recall the period of time where Elizabeth wasn’t certain if her husband would be able to love her in return, or if it would all go terribly wrong, or if her father...

Well, they didn’t talk about that. That was in the past. She didn’t want to darken Elizabeth’s day by bringing up all those bad memories.

“He’s given me my dreams,” Lily declared, wanting her friend to know she was safe. “I’m about to open my own dress shop.”

Elizabeth gasped. “He is making it possible?”

Lily nodded.

“Then he *must* be a decent fellow, and I shall be your first client,” Elizabeth said, squeezing her hands.

“And because of that,” Lily said brightly, “everyone will come. I think they shall come anyway because I’m such a curiosity. A duchess who runs a dress shop! From afar, of course.”

“From afar, absolutely,” Elizabeth repeated, nodding.

Lily shook her head, a shadow passing over her joy. “But a few weeks ago, my life was in total ruins.”

“And then he came into your life,” Elizabeth observed. “My goodness, what a fairy tale. It sounds like it could be love.”

“It is not love,” Lily protested swiftly, not even daring to allow herself to hope for it. It would be too cruel. “I do not love him. I like him. He’s interesting, and he makes my heart do interesting things when we...”

“Yes?” Elizabeth prompted, her eyes dancing.

Lily cleared her throat. “Well, you know. You told me how wonderful it is.”

Elizabeth beamed. “Good. He knows what he is doing! So many young ladies never find out how wonderful it is.”

“What a misfortune for them,” Lily lamented.

Elizabeth stared at her for a long moment. “I did not marry for love but found it. And Lily, I think that you—”

“This is not a love match,” she cut in, wishing to divest her friend of false hopes. “He has been clear about that. We both have.”

Elizabeth cocked her head to the side. “I’m not so entirely sure about that.”

“I don’t want him to have interest in me,” Lily said firmly, her body tense. Oh, part of her wished for love—for what Elizabeth had—but it was too dangerous. Too wild.

“What?” Elizabeth breathed. “You wouldn’t wish him to love you?”

She shook her head quickly, even as she felt her body tremble with emotion. “No, I don’t want him to love me,” Lily said tightly.

“Why not?” Elizabeth asked. “You deserve to be loved.”

“Love makes people do dangerous things.” Like finding oneself in the midst of a bloody rise of a dictator, and choosing love over the safety of one’s children.

Her parents could have returned to London, keeping them all safe. But they had not. They’d chosen their own lives over the safety of their family. Love... Love was not practical. And practicality mattered.

Lily squared her shoulders. “All I want is security. All I want is the dress shop and the ability to help others as a duchess. And I will not risk...”

“What?” Elizabeth prompted.

“I do not want someone to weaken me.”

“Weaken you?” Elizabeth echoed. “What do you mean by that?”

She looked away, and her throat tightened. “My mother was warned by a friend to leave. More than once. But she refused to leave my father because she loved him so deeply. When my parents were killed, I had to protect Violet. I swore then that I would never let anything cause me to act out of such foolishness, and I won’t. James did not ask me to wed him for love but for business. An arrangement of benefit to both of us. And that is why I could say yes to him.”

Elizabeth stared at her, her eyes full of sorrow.

“Do not be unhappy for me,” she urged her friend. “He doesn’t want to own me. He wants to set me free. And that is a glorious thing, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth nodded, but there was a strange look on her face as if she wasn’t so sure. “I will throw you a ball,” she decided suddenly.

“A ball?” she queried.

“A grand ball,” she confirmed. “I think it is time that we show all of

society that we duchesses rule London.”

“If you say so,” Lily said with a smile, glad that her friend was focusing on that and not love anymore.

“I do,” Elizabeth pronounced. “It’s time to shake this town up. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, my husband certainly wants to do that.”

Elizabeth clapped her hands together. “Good, because my husband does, too. What a team we shall make, the four of us.”

And with that, Lily lifted her teacup in salute.

It was good to have friends and allies.

But she did not want love. No matter what Elizabeth said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

As the crush of people filled the Duchess of Montrose's gilded ballroom, the duke groaned. "I hate people."

James eyed the man, barely containing his laugh. "So you keep saying, but you invited them."

"I did not invite them," Montrose pointed out. "My wife did. And there is a vast difference."

"Well, you can always slip up to your library if you want," James assured, realizing that the duke genuinely preferred to avoid company.

He'd met men like that. It was nothing to sneer at.

"No, I can't," the duke sighed. "No. Not if we are to do what we say we want done. I have to show all of London that I'm behind you and that if they come for you, I'll eviscerate them."

James let out another laugh, then dared to clap Montrose on the shoulder. "Damned glad to have you at my back."

And with that, Derby came up behind him.

"Monty!" Derby exclaimed, throwing his arm over Montrose's free shoulder for a brief moment of completely un-English excitement.

Derby and Montrose had been boxing every day for the last two weeks, since James had formally introduced them.

"Since this is my wife's ball, I shan't knock out your teeth," Montrose replied to Derby. "But call me Monty again, and I shall polish the wood floor with you."

"Promises, promises," Derby returned.

"Dear God," the duke sighed, "I cannot bear your enthusiasm, Derby, combined with the American. We don't need a complete revolution."

"Come now, we're not exactly going to light Parliament on fire," James drawled.

“Thank God for that,” Montrose said. “Though there are some amongst my set who wouldn’t mind. We’ve got to get rid of all those old fools, don’t you know, who keep wanting to drag us back into the Dark Ages and can’t seem to understand that women and children deserve safety and education. Can you believe that there are people who think that children should be shoved up chimneys?”

“I can.” James grimaced.

“People do appalling things for profit,” Derby added as he took a glass of punch from a passing silver tray.

The duke inclined his head. “Yes, I won’t argue with you on that point. But the East India Company, if we can stop some of their work, it will be a good thing indeed.”

“Here, here,” James seconded.

“Look at all these people,” Montrose said. “So much wealth, so much to throw away mindlessly.”

“They can be moved,” James said, determined. “I have to believe things can change.”

“With my wife at the helm,” Montrose said proudly, “anything is possible.

James spotted her with his own wife, greeting ladies as a team, a unified front against anyone who might cause them trouble.

“They seem to be conquering London as well,” Derby observed.

It was true.

