

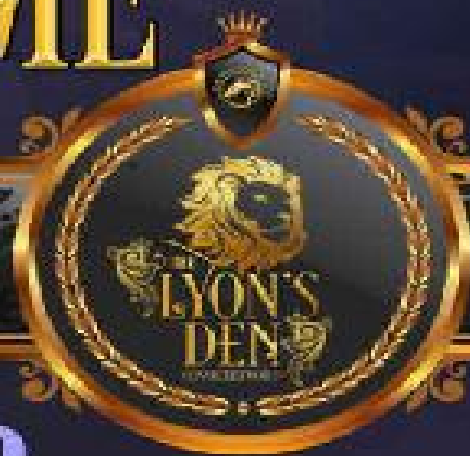
THE
LYON

WHO LOVED ME

THE LYON'S DEN CONNECTED WORLD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TRACY SUMNER



THE LYON WHO LOVED ME

The Lyon's Den Connected World

Tracy Sumner



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Text by Tracy Sumner

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Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

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At the touch of love, everyone becomes a poet.

~Plato

At the touch of love, everyone becomes a poet.

~Plato



PROLOGUE

Where an engagement is soundly broken

*A deserted chapel
Richmond, England 1816*

HE WASN'T GOING TO SHOW.

Wilhelmina Wright released a defeated sigh and sank to the marble leading to a medieval altar that would host no celebration this day. She pulled the veil from her face and let it flutter like a flag of surrender to the flagstones. Taking a breath crawling with the scent of freesia from her posy, she concluded that Griffin Alistair Beckett, fourth or fifth or seventh Viscount Kent, was indeed a rat bastard.

Much as he was rumored to be.

She should have known better than to trust anyone in the aristocratic blue blood and lies, the lot of them. And debt, enough liability to loveless arrangements such as these through the marital channels even. She huffed and yanked her chignon free, hoping to ease the headache plaguing her. Her flaxen hair tumbled past her shoulders, the only bit she'd yet to overpower.

Oh, and a viscount who'd thought to leave her sitting on her bench in a chapel in the middle of nowhere.

She'd assumed her intended was arrogant, of course. A man who resembled a Greek god couldn't be anything but conceited. He imagined he was also the most intelligent bloke in the room, cleverer than a mere female. This deficit she could have managed because it was true, but because it was what they all believed. However, Kent had seemed, during their brief introduction two weeks ago,

honorably or wishing to be honorable, his days of White's betting wagers and wild carriage races down Bond over. The actresses, opera singers, and jaded wives no longer his to pursue. No more duels or climbing second-story windows to escape enraged husbands.

According to him, he was cleaning up his life.

Mina dragged her slipper through the multicolored stripe thrown from stained glass above her head and compiled a list of benefits of leaving chapel unwed. She wasn't a chit to cry over blunders in planning.

For one, it would have been extremely hard to pledge to obey. She didn't believe in submitting without negotiation. Blind adherence was something she was comfortable with. Two, she wasn't sure about this congress business. She'd heard contrasting reviews in whispered conversations, most of them ominous. She chewed on her thumbnail as a dangerous ripple rippled through her belly.

Although the reviews about Viscount Kent—and after meeting her stepfather—trusted them—were impressive.

She had high ideals even as she'd planned to sell herself short. Her parents' marriage had been an excellent partnership, equals bound together until they were forever parted after cholera swept their borough when she was nine. Then, it had been left to her father to parent his only child as best he could. Andrew Wright, the owner of a racecourse that rivaled Epsom, was fashioned for the lower classes, had supported education—his daughter, providing tutors and books rather than his attention or love.

At a distance, he'd encouraged her to voice her views without mentioning her name. The world outside Wright's Grand Derby wouldn't appreciate her candor.

He'd died two years ago, leaving her with bold opinions, an inheritance large enough to kill a moose, and a pervading loneliness he'd not so easily ease in his lifetime.

Mina dropped her chin to her fist. Perhaps Griffin Beckett had been right about her willfulness, or God forbid, her secret endeavor, which had nothing to do with horses. All she'd wanted was a title to hide behind, a man who would likely wish to manage her father's business—and possibly, someday, grandchildren. A lady of standing, a viscountess, could champion any career she desired, including running a discreet enterprise. She lost the occasional favor when they realized an unmarried woman operated W.L.W. Investigations, although the dubious nature of her commissions kept her clients from

g bookoverly choosy. A proper union would have calmed the few who cared. singers, Lord Kent needed blunt to save his estates, a tired but true stor- ing fromshe'd more than enough to share. It could have been the perfect solutio- groom had opted to attend his wedding.

For Mina, money wasn't the problem. *Freedom* was. rom the Temper brewing, she plucked at her skirt, a satiny champagne ro- ing thishad made a reasonably lovely wedding gown, then stomped her foot- flagstones, sending a swirl of dust rising around her. There was no c- e didn'tabout anyone witnessing this disaster as she had no family left, a- as notbridegroom had chosen not to invite his, so she was alone, except- ; sexualerstwhile matchmaker and the vicar snoring in the last pew. parlors, Mina glanced around, her sigh echoing off the stone. It was an a- s sizzlespot should this have been where her life took another direction.

Damn him. Now, she'd have to go back to the drawing board. im, she As if she heard the whispered oath, Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, the- Widow of Whitehall, slipped into the chapel through the arched side d- rt. Herveil covering her face fluttering in the breeze. Before the scrap- oy lovefluttered back into place, Mina caught sight of a stubbornly rounded c- n Minaequaled her matchmaker's trenchant demeanor.

as best Surprising her, the Black Widow settled beside Mina on the top- om buthesitant but determined show of support. "This was a gamble, my c- for hisfailed one, it appears." She rolled her shoulders with a pained murmu- From anot sure how to take it. My agreements are rarely breached, my st- that therarely disputed."

Mina reached for her cloak, searching a pocket and coming out- eritancedented silver carafe bearing the initials *A.C.W.* She'd packed her father- ught toin the event she needed liquid mettle for her wedding night. She offer-

Mrs. Dove-Lyon, who shook her head, her censorious hum rattling her- l heard "Agreeing to anything with Lord Kent was a gamble," Mina said- nothingthe decanter's grooved rim. "I should have realized what a risk- an whoaccepting the man."

ive her The Black Widow laughed softly. "I meant you, Miss Wright. *You*- use shegamble. I thought the other piece of this puzzle was confirmed. I e- il clienthim to show up, the gutless knave. My dear Colonel would be sup- gations,disappointed."

n being

Mina coughed, brandy leaving a fiery trail in its wake. She wasn't a drinker, but now seemed a good time to start. "I'm the gambler if the what did Mrs. Dove-Lyon's late husband have to do with this?"

Her matchmaker patted her hand, only part of the gesture patronizing. "Your father was a dear friend. He helped me when finances were low during the opening of the Lyon's Den. When I could not find men who would make repairs and provide security, as I was such an uncertain wager my father's concern never forgot his kindness or his understanding of the plight I was facing and the beautiful, bright hooligan of a daughter. When you came to me for her assistance locating a husband, I thought, 'Wilhelmina Wright is not just any man.' There's something exceptional about you, my dear." Mina glanced down in embarrassment, rarely on the receiving end of compliments.

The Black Widow clicked her tongue against her teeth. "I need a Black desperate gentleman, true, of which there are scores in London, but a poor one, the who would be tolerant when he found himself attached to a headstrong woman of lace. A more accommodating sort than is typical in society. A man with a heart, even if the heart is buried deep. I believed I had located him in Vauxhall, Kent."

Mina would have refuted the unflattering statement—but a dear husband is what she'd needed. Due to the missing groom, still in the air. "I'm sorry. Regrettably, my reputation may have presented more of a challenge than your 'accommodating sort' could take."

"My dear," Mrs. Dove-Lyon whispered with what Mina assumed was a steady smile, "you're a lioness in satin. I wanted to find you a lion to roar with. Your flask was aware of the challenges."

Mina twisted her fingers in her skirt. "If I ever get my hands on you, he'll be sorry." Although, she didn't mean it. Of course, when she realigned against wasn't coming, she'd wanted her intended bruised and bloody.

Then she remembered the cats.

Griffin Beckett liked cats.

Something about this remained with her weeks after their first anticipated meeting. She'd had fur on her sleeve that morning in the Lyon's Den, which she'd apologized profusely. She'd been tending a litter born in the stable the previous evening. Rather than frustration, his smile had been positively delightful as he listened to her stammering explanation. The

't much mentioned a litter living in *his* stable in Hertfordshire, three males?" And mama, all a blazing tabby orange.

She'd have enjoyed having a husband who loved animals.

Minizing. Mina tapped the flask against her teeth. Lastly, her little secret...

re tight He'd called her Willie.

lling to Turning away from the Black Widow, Mina pressed a smile into herself. I *Willie*. It was ridiculous, and sadly, she'd been utterly charmed. Asic ing. Or her father's employees, no one had flirted, teased, or even talked to her. me forseemed repelled by her impudence or disgusted by her lowly status. ited for sturdy attractiveness, confirmed in her mirror, hadn't been enough to overcome the burden.

end of Whatever it was, the opposite sex stayed away as if a foul aroma attached.

eded a Consequently, she hadn't known what to do with Lord also one playfulness, like Mrs. Dove-Lyon didn't know what to do with a collig wife. planning.

a heart, They were both baffled by the situation. And the man.

iscount Decidedly, she leaned in to catch Mrs. Dove-Lyon's gaze through the wall. "Let Lord Kent go. I've heard rumors of punitive consequences for anyone who crosses you, and if he's in trouble due to breaking your contract, I'll need to double my fee to compensate for the disruption to your schedule. I'll get it done, over and over." She curled her fingers around the flask, hating to ask, but to ask. "I would like to arrange for your services. Again. If you'll allow, I'd like to work with me. My needs are, as yet, unmet."

natch. I A stab of disappointment pricked Mina's usually thick skin as Beckett's pleasing visage flashed through her mind. Amorous activities such as a handsome creature might have been enjoyable. Maybe. Possibly. But in the end, what did having a gorgeous husband do for a woman? She shrugged. *Nothing*.

The Black Widow shoved to her feet and began pacing, energized at collecting double her fee and an additional payment for the undertaking. "Baron Riley-Fitzgerald was one I considered for you, and I'd have him on the hook. He's quite frantic to locate assets as his estate in the Derbyshire is nearing insolvency. His clock is ticking."

d been Mina groaned and banged the flask against her knee. Riley-Fitzgerald's face was enough to curdle milk. And his constitution? Milquet toast.

and aplus side, she wouldn't have to fend off society chits as she surely have with Griffin Beckett. She'd have had to watch her back—and his sculpted one—every second. “I suppose he could do,” she replied, br through her nose. The piquant aroma of incense was making her queas

Or perhaps that was the thought of bedding the baron.

her fist. “Mayhap, we’ve learned our lesson, dear. Weaker men are ea le fromcoerce.” The Black Widow halted in place, her skirt swirling arou er. Menankles. She pointed to Mina with a determined jab. “I won’t be as on. Herabout your obdurate tendencies this time.”

ugh to Mina took a sip without comment, as it was a sound plan.

“Although I didn’t detail the exact nature of your business as it ia wereconcern, of course. But I don’t want those types knocking on the Den and it horrifies me they knock on yours. Whomever we secure, and Kent’ssecure someone, it shall be up to you to inform them about your ac lapse inDon’t despair, Miss Wright. I owe your father, and Bessie Dove-Lyo leaves a debt unpaid.”

And that, Mina supposed, with brandy warming her because no h the lacewas going to, was that.

should

act, I’ll

want it

having

agree to

GRIFFIN ALISTAIR BECKETT, fifth Viscount Kent, was about to do sor

most men wouldn’t.

Griffin He was skipping his wedding.

es with Griff wrenched against the rope binding him to the chair, unsurpris

7. the thugs who’d dragged him into a rented hack an hour ago had stru

an? Sheup well enough to secure him for eternity.

Regrettably, they seemed experienced kidnappers.

feasibly “Can someone please give me the time?” he asked, searching th

: a newwarehouse for a clock. The dwelling reeked of labor and various

id I stillbound to the products amassed in stacks around him. Spices, lumber

state inoranges. He coughed into his sleeve, the aroma of citrus

overpowering. The last shot of sunlight flowed through a grimy pai

gerald’sabove his head, as were the shouts of dockhands inundating the public

On thelining the street.



would The day over, his wedding over.

is broad, If he survived this, Bessie Dove-Lyon was going to kill him. He'd
eathingheard of a man escaping the Black Widow's tangled web.

y. Even if the gent was family of the distant and by-marriage variety.

asier tointroduced himself as Jimmie Beans mumbled, a crimson-tipped
ind herdangling from his lips.

honest Wincing, Griff dabbed at his bruised lip with his tongue. They'd n
considerate when they hustled him into the carriage, although he'd
them when he shouldn't have. Four against one when the four had gr
's yourin the rookery, and the one in Mayfair presented a grossly unfair fight
's door,was desperation, and then, there was *desperation*. Exhaling hard, he
we *will*side his anger. His wits would get him out of this mess, not his fists
tivities.My wedding."

n never The cheroot bobbed in Jimmie's mouth. "Are you foolin'?"

usbandFor a split second, he experienced something akin to grief. The
arrangement he'd agreed to was as far from a love match as co
designed, but he'd not been dreading marrying Wilhelmina Wrig
reasons he couldn't outline. During their brief meeting at the Lyon
he'd seen a genuine flash of spirit in her, unlike the chirping annoya
the *ton*. Too, she'd been the most fetching woman he'd ever laid eye
nothingclose to it. Her hair alone, flaxen and as thick as the rope tangled abo
enough to make a man weep.

sed that Who needed bloody love when your wife looked like a goddess?

ng him "A ceremony makes sense." Jimmie bobbed his head, sucking air t
a gap in his yellowing teeth. "Proper reason for posh attire. Seemed a
from a lord's normal rig. Sorry we made a muck of your fine outfit."

ie dank A voice from the back said: "It's one of them Lyon's Den trades."

scents called Streeter. He looked part something, Romani perhaps, his jet-bl
; bloodoverlong and dusting a set of startlingly green eyes. The lad shrugged
nearlyof unconcern likely beaten into him. "I have a friend who works sec
ne highthe Lyon's Den. Talk is raging about the match between Viscount K
houses the lady owner of Wright's. He forced, she paying. The Black Widow'
deal."

Jimmie yanked his cheroot from his mouth and roared with laughter, never jabbing the smoking stub Griff's way. "She'll hook the chit you've abandoned at the holy bench another fine fish next week. Dove-Lyons list as long as her arm of fancy nob's needing blunt, or so they say. Who'd you, we have an easier way to save what's yours than wedding a cheroot-troublesome gel born at the racetrack. All nice and tidy, wrapped up and present without getting yourself a countess you don't want."

"Viscountess," Griff whispered, again thinking of Wilhelmina Wright. How she—deep in her heart, not that hardened façade one had to face to survive—was going to handle his not showing for what should be the most important day of her life. He wanted to forget that brood of kittens he'd shoved mentioned with such kindness lingering in her lavender eyes, but he couldn't. "I do, been able to."

Jimmie snapped his fingers, regaining Griff's attention. "Listen up, Griff. What I'm presenting means everyone will end up happy, everyone voluntarily." up *safe*. No need to bring a new wife into this unpleasantness your martial brother done caused, anyway, am I right? I have two younger ones, would beneither worth a damn, truth of it. I'm saving them left and right. I thought, for you, in part."

Griff let his breath settle. Unease was an emotion he didn't need to feel in the presence of this interesting group. Just because he'd give his life for his siblings didn't mean he wanted to give his life for his siblings. "What did he do to you, time?"

Jimmie perched his hulking frame on a wine cask, his grin friendly enough to charm if one found murderous grins charming. "Your brother was the worst gambler I've ever seen. I kicked him out of my place in Seven Dials last month, but he somehow returned the next night and lost all he had more. Only relation of a titled nob I've ever had at the Lucky Penny ain't Crockfords. Once got a baron who stumbled in, but he was looking for them'd the opium palace on Monmouth."

Griff scrubbed his shoulder over his mouth, years' conversation more painful than his split lip. "This isn't news, Mr. Beaumont. I'm aware of Dominic's failings and his inability to read a room." His brother had brought the Becketts to the brink of insolvency, risking the estate's usual Hertfordshire *and* the townhouse in Hanover Square, properties Griff had sworn on his father's deathbed to protect for future generations. So

daughter, family from disgrace and financial ruin was the only dream for five justsons these days.

Jim has a Jimmie flicked ashes to the floor and stomped on them. "This is mine. As for Kent. I want you to come work for me. For six months, then you and your somehapless brother of yours are free. No one the wiser. You need bluntness like a need sweet talk in a stylish suit of clothes."

What the hell? Griff tried to repress the stunned amusement that came to his nose in a snorting burst.

Jim had to Jimmie shoved off the cask, yanking his braces and letting the cask rest against his chest. "I know your breed don't hustle, it's looked down on us. You'd need investors for an enterprise." He tapped his temple with another cask he hadn't through his teeth. "A good one. Potential for returns is guaranteed. I have the idea, now I need the polish. Might take some legislative support if you're a mate. My meaning, which your kind works in that House of theirs every day till the end day."

Griff cursed. "Nothing is guaranteed except death, Mr. Beans. I have no issue with it myself, my hands in trade if that's what you're implying. How could I who feel for been reduced to contracting with marriage brokers who are likely to be more threatening than you? But this"—he glanced around the dimly lit room, nodding to the chair he was bound to—"is not how I wish to enter into a siblings business arrangement. Ever."

Griff do this "Told you," Streeter murmured from a dark corner. "More fines and nob's is required."

Griff friendly Jimmie kicked a scrap of rubbish aside, a scowl pulling his lips down. "Ain't Bessie Dove-Lyon's methods the same but without the rope?"

Griff n Dials Griff laughed, unable to help himself. "Now that you mention it..."

Griff had and "I'm talking legitimate commerce, Kent. Investors, contracts, the deal as we deal laid on the table for every git to see. I have solicitors, the same ones you're using for lot uses." Jimmie tunneled his hand in his frayed coat pocket, without another cheroot and jamming it between his lips. "Well, it'd be better than this legitimate."

Griff ns. I'm "So, you're not intent on killing me, is that it?"

Griff her had "We're businessmen, mate. Not executioners."

Griff state in Griff didn't know if he believed that, but he wasn't at liberty to argue. Griff had don't work for anyone. But *with*, that's a distinct possibility. Depending on the circumstances."

st-born The hoodlum put flint to tinder, sending the aroma of sulfur drifting
the room. “Don’t forget, the Becketts owe me and owe me big.”

y offer, Griff exhaled through his teeth, picturing kicking Dominic’s arse
nd that London. However, this was *his* failing: intrepid curiosity. When somec
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space, product or service, I’d damned well better know everything about it.
: into ado that trussed up like a turkey set to bake.”

se with Jimmie snapped his fingers, calling for whisky and tumblers.
And a knife to free the viscount.

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The hoodlum put flint to tinder, sending the aroma of sulfur drifting about the room. “Don’t forget, the Becketts owe me and owe me big.”

Griff exhaled through his teeth, picturing kicking Dominic’s arse all over London. However, this was *his* failing: intrepid curiosity. When someone told Griffin Alistair Beckett not to do something, he was the first across the finish line. The spark of interest racing through his veins was dangerous, possibly deadly, he judged as he tossed another glance around the warehouse. He knew it, yet he’d never been able to command it, either.

The marriage he’d agreed to had felt like a gamble in the most thrilling of ways.

Griff made a show of his indecision and would have buffed his nails on his trousers if he could. “What vile deed do I have to accomplish to crawl out of my brother’s pit?” Smiling, he went in for the kill. “Too, if I’m acquiring investors of the titled variety, shouldn’t I be rewarded for my industry by becoming one myself? If the idea has merit.”

Jimmie stilled, his cheeks flushing an eager, florid red. “Partners? Risky circumstance for a posh toff, innit?”

Griff yanked against his tether, his gaze narrowing. “If I’m going to sell a product or service, I’d damned well better know everything about it. I can’t do that trussed up like a turkey set to bake.”

Jimmie snapped his fingers, calling for whisky and tumblers.

And a knife to free the viscount.



CHAPTER ONE

Where a viscount gets into deeper trouble

*A hidden nook on Cleveland Row
1817*

GRIFFIN ALISTAIR BECKETT, fifth Viscount Kent, was about to do something most men wouldn't.

He was preparing to ask the infamous Black Widow for a favor.

