



THE

Phantom OF
DRURY LANE



KATE BATEMAN

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SCANDALS & SCOUNDRELS OF DRURY LANE



KATE BATEMAN

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Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.

- Oscar Wilde.

CHAPTER 1



The Theater Royal, Drury Lane, London – 1817

LUCY MONTGOMERY HAD MISSED many things about England, but William Arden, Viscount Ware, had *not* been one of them.

Three years had not been long enough.

Three decades probably wouldn't suffice.

Some men were simply too vexing for words.

Her stomach somersaulted with an unwelcome combination of anticipation and dread as the man in question pushed through the crowd, making a beeline for the quiet corner she'd chosen for herself in Lady Carrington's ballroom.

His desire to torture her clearly hadn't abated during her time abroad.

Lucy narrowed her eyes, studying him as she'd once studied a jaguar in the steamy jungles of Brazil; with the same fascinated wariness. She hadn't seen him since her family had docked in London several weeks ago, and despite her dislike of the man, she could grudgingly admit his physical appeal.

He'd always been attractive, but the scar that now slashed across his eyebrow and cheekbone—courtesy of a French saber at Waterloo—had inexplicably *improved* his appearance. There was no justice in this world. He'd been annoyingly handsome before; a dark-haired, indolent playboy, but this new imperfection added an air of dangerous, rugged maturity that had been previously lacking.

Damn him.

Lucy took a fortifying swig of punch and schooled her expression into one of polite neutrality even as her heart beat faster in her chest. She was three years older now. Three years wiser. She'd survived a shipwreck off Madagascar and the snake-infested forests of South America. She could certainly face one infuriating, sarcastic scoundrel in a ballroom.

However handsome he might be.

Still, her stomach tightened as he stopped in front of her.

"Lucia."

He said it the Italian way, as he'd always done. *Lou-chee-ah*. Three syllables, drawing it out like honey gliding from a spoon, and all her good intentions evaporated at the hint of teasing laughter in his gravel-deep voice.

"Don't call me that," she snapped. "It's *Lucy*. Only my mother ever calls me Lucia—and only then if I've done something particularly dreadful."

His dark brows rose in amusement. "I expect you hear it on a weekly basis, then."

She ground her teeth, and the corner of his mouth twitched as if he knew precisely the effect he had on her. Had *always* had on her, ever since he'd first come to stay with her older brother during the school holidays, when she'd been a girl.

She forced a sunny smile. "Not at all. I haven't done anything dreadful for weeks. Months, even."

"Then you're probably long overdue."

An inelegant snort escaped her. "Not me. *Lenore's* the scandalous one."

She tilted her head toward the dance floor, where her twin sister was laughing up into the face of a clearly besotted partner. "Most people still get us mixed up. Although I don't see why, when we're hardly identical."

"Ah, but I'm not 'most people,' am I? I've never confused the two of you." Arden's mocking expression didn't change, but something flashed in his eyes as he studied her. "You, Lucy Montgomery, are . . . unforgettable."

His deliberate pause—and choice of verb—were hardly flattering, and Lucy tried not to wince at the reminder that he'd been witness to some of her most humiliating childhood escapades. She hated the way he always seemed to be laughing at her.

"Yes, well, I'm a grown woman of twenty-three now," she said haughtily. "I'm past all that foolishness."

It was Arden's turn to snort. "Really? Because the Lucy I remember

couldn't pass up the opportunity for an adventure. Or refuse a dare.”

She lifted her chin and met his eyes, despite the quivery, weightless feeling it always produced.

“Not true.”

“So true,” he drawled. “Which is why I bet you'll be the one to unmask the Phantom of Drury Lane.”

Her own brows rose; she was intrigued despite herself.

“The what of where? I'm not up to date with all the London gossip yet. You're going to have to enlighten me.”

“It's been the talk of Covent Garden for months. I'm surprised it hasn't reached your ears.”

“I don't frequent the area as often as you do,” Lucy said sweetly, relishing the way his lips compressed at her saucy inference. Covent Garden was known for its proliferation of brothels and taverns. Arden, she was sure, was no stranger to either. “Lenore mentioned that you were ‘particular friends’ with an actress?”

Lucy had digested that news with hardly a pang. Arden always had a woman on his arm. He attracted everyone, from dairymaid to duchess, and he rarely denied himself female company.

The twinge in her midsection had *definitely not* been jealousy.

He sent her an easy smile. “You're referring to Kitty? Or maybe Barbara? Either way, we've parted company. But that's beside the point. I know the gossip about Drury Lane Theater because I have a financial stake in the place.”

“How so?”

“When the previous building burned down, my father donated funds to rebuild it and became one of the major shareholders. He gifted me his stake three years ago. Just after you left for lands unknown.”

“Oh.”

Lucy couldn't quite hide her surprise. She'd never imagined Arden as having any interest in business. He'd always seemed too carefree to bother with such serious matters, but perhaps he wasn't quite such a dedicated libertine as he'd once been. Perhaps the war had changed more than his physical appearance.

The thought was intriguing, but she quashed it. Leopards didn't change their spots.

“Tell me about this Phantom, then,” she prompted.

Arden glanced over his shoulder and then leaned in, as if imparting a great secret, and her heart stuttered as she caught a delicious whiff of his cologne.

God, he always smelled delicious. One day she was going to find out exactly which scent he wore and buy a bottle for herself. For no particular reason, of course. She most certainly wouldn't put a drop of it on her pillow so she could breathe it in while she slept.

His broad shoulders blocked out the rest of the room as she pressed back into the corner, simultaneously breathless at his proximity and irritated at herself for such a reaction.

Her body clearly wasn't as discerning as her brain.

"The Phantom is a masked figure who's haunted the theater for months," Arden said.

"He sits alone, in the highest box on the left-hand side of the stage. Sometimes he stays for an entire performance. Other times he only appears for a moment, then vanishes before he can be accosted. Everyone's desperate to know who he is. And whether he's real, or an apparition."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Of course he's real. There's no such thing as ghosts."

Arden raised his brows. "Are you sure?"

"Your 'phantom' is flesh-and-bone, Arden, I guarantee it. But why are you so keen to unmask him? If he's got people talking about the theater, and buying tickets on the off-chance that they might see him, you should be grateful for the free publicity."

He tilted his head in wry acknowledgment. "I can't deny he's been good for business, but it irks me not to know who the fellow is."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Not personally. But plenty of other people have. The rumor is that he's a veteran, hideously scarred by a grenade. He wears a mask so people don't scream in terror when they see him."

Without meaning to, Lucy glanced at Arden's own injury, and his lips quirked as he noted the direction of her gaze.

"Do you find *me* hideous now, Lucia?" he teased, clearly unworried about his own scar. "Do I make you want to scream?"

Lucy's heart was hammering against her ribs. His words sounded as if they had another, far more seductive, meaning. How had things suddenly become so intimate? It felt as if they were the only two people in the

ballroom.

She clenched her fingers into a fist against the sudden bizarre desire to touch his injured face, and rallied gamely. "Scream? Only in aggravation."

His gaze dropped to her lips. "Hmm."

Heat washed over her skin at the intense way he studied her mouth. She bit her lower lip, suddenly self-conscious, and he let out a low sound that made her belly tingle.

She'd kissed *his* mouth. Just once. Four years ago, before she'd left for Brazil. The shameful episode was etched into her brain. As was the subsequent humiliation.

"You mentioned a bet?" she said breathlessly.

"I did. Kit Hollingsworth is offering a hundred pounds to whoever unmasks the Phantom."

"And you think that person will be me?"

His gaze flashed back up to hers. "I do. Because if anyone loves meddling and mysteries, it's you. You've been back in London for weeks without a scandal to your name, which means you must be desperate for something to do."

Lucy tried not to look interested. She *had* been getting a little bored. Life in the *ton* was so restrictive compared to the wonderful freedoms she'd enjoyed for the past three years, traveling the globe with her intrepid parents.

Still, the fact that Arden knew her well enough to guess that she'd been longing for a challenge was annoying, to say the least. She hated to be so predictable.

She tilted her head and pretended to give the matter serious thought, despite already knowing she couldn't refuse such an enticing challenge.

"Let me just make sure I have this right. Kit Hollingsworth will give me a hundred pounds if I prove the Phantom of Drury Lane is a person and not a ghost?"

Arden nodded. "You must provide a name."

"Very well. It's father's birthday coming up next month. I'll use the money to buy him a new microscope. His favorite one was damaged when we were shipwrecked a few months ago."

Arden's lips curved at her confidence, and he moved back, giving her some space. The noise of the crowd intruded again. "I wish you the best of luck. When will you start your investigation?"

"As soon as possible." Lucy sent him a questioning glance. "I assume, as

one of the theater's backers, that you have access to the place whenever you like?"

"I have a key to the side entrance, if that's what you mean. But I'm not trusting you with it, Lucy Lockit."

Lucy scowled at the teasing nickname. Lucy Lockit was a character from John Gay's comedy, *The Beggar's Opera*—the foolish daughter of the fictional warden of Newgate, who stole the keys to free her bigamous, cheating lover from debtor's prison.

"How am I supposed to investigate, then?"

His easy smile made her feel like she'd walked into a trap. "I'll escort you, if you like."

Lucy blinked. Arden had never offered to take her anywhere before. In the past, he'd gone out of his way to *avoid* her company.

She narrowed her eyes. "You? Escort me?"

He looked almost offended by her skepticism. "Yes, me. We can go tomorrow morning. Hard as this may be for you to believe, Montgomery, but I do occasionally get out of bed before noon."

A sudden, unwanted mental image of him, sprawled in an artfully concealing tangle of bed sheets, heated her cheeks. He sent her an amused, wicked glance, as if he knew precisely the direction of her wayward thoughts.

"I'll be there, I promise," he said. "The entrance for the boxes is on Brydges Street. I'll meet you there at ten."

He didn't wait for her agreement. He simply turned on his heel and walked away.

Lucy watched him leave with mingled relief and regret. Interacting with Arden always left her slightly on edge, but the thought of having something to enliven her day tomorrow was enough to lift her spirits.

Discovering the identity of the mysterious Phantom would be gratifying, but not half as satisfying as proving to Arden that she was a clever, capable woman, and not the foolish girl he'd kissed and then rejected with such obvious loathing four years ago.

CHAPTER 2



Arden was waiting at the Brydges Street entrance to the theater when Lucy's carriage pulled up the following morning. Her parents had insisted that she be accompanied by Rebecca, her long-suffering maid, for propriety's sake, but since the girl was desperate to finish reading her book, Lucy laughingly told her to stay in the carriage with *Emma* and Jane Austen.

Arden took her hand to help her down the step, but he released her with unflattering haste, and Lucy bit back a sigh.

He tilted his head toward the theater door. "There's probably a rehearsal going on at the moment. The company can't afford to close between productions, so they practice the upcoming play during the day, and perform the current one at night."

He unlocked the door with a key from his jacket and ushered her inside. A handsome pillared hallway led into a square salon with plenty of gilt scrollwork.

Arden pointed to their left. "That staircase leads directly up to the private boxes, so the lucky few don't have to mingle with the general rabble."

"Do you have your own box?"

"No. I could have one, as a shareholder, but I prefer to be down in the stalls. That's where all the action is."

And all the harlots, Lucy added silently.

The sound of voices and general activity grew louder as they moved further into the building, and she smiled as they entered the auditorium itself. The stage at the front was framed by an impressive proscenium arch and flanked on each side by four tiers of private boxes, each with its own sparkling glass chandelier.

A sunken orchestra pit was positioned directly in front of the stage, next to where the cheapest spectators sat. Behind that rose rows of red velvet seating, sloping toward the stage, while three tiers of long, curved balconies soared up to the ceiling. The red, cream, and gold color scheme was both sumptuous and welcoming, and Lucy inhaled the pleasing scents of fresh paint and sawdust with a happy sigh. She'd missed the theater when she was on her travels. Performing plays with her sisters was hardly a decent substitute.

The stage was a hive of activity. A red-haired female carpenter was directing two men to reposition the sliding scenery of a castle, while a young painter perched precariously atop some wooden scaffolding to decorate a fabric backdrop.

"This is actually the fourth theater that's been built on this site," Arden said softly at her side. "The last three all burned down."

Lucy frowned. "My goodness! I hope you're taking care when it comes to naked flames."

"We are. I certainly don't want to see my investment going up in smoke. The chandeliers are currently lit by candles, which is not only time-consuming, but also has the unfortunate side-effect of dripping hot wax onto the people below. The other lights are oil, but we're trying to raise enough to install new gas lighting, both for the house lights and the stage."

"Gas? That doesn't sound much safer than candles. Isn't there a risk of an explosion?"

"There is, but it's small when managed correctly. We intend to take considerable care to avoid that scenario."

On stage, a gorgeous, statuesque blonde woman was arguing with a portly gentleman, while another man appeared to be trying to diffuse the situation.

"That's Sarah Beckwith, our leading lady," Arden explained. "She's playing Lady Drusilla. The man she's arguing with is Thomas Cotton, her leading man, who's the Earl of Pudding."

"What play are they rehearsing?"

"It's a new comedy called 'The Lady Of The Scullery.' It's a ridiculous farce about a duke's daughter who disguises herself as a maid in an earl's household." Arden's tone was dry. "They fall in love, of course, after the requisite number of complications and misunderstandings."