It did not seem to matter that both of them had come from a difficult part of town. He would’ve thought it mattered, but his wife was right. As long as one was bold, people made way, and everyone was making way for her now.

It was interesting—he’d wanted to upset London, but London was now embracing him and his wife, and he wasn’t entirely certain what to do about that.

He didn’t want to be embraced by London; he wanted to change London.

“You should go ask your wife to dance,” the duke urged.

“She’s occupied right now,” James pointed out.

“All the more reason to go and ask her to dance,” Montrose insisted. “Show her that she is the most important thing to you in this room. Not dealing with a gruff duke like me.”

James hesitated because frankly, he wasn’t certain Lily wanted that. “You go ask *your* wife to dance,” James said.

“Good God, if the room could but hear the two of you,” Derby said. “One

would think the duchesses were unapproachable goddesses.”

Indeed they are.

Montrose grinned. “She does dearly love to dance. Come on then, Ashbridge. Let’s go together and cause a sight.”

James drew in a calming breath and nodded.

And with that, they strode over.

He offered his hand to Lily. She turned from the ladies who were asking her opinion on lace and inviting her to a series of hunting parties in the fall.

He bowed. “Shall we dance, Your Grace?”

Her eyes trailed to him and slowly lit with joy. “Indeed, Your Grace.”

And the next thing he knew, a country reel was playing.

Despite his long-ago protestations that he only danced with a certain kind of lady, Derby also took to the floor, grabbing a partner who giggled and fluttered as they rushed into the lines.

The music struck up, and the room buzzed with joyful energy. The floor was filled with people eager to dance, as if an American duke and his dressmaker wife were the most normal thing in the world.

This was a moment, he realized, a moment where he was being accepted, not just as an American but as an equal to a duke. And in that moment, he knew he’d accomplished what he’d come here to do. He’d made a great ally in Montrose to make change, and...Lily had her dress shop. All was done.

He swallowed as he swung his wife around, then handed her off to the Duke of Montrose so James danced with Elizabeth.

He’d return to Boston to resume his duties there.

Surely, a strong correspondence and a yearly visit with Montrose would be enough to draw up a bill to protest the East India Company.

Perhaps... Perhaps he could stay longer and become more involved in English politics.

Especially as he gazed at her as they were dancing, her eyes alight, her face full of joy, he longed to stay, to find a place to call home.

For her world seemed to finally be coming together. She had returned to the society that she was supposed to have belonged to. James liked to feel like he had done that, but he knew better.

She was the one who had made it all happen. Like a lighthouse keeping ships safe, she beamed, a beautiful light in a sea of people who did not know how fortunate they were.

Lily knew exactly what she wanted, but he found his heart aching, aching

intensely, as he led her about the floor. For he longed to tell her that all he wanted was her. Montrose was right. He had fallen in love with his wife.

And it was terrifying, for he knew the agony of loving someone who could not love him back. It sent a jolt of emotion through him, and he tried to force it away, but as he turned her under his arm, the realization that he could lose everything he had worked for, all his control, and everything that protected him coursed through his blood.

As the music ended, Lily leaned in and whispered, "I cannot wait to go home."

He blinked, doing his best to keep his emotions locked away. "Oh?"

"Yes." She winked. "I cannot wait to think of England."

Those words immediately heated his blood, and in that moment, he feared, he was lost.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Before she could even sit down in the lavish coach, James pulled her to his lap.

“I cannot wait to have you,” he growled against her ear, then pulled down the curtains of the coach windows.

She let out a gasp of astonishment but did not pull away. “Here?”

“Anywhere,” he said, “with you.”

And with that, he stroked his fingers along the nape of her neck, then wound his hands into her hair and seized her mouth in a wild kiss. It was hot and tempestuous, with nothing held back. Their tongues danced together, tangling with passion.

His mouth worked over hers, promising the wild pleasure that he evoked within her. It hardly seemed believable, that fierce, hot pleasure. But she loved the way he stoked her body to life.

And so, she threw all caution to the wind, not caring about the fact that they were driving through the streets of London, returning to his townhouse.

She did not want to wait.

Still, she was rather grateful that the London streets were choked with traffic and that it would take time to return to their home.

Yes, with their kindled hunger, they would have time for this.

He lowered a hand to her ankle and slid it up her stockinged calf, paused at her knee, then slid up over her garter to her thigh. He did not cease kissing her as he stroked his strong fingers into her wet heat. Her body bucked against his and she held onto him tightly.

He teased her then, circling his fingertips over that spot that could so quickly drive her to the brink. That touch caused her body to pitch upward.

She felt as if she was being tossed higher and higher, over and over, toward that barely describable pleasure. He circled and circled, relentless as he

sought her release. She grabbed onto his shoulders, arching against him until, at last, wave after wave of bliss traveled through her body. She let out a cry before she remembered to stifle it with another kiss. Surely, someone would hear! If not someone on the streets, then at least the driver of their coach.

But she had no time to feel any embarrassment as her husband hitched up her skirts, adjusted her so she straddled him, and quickly undid the placard of his breeches.

He broke their kiss, looked up at her, and freed his sex. She bit her lower lip and braced herself on his shoulders.

“What am I to do?” she breathed. This was all so new to her. The public location, the upright position, the brazen urgency...as if the world were about to end and this was the one final act of their lives.

“Whatever you wish,” he rumbled.

“I truly don’t know how...”

James smiled slowly, a hungry, wolfish smile, and then he gently guided her down by the hips until she felt herself open to the hard, blunt tip of his sex.

Then slowly, oh so slowly, he thrust upward and urged her down, so that they met as one. She let out a shuddering breath, amazed at how she could feel herself molding around him, adjusting for a perfect fit, enveloping him. And then she began instinctively rocking her hips. “Like this?”

He let out a groan of pleasure, his hands tightening about her waist.

“Yes,” he growled. “Just like that.”

She took an exquisite amount of pride and happiness at the look on his face. The anticipation there. The vulnerability. And she could see he was already close to his release, having given it to her. She rocked harder, so that spot deep inside her was throbbing again.

She rode him up and down, rocking back and forth, taking his whole length into her and then sliding upward and down again. She studied his face with wonder as the tide of a new release neared.

At last, he grabbed hold of her, his entire body tensed, and he thrust upward in one solid action. And in that moment, her head fell back and she let out a moan of pure joy, as wave after wave caused her to tighten around his sex.