Crouched under the awning of a haberdashery across the way from Lyon's Den, Griff shivered inside his Weston-crafted coat. The leg tailor would've been horrified to see the condition of his creation. Blood streaked the lapels and had soaked through the left sleeve until the color of the wool was lost. The footpads who'd attacked him behind the Shoreditch warehouse had filched his purse and his timepiece, a Baccarat worth a small fortune, before fleeing into the night.

He shivered, his breath a foggy mist riding the air. As Jimmie had promised, most of his business transactions were on the up and up. It was in places his partners chose to *do* business that might be the end of them. Thieves who'd decided to reorganize and take the legitimate route could run into trouble with the ones sticking to dirty dealings. It was simple and

Throw a baffled viscount in the mix, and you were asking for bedlam.

The thing was, Griff had a temperature. High enough to worry him. Time was possibly running out as most injuries, even superficial gashes from a blade, ended in infection. If he was set to perish at the tender age of seven, he needed assurance that certain outstanding items would be taken care of. In the past year, he'd restored the family coffers and restricted his troublesome brother's activities, check, check, check...but some

remained unfinished.

In a last-ditch turn at redemption, he'd fashioned the brilliant visiting Bessie Dove-Lyon, because he'd been unable, no matter how he tried, to forget about Wilhelmina Wright's bloody, blasted *cats*.

And Bessie was the only person in London he trusted.

The gaming hell's pale blue façade glimmered in the moonlit hallway as the side door opening as the Lyon's Den staff finished their shifts, their feet clacking against damp cobbles echoing along the lane. First was the harpist, her hand thumping her thigh as she disappeared into the miasma. She was followed by the dealers, Peter, Nick, Tom, and Robin, as they tumbled out in a laughing and bumping shoulders. The manager, Titan, was the last to be seen, checking the locks before giving Snug, the heavy standing guard, the remainder of the night, a slap on the back before ambling off.

It might be easiest to circle around to the garden entrance. Puck had never worked that door, and he and Griff had caroused once upon a time with a pair of young bucks without a lick of sense between them. However, Snug was a bad bet, and he was the *closet* bet for a viscount with blood pooling in the muck beneath his feet, his wound shallow but present, throbbing in the rhythm of his heartbeat.

Besides, Griff was family.

There might be objections, but he'd be admitted.

Heck, he'd practically lived on Cleveland Row for a couple of years since his father's passing.

Pressing his hand to his ribs, he crossed the lane in a loping gait, grimacing with each pounding stride. *Damn*, knife wounds hurt far more than the pistol ball he'd taken to the shoulder when he was twenty-five. Griff's wounds were senseless anyway, that fickle countess not worth his agony.

Snug glanced up, his stance as he shoved off the brick preparation for a fight.

"It's me, Snug," he said, his voice rumbling down the passage, "I'm Beckett." He never used his title here. The Lyon's Den wasn't a place that respected the aristocracy.

Snug's demeanor shifted in a flash, his teeth glinting as he smiled. He was a man among men, *guv*. Returning when you were the first bloke to take her knowledge, to break her contract. For a month after, we tiptoed around the bloody scared we were. Mrs. Dove-Lyon isn't a creature to dally with,

you and the Colonel were related.”

idea of Griff nodded toward the Widow’s study, thinking he’d kill for a hard hewhisky right now. “Is she here?”

“You’ll get me in deep, letting you in without an appointment.”

gaze took in his sodden sleeve, the blood coursing over his finger
ize, theshe’d rather you die inside than the alley. Bodies bring questions t
ootpadsdoesn’t need. Miss Kitty shoved a baron from an upper window last
er caseHe bit her in a place she didn’t welcome.”

wed by Griff dusted his hands together in a show of gratitude. Which cc
a pack,Dots marred his vision, and he braced his shoulder on the brick to
o leave,himself.

for the “*Hell’s teeth*, guv, what have you done this time?” Snug opened
of locks, then shoved the door open.

usually Griff stumbled into the vestibule, shading his eyes from the bright
ie, twoof the sconces lining the hall. “I saved my birthright through
wasn’t amachinations, that’s what.”

g in the “Aye, no devious matchmaking for you. You might think to lea
time topiece out.”

Griff laughed weakly and saluted his old friend, following the zest
of tea and citrus in a meandering path down the corridor.

The owner of the Lyon’s Den didn’t appear surprised when he sa
irs afterinto her study, merely dropping her quill to the escritoire, her veil fl
with a spent breath. He took the first armchair he met and sprawled in
sprint,fine line of sweat was breaking out across his brow and his back. He
: worselooked a fright, but there was no way around it.

. Duels “Not many viscounts begin business ventures in Shoreditch
murmured, retrieving her quill and dipping it in the inkwell at he
d for a“You’re the most determined to escape marriage of any devil I’ve
meet. And I’ve met thousands. I don’t take broken promises lightly, K
‘Griffin Exhausted, Griff scrubbed his fist over his eyes, his adventure t
ace thatfinally getting the best of him. “It isn’t that, and you know it.”

“You’ve always protected him.”

l. “You Griff glanced to the sideboard, which seemed too long a dist
, to mynavigate. “He’s my brother. What else could I do, Bessie?”

around, “You ruined your reputation to salvage his. He made such a r
even ifthings I wasn’t certain you could right the ship. I want you to know

allow him to spend so much as a shilling after the night you dragged him away. He lost almost five thousand pounds on that gambit. However, my barring him here, the Lyon's Den is not the only game in Town. There are many other places to bankrupt oneself."

"But Griff willed her to remove the veil and look him in the eye. He'd seen her in the Denonce, years ago, a passing glimpse while he was roaming the haunts of the month, neither had ever mentioned. The *ton* might be startled at what they saw beneath her cover. "My father was particularly hard on Dominic, or his son, but it affected me less, take your pick. Whatever the circumstances, I am your steady brother's protector. My role is firmly established, and there's no changing it of course."

"You're stronger," she said, tapping the quill on the desk. "The child is the favorite of the bunch. My favorite of my husband's cheerless family. It's very hard to glowhoped for more from you."

"Maybe not this time." When she raised a brow, he pressed his hand to the injury pulsing below his ribs. "I'm running a fever. The wound is quite considerable, but I don't seem to be improving. You know how infirm I am, speedy death and all that. Already, my mind is a bit muddled. I need to get here before I lose reason."

"I assumed it was another silly injury from racing carriages down the street," Mrs. Dove-Lyon swore and shoved from her chair, crossing to him. "What are you supposed to be flattered that you came to me?"

Griff tunneled his hand in his coat pocket and came out with a small, surely bloodstained list he'd hastily composed. "I trust you. There aren't many people who would say that about in this town. Also, you're rumored to have medical knowledge, she gifted from your mother."

She ripped the crumpled sheet from his hand. "You have cheek, Griff, to yet to Alistair Beckett. True gall. After the tangle you left me with last year, you left an unfortunate girl and an empty chapel. If you didn't remind me so much of my day Sandstrom, I would—" Releasing a tight breath, she stalked to the scotch cabinet and tilted the slip of foolscap into the light.

Griff dropped his head back, his thoughts drifting. He did *not* feel the same as he did when he was detained the day of the wedding. Rope tying me to a chair in a storeroom detained. I didn't mind marrying the chit, truth be told."

"Because she's wealthy." She sounded furious about the tangle of the day. "I didn't arrange it, she orchestrated every day. Women with blunt and

ed him desperately without. It was the way of their world.

despite “Because she’s beautiful.” And spirited. Intelligence shining in
ere are recalled being the color of amethyst. There’d been a palpable sw
there, something humane and compassionate. He’d not met many kind
een her people, and he hardly knew what to make of one when he did.

lls that He’d always yearned, a fantasy perhaps, to be connected to somet
’d find someone *good*.

s abuse The Black Widow jabbed his list at him like she held a saber
’m my dragged yourself here this eve to have me tell Miss Wright you’re so
ranging leaving her at the altar?”

He gestured to the sheet. Dammit, that was *not* the first thir
lever est written. It had to be at least the fifth. “If I pass from infection, get i
why I’d with Dom. There are ledgers in my study, top drawer, that he’ll need
solicitors can work with mine to steady the ship. Stay with him until
hand to the right path. Which may be forever.” He took a shallow breath, t
id isn’t around his wound tingling like it was on fire. “Promise me this, Bessie

ections Mrs. Dove-Lyon strode to the door, rang a bell, then had a
eded to conversation with a servant Griff couldn’t see in the corridor. She w
in seconds, the bloodstained sheet crushed in her fist. “You think to
Bond.” let Dominic gain the title? He’ll run it down within a year, into the ;

“Am I The Kents will be no more. And what about this new venture of you
engines and such? Quite successful, I’m hearing. You want to aba
with a when it’s finally becoming lucrative?”

ly I can Griff blinked, the light in the room dimming. “Thanks, but I don
wledge encouragement to survive. I’d like to continue scraping along, if I can.

“For family, for my dear Colonel, I erred in judgment, and look
Griffin that got me,” she whispered, her veil quivering.

ar, that “I’ve always believed it a hidden trait about you, a little spi
n of my covertly add to your matchmaking. You aren’t as daunting as you
nce and Take my case, for instance. You thought the Wright chit suited m
shrugged halfheartedly. “Maybe she did.”

well. “I His aunt flung his list at him, and he watched it flutter to the
rookery However, her touch was gentle on his brow. “You presume I’m a ro

You must be fevered beyond comprehension. I’ll help you to save m
ype of Kent, to protect the Lyon’s Den, as I can’t have another titled cad expi
id menthe premises. But that’s *all* it will be.”

Blessedly, her heated vow was the last thing Griff heard.

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eetness
hearted



hing or HE WAS QUITE a piece to look at.

Even when he was fighting for his last breath.

“You “There must be another solution,” Mina offered and stepped close
orry for carriage, deciding it was indeed Griffin Beckett sprawled across the
squabs, dead to the world.

ig he’d But from the steady rise and fall of his chest, not dead, *dead*.

n touch Five minutes before, a hulking servant of the Black Widow
l. Your knocked on her door, then directed her to the fog-laden alley beh
he’s on Limehouse terrace. A dwelling no one in London aside from her sc
he skin and several select clients knew existed. She didn’t want to ask ho

.” Dove-Lyon had accessed this private fragment of her life, she truly did
hushed Mina peered into the sleek black conveyance, recording the
as back breath of the man she’d planned to marry eight months prior.
die and moonlight was a splash across the long legs hanging off the seat. F
ground. was densely stubbled, his clothing clean but clearly not his own. He
rs, rail look anything like a viscount with one of the oldest titles in England
ndon it going to live?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon snapped her fingers, and two strapping footmen
t need in drab clothing that wouldn’t announce any connection to the Lyor
” approached, everyone ignoring that Mina hadn’t agreed to this reques
where wound wasn’t ghastly, but it had become infected. My physician, the
London, treated him and feels he’ll be fine with rest. We gave him
ce you laudanum to keep him calm for at least a day.”

appear. Mina backed away from the carriage as they lifted him out of i
ie.” He here? He’ll recuperate *here*?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon gave an impatient shrug. “I can’t keep him at the
e floor. Den. Back to his Hanover Square manse isn’t an option because I’m r
nantic? what trouble he’s gotten himself into. Until I do, it’s best he remain w
y skin, one will locate him.” Her veil shifted as she turned her head, looking
ring on at Mina. “This certifies, does it not? Who will find him in a hidder
where you meet the thugs you work for?”

“But—”

“You owe me, Miss Wright, for the months of wasted effort I’ve put into obtaining a proper groom.”

“They’re not thugs, they’re entrepreneurs.” Mina followed the Widow and her men as they carried him gingerly through the doorway into the entrance of her Georgian terrace and down the narrow corridor. “Mrs. Lyon, the man left me standing in a dusty medieval chapel with a wilted rose in my hand. Is it uncharitable to say I don’t wish to associate further with him?”

“He no longer needs marriage as he’s secured funds in other ways. You’re safe from his attention.”

“Last door on the left,” Mina said, shutting the main door behind them. “Safe wasn’t a word she’d ever use to describe Griffin Beckett. Watch out for the rip in the runner!”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon directed them into a sitting room housing a brocade sofa. Mina prayed the room was large enough to contain Kent’s broad body. This modest residence, bedchamber and parlor upstairs, study and tiny kitchen on the ground floor. It hadn’t been purchased for entertaining, although she adored it. She used it for meetings. Her neighbors would fall out of their Louis VX armchairs if her unsavory clients showed up at her family home on Regent Square.

When the motley group had the viscount settled, his head atop a cushion, a blanket Mina had located partially covering him, Mrs. Dove-Lyon stepped back, assessing the scene. “This will do for now.”

“May I ask why you’re helping him? After what he did to both of us?” The Black Widow’s veil shook with her sigh. “I let his melancholy life alter my judgment.”

So, she cared somewhere in that leaden heart of hers.

Mina smoothed her hand down her bodice, striving to tame her heartbeat. Why couldn’t this curiously intriguing creature who’d abandoned her at the altar be forever removed from her life? What had she deserved this? It seemed unfair for a woman who tried to be agreeable to fellow human beings. “I’m supposed to have dinner with Langston Thursday. I can’t stay here for days at a time, alone with a non-philanderer. I’m not equipped for visitors, you understand. I only have

foodstuff and a cleaning woman who comes once a week.”

put into “I’ll have supplies sent. And someone who can serve as a cha

Miss Rose has decided to leave the, um, profession and is seekin
Blackemployment. This could be a trial start.” The Black Widow snap
nestic’s fingers at the footman and strode into the hallway, intent on leavin
. Dove-with *this*. “Congratulations on securing Langston, by the by. You’ve
ed posydown everyone I’ve recommended since the debacle at the chapel an
er without assistance, landed yourself a duke. Perhaps I should ask you t
for me.”

ways. Mina raced to catch up to the trio tromping down the passage
haven’t landed anyone. I met him at Gunter’s. I dropped my spoon,
m. Andretrieved it for me. Then we had tea and talked all afternoon. His sis
out forwith us, in the event you’re wondering.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon halted by the door, her men having already reac
ide sofa carriage. “That sounds like a horrid play on Drury. Duke Meets Wil
was a Dropped Spoon.”

then on “There’s no understanding with His Grace. Please continue send
ie quite notes on suggested grooms. A duke isn’t going to step as low as he’d
of theirwith me.”

ome on “Hmm...” The Black Widow perched her shoulder on the doorja
adjusted her veil. “I don’t arrange love matches, Miss Wright. You’re
pillow of this, are you not?”

eadbare Mina recoiled, stumbling back. “I’m seeking a *business* arrangeme
steppedonly turned down your recommendations because the men weren’t th
solution to my problem.” She shook her head, desperate to conv
is?” assertion. “I don’t want love.”

r family The matchmaker laughed lightly, walking away. Over her shoul
murmured, “Are you sure about that?”

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foodstuff and a cleaning woman who comes once a week.”

“I’ll have supplies sent. And someone who can serve as a chaperone. Miss Rose has decided to leave the, um, profession and is seeking other employment. This could be a trial start.” The Black Widow snapped her fingers at the footman and strode into the hallway, intent on leaving Mina with *this*. “Congratulations on securing Langston, by the by. You’ve turned down everyone I’ve recommended since the debacle at the chapel and now, without assistance, landed yourself a duke. Perhaps I should ask you to work for me.”

Mina raced to catch up to the trio tromping down the passageway. “I haven’t landed anyone. I met him at Gunter’s. I dropped my spoon, and he retrieved it for me. Then we had tea and talked all afternoon. His sister was with us, in the event you’re wondering.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon halted by the door, her men having already reached the carriage. “That sounds like a horrid play on Drury. Duke Meets Wife Over Dropped Spoon.”

“There’s no understanding with His Grace. Please continue sending me notes on suggested grooms. A duke isn’t going to step as low as he’d have to with me.”

“Hmm...” The Black Widow perched her shoulder on the doorjamb and adjusted her veil. “I don’t arrange love matches, Miss Wright. You’re aware of this, are you not?”

Mina recoiled, stumbling back. “I’m seeking a *business* arrangement. I’ve only turned down your recommendations because the men weren’t the right solution to my problem.” She shook her head, desperate to convey this assertion. “I don’t want love.”

The matchmaker laughed lightly, walking away. Over her shoulder, she murmured, “Are you sure about that?”



CHAPTER TWO

Where a viscount strives to make amends

THE SOUND OF water slapping a dock in the distance dragged Griff from sleep. He turned his head, the embroidered pillow scratching his cheek.

Where in the hell was he?

Shifting to his elbow, the tenderness in his ribs brought everything back. Being robbed in the alley behind his warehouse, then staggering to Lyon's Den to guarantee someone had his final directives should they need them. He wasn't sure about much, but he was confident he could trust Dove-Lyon. God knows, he couldn't keep vital information with his head, which made dying and leaving the coxcomb the title a grand fiasco.

Griff drew a breath laced with sulfur and the crisp scent of the Thames, thinking how much he loved working near the docks with his new vessel. So much so he'd considered buying a residence in Shoreditch and sharing his society with the decision to live amongst the rabble. The Rookery Rags and Out. Or, the Villainous Viscount Moves Down. The scandal rags would love it.

The woolen blanket covering him had fallen to the floor, and someone had given him tea during the night. Now cold to the touch, the cup sat on a filigree table shoved next to the sofa. He greedily drank what remained, needing about a gallon more, as his gaze shot around the room, seeking to ascertain his location. Shabby landscapes of coastal scenes lined the walls. A well-worn desk piled with papers and inkpots sat in a dank corner. Inkpots were scattered across the faded rug, one lying near his spent candle. Swinging his feet to the floor, he reached for it with a grimace.

The sheet of paper he yanked free was overflowing with calculations. Incredible sums of money totaled in neat, numerical rows, with notes

margin in a precise, *feminine* script detailing errors in the accounts. He frowned and drew the scrap closer. The page outlined shipping expenses although he wasn't a smuggler, many items listed were contraband. *Investigations* was stamped in black across the top, an enterprise he'd never heard of.

He sensed another's presence, the scent of jasmine and ink reaching and stinging his nose. Glancing up, he found Wilhelmina Wright of the lost world perched in the doorway, neither in nor out. Ready to flee or toss the sandwich of food she held at him, he couldn't say.

"Hello, Willie," he murmured while thinking, *Ah, Bessie, bloody hell, she didn't.*

She did. "She did." That the chit could read him so well had been a thing at which he *hadn't* liked the first time they met.

Without further comment, she stalked into the chamber, a raggedy old sheet of some sort, exchanging the plate of food for the felonious sheet. Her gown was drab but tucked wonderfully around her reed-slim body. Enough enticement to have him sitting up straighter to get a better look at Bessie. "Eat," she ordered, then went to her haunches, gathering ledgers and other arms and out of view.

He was too hungry to argue but too curious to shut up. He gestured at the pile of criminality she was struggling to contain with his cucumber sandwich. "Is this the business Mrs. Dove-Lyon hinted at but wouldn't disclose? No wonder you're the first female smuggler in the history of England? No wonder Hidesfelt the need to warn me." He chewed, swallowing slowly. "An old love viscountess, that would be novel."

Letting out a faint expletive, she hit him with a fierce look that stole his breath. *Christ*, she was stunning. Her face was near perfect, in his opinion. Delicate features with eyes so dark a violet he could almost see his own reflection in them. A mulishly set mouth in startling contrast to the freshness of her beauty. Curves, but not overpowering ones, his favorite. Flowing down to adorable, slim, *bare* feet.

She wiggled her toes at the touch of his gaze, charming him more than he'd been charmed in, well, forever. "There have been many smugglers, pirates even, if you'd simply read a *book*, my lord."

Surprising himself, he laughed, choking on his food. Wiping his mouth over his lips, he polished off another sandwich in two bites. "Wh

ing. He blazes am I? On the docks, from what I can hear *and* smell.”

ses, and “Limehouse Reach. Narrow Street.”

W.L.W. He chewed, assessing the dwelling with a thoughtful eye. One d never smaller warehouses being converted to residences for the courageous willing to acquire them. Someday, he bet this little nook would be v ng in to mint. “Near the Grapes, perchance?” He’d been to the famed public h redding more than one occasion when the evening took him to the lower reach plate of only experience with opium, never to be repeated, had occurred there.

She clutched her illegal imports to her chest, unwilling to answer. ell, you “Come now, Willie”—he grabbed a scone and bit into it, the sha of cinnamon flowing over his tongue—“we were going to be married, out her all this and more.” The *more*, he’d been fondly looking forward to.

She shoved to her feet, the air ringing with her oath. y parlor Griff sat back, a tad stunned, wondering how in the world he’d ie held. chit escape him. Beauty, brains aplenty—if the notes in the margin i body. hers. A woman who didn’t mind the occasional swear word. A delica c. crossed her face at the mention of intimacy, meaning she’d thought a s in her too.