A shriek of irritation emanated from the blonde, and Arden shook his head. "The two of them are going to have to use all their acting skills to

pretend to fall in love by the end of the third act. They've been bickering for weeks."

He pointed to the harried-looking gentleman standing alongside them. "Poor Holland has been driven to distraction. He's the Stage Manager."

"Maybe people will come just to see if Mrs. Beckwith can endure kissing Mr. Cotton every night. Perhaps she'll crack and punch him in the face instead."

Arden grinned. "One can only hope. Scandals like that are box office gold. And the theater needs every penny it can get to stay open when there's so much competition."

"All the more reason to encourage your Phantom, then," Lucy said. "If he's filling seats, you should be happy for him to keep haunting the place. Provided he isn't hurting anyone. He isn't, is he?"

"No. He's never done anything threatening or dangerous. I'd never have suggested you try to unmask him if that was the case. I'd never put you in harm's way."

Lucy snorted. "Ha! You spent *years* when we were younger putting me in harm's way, Arden. What about the time my horse lost a shoe and you refused to give me a lift back home, and I had to walk three miles in the mud? Or the time I cut my finger and you told me to squeeze *lemon juice* on it to stop the sting?"

Or the time you kissed me, and broke my heart?

She didn't say *that* out loud.

Arden's grin was unrepentant. "Disgraceful behavior, I admit. But I was young and foolish. Please allow that being in harm's way myself for several years has changed my perspective considerably."

Lucy stilled, surprised. She hadn't expected him to discuss his wartime experiences, but the scar on his face was a clear indication that he'd known suffering of his own. Had he really changed so much?

He spoke again before she could ask.

"I'd never do such things to a lady now. Not even *you*, Montgomery."

She rolled her eyes. "Only because my brother would box your ears if anything happened to me. And my parents would still give you a dressing down, too, viscount or not."

He chuckled. "True. Not one member of your family has ever demonstrated the proper respect for my title."

"An elevated rank does not necessarily equate to elevated intelligence,"

Lucy countered pertly. “True nobility is proved by someone’s actions, not by some dusty old piece of parchment.”

Arden clutched his chest and staggered backward in feigned horror. “Dear God! That sounds dangerously like something a Bonapartist would say. Don’t tell me you’ve returned to London to start a revolution. I’ve spent enough of my life fighting, thank you very much. I plan to live a life of peaceful indolence from now on.”

Lucy laughed. “Fair enough. I promise not to incite any revolutions. Not even the smallest riot, I swear.”

He looked doubtful. “Hmmm. You Montgomerys have a penchant for trouble, but we’ve had plenty of riots here without your interference. The Prince Regent’s coach was attacked on the way back from the state opening of Parliament in January, and just this March, in Manchester, a bunch of weavers gathered to protest against their working conditions. You need to be careful. There’s a great deal more unrest than there was when you left.”

“Duly noted. Although I hardly think it’s more dangerous here than being on a ship in a storm in the middle of the ocean. Or traipsing through the jungles of Brazil. Now tell me, which is the Phantom’s box?”

Arden pointed to the left of the stage. “There, the highest of the private boxes. He sent a note addressed to the directors requesting that it be kept empty for his exclusive use, and asking that the candles in that particular chandelier remain unlit.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two, maybe three months ago.”

“Did he say what would happen if his demands weren’t met?”

“No. He just said he was a theater lover who valued his privacy. And since his note was accompanied by five hundred pounds, *in cash*, the directors unanimously agreed to humor him.”

“Well, now I feel indignant of the Phantom’s behalf,” Lucy said. “The poor soul clearly just wants to enjoy his evenings in peace, but now Kit Hollingsworth has gone and put a price on his head. I bet scores of people are lurking about, trying to win that hundred pounds.”

Arden shrugged. “People have been interested ever since he made his first appearance. You know how London is for gossip. Once an article about the ‘mysterious masked stranger in box number four’ appeared in the newspapers, rumors spread like wildfire.” He tilted his head. “But if you ask me, I think the Phantom secretly *likes* the attention.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, he could simply stay at home, couldn't he? If he didn't want to engage. Then, he wouldn't run the risk of being unmasked. But since he *chooses* to keep appearing, it makes me think he likes the thrill of the chase.”

“Hmmm, it's an interesting theory,” Lucy mused. “And you might be right. Perhaps, if he's as scarred as everyone says, and doesn't go out much in society, then playing a game of cat and mouse here at the theater could be a form of entertainment in itself.” She squinted up at the darkened box. “Can we go up there and take a look?”

“Of course, this way.”

A side door led into a corridor, which in turn led to a set of stairs. Arden set off up them with athletic enthusiasm, while Lucy picked up her skirts and mentally cursed the Phantom, whoever he might be.

Of course he'd choose to haunt the highest box in the entire theater. He didn't have to contend with yards of petticoats and a stupid corset, did he?

She hadn't worn a corset for months while she was abroad. It chafed to wear the restriction now, purely for propriety's sake. Still, there was no denying it did wonderful things for her bosom.

Her thighs were burning by the time she reached the final flight of stairs, and she tried to distract herself from the pain by noting how delightful Arden's posterior looked as he climbed ahead of her. His buckskin breeches molded faithfully to his muscled flanks and she sent up a silent toast to the tailors of London who could produce such a form-fitting miracle.

Perhaps being back in England wasn't *so bad*, after all.

Arden was waiting for her in the shadowy hallway when she reached the top, looking irritatingly normal, while she tried to slow her panting breaths. Her heart was pounding against her ribs, and for once it had nothing to do with his proximity.

The last time she'd been this out of breath was when she'd raced down the beach toward the Royal Navy warship, *HMS Carron*, on the way to being rescued after a shipwreck near Madagascar.

She pressed her palm to her chest, and Arden's gaze dropped to the square-cut neckline of her pelisse, where her breasts rose and fell in time to her erratic breathing.

A muscle twitched in his jaw and he turned away abruptly.

“In here.” His voice was gruff, as if he had to clear his throat.

Just as the staircases had grown narrower with each successive flight, so

the corridor that let into the private box had become smaller. Arden pushed open the slim door, ignoring the sign that read 'PRIVATE BOX, RESERVED,' and Lucy followed him into the Phantom's lair.

It was not large, perhaps only ten feet wide, with a waist-high curved balcony overlooking the stage. The floor was split level, with two red velvet upholstered chairs on the upper level, and a two-person red velvet seat on the lower tier. The walls were upholstered in a patterned red silk damask, and despite being unlit, the facets of the crystal chandelier that hung overhead still glimmered faintly in the light from the stage below.

Lucy looked around with interest. The back of the box was shadowed, and hung with deep red velvet drapes.

Arden leaned on the balcony and looked down at the crowded stage. The bickering of the actors could still be heard, but since they weren't speaking too loudly the words were indistinct.

"So, tell me, what else do you know about this Phantom?" Lucy demanded. "Is he tall or short? Stocky or slim? Does he have a beard or mustache? How big is his mask?"

Arden turned, shaking his head at her barrage of questions. "By all accounts, he's of average height, maybe a little taller than most, and as to his build, he's neither fat nor overly lean."

Lucy gave a huff of frustration. "That's not very helpful. That could be half the men in London."

"He always wears evening dress; black jacket and breeches, white shirt and cravat. His mask is black, and fitted to cover the top half of his face. His mouth and chin are visible, and those who've seen him say he's clean shaven. He's also dark haired, although it's possible he's wearing a wig."

Lucy frowned. "I assume people have already tried the obvious, like waiting for him outside the door, once they see he's here in the box?"

"Of course. But the Phantom is wonderfully elusive. He seems to have the ability to vanish into thin air."

"Like the actors in Shakespeare's *Tempest*," Lucy murmured absently.

"What?"

"Oh, Prospero, I think it is, says something like that at the end of the play. '*Our revels are now ended. These our actors . . . were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air*'."

Arden shook his head. "You're a fan of Shakespeare, I take it?"

"I am. I took his *Complete Works* with me on my travels. Caro, Lenore,

and I used to act them out, playing all the parts between us. I make an excellent Lady Macbeth.” Lucy turned in a slow circle, then crossed to the walls and began sliding her hands over them.

“What are you doing now?” Arden’s sigh was thick with resignation.

“Looking for a hidden entrance. Perhaps the Phantom sneaks in here from a hidden closet, or escapes via a secret passage.” She tapped the walls, listening for a change in tone that would indicate a hollow space, then looked behind the curtains.

Arden perched himself on the gilt arm of the settee and watched her with the air of someone humoring an inmate from Bedlam.

“There are passageways all over this place, actually. They allow the production team and actors to move about the theater without being seen by the audience. The stage itself has at least three different trap doors that let into the space below, and there are cellars and store rooms down there, too.”

Lucy gave a frustrated huff as her search for a hidden door yielded nothing. She pointed to the decorated ceiling of the main auditorium.

“What’s above us?”

“The roof, naturally, but also a huge attic space between the rafters that’s used for storing costumes and scenery.”

“Can you get down to the street from the roof?”

He nodded. “Since the last three theaters burned down, there are now multiple means of escape for people in the case of fire. There are metal rungs attached to the outside of the building that can be climbed down to the road.”

“Perhaps that’s how the Phantom arrives, then.”

He gave a derisive snort. “Sounds like a lot of hard work.”

“I suppose you have a better idea?”

His lips twitched at her irritated tone. “All I’m saying is, why go to such drastic lengths? Half the men who come here dress in evening wear. The Phantom could just arrive with everyone else and mingle with the crowd with his mask off until he’s about to enter the box.”

“That wouldn’t be possible if he’s as scarred as everyone says. He’d be too recognizable. People would be bound to notice him.”

“Maybe he isn’t disfigured at all? Maybe the mask is just to hide his identity. He might simply be some bored aristocrat out for a lark.”

Lucy frowned. Those were all definite possibilities.

Arden stood, and despite the fact that he was on the lower tier, the top of her head still only came up to his nose. Her heart started to pound at his

nearness. She'd been too preoccupied looking for a secret door to realize quite how *small* this box was. How intimate. She only had to stretch out her arm and she'd brush his hand, or his thigh.

Arden shifted his weight, and she caught a whiff of his delicious cologne, then shook her head to dislodge the sudden, foolish desire to step forward and bury her face in his snowy white cravat.

No man had the right to smell so good. It wasn't fair.

Or, rather, it was wonderful that a man smelled so delicious, but why did it have to be *Arden*? A man so unattainable she might as well be a goat for all the chance she had of securing his interest. The one man who'd rejected her so unequivocally.

He cleared his throat, jerking her from her daydreaming.

"So, what's the plan now?"

Lucy made a concerted effort to pull herself together and sound capable and businesslike. She reached into her reticule and withdrew a folded piece of paper.

He squinted at it in the gloom. "What's that?"

"A letter. For the Phantom."

She held it out for him to take.

"*Dear Phantom,*" he read aloud. "*Please forgive my forwardness, but I desire to speak with you in private. To that end, I shall be sitting in your box this evening, and every evening henceforth, in the hope that you will grant me an audience. Be assured that I wish you no harm. Sincerely, Lucy Montgomery.*"

Lucy gave a pleased nod. "Short, and to the point, I think."

Arden shook his head. "It's certainly direct. But you have to assume this Phantom won't want to make *your* acquaintance. The man specifically asked for solitude. He might not take too kindly to someone thrusting themselves into his private domain."

"Nobody's *thrusting* themselves anywhere," Lucy said peevishly.

Arden's lips twitched, but she continued before he could make some childish, ribald comment. "I am merely being upfront about my intentions. If the Phantom wishes for privacy, then he can simply stay away. It's his choice."

He gave a skeptical shrug. "You have no idea who this person is. What if they're dangerous? What if your presence offends them so much, they decide to throw you off the balcony?"

She peered past him, over the edge, and her knees went a little weak. The rail was only waist high, and it was an extremely long way down.

“You said he’d never done anything threatening. But I shall bring my knife for protection. Father made sure all three of us girls could defend ourselves if necessary. And I learned some extra tricks from the King of Madagascar’s bodyguard.”

Arden made a derisive sound. “That may be true, but I still doubt you’d stand a chance against a fully grown man. He could be ex-military. What if he tries to hurt you? Or molest you?”

He took a step closer, deliberately crowding her with his body, looming over her to reinforce his point. “You’re *small*, Montgomery. Delicate.” His eyes held hers, and his pupils seemed huge in the shadows. “I could overpower you in a heartbeat. I could *kiss* you—right now—if I wanted to. And I could have you flat on your back on that sofa with your skirts up around your waist in less than thirty seconds.”

His voice was low, rough, and Lucy stilled, her heart hammering in sudden alarm as the image he described shimmered between them. She clearly imagined herself lying there on the chaise, Arden’s firm body pressing her down, and her pulse gave a terrible, betraying jolt. The thought of a stranger putting her in that position was frightening, but the thought of *Arden* doing it was horribly enticing.

She’d dreamed of such shameful, wicked things before.

She was an idiot.

She sucked in a steadying lungful of air. “Stop trying to scare me off, Arden. I can handle myself perfectly well. Besides, the theater will be full. Help, if I need it, won’t be far away.” She plucked the letter from his hand and placed it neatly in the center of the velvet sofa. “What’s tonight’s performance? Do you know?”

He frowned at her apparent stubbornness. “It’s Shakespeare. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. It starts at seven o’clock.”

“Excellent. I’ll come then, and hope the Phantom’s read my note. I don’t suppose you get free entrance as one of the shareholders?”