A release so intense crashed over her, she felt as if she had been cast into the stars.

He gripped her to him and dropped his head against her shoulder, his

ragged breathing steadily slowing. “What have you done to me?” he rasped.

She did not know. How could she? For she also did not understand what was happening to her.

“Whatever I have done to you,” she said, “you have done to me in turn.”

She knew she was standing on the edge of a precipice now, where she would either fly away with him...or crash to the rocks below.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The docks teemed with life as people crowded about the berthings of the ships that had come to London to divest their cargo. It was a wild scene of people from all over the world.

Accents filled the air, as did languages she had never heard. Lily grinned. She could not stop herself. The scents of ships and spices surrounded them, and the energy was palpable. This felt like the center of the world, of London, where all trade came to port. She could not imagine the dreams that started in this place, where cargoes were sent out across the globe with thousands of people with thousands of ideas and hopes.

She was so honored that James had decided to bring her and Violet here, to show them his world.

Violet had adored their walk every day by the Serpentine, and eventually, the paper boat was not enough. James had decided it was time that they come to see his ship. So here they were, standing at the gangplank. He held out a hand to her and smiled.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Oh, you could not stop me,” she replied.

He smiled at that.

Quickly, he took her up the bouncing wood plank, and they headed on to the sleek ship. It was a three-masted beauty, and she gasped as she stepped onto the deck. The masts towered high into the air. The sails were, of course, trimmed.

Violet let out a squeal of delight. “I have never seen anything like it in my whole life,” she said. “Drawings and paintings do not do it justice.”

And it was true. They did not. She did not know the names for most things on this ship, but she was stunned by the amount of rope and rigging. Even so, it looked like a perfectly ordered affair. Nothing was out of place. Nothing

looked cluttered or ragged, which should not have surprised her, given James's nature.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"It is splendid," she said.

"Och, Captain," a man called as he strode down the deck. "We've been wondering when you'd pay us the visit again."

James laughed. "I have been rather busy arranging things here in London."

The man, dressed in loose pantaloons and a billowing shirt, pulled at his silvery curls. "I take this to be the duchess, then."

"Indeed." James smiled. "McDuff, meet Lily, the Duchess of Ashbridge."

Lily smiled. "Hello, Mr. McDuff," she said.

"Och, listen to the lass. 'Tis a pleasure. And you look quite capable. It's good to know the duke has found someone who will take care of things when he's gone."

"Gone?" she queried, looking at James, her heart beginning to hammer wildly. Not out of excitement but panic.

James stiffened and would not meet her gaze.

"Yes," McDuff said eagerly, as if he could not wait to leave London. "When we head back to Boston... It's quite soon. The ship is ready, Your Grace," he said, emphasizing the last two words. "For your inspection. The lads are eager to return home. We should go soon. Don't you think? If we're to make the launch of your new ship in America."

She swallowed, but her mouth was dry. "You're going back," she said woodenly.

A look of dread crossed James's face. "That is the intention," he said. "I am scheduled to leave."

"I see," she managed, though her throat was tight. "Of course, you have a whole other life, a whole world away from Violet and myself."

She was trying to sound calm, as if it all made sense, but her voice was shaking. Her body was shaking.

Violet was swinging her gaze from James to her, confused. And that look of confusion nearly undid Lily. She was so tired of living with uncertainty. Why had she ever allowed herself to think... No, she wouldn't allow herself to feel it.

"Violet, go with Mr. McDuff," James said. "He will show you down below, and you can see where the sailors sleep."

"Are there beds?" she asked, her voice nervous as she sensed the tension in

the air.

McDuff leaned forward and briefly winced, probably realizing that he had put his foot in it, but then he winked at Violet. “Hammocks,” he said.

“What is a hammock?” Violet asked, and McDuff began explaining as he escorted her away.

“You’re leaving,” Lily said once she and James were alone. The world of color disappeared around her until she could see nothing but his face. And wait for nothing but his abandonment.

“I was always leaving,” he admitted.

“And you never told me,” she bit out. But she couldn’t be more upset with him than she was with herself, for she knew. Deep down, she had always known he would leave.

He drew in a long breath. “I’m an American and a sea captain. I don’t belong here. It’s why I wanted you to—”

“Be your wife?” she broke in.

“Yes—”

“Don’t you mean your estate agent?”

He winced. “You make it sound so terrible. I’m giving you power and vast lands and money...”

“And title and independence,” she finished for him on a sigh. “Yes, you are right,” she relented, though her stomach felt hollow with growing grief and the realization that she had been a fool. She should have seen this coming, but she’d been too busy believing things would stay just as they were, simply because she wanted them to. “You are giving me more than I could have ever imagined having, and I should not complain. It’s ridiculous of me to feel...”

“What?” he prompted, his gaze shadowed.

Betrayed, she wanted to say.

Abandoned, she longed to shout and sob.

Why did this always happen to her again and again? The people that she loved abandoned her. She was alone. So alone. And she had been foolish enough to dare to believe that he might choose her, stay with her.

She looked away, pushing aside all those thoughts and feelings. She couldn’t let him see them in her face. “Your ship is launching in Boston, then?”

“Yes,” he said. “And I am always there for such things. It is tradition.”

“Well, we must not mess with tradition,” she said tightly.

“You love to mess with tradition, Lily,” he pointed out.

She squared her shoulders, though she longed to let them sag. “I’m not so certain. I thought you did, too. But it seems I was mistaken. You have your traditions, and I’m not a part of them.”

“Lily.” He exhaled. “I—”

“No,” she said. “Do not explain. This was your intention all along. You planned to leave. You simply did not tell me.”

“I did not know *how* to tell you,” he ground out.

“You say the words, James; that’s how. You don’t have to...”

“What?” he challenged. “Explain why I have to go and why I did not dare to believe that I should stay? What I might stay for—”

“Violet is your ward,” she said over him. “You married me in an arrangement to ensure your duties were carried out. There was never any love between us, and you never said you would stay by my side. You’ve given me the ability to do everything that I have ever wanted. So, of course, you must return to Boston. You must return to your life and your traditions.”

And with that, she walked away from him, down to the prow, where she grabbed the railing so tightly her knuckles turned white. She waited for him to follow her. She prayed that he would not leave her alone.