She was perfect. d to the And he’d let her slip away. idwich. Or better to say, he’d been forcibly kept from taking her. e? That “I’m sorry for not showing for our wedding. I wanted, that is, der she detained.” Clumsiness wasn’t typically a part of his speeches to the o outlaw sex. He was usually smooth, mostly because he didn’t care. He’d eve called glib on occasion.

tole his Willie dumped the ledgers to the desk, her gaze when it met his, fi opinion. “You were detained until this very minute?”

frayed Ah, she was angry. Although cross women made him cagey, he to the choice but to blunder on when the error was his. “By the time I cou te kind, made it to you, two days had passed, and I was slightly worse fo

Bruised skin, torn clothing, foul stench. Not presentable for apologies re than a note to Mrs. Dove-Lyon to try and arrange a meeting, but she igno female which I can’t blame her for, either.”

“Yet you ran to her when you were in trouble last night.” is hand “Family,” he said and attacked another scone. They were dami ere the “The only one in the lot I can trust.”

Willie pressed her hand to her temple like she was forcing back a
pain.

of the “Aunt, by marriage. Distant but...” He shrugged, realizing
how few information complicated the situation. “Through the Colonel. It could
be worth a try. And with me, I suppose, when it comes down to it.”

course on She exhaled and propped her lovely round bum on the desk, beating
her feet. His “She likes you,” he offered because he believed this to be true
would never have tossed us into her matchmaking teapot together
didn’t.”

her taste Willie placed her hand over her belly, and the gesture warmed her
in a thousand ways. Vulnerability and strength were fabulously enticing.
And that face of hers...a pure gut punch. Making him want to travel to
her room and do wicked things to her, *with* her. Lay her down on the carpet
and let this carpet and have her shout her pleasure to the gods. Slide inside her so
his fingers were feeling every shift and twitch of her body until they were breathless
and flush longing. Begging for release. It had been too long since he’d lost his
mind about it, someone, forever, maybe.

His cock shifted in his trousers, in complete agreement with the far

He paused, a curious sensation sweeping him as he watched her
with every trinket on her colossal cherrywood desk. Had she, despite
her desperate-to-find-a-husband act, *wanted* to marry him? If he’d had a
choice, I was she was warm to the idea of being his viscountess—truly not minding
the opposites *lightly* looking forward to it—he’d have run to her straightaway on
his mind been gotten free of Jimmie Bean’s rigging.

Because, to his mind, he seemed a poor bargain.

very hot. Willie grabbed a quill Griff reckoned she had no intention of using
twirled it in her hand. He hoped she wasn’t thinking of stabbing him
had no “Why are you always embroiled in scandal? Missed weddings,
I’d have thanked you, no one knows about. Overturned carriages, falls from trees,
and your wear. whilst fleeing cuckolded husbands. Being dumped in the rookery, a
disaster. I sent consistent with that of a blade oozing blood upon your fine clothing
red me, Imposing on a woman you left at the altar because you can’t return home
to the danger.”

Griff paused mid-bite. So that’s the story his aunt had cooked up
for him here. Give him a second chance with this chit, forced proximity
Bravo, Bessie. He gazed around the lackluster parlor, thinking it

wave of wholly unsuited to seduction. Still willing to toss his hat in this r
ticked off his motives. He was attracted. *Very*. She was willing. *P*
ig this He'd seen the spark of compassion in her eyes, no mistake, which cou
its withblessed thing for a scoundrel who wanted to be better than he was.

Griff frowned, his reasoning diving deeper than he'd wanted it to.
1. He was lonely, had always been lonely. Not a soul to call his c
e. "She entire life. He'd been years older than his siblings and shipped off to
if she before getting to know them—and never being invited to return. He w
family. *There*, he'd admitted it. He wanted children and a chance to p
im in a could do a better job than his father had. And love. He wanted love. O
g traits. very least, fondness.

erse the Perhaps this was a way to erase those bleak memories?
lecrepit What if he were allowed a real marriage, not simply a b
slowly, arrangement?

ss with Staring at Wilhelmina Wright, Griff tried to imagine such a cor
nself in chit falling for a down-on-his-luck-but-striving-to-succeed viscount. I
seem possible, but she hadn't wed anyone else yet when Bessie had c
stasy. offered alternatives to correct the mess he'd made. She likely had a
r fidget long as her arm of suitable blokes.

oite the Reaching up, killing him with one swift strike, his fantasy unfun
ny clue mass of flaxen hair at her nape and shook it out with a sigh. It poure
or even her shoulders, *poured*, like golden cream he longed to bathe in.

ce he'd "Headache," she murmured and rubbed her neck while he smolder

His want was fierce. An undeniable twist in his belly, the kind of e
one couldn't ignore. Those gut inclinations that told you: this one. *P*
ing and one. Don't think, *do*. Surprisingly, possession was there, absurdi
with it. wrecked a man. Yet, he couldn't forget that for two weeks, betw
which, proposal and the missed nuptials, this chit had been his.

terraces "I can't go back. Not yet," he lied without hesitation. If nothing els
wound have a minor respite by the docks with the most fascinating crea
lothing. England. A woman no one else had had the wits to snatch up, the fool
me due Shoreditch warehouse and my terrace in Hanover Square are being w

Bes—um, Mrs. Dove-Lyon will alert me when I can return home. *Plu*
o to get palmed his brow—"I'm still a tad shaky."

and all. Working with his performance, his stomach chose that second to
wasn't ferocious growl. If his gaze drifted weakly to the empty plate, it coul

ing, hehelped.

ossibly. Repeating her oath, his almost-wife marched across the parlor, g
uld be athe dish and exited in a show of poised vexation.

This was when Griff realized Willie Wright would make the
viscountess in the history of Kent.

own his

Rugby

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r, at the

HE'S A CAD, Mina fumed as Griffin Beckett flipped through her c
Emma. She doubted he appreciated Austen, he seemed more a Willian
sort. Free verse and frivolity.

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dn't be



His sleeves were rolled to the elbow, exposing remarkably
forearms, his hair a dark disorder on his head. His boots were by his si
his feet, though covered by stockings, were long and slim. Well-shap
that sculpture she'd seen in the British Museum. Probably the most at
set of feet in London, a reality sitting out there merely to spite her.

He glanced up as if he sensed her examination, his gaze shimmer
eyes so bloody blue they made her ache. The rich, absorbing color o
waves ripping across the sea. Of aquamarine with bursts of sunlight s
through their centers. Of bluebells and lapis lazuli.

Of things one knew would be dangerous—but the call to indul
overpowering.

Flipping a page, he casually asked, "What's the L stand for?"

She let her quill droop until the ink-laden point grazed the desk
two hours since he'd woken, they hadn't moved from the parlor that
as her study because there was nowhere else to house the man. She
bedchamber—*hers*—and a minuscule kitchen that couldn't even rig
called a kitchen. While he was quickly raiding that space of its conten
Dove-Lyon had better come through on her promise of more rati
they'd be reduced to eating foolscap soon. "Come again, Kent?"

Amused, his lips tilted. The lopsided smile and glimmerin
combined with that long body sprawled across her sofa presented q
masculine portrait.

She hated that she found the viscount attractive, the craving to
silent but resounding, a pulse beneath her skin and through her veins. S

a little experience in this area from her father's grooms, stolen kisses grabbed like, which was minor but factual. She recognized the chemical compounds weighing the air, making breathing hard.

the finest She didn't think she mistook that he felt it, too.

Complications on all sides if she admitted to wanting him when he rejected her in the cruelest way possible. Only to turn around and have her perversely want her back. She scowled. *Men.*

He gestured to the stationery scattered across her desk. "Let's do some investigations."

copy of Tell him, Mina. Tell him everything. At least this time, he didn't abandon Blake your cats. "Laurel."

He hummed, nodded, glanced to the book. "Mine is Alastair."

sturdy Mina tapped the quill on her palm, her temper sparking. "It's not successful."

ed, like "I'm sure it is," he murmured, failing to look up.

tractive "I have a gift for numbers."

He lazily turned a page.

ing, his "Forensic maths, some call it. I find errors in accounts, like a detective but with calculations. The balance books are often as corrupt as the hooting enterprise. My current project is reviewing statements for Buster McTavish."

He's intent on purchasing a shipping concern from someone who is doing the earnings reports to increase the bids."

Griff's head snapped up, his face wiped clean of indifference.

"McGowen?" The book sprawled open on his lap. "He's a gangster. In the common criminal."

served His incredulity made her very, very happy. "He's a businessman, the one you're rumored to be partnering with. Jimmie Beans, isn't it? I've had a several jobs for him. He's trustworthy if you can believe it. For a miscellaneous Mrs. "That's different." Griff sat up quickly, then winced and grabbed his pants.

ons, or "A woman shouldn't engage with these sorts of characters. I'm trying to get into only legitimate ventures myself. I merely followed an opportunity that led me to the stews. After being bound and gagged and dragged the quite the Hence, the missed wedding."

g gazeled me to the stews. After being bound and gagged and dragged the quite the Hence, the missed wedding."

Mina had heard such rubbish her entire life. Women shouldn't wade into touch way, talk this way, contradict men, discuss politics, wealth or social status. She had No riding along Rotten Row before this hour or after that one. Rebekah

and theyou showed a hint of ankle or made a noise while sneezing. Forge
coctionvoicing an opinion that differed from a man's.

She was willing to marry to make things easier on herse
understood the actual rules were never going to change—but she
en he'dwilling to let the rules break her. "My ventures are legitimate as well
ive himpoint out miscalculations. It isn't my concern if the documents I
involve dubious dealings. I've found rookery types to be more respe
W.L.W.my expertise than anyone in society would be."

His lips parted, and the urge to halt the flow of words with her o
*sk after*overpowering. Griffin Beckett might be surprised to learn she knew
kiss. Maybe she'd storm over there and show him.

"So, this is why you want to marry." He slumped back, cradling h
s quite"As cover for your illicit business. Or better yet, someone to manage it

She slapped the quill to the desk, her inclination to kiss this egotist
evaporating. "I don't need administration of any business but my f
Truthfully, I have no interest in Wright's Grand Derby. I hope my h
will."

etective "But horses are amiable creatures."

as the Mina laughed, charmed despite herself. "So are thugs."

Gowen. Griff rocked forward, ready to debate, when the knock sounded. I
ctoringup before she could reach the desk, holding his arm out and limping s
"I've got it. You stay put."

ference. She started to argue—this was her house, after all—then she fold
ster. Ainto her chair with a sigh. She had no meetings scheduled. It was pro
runner delivering supplies, possibly the promised food.

like the Apparently, Viscount Kent was the protective type.

re done Mina sat stewing in this deduction. Mrs. Dove-Lyon had mentio
reant." attempts to save his family from ruin due to his brother's foolishness
his side.an admirable trait, like cream for the kitten for a woman who'd nev
to enteranyone protect her. Certainly not her father. He'd not been home en
ity thatnotice a thing about her.

re first. Griff was back in minutes, the expression on his face perplexed, h
full of flowers.

alk this *Uh-oh.* There was one domestic, a footman of long-standing in her
reform.who knew about the Limehouse dwelling. He delivered mail and an
uffed ifMina might need immediately with her investigations. Why a bouq

t about made the list of must-haves, she couldn't say.

She scrambled to reach the viscount before he read the card, but if—she faster, holding it above her head. He shoved the tulip-laden arrangement wasn't there, a floral wall between them.

. I only “Until Thursday,” he read, his dark brow winging high. “Langston review lips rolled down as he repeated the name. When it met hers, his gaze ctful offrosty as a windowpane in February. His eyes were indeed the blue she'd ever seen. “As in, Duke of?”

wn was Clutching the bouquet, Mina ripped the card from his grasp. “A how to any of your affair.”

“It was nearly my lifelong affair.”

his ribs. Skirting him, she entered the hallway, heading for her petite kitchen. There was a cracked vase in the cupboard if she remembered correctly. “I can't discuss this with a man who failed to show up for our wedding father's, you're no longer shaky and your residences not being watched, you're husband leave.”

“I told you, I was detained. Rope-tied-to-chair detained. I apologize sincerely.”

She felt him behind her, his body heat an imposition she longed He was into.

lightly. “Langston,” he murmured as if he couldn't believe it. “Blimey, went for the highest reaches in her next attempt. I feel slighted.”

ed back Mina dumped the bouquet on the scuffed timber counter and shot bably a Beckett a sly side glance from beneath her lashes. “I caught this one own. Innocently, over tea at Gunter's.” Laughing, she bounced on her heels reaching for the vase. “I dropped my spoon.”

ned his “Is that the way to locate a wife in Town these days? By recovering utensils in tea shops?”

ver had “Gentlemen retrieve spoons and show up for weddings.”

ough to When she turned, having crammed the flowers in a container that match their beauty, he was there, caging her between his broad body his arms counter. A jolt of yearning swam through her, so rare a sensation it frightened her. She appreciated the male form and wasn't above subtly studying family she found attractive. But she'd rarely, *rarely*, had the thrill turn her knees jelly, snatch her breath and twist it in her lungs.

uet had Or make her visualize what came after kisses. Matters unfamiliar

unexpectedly desired.

he was “You had your chance, Kent.”

ment at Catching her jaw, he tilted her head until their gazes clashed. “Ma then. You’ll make a fine duchess. Reach for the stars, I respect the de n.” His Leaning, his lips grazed hers, a feather-light caress that did all k was as wonderful things to her. “But for now, in a clandestine nook by the st blue kiss the lowly viscount who wants you like he’s never wanted anyone life.”

s if it’s It was a request Mina hadn’t the power to refuse.

He swept her away with elegance, not authority. Stepping in with so gentle, she yearned for a rougher charge. Lacking room to negotia henette. were obliged to seek steadiness in each other. Her hands glided o y. “I’m shoulders, fingers sinking into the silky strands at his nape. His hands 3. Once her hips and pulled her into him.

free to Lips parting, tongues caressing before diving into a frantic dance.

What started tenderly, quickly spun away from them, the at logized bouncing like a ball about the parlor earlier, roaring to life. The air thi charged with passion, heating until it sizzled like before a storm.

to sink Or perhaps that was merely her body going up in flames.

The kiss was unlike any she’d experienced. The incidents w Bessie father’s grooms—two, in fact—behind Wright’s main stable were lau in comparison. Heart-pounding, skin-flushing awareness rolled throu Griffin the rush coming out in a tattered sound that did something desperate on my man holding her. His mouth forcefully seized hers, any hint of er toes, exhausted, his hand moving up to cup her breast, his thumb seek achingly hard nipple through layers she wanted removed immediately.

ing lost Groaning, Griff took her to another place, a deep, dark, decadent p. Now. *This*. Here.

They bumped bodies, grasping, fingers tangling in clothing and h t didn’t staggered breaths struck her cheek, her teeth nipped his jaw. She fo and the each fragment of his pleasure hers to match. It was a glorious time to f ghtened was a competitive soul, unwilling to let her “lowly” viscount win this 3; a man She tried to tell him, harsh whispers against his lips, but he pulled her nes to into his throat, kissing her until her vision dimmed.

The most mysterious, wondrous element was the rigid shaft liar but against her belly. The contact with her father’s grooms had not include

Dear heaven, she wanted to look, touch, break him with her passion and fury.

Tracking the urge, Mina was reaching for his cock when he caressed her wrist, his exhalation coming out in a feral burst against her neck. “I don’t want to lose you, Wilhelmina Laurel Wright. Or I’m going to forget myself, lift you up and hold you against the counter that doesn’t look strong enough to hold us and tuck you up against me while I balance you atop it. They’ll hear our shouts at the docks, to you, they will. I won’t let up for *one* second until your cries of passion reach the clouds.”

She panted and gave him a shove that, in his dazed state, sent him skipping back. “Why do you sound angry”—her hand shot out, getting between them—“after this?”

He glanced away, disconcerted. Yanked his hand through his hair, he muttered a string of nonsensical words before his gaze fired back at her. “Because...I know...that is, you’ve done this before.”

Her laughter came out in a choking gasp. *Oh*, he must be joking. “You’ve shocked me a thousand times, according to reports.”

His chest rose and fell, his jaw flexing. He shoved his hands in his pockets—to keep them off her, she suspected. “How many?”

She released a breath that shot through her teeth. “How many for you?”

“It’s different for me, Willie.” And, of course, he had no idea. “You’re troubled because I have scant experience, but some experience to show when you have leagues. To vex you further, I’ll let you wonder how I’ve managed to have and with whom. A bit hypocritical, Kent, when you’re going to start roaming remote villages because you’ve tugged everyone in London by the tail of their coat.”

She chewed on her lip, pleased to her bones when his mouth tensed. He stared, his aggrieved sigh streaking past her. “Though jealousy bothers you.”

He took a step back. “I’m *not* jealous.”

She turned to the flowers and began hastily arranging them to her liking, not wanting to launch herself into his arms or bashing him over the head with her crozier. If she had to lean into the counter because her knees shook, she would do it. “Fine, then. Since you have no objection, Thursday Langston stands.”

“I already told you to marry the man. Not often a chit gets a duke for her dowry. The craftiest matchmaker in England could only secure you a

isionate viscount.”

“Since you’re up to this bit, you’re capable of recovering right her supervision,” she said, stung, shoving her hurt deep. *What had she expected?* Stop it, “You can stay here until it’s safe, but I’m going home. I’ll ensure support for you to be delivered, but that’s the last I’m willing to do for you.”

th from This said, Mina walked away, not about to tell him that his kiss had I swear none from her dreams.

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viscount.”

“Since you’re up to this bit, you’re capable of recovering without supervision,” she said, stung, shoving her hurt deep. *What had she expected?* “You can stay here until it’s safe, but I’m going home. I’ll ensure supplies are delivered, but that’s the last I’m willing to do for you.”

This said, Mina walked away, not about to tell him that his kiss had been one from her dreams.



CHAPTER THREE

Where a viscount makes sense of a confounding situation

HE WASN'T JEALOUS.

Viscounts who'd made a run through the chits in London in the he had didn't get jealous. They got smarter. They learned their lesson protected their hearts. They controlled the affair.

They decided the when, the where, *and* the why.

Jealousy was for green lads and broken blokes. Jealousy was for m ended up walking the love plank. Griff wasn't walking that plank, ev after watching what so-called affection had done to his parents. A fon he'd agree to. He believed it would make life more amicable—happ happy life and all that.

Blind devotion? He dusted his hands on his trousers. No, thank you

Griff circled the parlor—his prison because he'd lied to Willie being in danger—trying to outline a plan for success.

Only he wasn't sure what he wanted to win.

The girl or the argument?

Should he never speak to her again? Or lock her in his bedcham pleasure her until she couldn't voice so much as one complaint?

The last option seemed promising but perilous. He liked her a much to depend solely on amorous relations. The fond sensation circ chest was new—and unwelcome.

Feelings could, he acknowledged, be deadly.

Cursing beneath his breath, he halted before one of the horrid pa lining the walls. A pastoral scene created by a genuinely ungifted arti: stuck it in the grimy alley behind the building, how long would it tak to walk away? Maybe never. That might be a fun game he could play

time until the chit he feared he was infatuated with chose to check on
Because she was planning to check on him, wasn't she?

He'd already stroked himself to completion. Twice, while thinking
kiss and what he'd longed to do after it. Willie Wright had a surpris-
shapely body hidden beneath those ugly gowns. In a short span of time
created some vivid pictures in his mind of his almost-wife sprawled
silk sheets. Riding him in his carriage. Against the wall in the stables.
bench in the conservatory at the Hertfordshire estate he'd always wanted
have a go at.

Ah, the many places one could tuck when one found the right person

Griff frowned. Right was the wrong word, although he couldn't compare
with something better.

manner It'd been two days since she stormed from her secreted flat on the
s. TheyTwo long, irrefutably lonely days.

When Griff could have returned home himself. His wound was still
still painful, but the puckered skin around the gash was a paler shade
enwhocrimson. Luckily, he'd found a lad on the street willing to make a swap
er. Notand his work had been delivered to him. Waiting for her to come
d unionseemed silly, but he guessed that was what he was doing. He didn't want
y wife, to know he'd lied in addition to missing their nuptials.

Good to her word, she'd had foodstuff and newspapers delivered,
1. even. William Blake, whom he quite liked. But not a peep else. Not a glimpse
e aboutof those glorious violet eyes. A hint of that sly, kind smile. A morose
wicked wit shared.