He sent her a sardonic glance. “I do. But *you* can buy a ticket at the door, like everyone else. It’s three shillings and sixpence for a seat in the pit, two shillings for a seat in the lower gallery, one shilling for a seat in the upper gallery, and seven shillings for a box. Like this one.”

Lucy sent him a look of mock disappointment. She hadn’t really thought

he'd let her in for nothing. "Seven Shillings! I can see why there were riots about the prices a few years ago. And besides, why should I pay when you said the Phantom already paid *five hundred* pounds for the use of this box?"

"*Exclusive* use," Arden reminded her. "And since you've not been invited as his guest, you'll have to cough up the blunt."

Lucy gave a dramatic sigh. "Fine. I suppose I'll be getting that hundred pounds from Kit Hollingsworth soon enough. Seven shillings isn't too terrible to advance." She turned to leave. "I'd better get back to the carriage. Do *you* have plans for tonight, Arden?"

His sudden smile was so wolfish it made her pulse leap in her throat.

"Indeed I do. But telling you about them would make you blush. Suffice to say that I, too, will be in the vicinity."

Lucy bit her lip, certain she didn't want the details. A cad like himself would be up to no good, she was sure. The streets of Covent Garden were synonymous with pleasure and wickedness of all forms.

If only she could ignore the pang of jealousy for whoever he'd be getting up to no good *with*. It was foolish to wish it was her. She had a Phantom to unmask. She would forget about Arden and focus on her task; charming the 'ghost' into revealing his name.

CHAPTER 3



Two things made William Arden, Viscount Ware, extremely happy.

The first was increased ticket sales at the Theater Royal, Drury Lane, of which he was a part-owner.

The second was Lucy Jane Montgomery. A woman so vexing, so gorgeous, so infuriatingly *elusive* that she'd been the bane of his life—and most ardent desire—from the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

Not that he'd ever told *her* that, of course.

A man had his pride.

And a healthy dose of self-preservation.

Ten years ago, at eighteen, he'd been arrogantly convinced the world was his for the taking.

Lucy had been the irritatingly memorable little sister of his schoolfriend. In other words: untouchable. Completely off-limits. A Female Not To Be Trifled With Under Any Circumstances On Pain Of Death.

Will's heart, however, had blithely ignored the sensible edicts of his brain. Instead, it had made an unholy alliance with his cock, and the two of them had colluded to become alarmingly besotted with the girl.

Which was—obviously—a disaster.

He was young, handsome, titled, and rich. He couldn't possibly fall in love with the first girl he encountered. Especially since nothing could come of it. Girls like Lucy Montgomery weren't to be bedded then discarded, and he was far too young to even *consider* marrying.

He had adventures ahead. Drinking and gaming. Love affairs with wildly unsuitable women. Duels and capers and swashbuckling scrapes.

Will shook his head at the memory of his younger self.

God, he'd been such an ass.

Lucy's twin, Lenore, had enraptured every other male of their acquaintance, and while physically the two of them were almost identical, that was where the similarities ended. Lenore was bold and charming, and even at sixteen had been aware of the power she could wield over men with her looks and her sparkling wit.

Lucy had always been a tomboy, perplexed and somewhat irritated by the attention given to her beauty, always looking for a challenge, and for an explanation as to why the world was *just so*.

It had taken an extraordinary effort, but Will had managed to treat her with a credible amount of bored indifference and brotherly disdain whenever he'd encountered her—even as he dreamed of her with feverish intensity.

At university he'd distracted himself with other, more available women, but he'd still been plagued by thoughts of her pink lips and sly smile. He'd joined the fight against Bonaparte as soon as he graduated, cockily sure that he'd emerge unscathed from war. And despite the unfortunate incident in Sylvia Greenwood's gardens, he'd also naively believed that Lucy would still be within his reach when he returned.

He'd been wrong on both counts.

In France and Belgium, he'd found the adventure and excitement he'd craved. But he'd also found terror and misery and heartbreak. And while he'd been away, dreaming of her despite his fervent desire not to, she was off traveling the world with her intrepid family. Her father, a botanist, was the country's foremost expert on butterflies, and his work took them to some of the most far-flung corners of the globe.

At first Will had been glad that she wasn't back in London, where any man with half a brain might realize her brilliance and snatch her up for himself.

Then he'd been afraid for her, because he'd seen first-hand just how terrifyingly short and brutal life could be. He couldn't help imagining the myriad dangers that could befall a beautiful, inquisitive girl in the wilds of God-Knows-Where.

When a Frenchman's saber sliced his head open during the mayhem of Waterloo, and he'd fallen to the ground, stunned and barely conscious, his overriding emotions had been bitter self-recrimination and regret. Here he was, about to die a glorious, valiant, *stupid* death, without ever having told Lucy Montgomery that he loved her.

What a bloody waste.

He'd kissed her precisely once—and that had been by mistake—and his instinctive, panicked reaction on that occasion had been so forceful that he'd left her convinced that he hated her.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

As he'd clutched his bleeding face and crawled through the mud, with musket shots and cannonballs screeching all around him, he'd sworn to the Heavens that if he lived to see another sunrise, then he'd stop being such a stupid, stubborn bastard. He would go back to England, find Lucy Montgomery, and beg her to marry him.

He'd lived to see another sunrise. And he'd thought of her incessantly while his wound healed. But when he'd finally returned to London, it was to discover that while Lucy had returned from her trip to Brazil, she'd almost immediately set sail again, this time for the island of Madagascar, in the Indian Ocean. She was thousands of miles away again, and all Will could do was curb his miserable impatience and wait.

It hadn't taken him long to realize that instead of being repulsed by the scar that now curved across his eyebrow and cheekbone, ladies of every social level found it almost irresistibly attractive.

Before his injury, he'd have taken solace in a merry widow, or the practiced charms of the cyprians who frequented the clubs and brothels of Covent Garden. But the only woman he wanted now was Lucy, and despite the hunger and frustration humming through his veins, he hadn't been able to muster up the slightest interest in any of the tarts who approached him.

Subsequently, the only release he'd known for months had been provided by his own hand, which was a piss-poor substitute for the woman he ached to hold.

The thought that Lucy might reject him because of his physical imperfection didn't cross his mind. She'd never put any store into her own extraordinary good looks, nor been impressed by anyone else's beauty, and he was sure that she prized intelligence and wit over such superficial concerns.

There was, of course, the distinct possibility that she'd reject him for being too ill-read, or not amusing enough, or for lacking sufficient ambition and drive. All of those were true.

But not for his looks.

She'd always found him attractive. He had enough experience with

women to know the signs. She sneaked glances at him whenever she thought he wasn't looking, and her reaction whenever he stood close to her was delightful. Her cheeks grew pink, her lips parted as she drew little panicked breaths, and her pulse beat in her throat in a way that made him want to press his lips there and inhale the heady perfume of her skin.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the memory of their one kiss rose up to haunt him.

It had been the best, most erotic moment of his entire life.

He'd been home on leave from the army, and they'd both attended Sylvia Greenwood's garden party.

Still in denial about his feelings for her, he'd avoided Lucy all evening and, as if to prove to himself that he didn't desire her, he'd agreed to meet Cressida Bonham in the maze at midnight.

Cressida was a well-known flirt, already widowed at twenty-five thanks to the death of her elderly husband, and Will had anticipated a brief, mutually pleasurable interlude before he left to rejoin his regiment.

He'd entered the maze, and a shadowy female arm had emerged from a side-path and tugged him into a leafy alcove. Assuming it was Cressida, he'd caught her in his arms and kissed her—forcefully—and been gratified when she moaned in immediate pleasure.

A second later he realized his mistake. The woman he was kissing was too small to be Cressida. She didn't smell like Cressida, either. She smelled better, *delicious*, a scent so familiar and yet at the same time so elusive that he struggled to place it.

Will stilled, his lips still on hers, as his confused brain tried to catch up with his hammering pulse.

The mystery woman gave a little sound of impatience and pushed herself up on tiptoe, silently encouraging him to continue. Her small hands slid over his shoulders and up the back of his neck, and it was at that moment Will realized exactly who he was kissing.

Lucy Bloody Montgomery.

For a split second his brain simply refused to believe it. Then desire surged through his bloodstream like hot lightning, obliterating logic and the need to know how this miracle had happened. Only one, irrefutable fact remained: Lucy was here, in his arms, *kissing him back*, and he might never get this chance again.

Did she think *he* was someone else, too? Had she agreed to meet another

man out here in the gardens for a kiss? A stab of pure, possessive jealousy shot through him at the thought, but it vanished in the same instant. It didn't matter. Fate had put them here.

He had to keep kissing her.

He followed that instinct without any further ado. He slid his left arm around Lucy's waist, using it to tug her body completely against his, and her little gasp of shocked delight mirrored his own pleasure.

God she was perfect. Every dip and curve of her body fitted against the planes of his, and his cock hardened at the press of her breasts against his chest and the way she seemed to melt into him.

With his right hand he cupped the back of her head, tilting her face with a thumb under her chin so her lips were perfectly aligned with his.

In the distant part of his brain that still retained analytical ability, he marveled at the softness of the skin on her jaw, and the delicious warmth of her nape, and he stored the sensations away for future recall.

He kissed her again, more slowly this time, reining in his desire to give the moment the reverence it deserved. He grazed her lips with his own, savoring the sensation, marveling at the pillowy softness of her. She made a little humming sound of pleasure, a vibration against his mouth, and returned the pressure, tilting her head and parting her lips in silent, unknowing invitation.

She wanted him, even if she didn't *want* to want him.

His exultant heartbeat thundered in his ears.

When he ran his tongue across the seam of her lips, seeking entrance, she seemed initially confused, but when his tongue touched hers, she gave a little gasp and opened her mouth fully.

The kiss went wild.

Time lost all meaning. Will lost *himself* as their tongues slid and danced. The taste of her—champagne and strawberries—made his blood sing, and he devoured her, slanting his mouth over hers again and again, drinking deep, drawing her into a glorious, dizzying haze of passion.

Her perfume filled his lungs and he reminded himself to slow down, not to scare her with his ardency, when what he really wanted was to strip her naked and kiss every inch of her, to pleasure her with his hands and his mouth and his body until the two of them were sweaty and limp with satisfaction.

Glorious.

He almost groaned her name as he pressed a kiss to the skin beneath her ear, and he could hear her rapid, panting breaths as her fingers tightened in his hair, urging him on.

“Will.”

His own name—a shivery, almost-inaudible sigh—escaped her and he froze in shock. Did she even know what she’d said?

Did she know she was kissing *him*? Or was she imagining him, while thinking she was kissing another?

Bloody Hell. This was madness.

Will’s blood was pounding, urging him on, but the insistent, nagging voice of sanity refused to be silenced.

This was wrong. So wrong. What was he doing?

He absolutely should *not* be kissing Lucy Montgomery.

If the two of them were discovered there would be a scandal. The kind of scandal that would end with them hastily married to satisfy the gossips, or leave her ruined, and himself with a reputation as a shameless cad.

He wrenched himself from her arms, even though it almost pained him to do so. He caught her shoulders and thrust her away to arm’s length. And then he said her name in the most shocked tone he could muster, as if he’d only just made the discovery that it was her.

“Lucy? What in God’s name are you playing at?”

Her gasp was audible in the darkness.

He was glad that he couldn’t see her face. He had to put a stop to this farce before he found himself on his knees at her feet, begging for her hand.

“Arden!” She staggered back, almost falling into the tall hedge behind her in her effort to escape. “I . . . you . . . oh, God.” Her voice was a strangled whisper.

“What are you doing out here?” he demanded, employing his best disapproving-older-brother tone. “You’re supposed to be safe in the ballroom, not skulking about the gardens, kissing strange men in the shrubbery.”

“I wasn’t skulking. I was just getting some air when—”

“—you *grabbed* me,” he interrupted, trying to sound outraged. “And kissed me. Most thoroughly.”

“No,” she countered hotly. “*You* kissed *me*.”

“Because I thought you were Cressida Bonham!”

She sucked in a breath at his lie, and he forced himself to slide the knife

home. “Why on earth would I want to kiss *you*?”

His own cruelty made him wince, but it was for the best. He was about to return to France; she needed to be free to pursue her own adventures. There could be nothing between them. Ever.

“Why indeed?” She sounded more mortified than haughty, and his stomach clenched at the thought of causing her pain. “Let’s just agree that this was a terrible mistake and never mention it again. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he said solemnly.

She gave him a firm shove in the chest. “Stand aside, then.”

He sidestepped with a sarcastic flourish. “With pleasure. Do you think you can make it back to the house without assaulting another innocent bystander, or do I need to accompany you?”

Her snort of disgust almost made him laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of dragging you away from Cressida’s superior charms. Goodnight.”

Will shook his head at the memory. He hadn’t kissed Cressida that night. Nor any other night. It had been Lucy’s inexperienced, yet enthusiastic kisses that haunted his dreams. It had been the taste of her, the memory of her skin, that had dragged him from sleep on the brink of a full-body climax more times than he could count.

Bloody woman.

And now he was back, and so was she, so tantalizingly close that it took every ounce of his self-control not to simply push her up against the nearest wall and ravish her. To remind her how good it had been between them. To show her how good it could be again.

But Lucy would never believe that the Will Arden who’d rejected her so thoroughly ago could want her now. He’d done such a good job of appearing indifferent that she’d react with astonishment and suspicion if he confessed his love.