She willed him to come with every fiber of her being as she gave up her last hope that she was not alone.

But instead, she heard his footsteps turn and walk farther in the opposite direction.

Tears threatened, burning her eyes, but she wouldn’t yield. She could not.

Everyone was always taken from her. Except he was sailing off. And that made this worse, because he was *choosing* to go. And it was clear to her, even though she had hoped beyond all hope she was wrong—she’d been right.

He did not love her, and protecting her heart had always been the right thing to do.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A terrifying chill swept through Lily as she clutched the letter in her hand. She sat at the breakfast table, a place that had been a joyful one until this very moment.

Every morning since they visited the ship, it had grown colder here. Harder. And the safety she'd begun to feel had slipped away.

Dear God, what a fool she'd been. It had been an illusion to think that she was safe as she stared down at the letter.

Did you think I would forget?

The words scrawled across the parchment.

Did you think that you could get away with this? Did you think that I'd forget what I know? The duke came and paid your debt, of course, but that shall never be enough. I shall charge interest and then some. For I know what I know. If you do not do exactly as I say, when I say it, and give me the funds that I require, I shall expose to the world our little arrangement and the fact that you were nothing but a shop girl who was one step away from being used like a rutting post.

She swallowed.

Mother Maggie was one of the most vicious women in England, and Lily did not doubt that the bawd would do it. It seemed reckless of her, of course, because to go up against a duke was not wise for a bawd, but Mother Maggie felt she had a secret. A secret she could use to her advantage because exposing to London, to the ton, how very precarious Lily had been, was indeed power.

The fact that she had made a deal with the bawd could destroy her. The scandal of it could break her dress shop, could break Violet's chances at a good life. Before, she'd had nothing to lose, but now, as a duchess and

Violet's guardian, such a taint could hurt her and even James' chances of having influence.

She placed the letter down and grimaced.

"What is it?" James asked.

Though she wished to throw the paper on the fire, she wouldn't hide the truth from him. She handed the letter over to him, and he read it quickly.

His face transformed to a mask of fury and resolve. "Do not be afraid, Lily. I will take care of it."

"No." She looked up, locking gazes with him.

He blinked, shocked by the force of her voice. "No?"

"I do not want you to rescue me," she rasped, her voice a painful barb against her throat. "You have been rescuing me over and over, and I cannot allow it any longer."

"Why not?" he said. "It is my role."

"No it is not," she countered, shaking. Shaking as she felt the horror of having depended on someone in the past and losing everything. "I cannot..."

Understanding of a kind must have hit him, for shock washed over him. "You don't want me to help you."

"I need to help myself," she gritted out. "I cannot bear this continual upheaval. I cannot rely on you to always make sure that I am safe, because what if..."

He paused. "What if what?"

She looked away.

He had said he was going to leave. He was almost done with his work. He would depart at any time, and so she had to hold firm and she had to sort this out with Mother Maggie herself.

"You said that you are going to Boston," she said firmly, forcing herself to shove all longing from her face and voice.

He looked at her then, his eyes wide. "You *want* me to go?" he queried.

"I expect it," she said tightly.

"I see, but Lily, I..."

"No," she cut in, unwilling to allow her heart to be ripped open. "This was never meant to be more than an arrangement, and it is clear to me now that I have brought trouble to you. I will sort this out, James," she said. "Without your assistance, and I need you to know that I can stand alone, that I am strong and capable."

"I know those things already, Lily, but please," he protested, "allow me

to...”

“I don’t want you to,” she said, her voice tumbling out of her as if it wasn’t even her own. She felt driven in this moment as if she was being chased by a demon. A demon insistent on shoving him away before he could shove her away. “You’ve already done enough, James. I want to go back to work at the dress shop now. I want to focus on my dreams. I need to—”

“But what about—” He stared at her, his chest rising and falling in swift breaths. “Lily, what about love?”

A dry laugh rippled out of her. “Love is for fools,” she said. “I thought you’d know that best of all.”

“Why would you think that?” he asked.

“You told me about what happened to your mother when your father died.” She sucked in a breath as pain wrenched through her. She had to stop it before she was destroyed by it. “Surely you can see how absurd love is.”

He was quiet at that.

She curled her hands into fists as she told him something she’d never told anyone, not even Violet. But she couldn’t hold it back. “My own mother— she could have saved Violet from so much harm. She could have taken us back to England, to safety, but she stayed with my father in France. She chose love, and I saw them—” She winced and swung her gaze away.

“Saw what, Lily?” he asked softly.

“Executed for treason,” she bit out. Her body trembled as if she was living it again. “They were dragged up onto the platform. Their hands were bound, and one by one they were placed on the table. Their heads...” She swallowed. “I don’t want to speak of it.”

“You don’t have to,” he assured her, reaching out for her, but when she did not take his hand because she was afraid she’d rattle apart if she did, he slowly drew it back.

“How did you and Violet escape?”

“It was not easy,” she confessed, a wave of nausea twisting her stomach. “We were swept away in a crowd. A few people got their hands on us and pushed us to the edges of the mob jeering for more heads to be sundered. We were lucky to get away...and the things we had to do...”

She closed her eyes but then snapped them open lest she recall the bodies in the streets of the first days of the Revolution, then, years later, the rabid surge of Napoleon’s followers... “I am lucky that far worse did not happen to us. I had coins sewn into my skirts, and we managed to make it to the coast

and got a ship. When we arrived in London, we had nothing, just my sewing skills and the clothing on our backs, and my grandfather treated us like lepers. He would not even see us.”

She shook her head, her hands still in fists. “No, love is dangerous, James, and I wish no part of it.”

After a long pause, he said, “I understand.”

She peered at him, not comprehending the emotions tearing her apart. “You will go, then?”

“If it is what you want.”

“What I want does not matter. This world is not for wants and desires. It is for action, James, and you know that.” She stood and forced herself to walk from the room, determined to make all of this stop, even as her heart broke.

She had brought far too much trouble to him, just when they had seemed to have success, and worse, she felt it in her bones.

He wanted her to love him. He wanted her to open her heart to him, but she could not. She could not risk it.

It was too terrifying because when she closed her eyes, she could see the blade swinging down, hear her mother scream out her father’s name and then leave her daughters entirely alone.