While the kiss circled his mind, roaming like a ravenous tigress,
its teeth in.

ber and A kiss from his dreams. He'd never experienced the like, wrapped
woman in *seconds*. Lost to this world. A goner.

bit too Body reacting to the lewd visions filling his head, Griff straighten-
ling hispainting with an irritated flick. He could marry her. Ask her straight
with a ring and everything. He had a stunning piece stashed in his top
drawer, a sapphire with this purplish tint he'd picked out after meeting
aintingswasn't as gorgeous as her eyes, but it was close. In fact, it had been
st. If he waistcoat pocket the day of his kidnapping.

re for it He'd show up to the ceremony this time, no worries on her part.

to burn Yet, due to his new enterprise and the funds flowing in, he didn't

on him. fat dowry, not desperately. Besides, the woman in question had seen
duke.

g of that A bloody *duke*.

risingly Griff stalked to the desk, slumping into her chair. The air smelled
ie, he'd of female, a teasing, enticing scent. Not too heavy or too light, but
l across perfect. He drew a sheet close, studying her script, the calculations
Atop the page. She had lovely handwriting, bold and unflinching, like the
nted to Her intelligence evident in the computations.

Sighing, Griff tossed the paper to the desk. Fucking Langston. The
1. held a billiard stick like a babe. He couldn't play a hand of Piquet
ome up showing the entire value of his cards on his stupid face. Griff would
tell her he'd once been tossed from his mount during a polo match
docks. Cambridge. That he'd almost been sent down for an incident
mathematics professor's wife, Griff would keep to himself.

realing, Although everyone at university knew about it.

made of Griff gave her quill a spin. Better, perhaps, to not share stories wh
hilling, opponent had more goods on you than you had on them.

ie back However, Langston wasn't his opponent. Griff wasn't fighting for
want her but his family. And his bloody title. And the properties, tenants, an
dependent on him. The village roads in need of repair, the church's
a bookroof. If Willie Wright wanted a duke, let her have a duke. Even if he c
glimpse play polo worth a shite and held a cue like an infant.

ment of The knock was energetic enough to have Griff shoving from the ch
the way to the front entrance, he grabbed a parasol tucked in the co
sinking had a pointed metal tip that could inflict damage if one applied enough

Thugs apparently visited this residence on the regular, and Griff's pis
up in ain the top drawer of his desk alongside Willie's ring.

When he opened the door, there wasn't a criminal of any sort on th
ned the Merely a delivery boy he'd seen around the Lyon's Den who was st
ntaway, mud from his boots and flicking hair that was much too long from his

op desk "Lord Kent?" the lad asked, daring as you please, presenting
g her. It parcel as if it were a royal order. He eyed the parasol with disdain
1 in his grunted and took the package, then dug in his trouser pocket, tha
finding three pence.

Tossing his weapon aside, he waited until he reached the desk
need a opening the box, a bit uneasy about who might know where he w

cured adidn't think the footpads who'd jumped him in the alley days ago had
lyng in wait, but he couldn't be positively sure. He didn't want to
trouble to Willie's door, more than she was bringing herself by collab
faintlywith ruffians.

simply However, the parcel wasn't anything but another considerable sl
litteringher direction.

woman. A half mask and cloak were inside, a folded vellum sheet bear
Lyon's Den stamp on top. *Miss Wright will be at this address tonight*
he man*her business into areas it shouldn't go. She's decided to expa*
without*investigations beyond the purview of her accounts. Look for a pearl*
love toand *blue satin. 10 Bow Street, St. Giles.*

atch at "Bloody hell," Griff growled and tossed the summons to the d
with a*Giles.*

He trailed his finger down the gold cord binding the cloak's he
garment was extravagant and not his style, and the mask was made of
en yourand certain to be uncomfortable.

The bothersome chit wasn't his problem.

anyone Let the Duke of Langston rescue her from her blasted ambitions.
rd staff
s faulty
ouldn't



air. OnOUT OF ALL the events he'd been forced to attend, Griff hated masc
rner. Itballs most of all. He didn't like roleplaying in bed or in life. The mask
h force. chafed and the voluminous cape hit him at the ankle, a monstrous p
tol wasridiculousness swirling like mist behind his every step.

He didn't look himself, which was the bloody point, wasn't it?

he step. Music from a quartet flowed past as he waded through the suspi
ompingdressed crowd, grasping hands and leering smiles an expected part
eyes. scenario. A pinkish sunset glow, rare to London, spilled a rosy twili
a largeacross the ballroom's marble floor.

1. Griff Had Willie any idea what she was getting into when she'd ag
nkfullyattend? This was demimonde at its finest. He recognized a Drury actre
had a minor association with two years ago across the gallery. The r
beforeof a prince in one corner, the wealthiest courtesan in England in anothe
vas. He the kind of fete his almost-wife was typically invited to if she was in

ad been any. Her father's success hadn't endeared her to the *ton*, that was
o bring Money spoke volumes but rarely made it to the upper reaches.

orating Griff began to get anxious, afraid he'd missed her when she stepped
view from the veranda's French doors.

hove in It was awful what he experienced upon seeing her. Dreadful.

ing the He halted in place, his cape settling around him with a beaten sigh.
Her gown was a benediction, a lustful creation that urged his cock
, *taking* painful press against his trouser buttons. An ice blue satin promise
nd her her form, the daring neckline drawing every ravenous gaze in the pla
domino had a magnificent body, he realized sullenly. What chit with such a
mind needed breasts like those? The urge to toss his ridiculous cloak c
esk. *St.* and drag her away was blinding. When she wasn't his to protect. He'd
that chance by deserting her in a remote chapel in the woods.

m. The She didn't appear to notice him, and with his senseless costume in
leather he wouldn't expect her to. So, he trailed her much as he had other wo
other ballrooms, getting close but not too, the scent of sameness n
memories of prior conquests into one fat lump in his mind. It wasn't th
time to realize he was exhausted, to his bones, with those endeavor
false compliments, the whispered suggestions, the *games*.

By God, he was getting himself on track with this business v
lifting the Kent title from the ashes through hard work and dil
Restoring the Beckett name. With a few minor, nearly legal cut c
juerade which was his way. You couldn't completely remove a man from his
indeed personality. He was creating something durable for the future. M
piece of fences with his family when they'd helped destroy them right along wi
As the eldest, responsibility for the entire jumble was riding on his sho

Griff was, if nothing else, aware of his obligations.

sciously Along that vein, he observed his almost-wife as she circled the
: of the dodging some appeals, halting to entertain others. Her smile was fix
ght hue false, her gaze seeking information, not entertainment. She had a pl
getting tugged in the deserted parlor of a newly-minted baron's mans
reed to Giles wasn't on the list. He was thankful, but every time a man touc
ss he'd with so much as a gloved pinkie, his hands curled into fists at his side
mistress had two glasses of champagne at his count, certainly one mo
ier. Not necessary. A third she'd adeptly poured in a palm as she passed it.

visited to The youngest son of the Earl of Dodson stopped her as she pas

certain, gaze dropping promptly to her bosom. He had a reputation that made
look positively angelic.

ed into Griff grabbed a flute off a passing footman's tray and tossed b
contents. This watching business wasn't going to work for much lo
Willie didn't start keeping her stunning smiles to herself.

Possession wasn't a sensation he'd embraced with any familiarity
k into aIt chafed as badly as his mask.

lded to At least he wasn't brainless enough to think he could control her.

ce. She But defend? Griff recalled the blade tucked at the ready in hi
a giftedMaybe.

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sed, his

gaze dropping promptly to her bosom. He had a reputation that made Griff's look positively angelic.

Griff grabbed a flute off a passing footman's tray and tossed back the contents. This watching business wasn't going to work for much longer if Willie didn't start keeping her stunning smiles to herself.

Possession wasn't a sensation he'd embraced with any familiarity before. It chafed as badly as his mask.

At least he wasn't brainless enough to think he could control her.

But defend? Griff recalled the blade tucked at the ready in his boot. Maybe.



CHAPTER FOUR

Where a fearless woman experiences fearful feelings

DID HE THINK she didn't know he was there?

Griffin Beckett *wasn't* an able detective, she decided as she crept the corridor in search of a painting. Light from the oil sconces drifted the Aubusson runner at her feet, the excess illumination witness homeowner's wealth. Mina would never hire a viscount should her business expand into investigations outside accounts containing error calculations. The moment he entered the ballroom, the hair on the back of her neck had risen, her skin prickling unnervingly.

She didn't appreciate what her body was trying to tell her.

Anyway, it was futile for him to try to hide. One, he was practically the tallest man in the room. Two, masks didn't conceal eyes the color of the oceans and sunny skies. Three, *oh...*she groaned and halted before the footman she'd bribed had told her was the baron's study.

Three was all about *him*.

Viscount Kent had that intangible talent, the rare few were gifted with a Magnetism that went above and beyond. Women were drawn to him, envious but admiring. Where some held it high, like a carrot out of reach, Griff shared his charm with his lazy smiles and occasional winks. Mina growled and gave the study's beveled glass doorknob a hard twist. He winked at the woman, an actress if Mina wasn't mistaken, who'd been looking at him at the edge of the ballroom floor, the silk chiffon barely covering her bosom, a blatant invitation.

Mina had decided then and there that now was the time to begin Investigation's first non-mathematical quest. Happily, she'd inched from the ballroom before her erstwhile protector could wreak more havoc on her

female delegation. She'd been asked by a former client of absurd influence to look into a piece of art that may or may not be hanging in a certain study. Either her former client wanted to steal it—or steal it *back*.

She'd not asked and did not want to know.

A modest undertaking for which she was being handsomely compensated. Uncomplicated. Safe. Mostly.

More importantly, she would then be owed a favor. Her grand plan would have every agent of influence indebted to her. Her father's advice—where it hurts—sticking. At least he'd given her something, her papa.

Thankfully, the room was unlocked. In preparation, she'd researched how to pick locks—and had practiced on her own—but hadn't any guarantee that it was a skill she'd mastered. Shutting the door, she closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against it in relief. Shoving her mask atop her head, she let the chi of the door strike her cheeks for the first time in hours.

Step one complete.

The sound of flint striking a tinderbox had her straightening in alarm. "I was wondering when you'd make it, Willie. A long hallway, but not that long."

Mina shook her head. *No*, he couldn't possibly... How had he... was...

The decision was made. She was going to kill him.

With an amused grin, his ridiculous mask still in place, he shrugged and lit the lamp's wick, repositioning it on the desk with a flourish. "The fellow was willing to tell me everything, although I had to pay him double what you'd given. The lad's made excellent wages tonight. In the future, at birth, advice, increase your bribes. And put your mask back on in case someone stumbles in here and finds us, will you."

"I don't need saving," she whispered and crossed to him in a flourish. A ripple of happiness was an emotion she simply *had* to conquer. "I know who you are. He knows who I am. You're the infamous one. Save your rescuing for a girl who needs it."

He glanced around the space, then back at her, his gaze slightly, touched with irritation. "I'd hardly call this a rescue. More an intervention."

She braced her hands on the desk and leaned until she could see the flecks swimming in sapphire. That little fact of his visage had not been in her imagination. "Why are you here, Kent?"

ence to He mirrored her pose, close enough to touch. The teasing scent of baron's and a spicy fragrance all his own drifted to her. She took it in hunger moment spinning out as they stared, lost. The air lit like the lamp's going buttery hot. The kiss they'd shared roared through her mind, her unsated. *My, she thought in wonder, he looks like he belongs in this sordid treachery and deception.* And I want to belong. To someone.

It was to "It's not the blunt, is it?" he whispered, his voice aching soft. It bit them flexed, his exasperated sigh splitting the air. The mask came off in a flash was crushed in his fist. "You don't need the money, not one penny. I need how excitement. Which makes it a hundred times worse. A bored heiress and an antebellum one-in-a-million intellect. That's a combustible combination." With a flourish he leaned he yanked his cape free and let it drift to the floor. "I'm frightened of the combination."

"You hypocrite." She shoved off the escritoire, breaking his hold. "Boredom drives every decision you make." She tapped her chest, wishing she hadn't when his eyes flared. Her gown had the lowest neckline of any dress she'd ever owned. "Because I'm a woman, I don't get wearied? I don't want to. You have no idea what it's like being held back."

. What He rose to his full height, towering over her, the desk between them thank heaven. He had the longest, lean-but-muscular body of any man she'd ever met. Exquisite that made her mouth water. Her yearning peaked and argument: *see what he looks like underneath his fine clothing.*

Footman "Your duke isn't going to give you more, Willie. Not this kind of rule. What that's what you've found you require for true contentment." Shaking free of her hold this time, he circled the study, halting before a small portrait of someone. The painting, if she wasn't mistaken. Trailing his hand along the sculpture's frame, he added, "Matters like this, demimonde balls and hidden money. The flats, sneaking into private domains and bribing servants about art. Nobody art work, require collaborators with blades in their boots. Men willing to play the dice. Not every bloke can match you in this, I'll bet my life on it in Lyon's Den."

finally, "Do you have a blade in your boot, Griffin Beckett?"
tion." He glanced over his shoulder, his smile meant to destroy her if she had the gold. "As a matter of fact, I do."

been her Raised voices in the hallway pierced the air, getting louder and boisterous group closed in. A scuffle in the making. Mina had heard

leather at Wright's to know what impending brawls sounded like. Silently, the man went on feral instinct, Griffin ripped the painting off the wall, his wick, her upper arm as he strode past, yanking her through a side door and into the next chamber before she could take a breath. "Griff," she whispered, but he immediately shushed her. "What are you doing?"

His jaw clenched. "Shh." Glancing about, he halted for a split-second, then was on the move again. As if he'd done this before. Nothing to figuring out how to find the pilfered artwork jammed under your armpit.

She supposed this was his version of "rolling the dice." The storage closet he shoved her into was microscopic and without a trace of freshness contained within. The stink of mothballs and dust permeated the space, making her gasp as he roughly backed her into the paneled wall. "When closed the door."

"I don't like tight confines," she whispered into the warm nook above the door, her hand tucked into the vee of his waistcoat. Point of fact, small spaces made her feel more comfortable and had since she was a child.

Shouts in the study, cries that unfortunately included the word *peril* made their way to her.

Griff swore and lowered the canvas to the floor, bumping her on the nose as he crouched down because there was no way around it. "I'm here, Willie. Stay put."

When he straightened, her dread soared for different reasons. The man's hands pressed like petals in a book. She had nothing to do but cling to him. His hand curled around his lean hip, the other twisted in his shirt. His heartbeat skipped beneath her wrist in a mad rhythm, daring them both.

He tilted her chin up, and in the shadows, she noted a blazing indignation in his eyes. Light wasn't needed to detect his arousal wedged against her. His stolen longing wasn't as obvious, but it was there. In the fevered breaths he drew, his fingers to roll between the layered folds of his cravat, working their way to his skin. He didn't wish to suffer alone.

"We're confused by the near miss at the chapel," he finally said, offering a weak explanation. "A connection when there isn't really a connection. Let it be. Bessie's talk of marriage and forever, even when she scarcely believes it herself, is enough to confound anyone. Leaving me muddled, as if that you're taking such chances when they're your chances to take. They will show up in a gown like this, one created to make men mad."

“I’m not yours,” she whispered when the statement felt like a lie. His lips found the crown of her head, her brow, her cheek. He erupted, heat swimming through her at the caress. “You’re not mine.”

Of course, the kiss was inevitable. A boundless fall, a devouring conquest. A show of skill, proficiency growing expertise.

Cupping her jaw, he directed her where he needed her to be to be with most profound sensual invasion of her life. Her lips parted without hesitation allowing all he sought. The glossy thickness of his hair grazed her lips as she slanted his head, taking what she wanted, too. Searching, caressing, a hint leading. Fingertips digging into flesh, skin moist from the effort, the thumping. They switched roles and dominance so quickly that it melted all and breath ceased.

Bodies finding the connection he’d spoken of, one without words. His yearning lit a flame she didn’t desire to extinguish. He was generous and giving, and at the same time, greedy. Emotions she channeled and returned back to him.

The fond affection of the last encounter faded from memory as the strength of this one took over. Growling gently, he moved her against the waywall, lifting her to her tiptoes, positioning his cock where she most wanted calm.” a preview of what he’d do after he climbed atop her. They explored a way whereas they could with layers of cloth between them. A grind, a buff, his firm, one long and hard, almost as if he was polishing her in places, *ah*, that heartbeats care. His lips matched the tempo until it sparked a sizzling blaze between thighs. When his hand arrived to cup her breast, knead lightly but with purpose she curved into the possession.

The quiver swirled, feet to belly, making her break the kiss, her body sliding against his neck, tormented sighs released against his flushed skin. She knew what was close to happening. She’d done it to herself in her bedchamber.

Lately, while thinking of *him*. “Don’t you dare stop,” she ordered into his cravat’s silken caress, bowing her head and concentrating on pleasure. “Not when you’ve come so far, brought me here.”

“Come, then.” His voice was broken, the words ragged. “I’ve got it when you’re here.” The clamor in the baron’s study hadn’t abated, drunken shouting and general chaos sliding under the closed door. Sounds of furniture

overtaken. Someone singing a vulgar song at a high pitch. Laughter, her skin merriment. The thump of a bottle hitting the wall.

Griff seemed to ignore it, as she was trying to. Because they could leave. Furthermore, she wanted what he was offering. Above her duty, and above her reputation, which wasn't outstanding to begin with.

She finally understood the lengths people would go to for *this*.
She spread her legs when he reached, fistfuls of satin drawn to her waist, crushed in his fist. He whispered in her ear, letting her know what he was doing. Each word bringing her closer. *I'm touching here, stroking there. Lean into me. Close your eyes. Let go.*

She wasn't naked. A layer of silk and one of cotton separated him from her swollen sex, but he knew how to work around it. She wondered even considered it a challenge. Possibly. The glint in his eyes before he fell back in delight was that of a man wrestling a tiger.

The bliss when it hit her was astonishing, unlike any she'd managed on her own. A fire flood of sensation cascaded down her spine, turning her to molten bone and sinew. Her breasts ached, her core pulsed, he savaged seeking more but willing to accept this.

The world receded until there was nothing but Griffin Beckett's tormenting her fascination.

"I want your hands on me," he growled before kissing her, capturing her low moan and pressing her back, back into the wall. His own groan thudded down her throat as he trembled.

Had he...?

She tried to catch his gaze, marveling, unsure. *Had he?*

The scent of smoke and hoarse bellows ended her questioning.

And her adventure.

She knew
amber.

creases,
me this

t."

its and
being

overturned. Someone singing a vulgar song at a high pitch. Laughter, bawdy merriment. The thump of a bottle hitting the wall.

Griff seemed to ignore it, as she was trying to. Because they couldn't leave. Furthermore, she wanted what he was offering. Above her safety. Above her reputation, which wasn't outstanding to begin with.

She finally understood the lengths people would go to for *this*.

She spread her legs when he reached, fistfuls of satin drawn to her waist, crushed in his fist. He whispered in her ear, letting her know what he was doing. Each word bringing her closer. *I'm touching here, stroking this spot. Lean into me. Close your eyes. Let go.*

She wasn't naked. A layer of silk and one of cotton separated his hands from her swollen sex, but he knew how to work around it. She wondered if he even considered it a challenge. Possibly. The glint in his eyes before her head fell back in delight was that of a man wrestling a tiger.

The bliss when it hit her was astonishing, unlike any she'd managed on her own. A fire flood of sensation cascaded down her spine, turning her body to molten bone and sinew. Her breasts ached, her core pulsed, her body seeking more but willing to accept this.

The world receded until there was nothing but Griffin Beckett's touch and her fascination.

"I want your hands on me," he growled before kissing her, capturing her low moan and pressing her back, back into the wall. His own groan traveled down her throat as he trembled.

Had he...?

She tried to catch his gaze, marveling, unsure. *Had he?*

The scent of smoke and hoarse bellows ended her questioning.

And her adventure.



CHAPTER FIVE

Where a viscount is embarrassed and enchanted

GRIFF PACED THE width of the ramshackle Limehouse parlor they'd r to. Fled to. Having a residence no one knew about was beneficial for d such as these.

He sipped straight from a bottle, bypassing the tumbler he'd beer hoping the whisky would help clear his mind—and soon. It had be since he'd crawled out a window, and certainly never, that he recalle flames leaping at his back and a pilfered canvas jammed under his ar woman he'd humiliated himself with, a puddle of satisfied delight at hi

Someone to worry mightily over.

When he rarely had anyone to think of but himself.

Knocking the bottle against his teeth, he glanced at the painting p on Willie's settee, a portrait of an old woman reading a book that h too woeful to crave. Who needed their artwork to tell them how sa was? If he could afford a Rembrandt, which he couldn't. And he hate the dazzling woman with her head in her hands and a glass of whisky side—proof of his devotion drifting lazily from her skin—that they'd a damned masterpiece.