She needed seducing. Not just her body, but her mind, too. But there was too much history between them to allow that to happen. They needed a fresh start, so Will could woo her and win her as he should have done years ago.

As the Phantom, he’d have that chance.

He hadn’t originally created the Phantom as a means to engage with her. When he’d first returned to London and realized he had months to wait for her return, he’d directed all his pent-up energy into making Drury Lane more profitable. Competition was always fierce, with countless playhouses vying for theatergoers’ attention, and he’d known that a mysterious figure haunting

the boxes would drum up interest and fill seats.

His fellow directors had supported his plan, and it had worked, brilliantly. Covent Garden had been awash with gossip, and attendance had almost doubled as people began to come in the hopes of glimpsing the new 'theater ghost'.

But he'd become a victim of his own success. He'd had to use every one of Drury Lane's secret passages and alcoves to avoid detection, and he and the other directors had finally agreed that it was time for the Phantom to take his curtain call. Kit Hollingsworth's offer of a reward to whoever unmasked the Phantom had been a final attempt to create a buzz before Will disappeared as mysteriously as he'd come, banished into the realm of myths and legend.

The idea to challenge *Lucy* to expose the Phantom had just slipped off his tongue. She'd always loved a challenge, and he'd jumped at the excuse to spend time with her. But now he thought of it, it was the perfect opportunity for them to start again with a clean slate.

Not only could they indulge in some wicked flirtation, but he'd have the chance to become her friend, as well. Lucy would converse with the Phantom with a freedom and candidness that she'd never use when speaking to him as William Arden, Viscount Ware.

Yes, there was an element of subterfuge to the scheme, but all was fair in love and war, as they said. And Will would use any means necessary to win Lucy, body and soul.

She'd invited the Phantom to meet her, and he was only too happy to oblige.

CHAPTER 4



Lucy didn't usually pay much attention to her clothing, but she dressed with care to meet the Phantom. Her stomach fluttered as she stepped up to the booth and purchased a ticket for the evening's performance. Hamlet wasn't one of her favorites, but she wasn't there to enjoy the play.

Several people nodded to her in greeting as she ascended the stairs. Hopefully they'd assume she was on her way to the private box reserved for her brother-in-law, Max Cavendish, the Duke of Hayworth, who was married to her older sister Caro.

There was no-one in the hallway outside the fourth-tier box, and she held her breath as she pushed open the door. The chandelier above was unlit, as per the Phantom's demands, and the corners of the box were very dark—but empty. Just to be sure, she patted the drapery, but no-one was lurking there.

She quashed a wave of disappointment.

The letter she'd left was nowhere to be seen, but it could have been disposed of by someone cleaning the box, instead of being intercepted by the Phantom.

A bell rang, signaling the imminent start of the play, and an excited buzz rippled through the audience, followed by an expectant hush. Not wanting to be seen by those below, she settled herself in the darkest corner of the love seat as the curtain rose, and smiled at the familiar opening scene. Two actors playing night watchmen paced on the painted ramparts of 'Elsinore Castle in Denmark', discussing the sighting of a ghost.

If only *her* ghost would make an appearance.

Still, it had been so long since she'd had the pleasure of attending a play that she allowed herself to relax. Even if the Phantom didn't come, she would

still enjoy the evening. She normally attended the theater with her twin, Lenore, who was the very worst companion; far more interested in peering into the audience and gossiping, than actually watching the performance. Lucy was constantly hissing at her to be quiet.

Act two was well underway when Lucy finally sensed a presence behind her. She spun around in her seat, then reared back with a gasp at the sight of the black-clad figure leaning casually against the back wall, arms folded across his chest, black mask covering the top half of his face.

The Phantom.

She cleared her throat and tried to calm her hammering pulse.

“Good evening, Sir. I suppose you got my letter?”

The man straightened, and a shiver of apprehension rippled through her. He was tall. Broad. Well-formed. She tightened her grip on the knife she’d placed in her lap.

“Your *summons*, you mean.” His voice was low, a rough rasp that shivered across her nerve endings.

Lucy gulped. He did not sound overly welcoming.

He tilted his head and she tried to study his features in the faint glow from the stage. As Arden had said, he was dark-haired and clean-shaven, with a straight jaw and no sign of any scarring to his lips.

“I’m—” Lucy began.

“Trespassing,” he finished with a growl that made her stomach somersault. “This box is reserved for my personal use.”

“I’m sorry. Please, let me explain. I’m—”

“Lucy Montgomery,” he finished again. “A woman accustomed to studying strange and fearsome creatures in the jungles of Brazil.” He took a step forward and slid elegantly into the chair behind her. “Turn around and face the stage. Don’t look at me.”

Lucy did as he ordered, even though every instinct screamed at her to inspect him more closely. The back of her neck prickled in awareness as the movement of his body fanned the tendrils of hair at her nape. She clutched at her skirts, simultaneously thrilled and terrified.

“I hope you’re not thinking that *I*’m some exotic creature you can examine, Miss Montgomery,” he murmured. “I don’t care to be prodded and poked for your entertainment.”

Lucy shook her head. “That’s not why I’m here. I came to see if you were a man, or a phantom.”

His laugh rippled across the bare skin of her shoulder. “Oh, I’m not a ghost, despite the rumors. See.”

His gloved finger gently skimmed the side of her neck and Lucy gasped at the contact. Her skin tingled.

“Flesh and blood, just like you.”

She sucked in a deep breath. His scent filled her lungs and she closed her eyes, trying to identify the dark, delicious combination of ingredients, but it was completely unfamiliar.

She reopened her eyes and pretended to study the action on stage. “Why do you wear a mask?”

“Why do *you* ask so many questions?”

She relaxed a fraction at his gruff teasing. He didn’t sound as if he was annoyed enough to throw her off the balcony. “Because I’m cursed with insatiable curiosity, I suppose. Always have been. Just ask anyone.” She shrugged. “I would like to know your name.”

He let out a soft huff of amusement. “You and the rest of London. Why do you think you’ll be successful in getting me to spill my secrets when all the others have failed?”

“I could give you an incentive?” Lucy suggested. “Kit Hollingsworth’s offering a hundred pounds to whoever reveals your name. What if we split the reward money?”

She saw the shake of his head from the corner of her eye. “I have enough money, thank you.”

“Aha! So you’re rich.”

“Or lying,” he pointed out. “Don’t discount that.”

Lucy pursed her lips at his playful evasiveness. “Hmmm. Is there something else I could offer you that would make you tell me? Perhaps you’re in need of scintillating conversation? I’ve had some very unusual life experiences. I could provide you with some entertainment.”

He tilted his chin toward the stage. “I come here for my entertainment. And not just to see what’s happening on the stage. There’s just as much drama happening in the audience. Men are foolish creatures, for the most part. Always quarreling and falling in love.”

Her lips twitched at his dismissive opinion. She’d thought the same thing herself on a few occasions. “Wasn’t it Shakespeare who said, ‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players?’”

“Indeed, it was. Are you a fan of the bard?”

“I suppose I am. I took his Complete Works with me on my travels. When we were shipwrecked, off Madagascar, it was the only book I managed to salvage from the wreck.”

Lucy realized she was babbling, but she couldn't seem to stop. She was supposed to be making *him* talk, but his presence seemed to be having the opposite effect on her.

“A surprising number of Shakespeare's plays feature shipwrecks, you know,” she continued. “*The Tempest. The Comedy of Errors. Twelfth Night.*”

The Phantom shifted in his chair and leaned closer. His lips were beside her ear, his chin almost touching the side of her neck.

“I suppose that's because shipwrecks provide a fertile starting point for drama. Life and death situations. Or it can be a new beginning; a character can appear in a foreign land and reinvent themselves entirely. The slate of their past life can be wiped clean. They can be whoever they want to be.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Lucy murmured. “But yes, you're right.”

“Is that what *you're* doing? Trying to reinvent yourself here in London after your travels?”

Lucy stared sightlessly down at the stage. The Phantom's voice was strangely hypnotic, and the semi-darkness created a sense of intimacy that made her want to share her deepest secrets. Up here, in the gods, they were in their own little world, removed from the hustle and bustle of the crowd. The shadowy box felt almost like the confessional booths she'd seen in Catholic churches, with the sinners conversing with a faceless priest from behind a concealing screen.

“Perhaps it is,” she admitted wryly. “But it's not that easy. There are people here who've known me for years. People who refuse to see that I'm not the foolish, green girl I was when I left.”

Like Arden, she added silently.

“You're beautiful,” he said. “Perhaps that's all they see?”

She wrinkled her nose. “People put far too much store in beauty. The world would be a better place if we were judged on qualities like humor, and kindness, and bravery. Besides, the only man I ever *wanted* to find me beautiful has no interest in me at all.”

She bit her lip, appalled that she'd let something so personal slip.

The phantom's lips curved upward. “A classic case of unrequited love, eh? How Shakespearean. At least you didn't drown yourself, like poor Ophelia.”

Lucy shook her head. She was supposed to be unlocking the Phantom's secrets, not spilling her own.

"Are *you* trying to reinvent yourself by wearing that mask and haunting this theater?" she countered. "Here, you're exciting and mysterious. I bet in real life you're someone who writes tax law."

He chuckled, and her stomach contracted at the deep sound. How odd—Arden was the only man who'd ever produced such intense reactions in her before. And yet there was something about the Phantom's innate confidence that reminded her a little of him. Both were impossibly beguiling.

"I'm neither a banker, a lawyer, nor a clerk. You'll have to keep guessing."

Lucy suppressed a huff of frustration. She gestured at the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on stage. Time for a different tack.

"So, what is it about the theater that you find so appealing?"

"It's an escape," he said, after a short pause. "There's something for everyone, a play for every mood. Tragedies and comedies, opera and farce. It's *life*, in all its messy glory, but in a neatly-rounded package, all wrapped up in a few hours."

Arden had said something very similar.

"There is something wonderfully predictable about a well-written play," Lucy agreed. "All the loose ends are tied up. Mistakes are rectified, lovers reunited, and villains are punished."

"Whereas in real life, good men die young, wicked men prosper, and virtue often goes unrewarded," he murmured drily.

"Too true." Lucy sighed. "Is the reason you're wearing a mask because you're wanted by Bow Street? Are you a highwayman? A cutpurse?"

"You seem to be blessed with a highly active imagination, Miss Montgomery." Amusement honeyed his tone. "And no. I'm not a fugitive from the law."

"Some say it's because you've been scarred," she persisted doggedly. "That you were once a soldier. Is *that* true?"

He stilled, and she cursed herself for pushing so hard.

"Yes, that's true," he said finally, and she let out a tiny, relieved breath that he wasn't leaving in a huff. "I was a soldier."

"And were you hurt?"

"I was. At Waterloo."

Lucy did some swift mental calculation. Napoleon's final defeat had

happened two years ago. She'd been in Brazil at the time, and it had taken several weeks for the news to reach them.

"I'm lucky to be alive," the Phantom said softly. "I might have scars, but many of my friends were cut down in their prime. It's a privilege just to be here."

Lucy's heart squeezed in sympathy and she straightened her spine against the urge to turn around and comfort him. To cover his hand with her own.

"I know that feeling," she whispered. "I nearly drowned when our ship hit a reef. Luckily, most of us managed to reach a nearby island with the lifeboats. When the storm died down, we salvaged a few things from the wreck, like canvas, an axe, and a tinder box. It wasn't so terrible, in the end. We had fresh water, food, fire, and shelter. Those are the most important things."

A strangely companionable silence settled between them, an unspoken understanding of triumphing over adversity.

"People are far more necessary than *things*," Lucy continued softly. "One can live with relatively little in terms of possessions, but having your health, and people you love around you . . . those things are essential to happiness. To life."

"Was there no-one you missed when you were on that island?" The Phantom asked. "What about that fool who ignores you? Did you dream of him during the long, lonely nights?"

A telltale blush heated her skin, but she forced herself to answer. It was only fair. She ought to answer his questions if she expected him to answer hers.

"Truthfully? Yes. I dreamed of him." She gave a despairing, rueful laugh at her own foolishness. "Despite the fact that he did absolutely nothing to deserve it. I'm sure he never spared me a thought."

The Phantom stayed silent, and she shrugged. "I suppose I wanted a fairytale of my own, a happy ending like the ones that happen down there." She gestured toward the stage. "But as you've already observed, real life isn't like that. When I saw him again here in London, he treated me exactly as he'd always done, as his schoolfriend's hellion sister."

"You hoped he'd see you with fresh eyes. As a beautiful, fascinating woman."

"Well, yes," she laughed. "I suppose I did."

The Phantom tilted his head and she could sense his gaze on the side of

her face almost like a physical touch.

“There is a man out there, Lucy Montgomery, who will love you until your dying day. You just have to find him.”

“Easier said than done,” Lucy said lightly, even though her heart warmed at the possibility. “But I appreciate your confidence.”

“Oh, I suspect you’re much closer to finding him than you think.” There was laughter in his tone, and she was about to ask him what he meant when his gloved finger lightly stroked the side of her cheek.

It was a teasing touch, light enough to tickle, and her stomach did another strange little somersault. Apparently, matching wits with a mysterious, delicious-smelling stranger was something she’d been secretly craving.

“Will you tell me your name if I promise to give you my firstborn child?” she joked, a little breathless. “Like in the fairytale Rumpelstiltskin?”

“I’ve no need for a child. Firstborn or otherwise.”

“What *do* you have need of then? There must be *something*. Tell me.”

“Very well. I have need of . . . a kiss.”