The danger of love was too great to bear, and she could not risk it. She had to protect Violet. She had to protect herself, and she could never trust love.

So, she stumbled onto the street then, tears blurring her vision, alone, praying that when she got back, James would be gone.

...

Half a bottle of brandy later, James wanted to throttle himself. His ship was moored at the docks. It bobbed ever so slightly, and he swallowed back another mouthful of brandy.

He couldn’t allow Lily to just be a victim of Mother Maggie. He couldn’t leave her to face that danger without assistance, but nor would he push himself on her.

She’d made it absolutely clear she wanted him to stick to the contract between them and the promises he had made.

She did not want his love.

She did not want to see how much he loved her, and his heart broke for it. Good God, it hurt. Why had he been such a fool as to think that she might one day turn around and see him? See how much he was willing to do for her,

how far he would go to help her, how much he adored her determination and her tenacity.

She was audacious, and he loved her for it, but she was never going to love him back. She was never going to give him the care that he so desperately and secretly longed for.

Damnation, he'd thought he had killed that part of himself years ago. He'd never thought he would be vulnerable again, but here, sitting in his cabin on his ship, the pain of it crashed through him, whipping him like the worst cat o' nine tails.

"Are we making sail, then?" McDuff, his first mate, a big, wild-haired Scotsman, asked as he entered the captain's cabin.

"Yes," he said tightly. "I've a letter to send, and then we will."

McDuff eyed him. "Shall we wait until the brandy has worn off, Captain?"

He ground his teeth together, hating how weak he was in this moment as he tried to stop the pain, and gritted out, "We go at the tide."

McDuff sighed. "You are the captain. Whatever you say goes. And the sooner we leave this place, the better, I say."

That was how he had felt, too...until Lily.

McDuff pursed his weathered lips. "London's a good city if you like to be pick pocketed by the ladies that you are trying to make love to. That was a rough lesson learned."

He eyed his first mate, glad of his company in this hellish moment. "McDuff, you have been in far worse cities than this."

The Scot winked. "It's true, but I liked the girl, didn't I?"

"Yes," he whispered. "I loved her, too."

"What?" McDuff asked, cocking his head to the side.

He narrowed his gaze. "Nothing."

He didn't need to repeat it. He'd only been talking to himself, anyway.

He *loved* his wife. He liked her and loved her and gave his heart to someone who didn't want it.

And he was going to pay for it. As she herself had said, his beautiful wife was always correct. Love was dangerous. Love did destroy. Love took a heart and crushed it into nothing, and in that empty space, despair entered.

He could feel it welling up in him, an unbearable void, and he lifted the brandy bottle to his lips once more. He would never make the mistake of falling in love again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When Lily got back to the townhouse, from a long walk meant to clear her head, it was quiet. And her head was far from clear. She looked about the foyer and wondered if she was alone now. Alone as she always knew she'd be.

She headed into the study.

It was also quiet, except... She spotted boots propped upon the table.

Her heart leaped. Perhaps he had not left.

"What the hell did you do?" a voice demanded.

"I beg your pardon?" she yelped.

Derby swung his feet down, turned, and looked at her. His eyes were full of woe. "Why did you drive him away?" he asked softly.

"I didn't drive him away. He always intended to leave."

Derby rolled his eyes. "You two are a pair," he said. "But I think you're worse."

"What?" she gasped.

"He loves you," Derby said.

"It does not matter," she replied. "Love is dangerous. Love—"

"Cease," he said, raising a hand, his signet ring winking. "Whatever story you're telling yourself is in your head; cease this instant. I don't know what happened to you," he said softly. "But I do know what happened to him. And he has the biggest heart in all of London, though he would never admit it, and he wanted to give it to you."

"I don't want it," she said, even as she wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

"Obviously," he replied. "But why? You love him."

"I do not," she stated.

He laughed then, deep and long, before he stood and poured brandy into a

snifter. “That is the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. You *do* love him. You can tell me whatever story you want, but it is obvious. And everything you’ve done, from the way that you’ve acted to the way you dance with him, to the way that you look at him—even the way you’ve changed this very room for him—his soul matches yours.”

“I have seen what two souls can do when they match,” she snapped.

“What do they do?” he asked.

“They die.”

His shoulders sank. “Oh, Lily.” He blew out a long breath. “We all die. James’s mother died, too. Did he tell you?”

“Yes, I know, but...” Now that she thought of it: “He never told me how.”

Derby paused, then nodded, as if assuring himself to go on. “His mother killed herself after his father did not come back from sea. It is fairly known in society. It’s difficult to hide that sort of public death, even if it occurs in Boston. People talk.”

“Heavens,” she gasped, and her heart broke for him. What he must have endured.

“Can you imagine it?” Derby said. “He told me about it one night, when we were in our cups. I don’t think he meant to. He doesn’t usually imbibe. I am haunted by the image, though. James, sitting by her bedside and begging for her to get out of bed. Begging for her to choose life. To choose *him*. He tried over and over again to get her to see him. He was but eight years old. But he was old enough to try. An eight-year-old boy begging his mother to not give up, to see anything in this world but that his father was dead. To see him and his love for her—”

“Yes, I can imagine it,” she choked out. “And look at what love can do.”

He nodded again. “You’re right. It destroyed his mother and your mother.” There was a pause, then, as if to suggest perhaps love had destroyed him, too, before he continued, “But James understood something that you clearly do not. Love can still be a beautiful thing.”

“No,” she gritted out. “It can’t.”

Derby took a step toward her and growled, “Look at how you love Violet. Do you deny that you love her?”

“Of course I don’t, but that’s different!”

“How?” he demanded. “You would lay down your life for Violet. Look at all you’ve done for her. And James would do that for you,” he said. “You’ve seen it.”

“Yes,” she said, “but—”

“No, Lily,” he cut in without mercy. “You are afraid. You are so afraid.”

“You would be, too,” she rushed, “if you’d seen what I’d seen.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed. “But James has gazed into the gaping void of death and misery and despair, and instead of giving into it, he saw you. And he chose you. But now he’s gone, and I think he may never recover from this.”

“Do not blame me,” she said. “We had an—”

“Arrangement?” Derby ground out.

“Yes,” she replied, even as the word sounded so pathetic to her own ears.