“My task was not to steal it,” she repeated for at least the twentieth. Streaks of ash covered her cheeks, creating absurdly charming hollow looked an adorable fright. “I was simply to ensure it was *there*. Rec location and review the signature. Now we have to bloody return it. W baron's house might not be standing after the lamp you lit got pitched floor in the chaos. The study is destroyed, to be sure.”

“In that case, maybe it's good we filched it.”

She grunted, disgusted with the situation.

"I'll return it," Griff ground out in a tone he hoped conveyed inflexibility. His almost-wife wasn't returning to St. Giles, not for a second. Was it his fault those drunken fools had nearly burned down the manse? Maybe he'd ask Bessie to assist him since she'd gotten him tangled in a roundabout way.

She had all kinds working at the Lyon's Den. Someone to repair a pinched artifact? Not a problem. Someone to separate him from a troublesome heiress, however...

He feared he didn't want to escape the clutches of Wilhelmina Wright. Instead, he wanted to be in *deeper*.

Glancing up, he felt the shift, as reliable as a church's bell tolling returned belly. A quake in the region of his heart that he'd fight to the death to rebacles. Thankfully, she'd removed that hazard of a gown and was now back in her dour specialties that adequately covered her generous breasts.

Still, the needy pulse was there beneath his skin. Lying in wait on a given, en ageshim.

They'd gone to three, maybe four, on a scale of ten in that closed, with intimate a first take as any he'd encountered. He wanted the remainder on his side. counts with Willie more than his next breath.

Although it was reckless, what they'd done. A danger to both of them.

Falling for the alluring woman he'd left at the altar wasn't happened perched "Today's Thursday," he reminded her, taking note of the clouds. e foundsplashes the bountiful sunrise was lobbing across an Axminster carpet. id it allshould have been thrown in the rubbish heap years ago. He sniffed, id to tellfor the modern bathing facilities at his townhouse. His clothing reeked by hersmoke, his hair standing on end from the rain they'd encountered on the filchedhere.

"I know what day it is," she murmured against the rim of her glass. th time. "Your appointment is this evening." Although the thought of Langston vs. Shebaby-soft hands on her made him want to put his fist through her jaw. ord thecracked plaster. Nevertheless, solid advice was solid advice. Taking a hen theon a duke was the brilliant choice. If Griff was acting the friend, and could to thefriend, he had to be honest.

Her gaze was scorching, a violet assault. "You mean Langston because he doesn't burn down houses or steal paintings? Or leave friends standing in dank chapels with a sad twist of freesia in their hands?"

ved hissed, her expression impassive, her flaxen hair a gorgeous tumble for one over her shoulders. She had to be the most fascinating woman in E own the she simply *had* to be. “I bet he doesn’t carry a blade in his boot, either. in this She didn’t mention how Griff had touched her in the confines splendid little closet. How the air had lit like magnesium around them. return a Therefore, he felt he must.

from a “I can’t help it any more than you can, this thing between us.” W bottle, he gestured to her, to him, then back again. “If it makes y Laurel better, the situation has traveled beyond my considerable control.”

“Did you have a similar reaction to that tart at the masquerade ball g in his Griff halted, bracing his hip on the sofa’s cherrywood lip, facing o deny. far enough away that he couldn’t touch. “The actress?” Unable to re one of tart’s name, he laughed, realizing seconds later that this was the response. His almost-wife wasn’t pleased. “She means nothing to me, to slay a chit I can barely recall when”—he lifted his hand to his nose and

Willie’s glorious scent in—“you’re implanted in my very *being*. The s set. As you on my skin, your moans sliding into my ears, your body qu ing six around mine. My dreams have been filled with lewd visions sin moment we met. It was the only reason I was relieved when em. delinquents tied me to a chair and kept me from you because I feared t ng. you had over me.”

crimson Her lips parted as she turned his admission over in her mind. Al pet that though customer, she drew the moment out until it was painful.

longing Why had he gone and called her *sweet*? He was losing his mind.

aked of Griff tapped the bottle against his knee. “Like you do, I want t he way Every moaning, grasping moment with a desperation that makes me and frightened in turn. Like I said in the closet, I want your hands a me. Your lips, your *teeth*, especially that front one with the little gston’s How’s that for honesty? But that doesn’t mean I’m going to take it. . parlor’s you should give it. My being prevented from attending our nuptia chance celestial intervention. We’re finding our own way without it being only the upon us at the smoking end of Bessie Dove-Lyon’s pistol.”

Willie’s gaze narrowed, and he experienced a jolt of fear at what s is safer about to say. “You quivered.” When he didn’t respond, she made a fiancée’s gesture to her lower body that had the power to send him tumbling c s.” She edge. “When we...in the...you reacted, as I did.”

flowing The gulp of whisky burned a broad path to his gut. *Well, hell.* “The
ngland, typical much past boyhood. Hasn’t happened to me since I was fifteen
.” My apologies.” He propped the bottle on his thigh, desire flaring and
of that she followed the move, her gaze lingering near his crotch. “I’m not p
it, no man would be, but I’m not going to lie, either. I was undone.”

What he *wasn’t* going to admit was that he’d never been as involv
with the mere kiss, so much so that he lost himself and released in his trouse
ou feel cravat hadn’t even been undone, for pity’s sake. But he’d been help
almost-wife had been sighing out these tiny mewls against his neck, h
?” hot as a hearth even with a set of frilly drawers separating them. He’
her but forget how her lids had drifted low, her head falling back as she came.
call the His weakness was wretched and, in some horribly menacing
wrong beautiful.

, sweet. To yearn with such urgency hadn’t been a part of his prior esc
inhaled He’d been unprepared for the strength of his need.

smell of Unfortunately, he’d provided his intrepid investigator with a ridd
ivering you have trouble controlling yourself with me but no issue con
nce they yourself with tarts?”

1 those Considering, Griff hummed an off-key tune, wondering how sh
he hold look so lovely covered in soot, her hair a tragedy, her gown this
repellent. “Likewise, as you have no issue controlling yourself with
ways a Been jammed in any closets with Langston lately?”

A minuscule pleat inserted itself between her eyebrows. The urge t
to her and kiss it away was palpable. “You’re not really in danger, a
he rest. Mrs. Dove-Lyon made that up to keep you here. A second cha
furious matchmaking. This has all been a hoax, a ruse to pass the time.”

all over He stared through the bottle, her visage golden and hazy, reco
crook. with a heavy heart that their time together was ending. “Not any more
.or that than usual.”

als was She glanced at the painting, her chest falling with a spent breath.
forced you can leave now so we’re not seen together. Before day breaks.”

“Because you need to prepare for an evening with a duke who doe
she was steal paintings, romance tarts, miss weddings, or keep blades in his bo

1 vague “So, it appears,” she whispered.
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CHAPTER SIX

Where a woman contemplates indelicate topics

I WANT YOUR hands on me.

Mina stared at the King's Theatre stage, wondering when those would leave her. *I want every moaning, gasping moment.* Mozart's *Magic Flute* flowed over her, while it was Griffin Beckett's voice she heard in her mind.

I was undone.

It had been two weeks since he'd walked out her rookery door with a passing glance. Of course, she'd given him no option to stay. Not after he'd lied. Forced proximity was only helpful if it was actually forced. True to his threat, he'd returned the painting to the underworld titan who'd hired her for fabricating a story about Mina snatching the piece off the wall when she'd started, its recovery due entirely to her quick thinking.

In the end, she'd been paid even more handsomely for her trouble than she'd left wondering if she'd stolen a priceless canvas from its rightful owner.

The note she'd received from Lord Kent was concise, telling her what she needed to know and nothing more. *Funds for the completed task included. Burn this missive upon reading.* If she'd been unable to dispense with the wrinkled page bearing his looping script, his charming signature—*Sir G.A.B.*—this was a weakness she could easily hide beneath the blotter on her desk.

There'd been no mention of breathtaking kisses or two evenings of companionable conversation in a Limehouse flat. Shared histories and a glimpse into the world another inhabited. For all that she was surrounded by people in London, Mina didn't know any of them well. And no one knew her. She'd been a lonely child and was approaching being a lonely old woman.

Unless she took the duke up on his offer.

Because an offer was coming. She recognized the signs even if she experienced with such things. A chaperoned dinner at his home, two stables in Hyde Park, also escorted, and a horrid musicale at the Earl of Winton's Firth's Mayfair terrace. And tonight, the opera. For a man who'd not even move to kiss her, Langston had made quite the public show of courting her, which was puzzling. She was the daughter of a racetrack owner, a woman beneath him in status.

Yet, she still needed a husband. The painting debacle had proven that she required support and some level of protection, even if she'd like to think she didn't. Therefore, her say-yes-to-the-duke list now stood at a solid dozen.

Glancing at Langston from the corner of her eye, she ticked off the first word on her fingers.

It's *The Duke* He was jovial.

She heard Handsome, if a woman didn't mind being slightly taller.

Uncomplicated in the best of ways, his life wholly handled by his wife, and his wife set to take over the role when she married in two months.

Without a He had an agreeable family, deceased parents he'd loved and no bother he'd dragging along behind him to muck things up. (Amazingly, he didn't seem to have any of his four siblings.)

He'd retained his inheritance and didn't require her money.

Mina frowned and pulled at the crooked seam of her glove. What was the last one again? Had she already mentioned his pleasant nature?

The ripple of chatter had her glancing around the theatre. The movement directly across from the duke's box. A woman in a garish corset that she gowned and—

Mina sat up with an audible breath she wished she could retract.

The *cad*. The crooked, dirty bounder.

Viscount Kent made no effort to conceal his arrival—or the scandal he'd invited into his box. Mina squinted through the flickering shadows, recognizing a widowed countess the gossip rags loved to spill ink on.

It wasn't altering his ways. Mina's temper simmered before she remembered as he'd been debating whether to marry a duke seconds prior.

Hell's bells. She slumped back with a huff.

The performance continued, the man at her side grinning, but she'd had a little aside from the gorgeous rat across the theatre.

He'd cut his hair. The most stylish she'd ever seen it. Dressed in what wasn't black and gray, he served up a feast for the famished gazes in the theater. The trolls included.

Williams— She let her opera glasses fall to her lap, stung by sorrow. Griff had made a back into his life like she was never there. Returned to his business with her. It Shoreditch—this she'd read in *About Town* last week. Placed another hand on his arm. Another opera. Another ball. There'd been no transformation for him, their encounter in the closet a passing fancy.

That she Apparently, undone was a fleeting state for rakes.

believe Mina feigned a coughing fit and gave Langston a gentle nudge. “Not six,” she asked, gesturing to the aisle.

He points He jumped to his feet, bowing, a lock of ashen hair dropping across his forehead. That he should annoy her after how gracious he'd been, how ill-mannered *she* was. But you couldn't remove the racetrack from a girl, even with costly clothing and refined-through-much-practice sister, comportment. “Allow me to escort you,” he whispered near her ear, enough to tell her she was unaffected by his presence.

baggage She patted his arm to hold him in place. “Stay. Your sister and that loathecompanion are at the top of the stairs, and the ladies' parlor is only two down. We checked when we arrived. I'll be back in seconds.”

His lips parted in a ready argument. Ladies didn't wander opera without an escort. Duchesses certainly never, *ever* did.

She left the box, ignoring his sister's pungent stare. It might be a waste of time for the siblings to discuss a racetrack heiress's appropriateness for crimson any offers were made. Even if she was seeking a husband, Mina's intention of being managed like a mindless society miss.

Since the opera was in the first act, the hallway was deserted. A cool wash of emerald and amber. Her slippers sank into plush carpeting. As she passed the brocade settees situated randomly along the passage. Beeswax candles, linseed oil mixed pleasantly with lemon verbena and bergamot. Halt. To see. He came to study a painting of a singer dressed in a scandalous costume. Mina wondered if this is what a bordello looked like—on a less sedate scale.

Mina felt him, *sensed* him before Griff drifted in beside her. She caught his covert breath. He smelled differently than he had in her flat, a perfume she saw fragrance to accompany the new haircut. She burned to ask if his cut had anything to do with the shift.

formal He gestured to the painting, taking a languid sip from his flute. “K
re, hersDel Mónico. A stage name, a fake accent, although her French is resp
I believe she’s actually from Surrey.”

drifted Mina snorted softly. “I’m sure you’re acquainted.”

ness in His gaze shifted to her, then back to Katerina. “You believe too n
tart onwhat you read in those damned newspapers, Willie.”

ion for Mina pressed her lips together, her jaw aching. He had to u
nickname and make her heart skip a beat. “How’s your countess?”

May I?” She turned to him, prepared to battle. “Aren’t you missing the oper

Rocking on his heels, he tunneled his hand through his hair, leav
ross hisfreshly shorn strands in adorable confusion. Candlelight called out
provedhighlights she didn’t think she’d noticed before and was vexed she wa
om theshown now. “German librettos are a tad severe for my taste if yo
practiceknow. I prefer Italian comedies.”

. Close “I quite like it,” she said when she’d only been to one opera in l
this one.

nd her He grunted, his gaze fixed on the painting.

o doors “Why attend if you don’t care for Mozart, my lord?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling through his teeth. “E
housessomeone at White’s mentioned the Duke of Langston was bring
rookery chit he’s courting. So here I am. Like a hound after a tasty bor

a good His admission brought anguish as well as a dull rush of pleasu
beforerealized the *ton* was talking about her unsuitability, which mortified l

had noGriff had come anyway. Mina trailed the toe of her slipper over
thread in the rug, searching her mind for what she’d admit to if the
andlelitbeing honest.

as she *I miss you. I want you. My feelings scare me.*

vax and *Mrs. Dove-Lyon was right about us.*

ig in an Instead, true to her legacy, she blurted the worst possible thing
ne, sheseems what a fancy bordello would look like. A treasure of velvet, eve
of trim done in gold. Without sexual congress, that is.”

drew a Griff flinched, his empty flute tumbling to the carpet. Thankf
pepperydidn’t shatter. Going to his haunches to retrieve it, he gazed up at l
ountesseyes a dusky, twilight blue in the shadows. “Are you trying to give
apoplexy in the middle of *The Magic Flute*? Carted out as the opera is

“Caterinamid-aria? Everything but my erection wilting?”

“Acceptable.” She shrugged, her cheeks flushing. “I’ve always wondered.”

Shaking his shoulders out like he’d run a race, he shoved to her. “There’s a fairly respectable set-up in Bloomsbury reserved for me: much of and the occasional wife of very progressive couples. The Rabbit”

Masks are provided, no questions asked, a confidential endeavor. Use that watch, no touching allowed, so it’s not as indecent as it could be. Like but more...” His gaze hit her, fiery hot, before shifting away. “Just more”

“Take me there.”

“What?” Griff tapped the flute against his hip, drawing her eye. She let him regulate her gaze, thoroughly studying his form. He was the tallest in the most parlors. Broad of shoulder, lean of hip, muscular where it counted. No place it didn’t. The perfect balance of sinewy brawn. To her mind, he must be the most impressive physique in England.

Because she was trying to be a *lady*, she wouldn’t mention the wretched part of him making a statement at the front of his trousers.

“Go back to your duke, sweet. Your gaze is lighting a fire inside. I need a moment to put the flames out before I return to the façade. No one in that rented box inspires anything close. Too, I’m now imagining taking you to a disorderly house you shouldn’t even know exists.”

Mina rested against the alcove’s curved wall, hands clasped before her in a guileless pose when her mind was whirling with possibilities. If she were to continue an association when the man desired you but didn’t want to see her, but you? How to get a scalawag to escort you to an indecorous hovel?

“A silver?” She tried a different tack. “I received another query from Mr. McCoy. He was thrilled with my investigatory work. The new project involves a French count’s country party and a rare vase. I’m to play the pitiable cousin of a dowager aunt or some such. No one will know me, nor I think it’s safe.”

“This?” He dropped his negligent stance like a sack, straightening to tower over her. A threatening pose when she wasn’t threatened. “You tell him no, Mina.”

“You’re finished with thugs as clients. Finished stealing artifacts. Fully, it returning that bloody Rembrandt was your out. Time for you to return home, my beloved arithmetic.”

“I’ll come and see you.” She lifted a slim shoulder in her own show of negligence. “I already said I’d halt him yes. I leave on Tuesday for Derbyshire. I simply have to make a

the mark on the bottom of the piece. There's no theft required." She
when she felt like sneering. "Like the last task, until you got into
his feet, shoved me into that blasted closet."

stresses *Making me want things I shouldn't.*

's Lair. Turning to a gilt-edged bamboo table, Griff popped his glass at
People feel like I've been tossed into a ring, halfway into a bout I had no
e opera entered. Is this a negotiation of some sort? Please tell me if it is."

re." Mina flicked fluff from her sleeve, undeterred by his cross

Mozart's singspiel rolled over her in a thundering wave.

t desire Because she'd decided.

man in She didn't want the Duke of Langston's lackluster grins, a th
ited but evenings spent with his senseless sister who disapproved of her. A
he had she'd never be worthy of, to her mind *or* theirs. She wanted Griffin

Beckett, the irascible Viscount Kent. She wanted his moods, his
ondrous intelligence. The generous heart he hid so mercilessly. The anger
exposed to so few.

e me. I She wished to give him what he'd been missing, what they'd bo
one in missing. Family. Love. *Companionship.*

ing you Mrs. Dove-Lyon had known precisely what she was about, the
creature.

e her, a Mina peeked at Griff as he made a slow turn of the alcove, m
low to beneath his breath. He was so dazzling he made her chest ache. Why c
o desire Mina secure this splendidly annoyed, wickedly cunning scoundrel

wanted him? A man who'd keep her interested. Aroused. On her toes.
Gowen, who made her laugh, who challenged her as no other had? She'
olves awaiting for something as extraordinary as Griffin Beckett to happen.

spinster She would be good for him. Deep in her determined heart, she rec
hem, so this, even if he didn't.

Her silent pledge sealed the deal.

er over Mina dusted her slipper along a crooked azure thread in the ru
Willie, willing to negotiate."

ts. My He knocked his knuckle on the side table, rattling the flute he'd
to your atop it. "I bet you are."

"I'll ensure you and the blade in your boot receive an invitation
dy told country party, where you can keep an eye on the proceedings but *not* in
note of in them if you, in turn, take me to Bloomsbury."

smiled Halting, he scrubbed his hand over the back of his neck, his haircut allowing a slice-of-skin view above his crisp collar. She was pressing her lips there, then to the pulse tapping a drumbeat beneath her skin. Shifting to ease the ache slowly filling the tender area between her thighs, she opened her mouth. "I comprehended what would happen if they went to Bloomsbury."

"You're too inexperienced for that style of entertainment," he whispered. "I'm only two years younger." She had a roundabout idea of his business as "Maybe not even."

He shook his head, adjusting himself while he faced away from her. She was reacting to the idea in a similar, aroused fashion. "Age has nothing to do with it, sweet."

"Ten minutes. You can time it on that fancy Bainbridge in your pocket watch." He laughed into his fist, turning to her with a flourish. "That's ten minutes longer than I need to drag you into the nearest closet." Scowling, he gestured wildly, almost pleading. "Look how that turned out."

"I thought it turned out well."

His gaze flashed, his eyes turning a molten, sizzling blue. His chest and fell with his exhalation. "No, Willie."

She passed him on her way to the duke's box, making her last attempt. Langston asks, I'm going to accept. Unless you see a way to stop this from happening, keep me in reserve for your beloved aunt's next proposition. "I couldn't Dove-Lyon assures me she can secure other keenly desperate men."

Griff swore, his fingers circling her wrist and yanking her to a stop. A man him. "You fight dirty, Wilhelmina Wright. I'll give you that. Almost been enough to earn the privilege to live in that rookery flat of yours."

"I fight like a chit raised around horses and men."

"We're playing with fire, sweet, you must know that. I sure as hell am. I'm fascinated, and you're curious, the most dangerous pair imaginable." His hand tensed around her wrist, drawing her a step closer. The flecks of green in his eyes glittered like stars. "I feel singed from your gaze. Let alone what I feel if I put my hands on you."

His gloved hand burned through the sleeve of her gown, warming her toes. "I thought you liked to roll the dice, Kent. Isn't that what you're into? And that Langston wasn't suited for the wager. Consider this a gift that makes it more edible, a confection you wish to eat before anyone else does."

shorter He growled low in his throat, and with a sharp glance down the canted topulled her from the alcove. He guided her to a narrow staircase at the top of his ear, and took them to a darkened hallway crowded with pushcarts and benches, shespace for theater staff, not those attending performances.