Lucy stilled, slightly shocked, yet also intrigued. “You’ll tell me your name if I let you kiss me?” she clarified.

“Yes.”

She blinked. Lord, it would be madness to agree. She’d be no better than a whore if she said yes only to win the hundred pounds.

But she was tempted.

She *wanted* to kiss him. Her body was humming and alive, and there was something about him that drew her, a strange familiarity, a kinship, as if they’d met before in another lifetime. How could she be attracted to mystery man whose name she didn’t know and whose face she’d never seen? And yet there was no denying the thrill of excitement running through her veins.

“Agreed.”

Before she could think better of it, she turned in her seat, leaned forward, and pressed her lips to his.

It was the briefest of kisses, a mere peck, and she pulled back, flustered and blushing at her own uncharacteristic daring before he could even move.

“There,” she panted. “A kiss. Now tell me your name.”

His laugh was deep and delighted. “Oh, sweet girl. That doesn’t count. You agreed to let *me* kiss *you*, not the other way round.”

A hot flush of mortification swept her cheeks. She felt tricked, foolish, but technically he was right. That *was* what he’d suggested.

Unable to look at him, she faced the stage again and braced herself as if preparing for the guillotine. “Fine. Then you have my permission to kiss me. Right now.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw him shake his head. “I’m afraid I have to go. The house lights are about to come on for the intermission.”

He stood, and a wave of disappointment crashed through her. She twisted around on the love seat, gripping the back. “Wait! No! Don’t leave.”

He stepped back, easily blending into the shadows. Only the white of his evening shirt and cravat glowed pale in the darkness.

“Can we talk again?” Lucy pressed, strangely desperate for him to agree. “I’ll come again tomorrow night.”

He sketched her an elegant bow. “Then I shall be here. Goodnight.”

Before she could say more, he slipped out of the door. She leapt to her feet and followed him just as the lights on the stage grew brighter, but when she stepped out into the hallway he’d already vanished.

Lucy cursed softly under her breath.

* * *

WILL SMILED in the darkness of the narrow passageway he’d entered to escape from Lucy. The entrance to this one was hidden behind a large gilt mirror on the lower landing of the stairwell, and he’d used it several times before to avoid detection.

He had little doubt that Lucy would be scowling down the empty staircase, her pert nose wrinkled in frustration that her quarry had eluded her. Her tenacity was just one of the many things he loved about her.

At least she hadn’t seen through his disguise. He’d deliberately kept his voice low, and worn black leather gloves to hide a rather distinctive scar on his hand that eagle-eyed Lucy might notice.

He’d even applied a different cologne to alter his scent. According to Lucy’s twin, Lenore, Lucy had once commented that ‘the only good thing about Arden is that he smells nice.’ It was still his most cherished compliment.

His pulse was pounding from their encounter, his blood simmering with desire. She’d looked so beautiful, sitting there in the darkness, her face illuminated by the footlights as she gazed, rapt, at the drama below. He’d

watched her for several moments before she'd become aware of his presence, and his body had warmed at the way the light played on the upper curves of her breasts and danced along her collarbones.

He wanted to touch her, so badly he was almost shaking. He wanted to kiss those sweetly rounded curves and feast on her lips. Her impetuous kiss had been ridiculously brief, just the brush of skin. He'd fisted his hands in his lap to stop himself from reaching over the back of her chair, cupping the back of her neck, and kissing her *properly*, as ardently as he'd done in Sylvia Greenwood's garden all those years ago.

He'd left before temptation got the better of him.

Still, he would take the kiss she'd promised. . . tomorrow night.

CHAPTER 5



Lucy jolted forward on the seat as the Montgomery coach came to a rocking halt, and she leaned toward the window to call up to the driver.

“Is there a problem, Mister Cox?”

“I’m sorry, Miss. There’s a crowd ahead, blocking the road.”

“Can you turn around?”

“I’m afraid not. The street’s too narrow. Woah there!” That last command was clearly directed at the horses, who had begun to fidget in agitation. “They’re all coming this way.”

Lucy sighed. She was keen to see the Phantom again, and this delay was irritating.

She’d dreamed of him last night. Strange, fitful dreams in which both the Phantom and Will Arden had made an appearance. Both men were with her in the steamy, humid jungles of the Amazon, playing hide-and-seek, flitting between the trees. She’d never been quite sure which man she was chasing. One moment it was Arden, the next it was the Phantom in his black mask. It had all been rather frustrating.

A shout snapped her back to the present.

“It’s some sort of protest, Miss.” The coachman said. “We’ll have to stay right here and let them pass us by.”

Chants and shouting filled the air as the crowd approached, and Lucy peered out of the window in sudden apprehension. The mood seemed angry, confrontational.

What were they protesting about?

The first people passed the carriage, and she saw that some had scarves pulled up over their noses, while others had their hats pulled down low in

order to disguise their features. One brandished a banner that read; *'Feed the hungry! Protect the oppressed! Punish crimes!'* while another read, *'The brave soldiers are our brothers; treat them kindly.'*

A man in a dark green coat bellowed, "The fat Prince Regent gets a million a year in public money, but gives only five thousand to the poor!"

The crowd brayed and booed enthusiastically.

"The starving 'ave been abandoned!" another voice shouted. "The veterans ignored!"

The discontented noise swelled like a wave, and the carriage was suddenly surrounded on all sides by people slapping their hands on the wooden panels, and making it rock violently on its springs.

Outside, Cox cursed and bellowed at the protesters.

"Make way there. Hoi, stop that! This 'aint the Regent's coach, you numbskulls! Stand aside!"

The carriage gave a terrifying jolt as the horses reared in the traces and tossed their heads. Lucy made a grab for the handle by the door, missed, and was bounced off the seat and onto the floor. While she sat there, shaken, the door was forcibly wrenched open, and she screeched in alarm as a dark, unmistakably male arm reached into the carriage and grabbed her ankle.

She began to kick at the assailant as vigorously as she could. "Get off me, you cur!"

"Damn it, Lucy, stop that! It's me. Will!"

Lucy stilled in shock as she recognized the voice. "Arden?"

She peered at the indistinct figure in the doorway.

"Yes. You need to come with me. Quickly. This mob is getting out of hand. We're only a few streets away from the theater. We can take shelter there."

"What about Cox, and the coach?"

"Cox can handle himself, but he can't protect both you and the horses. We need to get out of here now."

"He's right, miss," Cox shouted down from above. He was struggling to keep the horses under control. "You go with Lord Ware. I'll wait this out and meet you at the theater after the performance."

Lucy shot a brief glance up the road; it was entirely filled with people, an unstoppable human tide.

Arden extended his hand, and she clasped it. He pulled her to her feet then looped his free arm around her waist and swung her down without

bothering to let down the step.

The crowd engulfed them as soon as her feet touched the cobbles. She was crushed against Arden, stumbling against the hard wall of his chest, but he steadied her with his hands on her elbows.

“It’s all right. I’ve got you.”

He turned, craning his neck to peer over the crowd. “This way! Come on.”

He took her hand in a grip that was almost painful, and Lucy ducked her head, following him blindly as he began to push his way through the crush. The throng was terrifyingly thick. There was barely any space to move, but he weaved his way expertly, jostling with his shoulders to forge a path.

Lucy almost gagged at the unpleasant odors surrounding them. The vast majority of the protesters were men, and the stench of unwashed bodies mingled with the oppressive smell of stale beer, pipe smoke, and coffee. They were all so tightly squeezed together that she couldn’t even lift her arm to push herself away.

An elbow caught her in the ribs and she let out a cry, then she stumbled as someone else jostled her from behind. She would have fallen and been trampled underfoot, but Arden caught her, his firm grip never leaving hers.

“Careful!”

A crash of thunder directly overhead made several people shriek, and Lucy glanced upward just as the heavens opened and a torrent of raindrops was unleashed from the clouds.

She cursed soundly under her breath.

The mood of the crowd changed almost instantly from anger to desperation. People started to push in earnest, all keen to escape the sudden downpour, but the street was too narrow to allow such a large crowd to disperse quickly.

Just when Lucy didn’t think things could get any worse, a troop of mounted soldiers appeared at the far end of the thoroughfare, and the air filled with cries of alarm.

“Bloody Hell!” Arden growled. “The militia. We need to go.”

The soldiers began to push their horses forward, swinging what looked to be wooden truncheons or cudgels at whichever unfortunate beings happened to be in their way. Panicked protesters started to run, scattering down the narrow side streets and squeezing into shop doorways. One man climbed a lamp post to escape, and another pulled himself up and over a set of tall iron

railings.

Arden tugged her hand and pulled her down an alleyway so narrow there was barely enough room for the two of them to stand side by side. They'd escaped the crowd, however, and Lucy took a relieved gasp of air as they stumbled forward.

"Where on earth are we?"

"Feather Lane," Arden panted, seemingly as out of breath as herself. "This way."

He still had hold of her hand, and they dashed forward through the blinding rain. The buildings that loomed either side of them did little to shield them from the torrents. They turned a corner, but instead of carrying on, Arden stopped at the base of an unremarkable building and drew her down a set of slick stone steps, as if descending to a basement or scullery.

Lucy watched in interest as he pushed open a slim wooden door that was half-hidden in the shadows.

"What's this?"

His teeth flashed white as he smiled. "A secret way in to the theater. There's a passage that comes out beneath the stage."

Despite being desperate to get out of the rain, Lucy eyed the tunnel with deep suspicion. It was narrow and pitch black. "How often is this used, might I ask? It isn't going to be filled with spiders and cobwebs and rats, is it?"

"You're not afraid of a few spiders and rats, are you Montgomery? You must have encountered far worse on your travels."

"I have, but that doesn't mean I enjoyed the experience." Lucy pushed a dripping strand of hair from her face. "Fine. Lead on. At least it's dry."

Arden's shoulders were so broad they brushed the curved sides of the narrow tunnel as he pulled her forward, tugging inexorably on her hand. Lucy scowled at his back, even though he couldn't possibly see her in the fast-fading light.

After a few more steps the passage became completely dark, and she shuddered. She disliked enclosed spaces such as this, but she'd rather die than admit such a fear to Arden. He'd probably slow his steps, just to prolong her torment.

To distract herself, she focused her attention on her other senses, like the feel of her hand in Arden's much larger one. His fingers were warm and strong, curving around hers, and when she moved her thumb, she brushed the hard ridge of a scar that ran across his palm and curved up and over the back

of his hand.

Her heart gave a funny little thump in her chest. She'd never imagined she'd ever be holding hands with him. It felt disturbingly pleasant.

"How long is this blasted tunnel?" she murmured.

"About a hundred yards or so." His disembodied voice sounded strange, bouncing off the walls. "It runs under White Hart Yard."

Lucy ducked her head and pressed closer to his back, praying that his taller form would sweep any spiders out of the way and leave the path clear for her. She was so intent on her task that when he slowed his pace unexpectedly, she barreled straight into him. Her nose bumped between his shoulder blades and she sucked in a shocked gasp.

"Oof! Sorry. I can't see a thing."

She cursed herself silently, and tried to ignore the way the delicious scent of his cologne wrapped around her, intensified by the rain and the enclosed space.

He gave a grunt that could have been either annoyance or amusement, and carried on.

Lucy frowned as a series of thoughts struck her. "Wait. What were you doing on Exeter Street? Were you taking part in that protest?"

"I happened to be in the area, and no, I wasn't taking part. Although I agree with the sentiments of the protestors. Veterans *should* get more help from the government, as should the poor."

"But how did you know I was in that coach?"

"The Montgomery crest is painted on the door."

"Oh." He'd probably envisaged a delightful evening visiting the taverns and brothels around Covent Garden. Instead, he'd turned into her knight in soaking wet armor. "Well, thank you for rescuing me. I'm sorry to have interrupted your night."

His grip on her hand tightened. "I hope you wouldn't have considered leaving the carriage if I hadn't been there. Covent Garden is no place for a woman alone, however intrepid."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Of course not. I'm not completely dim-witted."

His answering snort sounded highly skeptical.

"This tunnel could be one of the ways the Phantom manages to get in and out of the theater without being seen," she mused aloud.

"Still hot on his trail? Is that where you were heading? Back to the Theater?"

Lucy nodded, then realized he couldn't see her in the dark. "Yes. In fact, I met him last night."

"You did? He obviously didn't throw you off the balcony. I applaud the man's restraint."

She debated how much to tell him. Not about the kiss, certainly. He'd probably be scandalized. "He was very polite, actually, although I didn't succeed in getting his name. I was hoping I'd have more luck this evening."

"You always were persistent."

"How do *you* know about this tunnel, Arden?"

"The architect, Benjamin Wyatt, is good friends with my father. He showed me the plans. This tunnel was already here when he redesigned the theater, though. I'm not sure when it was originally built. London has a whole warren of secret tunnels and passages below it. Ah, here we are."

Lucy bumped into him again as he stopped and finally released her hand. A crack of light entered the tunnel, outlining him as he pushed open what was presumably another door, and the sound of distant voices intruded.

They stepped out into a large, vaulted cellar, in which a single oil lamp illuminated another set of steps to their right. Arden straightened and pushed his wet hair back from his forehead. It settled into a perfect, albeit damp, wave, and she snorted to herself. The scoundrel *would* look handsome after a drenching. He'd probably look handsome after months trekking through the sweaty, muddy Amazon, damn him.

"There's a mezzanine floor above us, and above that is the stage," he whispered.