“Arrangements are like contracts—dry, brittle affairs. They can be broken, they can be burned, they can be torn up. They can be gone back on.” He sighed, but then he gazed at her, hope blazing in those orbs. “There is always a way out. So find a way out. *Choose love.*”

She began to shake as she thought of her parents, of the horrible way they had died, the mad dash to London, the way she’d been turned away from this very house all those years ago.

Digging her nails into her palms to the point of pain, she confessed, “I don’t know if I can.”

“Then you’re a coward,” he said simply.

She shook her head. “I have fought so hard.”

“Then fight harder,” he urged. “Fight for something more than survival.”

“I have. I’ve fought for my dreams,” she protested.

“Good. And now you have them,” Derby pointed out. “Now fight again. Fight for something more. Fight for love.”

And she swallowed because in her heart, she knew that Derby was telling the truth.

Elizabeth had said it, too, and her dear friend was one of the rare few she trusted in this world.

Now that James was gone, she felt the hell of it. She had made this happen. She had pushed him away. She had declared over and over and over again that she did not want love.

And now, she’d made it happen. With her own words and actions.

Now that she had what she had striven for, she felt as if half of herself had been hacked away.

“What do I do?” she said, her voice strained as tears filled her eyes.

“I don’t know,” Derby admitted. “You wanted to do this alone.”

“And now I am,” she sobbed.

Derby took a step toward her and said softly, “No, Lily. You’re not alone. You’re never going to be alone again, because you have people who care about you. And you can have James, too. There has to be a way.”

“Please—help me find it?” she asked.

Derby looked at her, his eyes dark and heavy. “I will try,” he said.

Tears coursed down her cheeks. How great a mistake she had made. Trying to protect herself, she had nearly destroyed herself instead.

Independence was a wonderful thing. But it also meant if she was not careful, she would choose being alone above all things. And she had been alone for far too long.

Chapter Thirty

That morning, the bells had not rung. There was no wake-up bell, no breakfast bell, no walk... No paper boat along the Serpentine.

James was not there. And the pain of that silence had cut through Lily like a knife.

But she was not going to allow pain to win any longer.

For it was their pain that had cast them apart. And she had to learn to let hers go.

She had been bandied about like a piece of flotsam and jetsam upon the water for far too long. She knew James didn't understand. He didn't need to.

She had to feel as if she had some control over her life, as if she was not just a victim of fate in the winds of fortune. So she sat across from the young novelist and pamphlet writer Rose Digby in the Maiden's Jig Tavern. "I have something that I need you to do for me."

Rose Digby cocked her head to the side, her astute gaze assessing. "What could you possibly wish for me to do for you, Your Grace?"

"Thank you for meeting me," she said, her insides a flutter with both fear and hope.

Miss Digby smiled ruefully. "When a duchess writes to one, one answers. And I must admit, I was curious. I'm a novelist, after all. I like a good story. What could you possibly want with me?"

"I've seen you about," Lily said, "doing research for your books."

Miss Digby laughed. "Truly? I had no idea I was being observed. I should have, of course."

"I used to live in this part of town," Lily pointed out.

Miss Digby's eyes narrowed. "I don't recall ever seeing you."

"I spent most of my time at Madame Josephine's. It was very rare that I came out. She worked us quite hard."

Miss Digby's mouth tightened. "I've written about the trade," she said. "Most have no idea how deleterious it is to a young lady's hands and eyes and how they can never make a living. It's a slow death."

"I agree," she replied. "But this is not my difficulty right now."

"Obviously not," Rose said easily, "since you are now a duchess, and isn't that a story I'd like to tell."

"Good," Lily returned, "because I want you to tell it."

Miss Digby's eyes flared at that. "You can't possibly be serious. If I write a story about you, I could be in a great deal of trouble."

"Not if I give you permission," Lily countered. "I want you to write an account. I want you to write an account of the love affair of myself and the Duke of Ashbridge."

Rose's eyes widened, and she nearly choked on her drink. "A love affair?"

"Yes," she said. "The greatest love that London has ever known. And I want you to expose someone."

Rose drew back, and she shook her head. "Exposing someone is very difficult. I can end up in the courts for that."

"No." Lily shook her head. "You have my permission to expose *me*."

Rose cleared her throat, and she took her notebook from her reticule. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace?"

Lily's heart hammered, but this was the best way. She was sure of it. "I want you to tell of my sins, but I want you to explain them. I want the world to see what truly happened to the daughter of a young lady who ran away for love."

"First," Rose said, "I think you better tell me the tale, or else I won't be able to tell you if I can do that. I'm good with the pen, but I don't know you. And if you're a sinner, I'm not sure that I want to save you."

She laughed at that. "Well said, Miss Digby. Then let me tell it, and you can decide what it is that you want to do."

Rose nodded. "Begin, then."

And so she did.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Mutiny!” James growled as he stared out the window of his cabin.

London still surrounded him.

They should have cut anchor and made their way down the Thames, out toward the coast, but apparently not.

He was going to have to kill McDuff. After all, when a man committed mutiny, there was really only one thing to be done. It was clear.

But that was when he noticed he was not alone.

“Good morning to you, Your Grace,” the Duke of Montrose ground out. “Did you sleep well?”

“No,” he growled.

“Too much brandy, is it?” Montrose drawled, from behind James’s desk. “Never thought you were the type to drown your sorrows. But then again, you are a sailor.”

“For God’s sake, get to it,” he snapped, realizing he was acting like a churl but unable to stop himself. “What the hell do you want? Are you the reason why I have not set sail? Otherwise, I have to kill my first mate.”

The duke laughed. “I am indeed the reason why your first mate did not sail. It took a great deal of doing, but I told him if he set sail with me aboard, it would be kidnapping, and then you would all be guilty of kidnapping a duke, and the English Navy would find you, and it would be terrible going from there. Firing squads and all that. Possibly Tyburn.”

James blew out a breath. “Out with it. What the devil are you doing here?”

Montrose stilled, then said in all seriousness, “I’ve come to stop you from making the greatest mistake of your life.”

“What are you talking about?” he challenged.

“Abandoning the woman you love.”

“I am not abandoning her,” he gritted out, even as his heart bled. “She told

me to go.”

“Perhaps, but I never thought you’d give up so easily,” the duke said, cocking his head to the side.