Vexed, she shook free of his grasp. Because of his amorous adventures with thespians, the scoundrel knew the layout of the building. He lodged in her throat as she imagined what he'd done down here—and at whom.

her. He Halting before a crimson door marked *Attire*, Griff jiggled the lock to find it unlocked. He was inside in a flash, returning with a black cloak that was obviously part of an actor's costume. Tossing it over her shoulder, he arranged the hood until he was the only person in England who could recognize a racetrack urchin peeking from beneath the velvet folds.

ling, he Anger in his actions, he cradled her face in his broad palms and pressed her against the doorjamb. Trapped her with his long body if she thought she could get away, when she had no intention of fleeing. Her lips opened, and the first rose of her tongue engaged his in the dance she'd found he adored, and he was so tender about it.

npt. "If The man lived as he kissed, on the edge.

at from The embrace was a promise—and a threat. Passion unleashed a surprising flood of emotion from a man society deemed a dispassionate.

When Mina knew Griffin Beckett felt deeply. Would love deeply, given the chance. She verified her belief in the furious beat of his heart, the first dirty his pulse where his wrist grazed her jaw, the ragged moan leaving his travel over hers, his tenderness despite his yearning.

He didn't push as hard or as far as he could—because she would do anything she agreed to everything.

le." His "Why are you stopping?" she whispered when he drew a hair of gold in away.

what I'd "I could kiss you until the end of time, Willie. If I weren't so busy saving you from one disaster after another." He nipped her jaw, his hand sliding her beneath the cloak's hood to cup her nape, tilting her gaze to his steady gaze. "I've never experienced such a thing, where I'm confused about the end of one dare, if and another's beginning. Where this supposedly simple piece is so simple and good that I'm scared, to my studs, of the next. No woman has ever led me to a coward's precipice. Not here." He laughed, sending a chamber

orridor, breath across her cheek. "I'm not sure I like it."

ie back Stomping footfalls on the floor above brought them staggering apa

oxes. A He braced his arm on the wall, blocking her. "I have my own

propose, sweet. Your agreement before I have a servant deliver a note
ctivities duke saying Miss Wright had to leave abruptly due to a fainting spell."

r heart "I've never fainted in my life, not once. And he's not *my* duke."

nd with "Not unless you deny him." He grunted, his smile beautif

merciless. "This is my offer. Rules in place, parties in complete accor

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ak that secure my invitation to your country party, a fete I have suspicions at

lers, hesuitability of, but that's another story. Three, we record the mark

would bottom of the vase, deed done, then return to London. You to your c

books and simpering dukes, me to my business ventures and that c

backed viscounty."

ught to "And your countesses. Don't forget those eager chits in need of l

nviting. lots of attention."

nothing His jaw flexed, his lips tightening. "Agreed, Willie?"

"Agreed, my lord," Mina whispered and adjusted her hood over h

seconds before a troop of actors flooded the hallway. One woman, dre

d in aa milkmaid, winked at Griff as she passed.

te soul. "Did you see that?" Mina swatted his shoulder. It was rock ha

ven the layered in muscle, flexing beneath her touch. "Quit laughing, you scou

utter of "I am a scoundrel. And you should be scared, sweet, because you'

lips to for every one of those ten minutes."

Grasping her hand, he went in search of someone to alert a duke

ld have sudden departure of an heiress.

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breath across her cheek. "I'm not sure I like it."

Stomping footfalls on the floor above brought them staggering apart.

He braced his arm on the wall, blocking her. "I have my own deal to propose, sweet. Your agreement before I have a servant deliver a note to your duke saying Miss Wright had to leave abruptly due to a fainting spell."

"I've never fainted in my life, not once. And he's not *my* duke."

"Not unless you deny him." He grunted, his smile beautiful and merciless. "This is my offer. Rules in place, parties in complete accord. One, I agree to your requested ten minutes in the Lair. Not eleven. *Ten*. Two, you secure my invitation to your country party, a fete I have suspicions about the suitability of, but that's another story. Three, we record the mark on the bottom of the vase, deed done, then return to London. You to your crooked books and simpering dukes, me to my business ventures and that damned viscounty."

"And your countesses. Don't forget those eager chits in need of lots and lots of attention."

His jaw flexed, his lips tightening. "Agreed, Willie?"

"Agreed, my lord," Mina whispered and adjusted her hood over her face seconds before a troop of actors flooded the hallway. One woman, dressed as a milkmaid, winked at Griff as she passed.

"Did you see that?" Mina swatted his shoulder. It was rock hard and layered in muscle, flexing beneath her touch. "Quit laughing, you scoundrel!"

"I am a scoundrel. And you should be scared, sweet, because you're mine for every one of those ten minutes."

Grasping her hand, he went in search of someone to alert a duke to the sudden departure of an heiress.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Where a viscount spends twelve minutes in paradise

THE RABBIT'S LAIR was better—and worse—than Griff remembered.

Better because the establishment maintained an atmosphere of discretion for the ladies in attendance. Masks, cloaks, even a chit he could have been wearing a wig. Glasses of champagne resting on silver slavers, the scent of gardenias and roses from the bouquets scattered about riding on the air. Velvet and brocade settees and sofas, not a stain to be found, which would have been the case in an East End bawdy house. Covert smiles and glances, a genuine effort to not stare at anyone, lest you recognize and be recognized.

A façade of graciousness in a den of iniquity.

Worse because the moment he'd escorted Willie into the parlor and down the lavish hallway, warring instincts took hold and yanked him. He'd been placed on a rack. Protectiveness, desire, fondness, a thrumming tinge of fury. He *liked* this woman. A lot. In a friendship but with shades of something more profound.

It was senseless, but he wanted to show her the world, even this small, lewd slice.

He wanted to see her bloom like one of the roses on the Lair's mantel and this was an urge he'd not been able to conquer. Not at King's Terrace where he'd scribbled a note to a duke, signed a name that wasn't his. Not at the elderly gentleman of excellent standing who hadn't been in attendance but could've been. That kind of gent could have seen Willie stumble on the stairs and then he and his baroness escort her home when she felt unwell.

It was a probable lie, the best kind to make. He only hoped Laird wasn't so smitten he'd check on Willie on the way to his ducal

They'd have to untangle that mess later if he did.

Rolling his shoulders, Griff reclined against the veranda's open side, ready to flee. Willie stood fidgeting by his side, her flute disappearing behind that ridiculous hooded cloak at too-swift intervals. She would be foxed in ten minutes were up, corrupted in a way he wished he didn't want—when the utter truth was, he did.

He checked his pocket watch. Six minutes remaining.

He'd allotted ten because sensual sport at the Rabbit's Lair was regimented tempo. The couple arrived, kissed, fondled, undressing, giving those who'd only wished to see this early bit of titillation the chance to leave. Griff figured five minutes, if that's what they had left of the entertainment arrived, should have them exiting about the moment the situation got interesting.

He'd sworn. Too interesting for him to observe with a woman he desired more than the scentany on this planet.

the air. "Five minutes," he whispered near her cloaked ear after another couple couldn't make the time.

He'd be polite. She waved her flute, irritated by his persistence in sticking to the door or beWell, that was too damned bad. He wasn't going to debauch her or ruin himself in the soul sense, not in this room, anyway. Even with her alone with no one knowing who she was, *he* knew. The fact that he suspected the foyer concerned wasn't stating it too bluntly—his heart might be involved with her. He'd like stubborn chit made him unsure about the entire mess.

and a. Unsure about letting Willie see this debacle when it was her right way...it. To be curious, to yearn, as he did. He didn't own her, after all.

Although he wasn't sure about letting her marry Langston.

or rather. Or about letting her marry anyone but him.

He'd agreed to wed her, hadn't he? Griff gave his almost-wife a parting mantle, side-glance, dismayed when his chest constricted in a manner that felt like theatre, treacherous. He opened his mouth, set to tell her they needed to leave this—when the entertainment strolled into the room through the hallway door. Twice but was buxom and blond, the man muscular, dark, with a footman's build. He'd come up the stairs, wore masks and clothing that looked ordinary but involved fewer layers. In fact the occupants of the parlor would see once the disrobing began.

Langston. They started kissing straightaway, arms winding around each other. Griff's manse wasn't a kiss as hot as his and Willie's, it wasn't *real*...but it was enough.

get the ball rolling. Observing, Willie backed into the door, her breath n door,her in a wispy rush that held him pinned in place.

g inside Griff had forgotten this sensation if he'd ever truly experienced it.

l before Arousal not by sight but by *feel*. In the mind more than the bo t to see couple across from him, agreed, they were enticing and going to do things to each other, but the woman next to him, her slim fingers around her flute, her lips—merely the rounded bow, all he could see l had a the hood—parted slightly, her tongue sliding out to moisten the bott slowly,was the key to his longing.

ility to A bloody frightening thought.

ice the Shifting to hide his burgeoning erection, he checked his Bai ent the watch. Four minutes.

Touching the players was not allowed, and the Lair's heavies circ re than room, fists clenched, urging the crowd of twenty or so back a step moved in front of Willie, not enough to cut her view but suffic heck of announce possession.

Her body was a welcome presence, her breasts hitting him just be e rules.shoulder blades. She wedged her cheek against his bicep, peeking bloodyhim, leaning into him. Closing his eyes, he took in the sound of h r mask,breaths and the scent of jasmine, the gentle knock of tree limbs again ected—other in the courtyard. The call of a nightingale. The crackle of the ith this fire.

When he opened them, they had one minute left. The coupl t to seeimpishly working on fastenings, buttons, and ties, all part of the sho brute's shirt was parted, revealing a muscular chest and flat belly. V fingers clasped his forearm, and Griff promptly lost his thought. Agita stood a bit straighter. He had an excellent physique from twice- seekingfencing matches and the occasional boxing club visit.

lt, well, Despite his discomfiture, he generously let Willie have an additio e when minutes, for a total of twelve.

he chit Because she was resting against him so sweetly, so trustingly. H d. They had many people in his life trust him. Besides, the couple was worki ayers, aleisurely pace, her bodice parted, his shirt floating to the floor, still nc more than one would witness at Covent Garden. Hands, however ther. Itbeginning to wander, the participants responding in a sincere fashion.

ough to When they began to simulate the act in a grinding rhythm, la

leaving clothing not enough to hide the implication, Griff turned and took V hand, shielding her view. She was wide-eyed, her cheeks flushed, her head askew. Her chest rose with rapid exhalations, those breasts he wanted to see. The every inch of surging against the rounded neck of her gown. A wicked provoked, as he was.

clashed Had he expected less? That he recognized the passion buried beneath surface made the situation lethal.

om, she When she mouthed one word—*carriage*—he decided he was a goner. So was she. As there was only so much temptation a man could take. They were down the veranda's staircase and traversing the misty night.

nbridge the rear of the manse in seconds. His carriage was parked on Great Street, a hulking beast of a conveyance that had belonged to his father. He waved off the coachman as they approached, hoisting Willie into the carriage. Griff and climbing in behind her without a clue what he was doing.

gent to She surprised him when he shouldn't be surprised by anything she did. She fastened her lips to his before he could utter a word, nailing him to the spot. A low hiss quabs.

around Jolting, the carriage bounced over cobblestones, and she tumbled forward. Her faint lap.

ist each Circling her waist, he brought her against his chest, unable to hear anything but *finally, yes*. She wiggled free of the cloak, lips parting, caressing his, controlling the pace. She'd learned quickly what he liked. She reset him aflame. Teasing strokes, then absolute abandon. Breathless, raw. The passion. A kiss to fall into and die inside of. Gladly.

Willie's His hands were full of her, his mind clouded. How to deny her or what? He wondered, when they were this good together? Her skirt was easily dragged to the ground. His fingers curled around her hip, drawing her into the sensual dance he'd witnessed in the Lair's parlor before he remembered himself.

nal two Remembered *where* they were.

Pushing her away, he settled her brow on his shoulder and gasped. He'd no hair. His cock was in a rather distressed position against his trouser leg. He was trying to get it in a body tense with need. "Not here. Not the first time, in any case."

it much She sighed, longing clear in the quiver of her body. He desired to possess her, were he in that moment to the heavens and back. Why his bloody feelings got involved, he wished he knew. They never had before.

yers of "You and your blasted rules, Griffin Beckett."

Willie's "You mean more to me than..."—he swallowed, gestured to nothing, and a mask could see crushed against him like a flower between pages—"...than that." Catching the pained note in his voice, she drew back. Her eyes affected, glowing lavender orbs in the muted moonlight, unfathomably beautiful. The woman. Wit, intellect, determination. He'd abandoned a perfect path for her on that damned altar. "You're saying yes, just not here?"

"You'll be ruined," he pointed out, unable not to. "Once you've experienced pleasure of this sort, you find yourself thinking of little else but warning you."

She laughed, delighted, dogged to the core. "Why can't we say we're better prepared for marriage, even. Worldly. Free. *Known*." He let out a tight exhalation, not thrilled with any of those options. She trailed her fingertip across his bottom lip. "Don't be cross. I want you. Let me choose. Take the burden off those broad shoulders, by God, yours."

"I loathe this carriage. My last conversation with my father was about this thing," he admitted, disbelieving, even as the confession slipped from his lips, that he was telling her this. "A vile argument, truth be told. He died a fortnight later, and a troubled viscount was born."

"Ah," she said, understanding, and possibly, she sincerely did. Tongueback enough to let him draw a full breath, she placed her hand on his forehead, what too near his heart for comfort. "You weren't close, then?"

"We weren't anything. My mother, even less. She didn't care for children, especially her own. All 'jam stains and drool' were the first things she could recall from her. I think I was happier in school, away from them. And for my waist, she gave me no choice about that."

Willie rose on shaky legs, shook her skirt and settled on the seat next to him. "You're trying to divert my attention to other topics. Give me a chance to rethink my decision."

He nodded, his gaze helplessly tracking her every move. "Is it worth it?" She grinned, already wise in ways, although she might not be aware of it. "Not a bit. I'm merely giving *you* time to calm down before we dive into whatever bedchamber we land in, yours or mine."

He didn't argue, instead glanced out the window, the midnight streets of London passing at remarkable speed. The occasional cart and carriage, a wanderer dotting the lane, flashes of color when all the richness in the

ing she sat across from him. “We could follow the initial agreement. The co
his.” are in my study drawer, still crisp as a new pound note.” When she f
s wererespond, he looked to find her tracing a rip in the velvet cushion. “
il. Likemarriage, sweet.”

ackage She laughed, a hiccupping sound that charmed his stockings off. ‘
mad, and not to use your words, though I will, but you’ve come to
you’ve more to me than that.”

lse. I’m Miserably, he understood. They weren’t going to play the g
pretending to care when they were actually starting to care. The
I’ll be trapped in the unhappy middle, or at least he was.

ing.” Unable to fully define what he felt—and pressed to define it or let
go.

ant this While he sat there stewing, compiling a list of pros and co
oulders wondering what Willie Wright felt for *him* because she’d never said
moved to sit next to him, cradled his face in her palms and pulled h
in this the gentlest kiss of his life.

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sat across from him. “We could follow the initial agreement. The contracts are in my study drawer, still crisp as a new pound note.” When she failed to respond, he looked to find her tracing a rip in the velvet cushion. “I mean marriage, sweet.”

She laughed, a hiccupping sound that charmed his stockings off. “This is mad, and not to use your words, though I will, but you’ve come to mean more to me than that.”

Miserably, he understood. They weren’t going to play the game of pretending to care when they were actually starting to care. They were trapped in the unhappy middle, or at least he was.

Unable to fully define what he felt—and pressed to define it or let the girl go.

While he sat there stewing, compiling a list of pros and cons and wondering what Willie Wright felt for *him* because she’d never said it, she moved to sit next to him, cradled his face in her palms and pulled him into the gentlest kiss of his life.

There was no denying her then.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Where an independent woman admits to wanting everything

A MAN'S HOME held secrets.

Revealed things he wouldn't.

As with most of life, the answers lay scattered amongst the details.

Mina took in as many as she could—books stacked in a darkened
scrap of paper on the bedside table, overturned Hoby boots by the h
stray stocking beneath the settee—as Griff closed his bedchamber d
leaned against it, his expression seven shades of wicked. The space
of him, spicy and male. He made no move to reach her, merely b
unfurl his cravat with sure, determined tugs, his gaze doing a sluggish
of her body, lingering at her waist, her breasts, before rising to her face

She felt the examination like she would his touch, her skin warm
heartbeat unsteady. Wrapping her arm around the bedpost, she leaned
She was winded from the race they'd taken up the back staircase, narr
dim and meant for servants, fleeing whoever the viscount in re
thought might see them at this late hour.

He wished to protect her from risks she was willing to take.

He'd stopped to kiss her—*twice*, pressing her into the wall, th
railing at the top of the stairs—adding mightily to her breathlessness.

She rather hoped he continued to undress and let her look her fill.

He halted, the strip of silk gliding through his fingers and droppi
wisp to the floor. Without another word, he toed off his boots, then b
work on his boned shirt buttons, exposing a swath of olive skin ar
chest hair. “You don't have an ounce of fear thrumming throug
delectable body, sweet, while I'm debating what the bloody hell I'm
Although it's not fear running through me, either.”

Her stomach clenched. “You don’t want me?”

He paused, startled, his fingers falling from his shirt. A task so happy to complete for him if he dared come closer. Shaking his head and laughing softly, he crossed to her in a resolute stride.

“Does this feel like a man who doesn’t want you?” he asked and placed her hand over his rigid shaft in the boldest move he’d ever made with her. Instinctively, she curled her fingers around him as he groaned, his skin fluttering. Finally, he was treating her as a woman and not a tea bag, worried about crushing if he held it too tightly. “I want your lips circling your teeth sinking into my skin, your body surrounding me. I’m greedy and voracious. Blind with hunger. Confused by it. Does that properly address your concerns?”

“Voracious,” Mina whispered, heat lodging between her thighs as he stared at her lips forming the word, a fierce look seizing his features.

Stepping in, he cupped her cheek, capturing her gaze, then her mouth. “Now,” was all he said before he took her under.

Between navigating ties, hooks, buttons, they kissed, the heat of his body providing a steadying presence. Wiggling free of layers that dropped away to their inhibitions. Amazingly, amusement was involved when she ripped a sweepshirt sleeve in her eagerness as he fumbled with the hooks at the back of her gown, not as proficient as she’d expected.

At least with her, he wasn’t.

She traced the still-rough edges of the scar beneath his ribs with the gentlest touch possible, thinking that someday soon, she’d press her lips against it and slide lower.

When she was down to her chemise and he down to his drawers, he backed her into the bed and with a teasing growl, pushed her to the mattress. Flipping her hair from her face, she went to her elbow with a sly grin and laughter. Towering over her, his gaze roved the length of her. With a firm will and a dash of courage she didn’t know she had, she let him look. Finding nipples pressing against silk, the dark swath of hair between her legs so obvious, so visible, she was undoubtedly a sight.

He scrubbed his hand across his chin, down his chest, halting beneath your touched himself. Though his arousal was tenting his drawers in a doing, unspeakably affecting way. “Ah, sweet, you’re so beautiful. I don’t know if I deserve you. Deserve this.”

Mina pinched the waist of her chemise between her fingers and she'd be above her knees, stopping when the hem hit her lower thighs. "Am I going to have to convince you, Griffin Alastair Beckett?"

Bewildered, his gaze sought hers. His eyes were a blazing, stormy blue. "You've been kissed before, am I right?" He palmed his belly, then twisted his lips. "I find myself becoming angry thinking about this, but this realization is hypocritical. Yet, I can't help myself."

She smothered her amusement, recalling the fragility of men. "The last time, two grooms at Wright's, and I received a kiss from each." Tilting her head, she held up a finger. "Actually, two from the one...I think his name is Samuel. Nothing like the kisses I've shared with you, but to my loneliness they were better than nothing."

"Off," he murmured, gesturing to her chemise.

"Off," she murmured, gesturing to his drawers.

They followed each other's command, staring soundlessly when the deed was done.

His body was glorious. Lean and long, and as she'd noted previously with muscular only where necessary for perfect symmetry. Shoulders, biceps, a wealth of hair between his nipples trailed to his flat belly. Her breath caught in her throat. His shaft...*oh*, she wasn't sure about that.

"It will fit, I promise," he whispered and grazed his calloused fingers along the pad of her foot, circling her ankle, calf, knee, thigh. Then he climbed atop her, rocking the bed while she struggled to control herself as his hand diving into her hair and drawing her into his kiss before she could reason this out.

She lost focus, desire taking hold, her caresses chasing his. His mattress settling over her was an unfamiliar delight, one she welcomed. A last thought of the lone lamp's glow lighting his beauty before logic dissolved.