He turned, and his lips twitched as he noticed her bedraggled state. Lucy scowled at him, silently daring him to laugh.

He shook his head. "Dear God, you look like a drowned rat. You can't meet *anyone* like that, Lucia, not even a ghost."

"You're the one who pulled me out of the carriage," she growled.

He pressed his lips together, clearly trying to subdue his amusement. "Let's see if we can find you some dry clothes. We'll use the backstage route, don't worry."

CHAPTER 6



With a huff of resignation, Lucy followed him. Above them, the sound of shuffling feet and muffled voices indicated the evening's performance was well underway.

Arden led her to a set of narrow wooden stairs, which ascended to a small backstage room full of wigs and costumes.

"You can't use any of these," he said quietly. "They're for later in the play. We'll have to go up to the store rooms in the attic. That's where all the extra unused costumes and props are kept."

Lucy's shoes were so wet that she left dark footprints on the boards as they sneaked past the dressing rooms and started up another set of stairs. Her sodden skirts weighed twice as much as usual, and she bit back a complaint as she followed Arden upward.

"I suppose, between your months in the rainforest, and that shipwreck, you've spent an inordinate amount of time being wet." Arden's amused voice floated back at her down the stairs.

"It's not a sensation I enjoy," she grumbled. "Which is ironic, because it rains so much here in England that being damp is almost a permanent state. We should have settled somewhere warm and dry, like the Sahara."

"Ah, but then you'd be complaining about the heat," he chuckled. "If travel has taught me anything, it's to appreciate the comforts of home."

Lucy grunted.

After what seemed like an endless ascent, Arden stepped through a darkened doorway. The scrape of a flint was followed by a mellow glow as he lit an oil lamp, and she gazed around in wonder at the cavernous loft that was revealed.

Exposed wooden beams ran along either side of the vast room, where several distinct areas had been created; woodworking tools on one table, paints and brushes on another. An even larger area had been set aside for the storage of costumes and props.

“This is as big as a ballroom!” Lucy breathed. “I had no idea this existed.”

Arden sent her an indulgent smile over his shoulder. “We’re right above the auditorium and stage. The space runs almost the entire length of the building.” He waved toward the far end. “Further back, over there, is above the flies—where the scenery is pulled out of sight by a series of ropes and pulleys.”

The area was clearly a dumping-ground for all manner of unwanted items. Tall shelves overflowed with hats and canes, teapots, globes and vases. Larger items created a bizarre forest of obstacles; towering stacks of chairs, huge pillars painted to look like marble, cardboard trees, and rolled oriental carpets.

In the flickering shadows, everything seemed fantastical, like a bizarre dream world.

Arden beckoned her forward, and she skirted a gaudily-painted wooden carousel horse and dipped a mocking curtsy to a dressmaker’s mannequin in a shimmering opera gown.

“Here you go. Take your pick.” He swept his arm in a grand gesture to indicate row upon row of costumes, all hanging on rails. “We both need to get out of these wet clothes. I refuse to have survived four separate battles in France just to succumb to an ague here in England. That would be a paltry way to go.”

He placed the lamp on a dressing chest, then peeled off his wet jacket to reveal a white shirt. The front section had not been spared the rain, and Lucy tried not to notice the way it had become almost transparent. When he untied his cravat, she hastily turned to inspect the numerous costumes on display.

“They’re arranged by size,” Arden said easily. “Small at this end. They should be about right for you.”

Lucy bit back an instinctive retort about his ability to accurately guess a woman’s garment size. No doubt he’d had plenty of practice. Still, the idea that he’d been thinking about *her* measurements, estimating the size of her breasts and hips and waist, made her skin heat in a way that chased away the lingering chill of the rain.

“What’s your fancy?” he asked.

He moved closer, and she tensed, acutely aware of his proximity as his shoulder brushed hers as he browsed the row of costumes. “Come on, Lucia. Who’s your favorite Shakespearean heroine? Let me guess. Cleopatra? Titania, queen of the Fairies?” He turned his head, assessing her, and his intent gaze made her even hotter. “Not Ophelia. She spends too much time in a river.”

Lucy tried to ignore the fluttering sensation in her belly. The goosebumps on her arms were from the cold, not from the thrill of his closeness.

“What about Hermia from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?” he pressed.

She scowled at him. “*Though she be but little she is fierce*?” she quoted. “You think that describes me?”

He sent her a cheeky smile. “It’s a compliment! Fierceness is an excellent trait to have. But very well, what about Viola from *Twelfth Night*? She, too, survived a shipwreck.”

“She also disguised herself as a boy.”

Wicked amusement flashed in his eyes. “I can’t say I’d object to seeing you in a pair of breeches.”

Now Lucy was sure she was blushing. She’d worn loose-fitting trousers many times while traipsing through the jungle, but the thought of wearing them in front of Arden, with the curve of her hips and bottom immodestly displayed by the tight fabric made her a little lightheaded.

True, she’d ogled *his* derriere when he’d ascended the stairs. She had no doubt he’d do precisely the same to her, given the chance. Not because he fancied her, necessarily, but because she was a female, in his proximity, and he wouldn’t be able to help himself. Flirting came as naturally to him as breathing.

“No breeches,” she said sternly, “Stop teasing.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh of disappointment. “Ah, but teasing you is one of my favorite activities.”

Lucy snorted, and started browsing through the clothes.

There was an incredibly eclectic selection. She rejected a voluminous, ruffled dress that looked like it could have been worn by Marie Antoinette, a deep red velvet Medieval-style gown trimmed in gold lace, and a shimmery silver garment that looked to be almost sheer. Was that for a character like Salome or Delilah?

“This will do.” The blue gown she chose was beautifully cut, with a

scooped neckline and small puff sleeves. It would not look out of place in the Phantom's box. She turned, then let out a squeak as she found Arden tugging his shirt up and over his head.

"What are you doing? You can't undress here!"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you've never seen a shirtless man before, because I refuse to believe it."

He used the material to wipe the residual wetness from his skin and despite her every good intention, her eyes followed the movement of his hand.

In the lamp glow he was beautiful, a symphony of smooth skin and muscular curves, and for a moment she lost the ability to think. Broad shoulders were stacked above a tawny expanse of chest, and a series of muscles rippled down his stomach, terminating in an intriguing line of hair that disappeared into the top of his breeches.

Her mouth went dry, but she forced her gaze back up to his face, and discovered a devilish smile playing at the corners of his lips. He *knew* he was gorgeous, damn him. And he knew that *she* thought so, too.

Double damn.

She clutched the dress she'd chosen in front of her like a shield. "Stop that right now, William Arden. I forbid you to remove anything else."

He pushed his lower lip forward in a teasing pout. "Afraid you'll lose your head and ravish me? As you did in Sylvia Greenwood's garden?"

Lucy gasped. They'd agreed not to raise that subject. *Ever*.

"I didn't ravish you. You ravished me. And besides, you were fully clothed. We both were."

She'd felt his body, though, through their clothes. The delicious press of his chest against hers, the taut strength of those shoulders. The memory was etched into her brain. She tightened her fingers into the dress.

"I seem to remember you finding me irresistible," he grinned.

"I didn't know it was *you*."

Oh, she was such a liar. She'd overheard him making that assignation with Cressida Bonham. She'd deliberately stood on Cressida's hem so she'd have to go to the ladies' room to repair it, then sneaked out to meet Arden herself.

His snort indicated he had his doubts, but he let it drop. "Very well. I'll leave you to change in peace."

"Are you not going to choose something to wear?"

“Not from here. Florizel, the Stage Manager, keeps a change of clothes in his office down on the second floor. We’re of a similar size. I’ll borrow those.”

“Fine.”

“Need help untying your laces?”

His cheeky question brought another flush to her skin. “No, thank you. I’ve grown accustomed to undressing without the help of a maid. I don’t require any assistance.”

He sent her a theatrical bow. “In that case, I’ll be back shortly. Try not to get into any more trouble in my absence. A protest and a rainstorm is quite enough excitement for one night, don’t you think?”

CHAPTER 7



Lucy waited until she was sure Arden had gone before she began to remove her clothes.

She'd left her shawl back in the carriage, and her evening dress had taken the full force of the rain. The lilac silk was drenched, sticking to her body like a second skin, and she gasped in horror as she caught sight of herself in a huge gilt-framed mirror that had been propped against one wall.

Not only was the fabric covered in dark smudges and cobwebs from the tunnel, but the rain had rendered it practically transparent. The cut hadn't required a corset or stays, and her nipples were clearly visible through the silk and her thin chemise.

Dear God, it was a miracle Arden hadn't made some sarcastic comment.

Then again, he probably hadn't even noticed. He was doubtless more attracted to that headless mannequin than to *her*.

Feeling exposed in the huge space, and a little unnerved by the darkness beyond the circle of lamplight, she stepped behind a folding screen and stripped hastily. Cool air rippled over her naked skin, and she shivered as she slipped the dress she'd chosen over her head.

The gown, surprisingly, was a perfect fit, and she couldn't prevent a gasp of delight as she positioned herself in front of the mirror again. The scoop neckline was almost scandalously low, exposing the top curves of her breasts, and the midnight blue fabric shimmered in the lamplight like a raven's wing. The skirts were full, in the fashion of the previous century, and the way they swirled around her legs made her feel like a princess.

Would Arden think she looked pretty?

She gave herself a swift mental kick. She shouldn't care what he thought.

Her goal was to meet the Phantom and discover his name.

She draped her ruined dress over the arm of a velvet chaise longue that had been placed next to the dressing screen, and turned her attention to her hair.

It was a disaster.

Most of the pins had fallen out of the upswept style, and rogue tendrils had started to curl around her face and neck as they began to dry. She'd been tempted to cut it all off a hundred times during her travels, purely for practicality, but had always changed her mind at the last minute. Her hair was one thing she liked about her appearance.

Pulling out the remaining pins, she gathered the wet mass in her hands and tried to pile it all back up on the top of her head, but it was impossible without assistance. She abandoned the task with a sigh, and let it drop back around her shoulders just as a shadow moved behind her in the mirror.

The Phantom stepped out of the darkness.

Lucy whirled around in alarm. How long had he been lurking in the shadows? Dear God, had he spied on her while she was naked? A hectic flush swept over her skin and she resisted the urge to fan herself.

"Heavens!" she gasped. "You gave me a shock, sir. I didn't hear you approach."

He took another step, into the circle of light, and his lips quirked below his mask as he casually lowered himself onto the chaise longue.

"I wouldn't be much of a phantom if I clomped about like a herd of elephants, would I? Stealth is an integral part of the job."

Lucy felt her own lips curve up, even though her heart was pounding against her ribs at his unexpected appearance. Her whole body seemed to hum with awareness, with excitement.

"True. Although I've heard of ghosts who make a terrible racket. Perhaps you should consider expanding your repertoire?"

"By rattling some chains? Groaning and shrieking? No, thank you. I'll leave the dramatics to the actors on the stage."

He was dressed as he had been the previous night, in black, with a white shirt and cravat. His hair was slicked back, off his forehead, and the familiar black mask covered the top half of his face.

"Arden—Lord Ware, will be back soon," Lucy warned, a little breathless.

A low chuckle escaped the Phantom. "I'm afraid not. He's been . . . waylaid."

“What do you mean? Have you done something to him?” Alarm made her voice quaver. As infuriating as Arden was, she’d never want anything *bad* to befall him.

“Nothing sinister. He’s simply going to spend longer than expected in Mr. Holland’s office.”

“Because you’ve hurt him?”

“Locked him in, I’m afraid.” The Phantom didn’t sound the least bit repentant, and Lucy found herself rooted to the spot as he stood and moved closer. She couldn’t step back without bumping into the huge mirror, and his knees pressed into the front of her full skirts.

This close, she could see the fine grain of the skin on his jaw, the hint of evening stubble.

She resisted the urge to reach out and touch it, and injected a scolding note into her voice instead. “That was rather wicked of you.”

His shoulders lifted in a careless shrug. “I wanted you all to myself.”

Her heart gave an irregular thump at the hint of possessiveness in his tone. She’d never had a man say something like that to her before. It was rather thrilling.

“What is Lord Ware to you?” the Phantom asked softly. “A suitor? A lover?”

A flush spread across her skin. “Neither of those. He’s . . . we’re . . .”

How *would* she describe their relationship? They weren’t friends, exactly. Nor enemies. And saying ‘*He’s just someone I kissed once, and can’t seem to forget,*’ seemed a little odd.

“He’s a friend of the family,” she said finally. “And he’s not here for my company. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time to help me tonight.” She bit her lip. “He has many disreputable qualities, but abandoning a damsel in distress is not one of them.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” The Phantom tilted his head and studied her. “Although any man who isn’t interested in spending more time in your company must be a fool. That dress looks magnificent on you.”

Flustered, Lucy turned back to face the mirror and smoothed her skirts with her hands. “Why, thank you.”

The Phantom was so close behind her that she could feel the warmth of his body calling to hers, and when she sucked in a shaky breath the delicious scent of him made her stomach somersault.

In the mirror they made a striking couple, a symphony of dark and light.

Her pale skin seemed to glow above the inky folds of her dress, and his white shirt stood out in bold contrast to the darkness all around them. His black mask seemed to hover above her shoulder.

Their eyes met in the mirror and her heart missed a beat as he lifted his hand and touched the side of her neck.

He wasn't wearing gloves.