“Why should I force her into something she does not want?”

Montrose rolled his eyes, dropped his feet from the desk, and stood. “She’s bloody terrified. That’s all I know.”

“She’s afraid of me?” James asked.

“Not of you,” Montrose amended quickly. “She’s afraid of life. She’d been living in that small room in a dress shop for a decade. Before that, Paris. You gave her the first taste of freedom she’s ever known. She’s afraid of losing it. She’s afraid of losing you, and so she’s acting like a complete fool.”

“You think she’s acting like a fool?” James asked. “I think she’s simply doing what she wants. She’s sticking to the rules of the game.”

“Then change the bloody rules,” the duke ground out, slamming his palm down onto the desk. “I’m tired of all these rules. Aren’t you?” Montrose’s gaze burned. “Didn’t you come to London to change the rules?”

“Yes,” James said, his shoulders sagging. “I thought I did. But it seems she likes them.”

“She doesn’t like them. She thinks she has to stick by them,” Montrose pointed out. “She’s been scraping and bowing all this time, subjected first by that ridiculous woman, Madam Josephine. Then Mother Maggie.”

“How do you know about Mother Maggie?”

The duke dug into his waistcoat and pulled out a pamphlet. “This,” he said.

James forced himself up, strode across the hardwood floor, and grabbed the newsheet from his friend.

*THE TRAGIC AND LAMENTABLE LOVE STORY OF THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF ASHBRIDGE
AND THE VILLAINS WHO TRY TO PART THEM*

James gaped at the salacious but eye-catching title.

“It’s been distributed throughout the entire city. Everyone’s read it,” Montrose said. “The exclamations of horror over tea this morning could likely have been heard all the way in India. I’m shocked you did not hear it here on your ship, but now I see you were passed out from too much drink.”

Montrose’s gaze narrowed before he added, “You are afraid, too. I had no idea that I was surrounded by people who were so terrified. Then again, I was afraid, too, recently.”

“You?” James asked.

Montrose nodded. "It took a good friend to show me that it was no longer necessary, and so I'm being a friend to you. Read that. Read it now, and if you leave, you're an idiot and you never should have come to her aid in the first place. Because when you make a choice, James, you must see it through to the end. And you chose her, did you not?"

He swallowed. "But if I force myself..."

"You're not forcing yourself on her. You just need to show her that you're not going to leave her." Montrose stared at him and said with terrifying calm, "That's what she's afraid of, and you are doing it."

He closed his eyes. The duke was right. Her parents had died. Her grandfather had abandoned her. She'd been left alone in the world, and here he was, ready to fly. For what? A ship's maiden voyage? Because she had not begged him to stay?

He drove a hand through his hair. "Can I thank you?"

Montrose smiled. "You'll thank me if you stay in London and finish what you started. The East India Company is not going to stop just because you write a few letters. I want it ended. So do you. Stay. Stay for her, stay for the cause you care about, and don't be a little boy afraid of shadows."

Shadows.

Yes, he was still consumed by shadows, but at some point he was going to have to be brave enough to step into the light. He looked at the pamphlet, skimming the lines, and his heart began to race.

"She paints you as quite the hero, you know," Montrose said.

"So I see."

And then he got to the line, "I love him dearly, the man who rescued me. He is the greatest man in the world, my love match, and he saved me from the most sinful and terrifying woman in all of London, who should be locked up and never allowed to put innocence in jeopardy again. But most of all...he taught me how to love myself. That I was worthwhile. He saw me and all that I was worth. Just as I see him."

Much to his shock, tears filled his eyes.

He read on and on.

It was better stuff than any novel he'd ever read. "Did she write this?"

"No," the duke said. "She found a writer to do it for her, and what you must understand is the cleverness of what she's done."

James lifted his gaze.

Montrose looked to the pamphlet. "She's told the world everything so that

no one can harm her. Or you. Any threat of exposure has been destroyed with this. And she's also told the world how she feels—about you.”

Montrose paused, then asked, “Will you truly throw that away?”

“No,” James said, his resolve building. “No, I won't. I don't like the city. It's not my home. But she didn't choose to come here, either. She had to, and so I won't leave. Not while there's still a chance.”

Montrose gave a nod. “Good. Now go find her.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lily could not stop the tears running down her face. She had spoken the truth. She had uttered every word that was in her heart and told them to Jane Digby.

Jane had written them down in the most marvelous fashion. It read better than any penny novelette or three-volume novel that had come out in the last ten years.

All of London was speaking about it.

She knew because she was receiving letters almost every quarter of the hour. Letters professing sympathy, letters expressing horror for what she had been through, and letters of allegiance.

It was shocking. One moment, London had been fairly against her, and now they were all on her side. They saw her as a character from a novel, a young girl who'd nearly been crushed by a bawd. And who had been turned away, a delicate flower with her little sister, by her odious and cruel grandfather whose heart was hard.

It had worked beautifully well. Derby had been right. All she had to do was tell the world the truth, and then she couldn't be hurt by it anymore.

She had not heard from Mother Maggie.

No doubt, the woman was now cowering somewhere, afraid of being arrested by the bailiffs and put in Bridewell, a place of horror for a woman like that.

But now everyone knew the kind of woman that she was, and she would not be able to come after Lily, now that there were no more secrets.

No more secrets.

She should have felt relief, but she did not. Wave after wave of sorrow crashed down upon her. Why had she done it? Why had she driven him away? Why had she told him to go when all she wanted was for him to stay?

Because she had been afraid of pain. She laughed then and wiped her tears

away. The pain she felt at losing him was worse than any pain she feared having before.

“I read the story, but I didn’t think there was anything particularly funny in it,” a voice said from behind her.

She whipped around...and her heart soared. “James,” she breathed. “I thought—”

“You thought I’d gone,” he said. “I almost did. Thank God someone stopped me.”

“Who stopped you?” she queried.

“A good friend,” he said. “And he told me to read this. So I did.”

She blinked, dashing the fresh tears from her eyes. “You did?”

He paused and leaned against the doorframe as he eyed the pamphlet. “You’ve painted me to be quite the hero, which I don’t think is fair, because in truth, I think you are the heroine of this story. You took the most action. You saved yourself, just as you told me you would.”

“Oh, James,” she whispered, unable to stop the tears now.