His hips pressed her thighs apart, where they rocked, sinking into the bed. He was hard, she soft, slick heat joining their bodies. A heat visible, started in her belly and flared, warming her from head to toe. Griffin

kiss, lips trailing her jaw, her throat, finally lowering to her breasts before her groans were muffled against her nipple, the tight bud drawn between her teeth, his tongue circling. Moving from one to the other until she could no longer resist and twisted into his touch.

This sound encouraged his exploration without another legible

lifted its spoken.

going to His hand journeyed between their bodies, finding her ready, eager hips rose, sending his finger inside her in a determined push. I my-sea clenched in the counterpane, her back arching as he began to slowly a scowl His ownership made her tremble, bringing her pleasure close.

which I “That’s it,” he said into the plump swell of her breast as he stroked measured cadence set to drive her mad. “Take what I’m offering. Be gone were The adventure wasn’t hers to manage after that.

her head, She merely followed, instinct guiding passion guiding desire as I ne was murmurs rippled over her. Sweat broke out over his body, over her y mind, nails dug into his shoulder blades, into his hip, urging him into a dash was only beginning to understand.

“Come for me, sweet,” he whispered, his lips dipping into the hollow the base of her throat and licking. “This might help.” Then, he pressed the dead thumb to the swollen bud at the top of her sex, circling, circling, sending over the edge.

Previously, He swallowed her cries, the kiss spiraling. She clung to him, body seeps. Aripples of bliss rolling like waves through her. Only when she’d been caught calm did he position himself into place at her entrance.

She opened her eyes to find his gaze fixed on her. Blue, shining fingertips scorching.

he was Shifting, she reached for him, gratified by his groan when her pulse circled his shaft. He was sleek, hard, smooth. She tested his weight e could length, learning how to touch him. “I think I’m going to like this.”

He captured her hand and pressed it into the mattress. “You’re going weight love it.” He shouldered a bead of sweat from his jaw and angled his glance, edging his cock inside her. “You’ve a talent, Willie, unknown to anyone me.”

to each She started to say more, joke with him about—

with fire When he moved more forcefully, more than edging this time. She left the occupying, *filling*. “Griff,” she sighed, the pinch of pain registering. His feeling of being stretched beyond her limit gripping her.

between his Reading her pleasure, he didn’t cease, his movements generated out persistent. His arm tunneled beneath her, lifting her into his shallow

“This,” he whispered, adjusting her bent leg alongside his hip, “no more easier. I’ll go as slowly as you need, but for God’s sake, let me in. Even

takes all night.”

er. Her Allowing her body to lose the tense hold she’d had on it, he b
er fistthrust, cresting and falling, plunging and diving. Once they caught
r thrust, other’s rhythm, they moved like a wave undulating across the sea, until
wasn’t an end or beginning but merely two souls working as one.

ed in a The seconds merged and time suspended. His hand lingered on
reedy.” waist. Hips bumping, lips meeting, then parting and meeting again
nipples abraded by the hair on his chest until they ached. Her core o
is lazy him, to him. Near the end, when her body had caught fire again, wh
rs. Her begun touching her, adding another element to the dance, she found
nce she clutching him, shoulders, forearms, guiding the tempo.

Her legs circled his waist, this elemental move one he moaned in
allow at over. The bedframe creaked with his strokes, the sound mixed with
sed his labored breaths and the tick of a clock in the room.

ling her She wished to expire from pleasure—and was profoundly glad
seized her.

braced, He recorded her fall, his eyes hot, his skin slick, his breath
egun to against her throat. He followed soon after, his hand grasping the head
for purchase as he left being a gentleman behind.

o blue, It was fury, passionate fury and nothing but. Moaning, gasping des

Pulling from her body, Griff spent away from her. Underst
fingers protection, but her heart shuddered as he experienced his release witho
ght, his There were no words, mere breathing a struggle. The air

bedchamber compressed, hot and thick.

oing to Falling to his back, he tucked her into his side, in a hidden no
is hips, found she fit quite well. His lips grazed the crown of her head, her tem
one but arm locking and holding. His heartbeat raced beneath her breast
abandon, his chest rising and falling as he sought to recover.

At that moment, they were equals. She’d destroyed him as he’d de
inking, her.

ng, the *This is trouble*, she thought as slumber overcame her.

And trouble felt a lot like love.

tle but

thrusts.

akes it

ven if it

takes all night.”

Allowing her body to lose the tense hold she'd had on it, he began to thrust, cresting and falling, plunging and diving. Once they caught each other's rhythm, they moved like a wave undulating across the sea, until there wasn't an end or beginning but merely two souls working as one.

The seconds merged and time suspended. His hand lingered on at her waist. Hips bumping, lips meeting, then parting and meeting again. Her nipples abraded by the hair on his chest until they ached. Her core open for him, to him. Near the end, when her body had caught fire again, when he'd begun touching her, adding another element to the dance, she found herself clutching him, shoulders, forearms, guiding the tempo.

Her legs circled his waist, this elemental move one he moaned in ecstasy over. The bedframe creaked with his strokes, the sound mixed with their labored breaths and the tick of a clock in the room.

She wished to expire from pleasure—and was profoundly glad when it seized her.

He recorded her fall, his eyes hot, his skin slick, his breath labored against her throat. He followed soon after, his hand grasping the headboard for purchase as he left being a gentleman behind.

It was fury, passionate fury and nothing but. Moaning, gasping desire.

Pulling from her body, Griff spent away from her. Understandable protection, but her heart shuddered as he experienced his release without her.

There were no words, mere breathing a struggle. The air in the bedchamber compressed, hot and thick.

Falling to his back, he tucked her into his side, in a hidden nook she found she fit quite well. His lips grazed the crown of her head, her temple, his arm locking and holding. His heartbeat raced beneath her breast in wild abandon, his chest rising and falling as he sought to recover.

At that moment, they were equals. She'd destroyed him as he'd destroyed her.

This is trouble, she thought as slumber overcame her.

And trouble felt a lot like love.



CHAPTER NINE

Where a viscount admits to fear and loathing

IF THIS WAS love, Griff didn't want anything to do with it.

Willie lounged on the terrace stairs leading to his estate's overgrown garden, clutching an apple in her fist, humming a jaunty tune as she cleaned. Her hair would take two to untangle, and her gown was utterly beyond anyone's ability to manage. Anyone who looked at her flushed cheeks, the sluggish smile on her face, those wiggling toes, would deduce the master of the house had tuppied a guest not once but *twice*. (As well as other lewd activities eventually resulting in a wreck of his chamber.)

His massive medieval bed, antique escritoire and the Aubusson rug covering his hearth had never experienced such exquisite abuse.

Dawn was leaking across the horizon in a rolling ginger burst, and as he sat, a beetle in amber, transfixed by the sight of his almost-wife's bliss. She hadn't let him do more than tend to her, as well as he could, with a scrap of linen and the chilled water in his basin before dragging her, radiantly pleased, down the back staircase and out of the doors.

He'd never stayed with a chit after tuppings, much less laughed and talked in between sharing bites of fruit as a dense London mist swirled around them. Why, he'd rarely visited the pond at the back of his property, not that he was a lad, much less circled it in bare feet and weak knees, grass growing between his ankles.

This morning felt unusual. Enchanting. He wasn't a man plagued by compulsions, needing to sleep next to the same person every night. He was unfathomable. Silly.

Tremors unrelated to sexual congress pulsed through him in tiny, sharp, filled quivers.

Because love had never been part of the bargain.

Any bargain.

With a shrewd smile, Willie offered him the apple, the second consumed. Blowing out a breath, he tugged on his trousers and stepped beside her on the top step, realizing his half-stance appeared as if preparing to flee. It was only that he'd never seen a woman respond gleefully to his carnal consideration, even as he had a reputation for delivering the goods.

Well, he'd wanted to see her blossom, hadn't he? Keeping his hands where they should be was enough of a challenge, tucked in his pocket away from Willie Wright. There was no need to wipe the dab of ink from their encounter on the desk, from her cheek.

Overgrown She took another bite of the apple, chewing slowly. "Your garden is in a shrewd, dismal shape, but the house is gorgeous. Honestly, with a little work, it could be as well."

Her face, He gazed into the distance, remembering climbing the hedges as he mostly hid from his father when the earl had been in one of what he called a "black mood." Before he'd been banished, Griff had loved the garden.

Before being sent to Rugby and made to feel there wasn't any need to go before even on breaks between terms. Student housing had indeed been bleak.

Christmastide. "I know the shrubs look horrid, the lawns worse. I have not had the funds, until this new venture came about, to maintain them properly. I am meeting with my estate manager next week. I'd asked my brother, Dom, to help manage them last year."

Of him, Griff shrugged and rested against the marble column. No need to go there. Dom had spent the estate budget at the Lyon's Den. Or that opinion during the Curzon. Griff wasn't sure, only that the blunt had left his desk's chair about a year and never returned.

Not since "You're good at taking care of people."

Tickling He turned his head, checking to see if she was joking. "I don't think I started, then let his words fizzle out. He didn't know what to say, only that his cheeks would cool. Viscounts didn't *blush*."

It was She gestured with the fruit, munching softly. "I was lonely, too, when my mother died, and my father wasn't a father, unlike the blokes you see on terror-street, carrying their children around on their backs and tossing the dice and such. But we had a home and food on the table. Wood in the

How's a person to complain about receiving no affection when there's misery in the world? Who cares about love when there's starvation?"

A low ache spiraled in his chest and spread to his throat, fairly constricted him. He'd never talked to anyone about his childhood, even his siblings. They were younger, frivolous beings he supposed he was taking care of, so to them, he was merely the boy who'd become the earl.

"What about the rest of this? That piece you mentioned after we took off the bed?" Her gaze shifted to him in a side-eyed bit of flirtation.

He wasn't fooled—or immune. His cock shifted, coming to life.

"I shouldn't have mentioned that," he said and reached for the front taking a neat bite instead of offering more suggestions. Although the rest of his head between her legs, licking, sucking, his tongue thrusting, his hands are in leaving him. And the other, her mouth on *him*. The opportunity was there to do more unless he tossed her into his carriage and sent her home.

Because they hadn't gotten there yet didn't mean they wouldn't.

Willie dusted her toes through a pile of leaves on the stair. "I think this staff like that after seeing how good you are at—"

He was beside her immediately, hand covering her mouth. "No return, killing me, sweet. We already went too far, carried this past what we'd do during to. Which wasn't half-naked confessions while eating fruit on my veranda, wasn't it had dawn."

She snatched the apple back and plunked the half-eaten core into the azalea bush by her side. "I don't know why you're cross. The other thing I could do was your idea. 'Another avenue of pleasure,' isn't that how you'd like to go it?"

Squatting, Griff rocked back on his heels and drummed his thumb on his knee. It was time to introduce the controversial subject circling his mind. "I want you to cancel the vase mission. Tell Buster McGowen you'll cancel the books but nothing else. No more sneaking around pretending to be an investigator or whatever it is you're doing."

Willie jerked like he'd poked her with a needle. "Oh, *ho*, you think you can do you?" She was on her feet quickly enough to illustrate how much she appreciated his advice.

He rose with a defeated sigh, figuring this was how the night would end. Badly.

She marched down the stairs, then back up while he watched, her

's such hungry for her. All that passion, *ah*, she'd exhibited every ounce of
night, astride him on that bloody desk. Kneeling before him on the head
choking Curious, witty, sensual, confounding Wilhelmina Wright.

iblings. Her willfulness was wonderful in bed but shite to handle out of it.

if. She halted before him, stabbing her finger in his chest. Her eyes
deep, dark amethyst that spelled trouble. "You think ambition is unap
umbled in a woman, is that it? Well, I'll tell you what's worse. Waiting for se
to save you or give your life *meaning*. Solve the puzzle for you. Me
wait for that. They use their power to open every door available to th
apple, sneer when females do the same."

e image He tried to grasp her shoulders, but she danced out of reach. "I
wasn't don't want you going to some demi-monde country party in the g
there to stealing a bloody vase! You think Langston would marry you if th
ever got out?"

She turned to him, her gaze stricken, cheeks as ashen as the de
ink I'd blooms scattered about.

He'd said something wrong, irretrievably wrong.

'You're *Wait*. Did she want to marry him now? After he'd decided he wa
l agreed marry her? Although decisions such as these shouldn't be made a
anda at most rousing bout of sex in one's life. He'd resolved to take a week to
the necessary paperwork, to let his body—and hers—settle before he a

nto the But he'd been damned set on asking.

ings we "Willie," Griff called as she stalked across the lawn, breasts bobbin
you put swinging, heading to the stables on the property's western edge.

thought he was letting her ride one of his mounts home, bare fe
on his bouncing bosom, she didn't know him well.

mind. "I He took care of the people he loved, didn't she recall?

ook his She was in tears when he reached her, bowed against the side
be an fucking carriage he hated. Great, gasping sobs he'd not imagined a g
her would suffer from. The horses had begun to whinny in their s
nk that, commiseration.

ich she He froze beside her, stunned, his heart squeezing until he thou
might cry. He reached but paused before he touched her. "Whatever I
ld end, didn't mean. Not in the way you're taking it. I'm still fuzzy in my hea
that little trick you did with your teeth." He searched for a handkerch
is body he was wearing only rumpled trousers and a hastily misbuttoned shirt.

f it last They were a sight to behold, both of them.

arthrug. She sniffled into her sleeve, adding further ruin to a gown ready
rubbish bin. “You’d let Langston have me if he asked. Duchess Wilh
at your service. I’m merely like all the others to you.” She laughed
were aedge to the sound.

pealing It was a terrible time to realize that she was the most gorgeous cre
omeoneEngland and that he’d never desire anyone, mind and body, the
n don’tdesired her. “Willie, stop. Let me rephrase what I said in better terms.”

iem yet “The ridiculous thing is, I thought I was *different*. Foolish, foolish
She leaned back against the carriage, bawling. “I’m overwrought. Se
simplythree spells of pleasure does to a person?”

uise of He was loathe to remind her, but it had been four.

at ever, “Sweet,” he started, his words stacking up on each other in his
*love you. I’m not letting that ridiculous duke have you. Imagine how
ogwoodbed if he holds a billiard cue like a child? And viscountess is quite c
title. “I—”*

“I would like to return home, Kent.” She flicked her hand
nted tocommanding gesture without looking at him. She would have r
fter themagnificent duchess, but he sure as hell wasn’t telling her that when s
gatherin this state. “Not *home*, home. Limehouse, if you please. Call your
sked. our night has ended.”

Griff flexed his jaw, hearing it pop. “You can’t go anywhere dress
ng, hipsthat, Willie.”

If she “Will you stop with that infernal nickname?” Searching the stable
æet andchamber, she strode to a line of pegs along the wall and ripped a blank

Tossing it over her shoulders, she clambered into the carriage with
assistance, a horsey stench drifting through the open window. Leani
of thatshe stared him down, her glorious eyes shining with tears and fury
girl likeisn’t the first time you’ve sent a chit home in less than appropriate cl
talls inam I right?”

Griff stayed silent. He couldn’t lie to her, he sincerely couldn’t.

ight he “My father didn’t give me much, but this advice comes to mi
l said, Iactions, *guv*, not words.” Blowing out a breath, she jerked the shade
ad afterending any notion of him climbing in with her. “I’ll wait here unt
ief, butgroom arrives, my lord.”

Cursing, Griff stalked to the main house, guessing he had no choic

let her go for now.

for the Until he figured out how to win the war. And the girl.
elmina,
, a dire

ature in
way he

h chit.”
e what

mind. *I*
he is in
i handy

d in a
nade a
she was
groom,

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nd. It's
e down,
til your

e but to

let her go for now.

Until he figured out how to win the war. And the girl.



CHAPTER TEN

Where a viscount strategizes

BESSIE DOVE-LYON KEPT him waiting when the invitation had been her
“More a command,” Griff grumbled, tapping his tumbler against the damp windowpane in her study. It had been raining for two days, spring weather that had his mood in the gutter alongside the rubbish piled up down Cleveland Row. He didn’t turn when the door opened nor when the swish of his aunt’s skirt sounded as she crossed the room.

Stepping beside him, she took his glass and sipped, beneath her veil the trick. Her perfume was light and enticing, at odds with the hard woman wearing the fragrance. “I’ll hand it to you, you wrecked the vase. As considerable a romantic disaster as any I’ve witnessed, and that’s something in my line of work.”

“Have you seen her?” Griff asked, unable to stand there a second when his aunt might have news. It had been two weeks since Willie’s return back to Limehouse wrapped in his stinking horse blanket. In the day she’d rejected bouquets, notes, all the ridiculous avenues a man might take to apologize. In desperation, he’d even gone begging at her home but was promptly shown the door by a footman twice his size with missing teeth and a granite jaw. Probably one of Buster McGowen’s bruisers sent to protect her since no one else had been slated for the job.

Actions, wasn’t that what she’d wanted?

But somehow, his were the *wrong* actions.

“I have,” Bessie said, returning his glass with a sigh. “Would you hear how that went? She’s furious with me, too, for hiding our relationship and association. For introducing you, for letting her fall in love. As if I had control over that. I was able to talk her out of going after that vase, he

for which you can thank me later.”

Griff choked on a slug of brandy, turning to his aunt in a fluster. “S you that? Used those words, those *exact* words?” If he had confirmati Willie loved him, he would find her now, *today*.

Her veil quivered as she released a strangled laugh. “My dear boy, been brought low by Cupid’s arrow. I never thought I’d live to see it. Beckett, Viscount Kent, lovesick. This would have done my dear Co heart good to see.”

Griff swore and drained his glass. “Don’t tease me, Bessie undertaking is as entertaining as a rash.”

“You’re comparing love to the pox?”

s. Prowling to the sideboard, he poured another glass, telling him s. nst the would be it for the day. He needed a moderately clear head if he wa typical figure out a way to get his almost-wife—at the very least—to talk floating “No, being *without* her is the misery. Being with her was...” Del hen the Exhilarating. Intimate. Serene. Everything from quiet moments while : to watching her eyes flash as he slid inside her—and all the misc il, quite between. “She made me happy, and the Kents aren’t exactly kno -hitting happiness. She made me laugh...and that’s been plenty rare, too. I vooring. don’t deserve her, but I want her.”

saying Greedy, aching, desperate *want*.

Bessie tunneled her hand in her skirt pocket and came out v l longer embroidered handkerchief. Beneath the veil, she dabbed her eyes w stormed watched in amazement. “I so value when love is part of the bargain. It rs since everything I do worth it.”

took to “I don’t need her blunt, not a farthing,” he stressed, if his int at been weren’t clear. This wasn’t the standard matchmaking enterprise. “Th eth and about money. My venture with the Shoreditch hoodlums is going qui tect her thank you. I’m finding them more ethical partners than anyone in the t

Bessie waved her handkerchief like a flag. “As a start, a piece of , wouldn’t be remiss.”

“I have a ring I picked out after meeting her the first time.” He w il like to add that the sapphire was purplish in hue, a color close to Willie’s ey familial with his aunt on the verge of tears again. Grimacing, he tossed b ave any remainder of his brandy. He’d had enough weeping women lately. “T owever, desires adventures, not jewels. She still wants this investigative busine

you were right, she's gotten bored handling crooked books. Unfortunately the priceless vases and stolen paintings are more her flavor."

Griff grunted. "I heard a wild rumor about a Rembrandt."

Bessie clicked her tongue and made a gradual circle of the study, stopping to admire a row of Wedgwood figurines on a shelf. Picking one up, she set it into the sconce's glow. "Help her then, in the way only a man of influence can."

Griff propped his hip on the sideboard, willing to accept advice as it came.

"Besides a charming wit, a pleasing face, a generous heart, and a self-reputation that likely taught you a few things, what else do you have to offer to Miss Wright?"

Griff shrugged. "The title is a bit tight, but who wants that? I certainly don't, but I'm stuck with it for life."

"She might not want the title, but she might like the connections. The chief in this town owes you, Kent? Imagine having a supportive husband rather than one who drains you dry. A visionary who sees a bigger future than you know for yourself."

Griff rested back, cradling his tumbler in his palms, crystal facets catching light across his skin. *Hmm...* "There are a few markers I'm holding close to my chest."

Bessie replaced the curio on the shelf with a neat click. "I thought you were a shrewd fellow."

"I could help her build her business. Contacts, associations. Hell, the connections at White's is talk each other to death and enter bets in that ridiculous isn't it book. Surely someone needs a discreet investigator." Griff gazed into the well, empty glass, the picture becoming clear. "I support her dreams to go on. What do you think, is it?"

Bessie settled against the window ledge with what Griff imagined a wide smile. "Go get your girl, Kent."