The feel of his bare skin on hers was like a static shock, and her lips parted on a soft exhale. His fingers were warm, as gentle as a breeze, as he traced them across her bare shoulder, up the side of her neck, then ran his thumb beneath her ear and along the underside of her jaw.

Lucy couldn't move. It was as if he'd cast a spell on her, a sensual web that held her utterly in his thrall. Her blood pounded in her veins, and a strange recklessness filled her, a combination of excitement and trepidation.

"The last time we met you said you'd let me kiss you." His voice was low, beguiling.

"In exchange for your name," she countered.

"Does that offer still stand?"

Her breath caught. What should she say? She could feel the warmth of his body against her back, feel the dangerous tug of his allure. What was it about this man that tempted her so?

Kissing a stranger was beyond foolish, but Arden would be back at any moment to interrupt them. Even if he was trapped in Holland's office, he wouldn't be waylaid for long. Something as paltry as a locked door would pose little challenge to a man as resourceful as Arden. He'd pick the lock, or call for help, or simply kick the door down.

Which meant that Lucy had limited time to throw caution to the wind. She *needed* to know this man's name. Almost as much as she wanted him to kiss her. Other than Arden, this Phantom was the only man who'd ever had this fascinating effect on her, and she knew she'd regret it forever if she didn't explore the possibility now.

"Yes," she whispered. "The offer still stands."

The Phantom stilled, almost as if she'd surprised him. Then he let out a low, pleased sound. "You'll have to turn around, then."

Before she could move, his arm snaked around her waist, and she gasped as he spun her round in a swirl of skirts. Her hands came up to brace against his chest, and her heart fluttered as she looked up into his masked face.

However scarred he might be beneath the fabric, there were no

imperfections to the lower half of his face. His lips were beautiful.

A flash of panic seized her. She'd only been kissed once before, by Will, in the garden. Would this be the same? It had been so long ago. What if she'd forgotten what to do?

And damn it all, why was she thinking of *Arden*, now?

"Close your eyes."

Lucy did as he commanded. She slid her hands up, over his lapels and onto his broad shoulders . . . and held her breath.

She'd expected the kiss to be forceful—maybe even a little desperate—but instead, it was gentle, tentative, as if he was holding back for fear of scaring her.

Her heart squeezed in sympathy. Did he expect her to reject him?

His lips were warm, and surprisingly soft, and she stilled, enchanted. His hand came up to cup her jaw, and when he started to lift his head, to end the contact, she went up on tiptoe, following him when he would have pulled away.

She pressed her lips to his again, silently urging him to deepen the kiss, and with a groan that sounded like surrender, he gave her what she wanted. He pulled her closer, hard against his chest, slanting his mouth over hers as his tongue slipped between her lips to taste.

Yes!

Familiarity, so strong it was almost like relief, flooded her. *This* was how it had felt to kiss Arden. This swooning, swooping sensation. This delicious dance of breath and lips and teeth.

In fact, it was *exactly* like she remembered. In the darkness behind her eyelids, images of Arden overlaid themselves with those of the Phantom. Past and present merged in a confusing swirl.

Almost without thought, Lucy slid her hands up to the nape of his neck to stroke the hair that curled over his cravat, and felt the Phantom tense against her.

Did he think she was trying to remove his mask?

She was about to murmur a reassurance when she realized his hair was . . . damp. As if he, too had been out in the rain.

She stilled, confused by the discovery, just as he lifted his head.

"I'm . . . sorry." He panted. His voice was even deeper than before. "That was . . . more than just one kiss."

His breath tickled her lips and she deliberately kept her eyes closed,

trying to ignore the niggling feeling of recognition she was experiencing, the bizarre sense of *dèja-vu*.

The Phantom's cologne was stronger than it had been last night—almost as if it had recently been applied—but she could detect a trace of Arden's scent, too. It was more subtle, but definitely there, like a faint echo.

His hand was still cupping her jaw. With dawning suspicion, she put her own hand up to cover his, and stroked her thumb over the back of his hand.

Her heart missed a beat.

Arden's scar. The one she'd felt in the darkness of the tunnels. There, on the Phantom's hand. What were the odds of two men having exactly the same injury?

Impossibly slim.

A host of conflicting emotions bombarded her. She snapped open her eyes and took a good, hard look at his lips.

They were the exact same lips that had haunted her dreams from half the world away.

She gazed up, trying to determine the exact color of his eyes behind the mask, and even though they were shadowed, she was sure they were the laughing slate-blue she'd known for years.

Suspicion coalesced into certainty. How could she have missed something so obvious? How had she been so blind?

Will was the Phantom.

And she'd just kissed him.

Again.

But why? Why would he disguise himself so? Was this some elaborate game to provide entertainment for himself and to humiliate her?

Her skin heated in mortification as she remembered how they'd talked last night. How much she'd revealed. *God, she'd admitted to missing him, to dreaming of him.*

Was he playing with her? Mocking her? Did he think her so lonely and pathetic, so in need of diversion, that he'd concocted this subterfuge out of *pity*? She should throw *herself* off the nearest balcony if that was the case.

Or had he seduced other women in this same way? Was she just one in a long line of similar conquests, all seduced by the thrill of a striking, mysterious stranger promising to fulfill their secret desires?

God, she was a fool.

Lucy bit her lip, her thoughts a whirl.

On the other hand, he'd *chosen* to kiss her.

Her, Lucy Montgomery.

He knew exactly who he was kissing.

Was he waiting to see how far she'd let him go, then planning to rip off his mask and laugh at her for being so desperate for the touch of a man that she'd let a stranger fondle her in the darkness?

Anger heated her blood, but her heart was still pounding with desire, and the recklessness that had seized her earlier still simmered beneath her skin.

What did it matter? She'd wanted to kiss him.

She *still* wanted to, damn it.

She'd wanted to for years.

And now she had the chance.

Who cared what his reasons were? She was here, now, in his arms, and she would take whatever he would give her.

Whatever she could get.

CHAPTER 8



“*I* suppose I owe you my name.”

The Phantom’s low murmur snapped Lucy from her whirling thoughts, and she shook her head, decision made. “No, you don’t.”

“But I kissed you.”

“Yes, I noticed.”

She sensed his frown, even under his mask. His lips compressed. “You *don’t* want to know who I am?”

Lucy sent him a serene smile. “I’ve changed my mind. Some things are better left a secret, don’t you think?”

“But you’ll lose your hundred pounds.” He sounded shocked, even a little indignant.

“I don’t care. If you tell me your name it’ll make this *real*, somehow. And to tell you the truth, I’m rather enjoying the fantasy.”

His lips parted on a surprised exhale that made her stifle a delighted giggle. *Oh, it was glorious to have the upper hand for once.* To have turned the tables so neatly.

He was amusing himself at her expense—why shouldn’t she do the same? After all, he didn’t know that she’d guessed his identity. Why shouldn’t she see how far *he’d* go? With any luck, it would include more than kisses.

Arden was a scoundrel, no doubt about it. He knew women, how to please them, and this might be her only chance to be seduced by a man like him. She was too independent to tempt most men, and she’d long ago resigned herself to a lifetime of spinsterhood. But that didn’t mean she intended to die a virgin.

She sent him a sultry look from beneath her lashes, as she’d seen her twin

Lenore do on countless occasions, and curled her fingers into the lapels of his jacket. “I was hoping you’d kiss me again.”

Will—the Phantom—pulled back, just a fraction. “What is this? Pity? A charity kiss for the poor, scarred Phantom?” His tone was scathing, suspicious.

Lucy gave an amused snort. “No. This is *desire*. You’re an excellent kisser, and I enjoy being kissed. I’m taking advantage of your expertise.”

“You haven’t seen my face. I *am* scarred beneath this mask.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she said evenly. “But scars don’t bother me.”

“Your friend Lord Ware will be back—”

Lucy hid a smile. “I thought you locked him in an office?”

“He’s a resourceful man. He’ll manage to get out sooner or later—”

“Then you’d better get on with kissing me, don’t you think? Unless you don’t *want* to, in which case—”

“I want to kiss you.” he growled. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since the very first moment I saw you.”

The absolute conviction in his voice left no room for doubt, and Lucy’s stomach gave another delighted somersault.

“Then do it.”

* * *

WILL’S HEAD WAS SPINNING.

Bloody Hell, he should have expected something like this. No interaction with Lucy Montgomery *ever* went the way he expected it to.

What on earth was she playing at? Inviting a stranger to kiss her.

A part of him was a little outraged at her taking such a risk, but another part was proud of her for chasing her own desires. She’d always been a woman who forged her own path. He could hardly blame her for seizing the opportunity now, and he could only be grateful that *he* was the lucky recipient.

Still, he’d never intended for things to go this far. He’d thought to give her a brief kiss—as she’d given him in the box last night—then tell her his name. He would push off his mask, reveal himself as Will Arden, and declare his love for her in no uncertain terms.

She would be annoyed by his deception, of course, but she’d forgive him

once he convinced her was in earnest and begged for her hand in marriage.

This particular situation, however—with her inviting the Phantom to seduce her— was not one he'd anticipated.

And yet it opened up a whole host of intriguing possibilities.

As the Phantom he could do what Will Arden could not. He could kiss her, touch her in ways he'd only dreamed about. He could take his time, worship her, show her a glimpse of how wonderful lovemaking between them could be.

And God, he wanted to. He was practically vibrating with need.

His resolve was crumbling with every breath he took, but he made one last attempt to do the honorable thing.

"You're so perfect. So beautiful." He shook his head. "You don't want a scarred monster like me."

Her clear gaze didn't waver. "Yes, I do."

"But there are hundreds of other men you could kiss," he argued. "What about Arden? He just saved you from an angry mob. Isn't that the kind of heroic behavior women are supposed to appreciate? Why don't you throw yourself into his arms?"

Her lips quirked. "He did save me, that's true, but he doesn't want to kiss me."

Will clenched his fists against the need to grab her shoulders and show her just how wrong that was.

"Are you sure about that? I saw the way he was looking at you earlier, before he left. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

She gave a soft feminine snort. "That's because my dress was practically see-through. Arden's a man who appreciates the female form. He was just enjoying the free show. The fact is, I could strip naked in front of him and he wouldn't be interested."

Will sucked in an outraged breath at this falsehood. "No man in his right mind would refuse to make love with you."

"Then Arden is clearly deranged, because he didn't even like kissing me. The one time he did so, he was disgusted."

"Will Arden is an idiot," Will muttered.

Her smile widened. "Indeed."

"Maybe he regrets his mistake? Men change, after all. You should give him a second chance. I bet he'd jump at the offer to kiss you now."

She gave another shrug. "You might be right, but unfortunately for

Arden, he's not here. And you are." She put her hands on her hips. "Now, are you going to kiss me or not?"

Will couldn't bear it any longer. Irritation and desire, a disastrous combination, were coursing through his bloodstream, urging him on. "Fine, I'll kiss you. But remember, you asked for this."

She gave a solemn little nod at his warning. "Understood."

He didn't give her another chance to change her mind. He simply caught her face between his palms, pulled her toward him, and captured her lips with his.

This kiss was nothing like the first.

Will abandoned all restraint. He captured her mouth and plunged his tongue inside, tasting her with a rhythm that made his blood sing in his ears. When she clasped his shoulders and kissed him back, little lights exploded behind his eyelids. He slanted his head and kissed her deeply, drawing her scent into his lungs like a drowning man gasping for air.

He couldn't get enough. His hands slid over her body, molding her curves to his larger frame, loving the way she fit so perfectly into all his hollow spaces. Her breasts against his chest, her legs between his.

His damned mask was an annoyance. Her nose pushed against the bottom edge of it, knocking it askew, and he made a grab for the ties that secured it as her hands swept up into his hair.

She dragged her lips from his. "Turn out the light."

His brain took a moment to process the request. His throbbing cock was claiming most of his attention.

"What? Why?"

"I want to kiss you without your mask. You can take it off when it's dark."

Will frowned. "Why? So you can pretend I'm someone else?"

She was panting, just as he was. Her gorgeous breasts were rising and falling against the neckline of her bodice. She opened her mouth to reply, but he shook his head.

"No, actually, don't answer that. I don't want to know."

This whole situation was beyond ridiculous. If he had a rival for her affections, some stupid fool who didn't appreciate her, then he'd deal with that obstacle later. He wasn't ready to reveal himself just yet. If he could steal a few more kisses, even under false pretenses, then he would do it.

With a growl of frustration, he reached out and extinguished the lamp,

plunging them both into a darkness so profound he could barely make out her faint outline in front of him.

And then he felt her small hands cupping the back of his head as she untied the ribbon that held his mask in place. She pitched it to the side; he heard it drop to the floor with a soft thud.

His hands found her waist and he pulled her back against him just as she gave a happy little sigh against his lips.

“That’s much better.”

She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his mouth down to hers, and without thought he slid his hands around her hips to grasp her bottom.

This. This woman. He’d dreamed of having her in his arms like this for eons.

He bent, lifting her against him, and she jumped up, wrapping her legs around his hips, her full skirts filling his arms as she clung to him like a monkey.

Thank God she’d chosen such an antiquated dress. The long, straight skirts of her fashionable gown would never have allowed such freedom of movement.

His cock was like an iron bar, pressed against her stomach between them, and he staggered back until his calves hit the chaise longue. He lowered them both, turning her so she lay beneath him.

His mouth barely left hers. He kissed her with all the pent-up longing in his soul, trying to make up for all the times he’d awoken without her, alone and aching. Craving this: her body next to his, her skin beneath his hands.