“No, my love, you did right,” he rushed. “You needed to prove that you were capable. You did not want someone sweeping in and fixing everything for you. You wanted someone to stand by your side while you did it. Well, here I am. I won’t leave you. Not ever. I love you. You’re my wife. You are my duchess. You’re my goddess. You are mine to protect. Your parents didn’t protect you. Your grandfather didn’t protect you. The world didn’t protect you. But I will never leave your side, Lily,” he declared, “because you are in my heart and I think that my heart is in yours.”

She let out a sob. “It is,” she rushed. “It is why I am suffering so much now. I tried to hack it out, that heart. To protect myself. I had no idea what I was doing.”

He crossed to her then and pulled her into his arms. “Please don’t ever send me away again.”

“Oh, you silly man,” she cried. “How could you ever think that I truly wanted you to go?”

“Because you are most convincing,” he pointed out.

She let out a half laugh, half sob. “Forgive me?”

“How can I not, when I was just as foolish?” He wiped her tears from her eyes. “Fear made us both do ridiculous and cruel things.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “Derby told me.”

He stilled. “I have been looking all my life for someone to see me as I am.

And I thought you didn't, but you do. It was all here in these words, the way you've painted me. You truly want me to stay, don't you?"

"Yes," she said, "with all my heart."

He pulled her to him, wrapping his arms about her. "I'm never going to leave you again, Lily. And I can't promise that the world won't hurt you, but I do promise that I will stay by your side."

"And I yours, James," she said, raising a hand to his face. "You and I have both been so alone, at war with the world, determined to protect everyone else from the pain that we suffered." She winced, her heart still so sore from all the suffering she'd put it through. But she felt hope now. *Love*. Oh, how she felt love.

"We made ourselves suffer, too," he whispered. "But we are done with that now, aren't we?"

She nodded but said honestly, "I'm afraid."

"So am I," he confessed. "But it is in that fear and the testing of ourselves against it where the greatness of life awaits us."

She sucked in a breath, shocked by his statement, and the truth of it enveloped her, as did his love. "Then let us go through this life together. Let us go through all our fears by each other's sides, and let us not ever let fear win again."

And he drew her into his arms, leaned down, and took her mouth in a soft kiss.

"I swear," he said. "Because in all of my years, being with you is the first time I have ever felt truly alive."

She smiled up at him, savoring the feel of his arms. "I thought I wanted a dress shop," she said. "But all I ever wanted was this. Freedom, the sort of freedom that is only gained by being so very loved and so very cared for. I know now that no matter what comes, we are not alone. Because we choose love."

Epilogue

Lily had always assumed she'd wanted a *place* to make her feel safe. Now she knew that a place could never make one feel safe, but a *person* certainly could.

James was her harbor, her home, her safety, her security, her love. And after two years sailing back and forth between London and Boston, taking adventures around the globe with him and Violet when they were not in London for Parliament, she had learned that the only way to live was with an open heart.

Montrose had recommended a land agent so that James and she could travel, and Lily had spotted an exceptionally talented young woman who she hoped to help start her own shop one day, by letting her manage the dress shop whilst they were gone.

It had been tempting to stay in England, after all, she'd thought that was where her only dream was.

But she found now, that dreams, when one was safe, had a tendency to grow and create new ones!

There was so much adventure and so much promise out there, with James, she did not have to hold tight and work herself to the bone to know security.

No, all she had to do was open her arms, trust, and fling herself into love. And as she stood at the prow of the ship, with the Atlantic wind through her hair and James's arms about her, his hands gentle on her middle, she leaned her head back and rested it against his shoulder.

In the background, she could hear Violet laughing, playing with McDuff as she learned to climb the rigging. She was now as skilled as any sailor in going up and down those rope ladders.

No doubt an English lady would be horrified. James did not care, for he had made clear Violet didn't have to be an English lady. She could be

anything she wanted.

For James wished them both to be free of spirit.

And his love had given her freedom in a way she never could have imagined.

The ship cut through the water, stealing her breath as the frothy waves came up and the salt air filled her senses. Dolphins danced along the sides of the prow, leaping up and dashing back down.

A note of delight escaped her lips. “How beautiful!” she exclaimed.

He turned his gaze to her, pressed his hands against her middle again, and whispered, “Yes.”

In that moment, she knew he was not speaking of the dolphins; he was speaking of her. He was speaking of their family, of the family yet to come that was making its life inside her.

And then a bell began to ring. On the eighth bell, he slipped his hand around hers. “Come, my love.”

Violet jumped down from the rigging to join them, and without word or question, they took to the deck as a family to take their walk. Together.

The joy that danced through her was the greatest she had ever known. The joy of having family and finally, finally knowing love, and that she would never, ever be alone again with James at her side.



The love doesn't end here...

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About the Author

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR [Eva Devon](#), was raised on literary fiction, but quite accidentally and thankfully, she was introduced to romance one Christmas by Johanna Lindsey's Mallory Novella, *The Present*. A romance addict was born. She devoured every single Lindsey novel within a few months and moved on to contemporary and paranormal with gusto. Now, she loves to write her own roguish dukes, alpha males and the heroines who tame them. She loves to hear from her readers.

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a novel by [Michelle McLean](#)

As the middle sister in a bevy of swans, Lavinia Wynnburn is quite content being the odd duck out. Until the Duke of Beaubrooke turns up the morning after a ball, asking for her hand in marriage. Alexander Reddington doesn't particularly care for social niceties, nor is he particularly good at them. But when he stumbles into the same corner as a socially awkward wallflower, he knows he's found the perfect wife. Only, Alexander's shy new wife is finding her new position surprisingly exciting and keeps accepting every invitation that flutters past their door. And worse luck, he might even be falling for her. Now he must hide the truth about why he really proposed...before his unexpectedly happy marriage is dashed to pieces.

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The beloved “sunshine” of the ton, Miss Charlotte Chapman, is trapped in a carriage with the best friend of her deceased brother. The reclusive Earl of Trevelyan has a reputation for being something of a beast in society's circles, but nothing—nothing—will stop him from rescuing Charlotte from her disastrous engagement. He promised his best friend that she and her sister would be looked after. Protecting her from himself is quite another matter... Now, thanks to their upended carriage, they're stranded at a country inn—which has only one room left.