Griff couldn't

say yes, not

ack the

his chit

ness, and THE FIRST OFFER of employment, a request to locate a missing family he



inately, for a marquess, was odd as Mina had gained a reputation for problem- among a lowbrow set. Members of the *ton* had never approached anything except recommendations on locating an exceptional thoroughbred. The second, from an elderly earl who wished to find a distant cousin whose name might be his heir, sounded alarm bells in her mind.

ie tilted When a third assignment arrived from a dowager countess searching for a replica of a doll she'd cherished as a child, Mina reasoned who was the growth of her business. Griffin Beckett, her not-so-silent partner. "Suchman she was frantically in love with.

A man she hadn't seen in sixteen days. Sixteen agonizing days.

and a And the nights? Hopeless, absolutely hopeless.
to offer Mina tapped the calling card that had arrived this morning in an envelope against the tufted seat of the hack, her heart doing a slow roll in her chest. Yearning, she had learned the past weeks, was a living thing.

The card was simple. White vellum and crisp black ink.

Who in
ier than
you see
W.L.W. Investigations
30 Wimpole Street
Marylebone, London

lancing Was a certain wicked viscount going to be waiting for her at the end of this journey?

ight so, When the carriage slowed, Mina nudged aside the curtain and peered out the window. The building they'd halted before was on a quiet street converted carriage houses, Georgian in design, a street or two from the bustling shops on High Street. The coachman moved to assist her before she could climb out—as if she were a lady in waiting.

nto his Which she wasn't, but maybe, just maybe, she could be.

ain my The promise of rain misted the air, curling her hair about her head despite her best effort to contain it. Her gown was serviceable but not elegant. She wasn't dressed for seduction or persuasion. She was merely Will Wright, horse heiress, mathematician, and amateur investigator, which might have to be enough.

airloom The sidewalk before the modest dwelling was well maintained. The shutters on the lone front window a stately blue. If the shade was the color of a certain scoundrel's eyes, Mina decided, for the moment, to

solving it. However, her breath caught when she reached the entrance, and she forsook her path to a stop.

W.L.W. *Investigations*, the sign on the door stated in neat gold lettering. She laughed and clutched her hands to her chest in delight. What her darling viscount had secured her a proper place of business—and not a brookside hideaway, either. The sign made it official! Beaming, Mina stepped behind the door to get a better look at the place. Nothing fancy, but she found it perfect. It was a real office, not some nook she used to conceal what she was doing.

Also, none of her clients liked traveling to Shoreditch, even the horse who'd grown up just down the street.

She opened the door and stepped inside, unsure of what she'd find. The waiting area was tidy with two scuffed leather armchairs and a desk. The space smelled faintly of coffee and cheroots, though the wall was covered with paintings you forgot the moment your gaze left them. The young man behind the desk was fresh-faced, bespectacled, with the black hair Mina had ever seen, so black it shone blue in the lamplight's glow. His clothing was rumpled but of decent quality, the garments struggling to contain a maturing build. He glanced at her without a hint of surprise, a toothpick dangling from his mouth bobbing with his smile.

"Trying to quit the cheroots." He freed the toothpick from his teeth and gave it a twirl. "Made of bamboo, hundred to the penny. Made in the Colonies. I get 'em on the docks."

"I'm Miss Wright." She held up the card.

"Oh, aye, I've been expectin' you." Sliding two sheets across the desk, he tapped his toothpick to the top page, a dimple in his cheek flaring to life. "You was a charming rascal, she'd give him that. "I have proper agreements for you to sign. Tools of the trade are being delivered tomorrow, a lock pick, a pair of opera glasses for surveillance, spying like. You have a meetin' at two o'clock with a prospective client, a dowager duchess who prefers to remain unnamed until an arrangement is reached. Crafty chit, that one. Tomorrow, blimey, she knows what catastrophe will walk through the door."

Mina forced back a snort of laughter. *Griff, what have you done? Kent?*

The clerk jerked his thumb over his shoulder, his apple-green gaze flicking back to the ledger sprawled before him. "He's puttin' up shelves in what you call the research room. Wanted to get it done before the duchess arrived."

and she the place looks more finished, ready for business and all. Though, being truthful, his work is distressing. The man has talents, sure. But construction ain't one. I'll go in there and straighten 'em when he leaves, her the day." He grazed the toothpick across his temple. "I have a mind for all sorts of things."

Laughing, Mina stepped inside a small office off the reception area. She found Griff clutching a hammer, his gaze fixed on a shelf too crooked to be so much as a thimble. He was dressed for work in rough cambric trousers, the sleeves rolled to the elbow, waistcoat flaring open, coat and cravat in a tangle on the desk at his side. His hair was in disarray as if he'd repeatedly yanked his hand through the strands during his undertaking.

A pulse of certainty pumped through her like blood. *I miss him. I miss him.*

"I think it needs shoring up before you place a book on it," she said, her voice darkest, trying to keep her amusement from her face. The map of the wall above his head wasn't level, either.

He flinched, turning to her, the hammer tilting to tap his hip. He'd shaved this morning, and his jaw was covered in dark stubble that she'd noticed with his sea-blue eyes. She pressed her lips together to hide her delight. She loved when he had a slight beard, even though it wasn't fashionable, and she felt sure he'd done this for her.

She started to cross to him, but he held up the hammer, forcing her to stop. "Give me a moment to look at you before you touch me. Just one moment. The past two weeks have been wretched, sweet. I've barely slept, and my life has been eaten. This love business isn't for the faint of soul, Willie. I worry that your distress would break me before I got you to give me another chance." Mina's fingers curled around the calling card, her heartbeat a loud thump with a pain in her ears, her body trembling enough for him to notice. Suddenly she needed until she swept her hand over her bodice, over the damp strands curling around her face. "Aren't you going to kiss me after that pronouncement?"

He placed the tool on the desk, his gaze making a languid sweep over her. "Lordbody. "If you say yes, I'll do more than kiss you. I'm going to toss you on my shoulder and carry you to the modest bedchamber I outfitted upstairs for those times when we can't keep our hands off each other. Once there, I'll be between your legs and pleasure us both to oblivion. When we stumble down, our knees will be weak. *Weak*, I tell you. Like before, if you rec

if I'm incident where we tumbled off my bed.”
re, but Mina's breath slipped past her lips in a ragged sigh. “Say yes to w
ives for He fished a velvet box from his trouser pocket, then crooked his
or such inviting her over. His smile was patient, while the polished boot tapp
floor was not.

area to She hesitated, wondering when they'd stop quarreling over eve
to hold thing. Why could he not come to *her*?

trousers, “Come now, Willie, my girl. You're going to have me crawling
vat in many times in the future, I guarantee it. Meet me halfway, then.”

peatedly Tucking the calling card she'd treasure for the rest of her life
bodice, Mina strolled leisurely to him, letting her hips swing becau
. *I love* whispered to her once that he loved watching her cross a room. Wl
reached him, Griff did what he'd promised not to, pulling her into hi
t,” she his lips seizing hers, sending reason and a stack of correspondence a
London desk flying.

They were starved for each other, the hand holding the jewel
e'd not caught against her lower back as he tugged her closer. Hip to hip, c
mixed chest, they fought for fulfillment that was out of reach unless he lif
ide her skirt and put his hands on her. Unless she unbuttoned his trouser plac
wasn't invited him into the warm welcome of her body. As he'd warned her
ago, once they made love, all thoughts would lead there. Prov
er back. statement, her mind filled with images of him poised above her,
moment. stretching her, *filling* her.

barely Her thighs clenched, holding the wonderful feeling close. She wan
ied thenaked and moaning that *minute*.

“Upstairs,” she murmured against his neck, taking a bite and suckin
l thump He groaned and pressed his rigid shaft against her belly. “Willie,
ervous, you more than I've wanted anyone. And the kicker is, I *like* you. I
und her you. I think you're the cleverest woman in England. A treasu
uncovered all on my own. I'm proud of myself for convincing you I
of her good enough.”

ou over “Then let's go begin the weak-kneed wager you mentioned. Del
airs for my treasure box, *please*.”

ll settle “Sweet,” he murmured with a lingering caress, laughter riding his
le back “help me here.” With a gusty breath forced between his teeth, he mo
call, the back a step. “I have a plan you're smashing to bits with your enthusia

if I can ever forget you called it your treasure box.”

“What?” He nudged her hand with his.

finger, When she looked down, the velvet case was on his open palm.

ing the “I’m sorry for everything,” he said, tipping her chin until her gaze

his. His eyes were fathomless cerulean pools, devotion clear in their

ry little “I wouldn’t have let that horse’s arse have you. Langston can’t even

billiard stick properly, although he might be able to hang a bloody she

to you I’m sorry I didn’t show up at the chapel. I honestly didn’t count on be

to a chair in a rookery warehouse on the day of our wedding. But may I

in her Halting the flow of words, she dusted her finger over his cheek

se he’d reached, pressing the inside of her wrist to his lips, his breath scald

ren sheskin. “I didn’t love you then, Griffin Alastair Beckett, sixth Viscount

s arms, Those vows would have been forced, whereas now, they won’t be. You

top themy heart. You own every part of me. I’m sorry, too, for being tetchy.

expect, that is, I didn’t know lovemaking would be so...intimate. Ever

ly boxhears that it is, it’s naught compared to the actual experience.”

chest to “It’s actually fifth Viscount Kent, sweet, although it hardly matte

ted her took hold of her shoulder, his grip forceful. “You know it’s never be

ket and way for me, don’t you? Not once, Willie, not ever. I was as astonished

weeks were, the feelings after. A tidal flood of them carrying me under

ing his shrugged, his smile the mischievous one she cherished. “I’ve never

his sex love, you see. Whole and utter love.”

She turned the box around in a lazy circle in her hands. “That mal

ted him of us.”

“Don’t forget this viscountess business, which is pointless, but the

ng. way around it. If you marry me, you’re stuck, as I am. Officially a

I want society, a trifling footnote in *Debrett’s* our legacy. Are you sure yo

Respect can sustain that silliness?”

re I’ve “I’m positively, without a doubt, undeniably certain that I love yo

can be my ardent feelings can sustain any and all titled ridiculousness.” She a

believed she’d make a fine viscountess, whatever that involved.

ve into At least there’d be no viscountess in England like her.

Cheeks flushing, Griff shifted from boot to boot, adorably anxious

words, on, then, open it.”

ved her She tilted her head, recalling how horrid the last two weeks had

ism. As with much of it his fault. He could wait a moment more. She gestured

office. "Care to share your grand plan before I give my final answer?"

"My grand plan is to spend the rest of my life with you," he g

"And you've already said yes and that you love me more than mathem
ize met "Oh, you," she laughed and bounced on her toes to hug him. She :
depths.back when he tried to pull her in, dodging the hold. "I'm teasing yo
hold aknow I don't love anyone more than maths."

lf. And "You're enjoying this a little too much, Willie."

ing tied She lifted a brow, glancing about the office.

oe—" He exhaled softly, letting her go. Scrubbed his hand over the back
ek. Heneck, a sign of his exasperation. "I believe in you. If you want to rise
ing herthe crooked account books and manage investigations, I'll help you. I'
it Kent.to this endeavor if you promise to travel with at least two footmen w
ou havestomp a man into the ground and keep him there."

I didn't "You've already helped me," she reminded him, rubbing her thumb
n if onethe velvet box's rough nap. Tears were stinging her eyes, but s
determined not to cry, not yet. "Three jobs have come sliding in fr
rs." Henobility this week. That's leagues above my regular clientele."

en that He shrugged, his gaze dancing away from her. *Oh*, his discomf
l as youendearing. "Like I said, I believe in you. It was nothing to mention at V
er." Hethat I'd employed a discreet investigator for a matter of some delica
been instunned by how many queries I received, hence, printing the cards. Th

is so pickled in problems you'll be in business for the next year from t
kes twoconversation alone. And we can't have these fancy fops traipsing to of

Shoreditch, so I found you a better situation. What I could afford for n
re's no "This is perfect, Griff. It's simply perfect." She brushed a l
part ofbeneath each eye, her tears arriving along with a burst of tenderness
ur loveman she loved. "The boy at the desk?"

He grinned, a weight seeming to lift from his shoulders. "Tobias S
ou, andHe's on loan from Jimmie Beans. Smart choice on my part, as the
actuallymore brains than anyone in that outfit."

Giggling, Mina gestured to the crooked shelf. "He's going to str
your shelf."

is. "Go "Figures himself an amateur architect if you can believe it, w
course, can never occur for someone born under such modest circum
d been,see something in him, so I'm going to provide more opportunities thar
d to thein the slums."

“You take care of people,” she whispered, swallowing hard. Rowled. Beckett was good, kind, *true*. She’d not been mistaken. atics.” He paused, considering, possibly willing to accept her judgment. “Streeter’s honest and ambitious, not unlike the boy I once was, with you. You esteemed education and a fortunate birth. Being part Romani makes it difficult, even if his father is titled, which is all he’d tell me and likely ever will.”

“I love you, Viscount Kent.”

Reaching for her, he cradled her face, his fingers trembling against her cheek. “Marry me, Willie Wright.”

“Yes,” Mina said in a rush, “yes, yes, yes.”

Griff took the box, flipped the top open and worked the ring free from the velvet folds. The fit was close to ideal, slipping only a little around her finger. The sapphire shone with glimmering hints of violet, a stone matched to her eyes.

“I love it.” She wiggled her fingers, turning her hand in the light. “That we’ve completed our business, are you ready to take me upstairs to show me that modest bedchamber? I have until two and my meeting with the dowager duchess.”

Griff picked her up, nestling her against his chest. “Sweet, I know you’d never ask.”

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EPILOGUE

Where a man counts his blessings and strives to hide his fears

*A year later, in a small garden on a quiet lane
Marylebone, London*

GRIFFIN BECKETT, VISCOUNT Kent, watched his wife dig in the micro patch of dirt behind her office, his heart tripping as it characteristically did when he was around her. Willie derived more pleasure from this small spot than she did the immense gardens at their Hertfordshire estate.

Whereas he derived pleasure from simply sitting in the sun with his trivial moments that made a *life*.

“Are you sure you’re not too hot?” Griff shaded his eyes and gazed at the expanse of uncommonly blue sky. “It’s rather warm today. Is your hat sturdy enough to protect you from the sun? It looks flimsy from here.”

“Darling,” she said, jamming her spade in the earth, “we talked this over. I’m fine. Healthy as a mule. I’ve agreed to an extra footman as a companion when I’m further along. More sleep, bigger breakfasts. To be working another afternoon in addition to his standard two. You should see the terrace designs he showed me last week. They are extraordinary, if only they will ever give him a chance.”

Darling. It was a recent endearment, and Griff hadn’t admitted to her that he adored it. “I’m searching for an apprenticeship position as he has no contacts, no education. He’s talking about going into the Navy, which she blazes out of me. It’s a tough sell locating a professional employer willing to employ a rookery lad, even if he’s brilliant.”

“You’ve been like a father to him.”

“No, *no*. I don’t know how to be a father,” Griff repeated for at least

twentieth time, sipping from the single glass of brandy he allowed him-
self during the summer afternoons. “The example provided me was indifferent at best
and cruel at worst. What if I’m not good at it, Willie?”

Bracing her hand in the long stalks of grass, his wife glanced at him
from her shoulder. Her abdomen was gently rounded, her breasts plump
and crowding against the bodice of another of her unfortunate gowns. He could
think of nothing aside from: *she’s bloody perfect. And she’s mine.* “You’re the
kindest person I know, darling, with the most generous heart. You’re
the magnificent father in a town that doesn’t know what that means. They
celebrate their yearly birthday parties and think they’ve done their jobs. Some hardly
even know their children’s names.”

“I’ll be there every day, every hour.” This was not a vow he took
lightly. He wouldn’t be like his father, not for one *second*. He loved his unborn
child more than he’d believed possible already. How could he be anything less
than present to cherish each moment?

As for his wife? There weren’t words to describe his love for her
or the happiness over the fulfilling life they were building together. Their
friendship, their undeniable passion.

He plucked a clover from the ground and twirled it between his
fingers. “We can’t break the bed again. I rolled on top of you last time, which
isn’t safe right now.”

She choked on a laugh and continued burrowing in the dirt.

“And the cases you’re handling. Nothing outside London until a
new babe is born. Close to home and perhaps not the most interesting, if you
ask me. Nothing stolen, nothing smuggled.”

“I have a new assistant, as you know,” she said and resumed plan-
ting the copse of begonias. She said nothing could kill them, not even
anyone’s mishandling. “Miss Winifred will manage everything while I’m resting.”

Griff skimmed the rim of his glass over his lips and ripped another
one free. “My business is keeping me at the warehouse until the wee hours
of the night, then there’s the work I’m doing at Wright’s. I could arrange for
it to be delivered to both offices for the nights you’d like to stay with me.
We’ll ride home together.”

“A lumpy sofa in Limehouse? A sagging settee at Wright’s Grand
Place? Where do I sign?” Shaking her head, she patted her spade on the
dirt. “Besides, I have the cats to take care of. We have four in the city
east of the river.”

myself on that we've brought two of your tiger oranges from the estate. I can't rest and staff to clean up cat droppings."

"Don't joke, Willie. I have five months to worry about you more than I can already do."

She shoved to her feet, and he restrained himself from going after her. He couldn't because he knew she wouldn't like it. Crouching before his perch on the brick wall bordering the property, she smiled gently. "I'm healthy, as you'll be a baby." She took his hand and placed it on her belly. "Soon, we'll be able to attend to him kick."

Griff's heart was what kicked. "Him?"

Willie lifted a slim shoulder in the most elegant of shrugs. "I'm not feeling anything."

"I admire you, I do. You're so calm about this. While I'm not"—he flexed his jaw, his breath shooting through his teeth—"nervous as hell. Up all day, staring at the ceiling kind of nerves."

His wife settled beside him, taking him into her arms. Comfortably, he willingly accepted, his brow finding the ideal spot in the crook of her neck.

Her scent stole into his lungs, soothing him as it always did. "Because of you, certain. Sure. About you, about this family. I want as many children as I can create. How does five sound?"

"Five," he said, his voice cracking.

"Or just this one," she negotiated, sensing his panic. "One is perfect for me. He nibbled on her jaw, pleased when she moaned lightly. "Two more would be nice."

"Two would take more practice."

"Oh, sweet, you know how I love to practice."

"Arrange for the sofas, darling. Big, gorgeous ones I can sink into for a few days." She stayed some nights not because I'm worried but to have more time together.

He lifted his head, his anguish easing. "I knew you'd see reason."

A flash of temper stole into her striking violet eyes. "Don't reject my sofa early. I'm not going to follow every order, you know. Like a good wife."

He tweaked her on the chin. "Viscountess Kent, don't I know it."

Derby? Easing to her feet, she tossed out her hand. "Come along. Mrs. Montague of Lyon will be here any moment for tea. She has a set of accounts I'd like to review."

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and rising to a stand. "She's more excited about this baby than I."

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"I'll hold you to that, darling." Willie laid her head against his arm as they strolled into the dwelling. "Every day for the rest of my life."

The End

Thank you for reading Griff and Willie's extraordinary love story. I'm thrilled to officially join the Lyon's Den family. This was such an incredible shared world to inhabit, and I enjoyed it immensely.

If you're interested in reading what happens to Tobias Streeter, the erstwhile clerk and the resident hoodlum Griffin Beckett is trying to check out my novel, *The Brazen Bluestocking*. It's a few years later Tobias Streeter is now known as the Rogue King of Limehouse Basin, a rookery titan with a secret past who matches wits with a willful blues singer (and a matchmaker of sorts) in a *steamy*, wild ride. It's also the first in my popular, award-winning Duchess Society series.

I also put another fun nugget in *The Lyon Who Loved Me*. The title of Griff wears was created by none other than Christian Bainbridge, my hero in the Regency novella, *Tempting the Scoundrel*. ALL my heroes are created by Bainbridge!

Please sign-up for my newsletter at tracy-sumner.com/newsletter to receive a free book (the award-winning steamy Regency novella, *Chasing the Duke*) and stay up-to-date about new releases, sales, contests and giveaways. Amazon and Bookbub are good outlets for information, too! And, if you have a super fun reader's group, The Contrary Countesses, that can be found here: facebook.com/groups/tracysumner.

Happy reading, as always! Historical romance is the best.

xoxo
Tracy

To see a complete list of my books, visit me at:

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xoxo
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About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author Tracy Sumner's storytelling career began when she picked up a historical romance on a college beach trip, and she fondly blames LaVyrle Spencer for her obsession with the genre. She is the recipient of the National Reader's Choice, HOLT Medallion, Golden Heart, and Georgia Romance Writer's MAGGIE. When she's not writing historical love stories about feisty heroines and their temperamental-but-adorable heroes, Tracy enjoys reading, snowboarding, college football (Go Tigers!), yoga, and travel.

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