In the darkness all he could do was feel, and he kissed his way blindly down her throat and along her collarbone as his hand cupped her breast over her bodice. She surged restlessly against him, arching her back to press herself more firmly into his hand, and Will went a little mad.

He caught her lips again and slid his hand inside her dress, catching her gasp of shock on his tongue as his palm cupped her bare breast.

“Oh! Oh goodness!”

He gave her a gentle squeeze, felt her nipple harden against the center of his palm. “Nice?” he panted. “More?”

She tightened her fingers in his hair. “Yes!”

A wave of desire swamped him, a need to show her the incredible things her body was capable of. He pushed down the fabric and fastened his mouth

over her nipple, flicking it with his tongue, then sucking it hard.

She gave a little shriek. “Oh, God, . . . that’s . . . don’t stop!”

He had no intention of stopping. Her perfume filled his head, drowning his senses. The entire world narrowed to the feel of her beneath him. So small, and yet so strong. So delicate that a wave of protectiveness swamped him. He wanted to keep on doing this, keep on pleasuring her forever. He wanted her in his arms until he died.

“There’s more,” he groaned. He pressed a kiss to the uppermost curve of her breast, then gave a teasing nip to her shoulder with his teeth. “Want me to show you?”

He thought she’d say no. Thought she’d tell him to relight the lamp.

But Lucy Montgomery had never done what he expected.

She caught his face between her hands, stroking her fingers over the scar that slashed across his skin. Her thumb found the notch where it bisected his eyebrow, her fingers traced the furrow that curved over his cheekbone like a sickle moon back up toward his temple.

And in the darkness, she leaned up and pressed her lips to his skin, kissing his wounds as if they were the most beautiful thing about him.

Will forgot to breathe as she leaned close to his ear and whispered, “Yes. Show me now.”

CHAPTER 9



Lucy didn't give Will time to think. This was no time for logic, for reason. If he started thinking he'd probably stop *doing*, and that was the last thing she wanted him to do.

So she tugged his shirt from the waistband of his breeches and slid her hands up, under his shirt, greedily absorbing the feel of his muscles bunching beneath her palms, just as she'd dreamed of doing a thousand times in her imagination.

He let out a groan against her temple and she sent a silent, incredulous, *thank you* to the universe for finally gifting her the opportunity to touch him as she'd always dreamed of doing.

The darkness made her bold. She kissed his throat, his jaw, breathing in the delicious scent of his skin, and her heart leapt in delight as his hand slid down her leg and burrowed beneath her skirts. His fingers curled around her ankle, and then his palm was sliding up, over her stockinged calf and garter.

"I . . . God, it's been too long since I've had a woman." His voice was almost a growl, and her stomach fluttered at his anguished confession. He sounded delirious. As if he'd lost his senses.

Good. She wanted to befuddle him as much as he befuddled her.

He was half-lying on top of her, but she welcomed his crushing weight. She writhed against him as his hand found the bare skin above her knee, then moved higher, squeezing the top of her thigh before sliding around to caress her bare buttock.

A heavy, insistent throb pulsed between her legs.

"Lucia," he groaned. "You're killing me."

Lucy bit back a laugh in the darkness. If she'd needed further

confirmation, that was it.

Loo-chee-ah. Three syllables, the Italian way. As only he said it.

She fisted his hair and put her mouth next to his ear. “I need to tell you a secret.”

A distracted grunt was his only reply.

“The man I’ve been in love with for years? It’s Will Arden.”

His entire body stiffened, and she held her breath, afraid she’d miscalculated. Would he reveal himself? Laugh at her? Pull away?

His fingers tightened on her thigh. “Say that again. Did you just say you *love* Will Arden?”

She nodded in the darkness, wishing she could see the look on his face. “I did.”

“Is *he* the man you dreamed of on your island?” he rasped.

“I’m afraid so.”

His breath tickled her lips as he pressed his forehead against hers. “Is he the man you’re thinking of when I touch you? Are you wishing he was here instead of me?”

“Yes,” Lucy whispered.

He gave a soft, disbelieving laugh, as if he was on the verge of madness. As if he’d just realized his only competition was *himself*. “Will Arden is the luckiest bastard in London.”

“And also the stupidest,” Lucy couldn’t resist adding. “After all, he doesn’t love me back.”

He paused for the space of three heartbeats.

“What if he does?” The question was barely audible, as if the thought were so delicate it would break if voiced too loudly. “What if he’s loved you for even longer than you’ve loved him?”

Lucy’s heart was thundering against her breastbone, but she managed to inject a note of skepticism into her tone.

“I’d find that hard to believe. He didn’t want to kiss me four years ago.”

He hissed out a tortured breath. “What if he wanted to kiss you so badly, he was shaking with it? What if he was seconds away from pulling you deeper into the gardens and ruining you completely?”

“I—”

He didn’t let her finish. “What if he was cocky, and arrogant, and thought he was too young to get married? What if he was scared by the strength of his own feelings? What if—” his voice held an ache that brought a lump to her

throat. "What if he's realized how stupid he's been?"

Lucy sucked in a breath. This was more than she'd ever expected. More than she'd ever dreamed.

"That's a lot of 'ifs,'" she managed.

His nose brushed hers in the darkness. "I have another. What if he was here with you right now?"

Lucy grazed her lips across his, a deliberate, provocative challenge. "Then I'd tell him to put on the light."

All the breath seemed to leave her lungs as she waited to see what he would do.

For a terrible moment he didn't move.

And then his weight lifted off her. The chaise creaked as he shifted his position and she almost protested as his hand slid from beneath her skirts. The air moved as he stood, and she heard the scrape of something metallic as his hand swept the top of the dressing chest in search of the tinder box.

She pushed herself upright on the chaise just as he struck the flint and lit the wick on the oil lamp. In the sudden flare of light, she saw his face, unmasked, and her stomach clenched with a terrible mixture of excitement and trepidation.

He leaned back, resting his hips against the dressing chest, and met her gaze. "Lucia."

She raised her brows and matched his solemn tone. "William."

How could turning on the light have made it so difficult to speak? It was as if they were suddenly strangers, with a yawning gulf between them.

But her lips were still tingling from his kisses, her skin still hot from his touch.

He gave a helpless little shrug and gestured to the scrap of black fabric she'd discarded on the floor. "No mask." He raked his hand through his hair, only adding to its disorder, then touched the pale ridge that marked his cheek and temple. "I told you I was scarred."

"And I told you, I don't care."

"How long have you known I was the Phantom?"

A smile curved her lips. "I suspected when I smelled your cologne, but I was certain when I felt that scar on your hand."

He turned his palm down and frowned at the offending evidence. "I forgot my gloves," he said, as if chiding himself. "I was too desperate to get back to you."

She tilted her head and tried to calm her pounding pulse. “Is that true?”

He sank onto the end of the chaise but made no move to reach for her. “I’m afraid so.” His lips quirked as he realized he’d repeated her own words from earlier.

“You aren’t teasing me?” she pressed. “I’m not just one of a hundred women you’ve brought up here and seduced?”

His brows lowered. “No! God, no. You’re the only one I’ve ever brought here.” He stared deeply into her eyes. “You have to believe me. I was so stupid four years ago. I wanted you, but I didn’t *want* to want you. I fought it with everything I had. I told myself I was about to leave for war, that I was in no position to offer for you. But it’s different now. *I’m* different now. And not just because I’ve got this scar.” He touched his left hand to his head. “I know exactly what I want, and I’m not afraid to go after it. I want *you*, Lucy Jane Montgomery. Now and forever. Will you marry me?”

Lucy bit her lip and pretended to give the matter serious thought. A warm glow of happiness was building in her chest, but he deserved to be punished, just a little bit.

“Only if you prove that you love me.”

He gave a groan of dismay. “How? Please don’t say you’ve thought of some ridiculous, heroic quest for me to undertake, like tramping through a snake infested jungle, or finding the source of the Nile.”

“Would you do something like that for me?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“God, yes, if you asked me to.”

She threaded her fingers through his. “I don’t think I need anything quite so dramatic.”

“Then what can I do?”

“Make love to me. Here. With the lamp lit.”

A wicked spark of interest flared in his eyes. “What, now?”

She nodded, astonished by her own daring, certain that her cheeks were a hectic shade of pink, and his lips curved upward in that devilish grin she knew so well.

“Lucia Jane Montgomery,” he chided, mock-sternly.

She raised her brows in faint challenge and leaned back against the arm of the chaise longue. Her pulse beat a frantic tattoo in her throat as he moved over her, sleek as a jungle cat, caging her with his hands on either side of her head.

“Are you sure?” he asked softly. “We can wait for a bed. Do this properly.” His grey-blue eyes bored into hers. “I want this to be perfect for you.”

“It will be.”

He shook his head, sending his disordered hair falling over his brow. “But it’s been so long, and I want you so much. I don’t think I can go slowly. What if I’m too rough? What if I hurt you?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve survived worse.”

“You deserve better for your first time. You deserve candles and cushions and—”

A smile curved her lips. “I deserve *you*, Will Arden. Right now.”

“No going back from this.” He traced her lips with his thumb, watching the movement as if mesmerized. “This is the point of no return.”

Acting on pure instinct, Lucy sucked the tip of his thumb into her mouth, then gave it a gentle bite, and his guttural growl sent a thrill of feminine satisfaction through her.

She sent him a mocking look. “Oh no, I’m about to be ravished. What a terrible fate.”

He narrowed his eyes at her sarcasm. “You, Lucy Montgomery, are a hellion.”

“Yes, but I’m yours.”

His eyes darkened. “Mine.”

He kissed her, pressing her back into the velvet, and Lucy bit back a triumphant smile as he lowered himself on top of her again. His hands roved her body, stroking and squeezing as if he was trying to memorize the shape of her, and she shifted restlessly as he slid his hand back under her skirts.

Yes!

When his fingers slipped between her legs, she closed her eyes in scandalized delight. Her skin was hot, aching for his touch. His tongue delved into her mouth while his wicked fingers slid between her folds, teasing the entrance to her body, and she arched up into his touch, desperate for more.

“*Mine*,” he breathed again.

He pressed a fevered kiss to the hollow at the base of her throat just as his finger slipped inside her, and she let out a soft groan of shock, of pleasure. Every muscle in her body seemed taut, quivering.

“You like that?” He swirled his finger in a devilish figure of eight pattern that made stars twinkle behind her closed eyelids.

“Yes!” she managed to gasp. “More.”

His low chuckle made her clench around him. “Beautiful girl.”

Her entire body was throbbing, poised on the edge of some momentous abyss, and she groaned in protest as he suddenly withdrew his hand. She opened her eyes to find him unbuttoning his falls, then his weight was back on top of her and she felt him position himself between her legs. The hot flesh of his cock pressed against her, and she wriggled in nervous excitement. Of all the adventures she’d ever been on, this, surely, was going to be the most life-changing.

He straightened his arms on either side of her, raising the top half of his body from hers to relieve her of some of his weight, and held her gaze, refusing to let her look away as he rolled his hips and slowly, slowly, pressed into her.

Lucy caught her breath at the intensity of it all. She felt a stretch, an aching sting, and she bit her lip, a little uncomfortable.

“Relax,” he breathed shakily. “Let me in. Please, Lucia.”

He drew back and she shuddered, feeling her own wetness between them, and when he pressed forward again, she lifted her hips, hot and desperate to feel his body fully joined with hers.

“Slowly,” he chided. “It’s all right. You’ll get used to me. You just need to—”

He slid deeper, still holding her gaze, and she absorbed the new feeling of fullness with a dizzy sense of amazement.

She’d never been this close to another person, *ever*, and the way he was staring at her, as if she were some sort of goddess, caused a strange, heavy ache in her chest.

“God, do you know how many times I’ve dreamed of this?” He shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Of you. Of being *inside* you, Lucia. I—”

He couldn’t seem to finish the thought. He rocked his hips, just a fraction, and a shimmer of sensation raced through her, the possibility of pleasure.

He slid his hand down her thigh. “Lift your knee. Wrap your legs around me.”

Lucy did as he commanded, and gasped as the new angle slid him deeper still.

How had she lived so long without experiencing something so incredible?

He let out a long, shuddering breath. “You—I can’t—” His cheeks were

flushed, his breathing choppy. “Next time, we’ll take hours, I swear. I’ll strip you naked and worship you. But right now, I *have* to move. Please, God, or I’ll die.”

She almost smiled at his desperation, but his mouth found hers and his palm cupped the nape of her neck and this time, when he pumped his hips, he nudged a spot somewhere deep inside her that made her shiver in delight.

Lucy closed her eyes and abandoned herself to sensation, to *him*. Every slide of his body created a wicked friction inside that sent her higher, closer to the edge.

His movements became faster, more frantic, and she held her breath, loving his urgency, reaching for that promise that seemed just out of reach.

Jumbled words fell from his mouth, incoherent murmurs and pleas that matched her own.

Yes.

Please.

More.

Perfect, so perfect.

Don’t stop!

Her body was burning up, so taut she felt like she would snap, and then with a gasp he sent her hurtling over the precipice, falling into a smothering ocean of pleasure. Her body convulsed, wave after wave of glorious release.

“Will!”

His big body surged against her and he let out a groan that reverberated from his chest into her own. With one last thrust, he pulled out of her, and Lucy held him as he shuddered and bucked, spending himself in the rumpled fabric of her skirts.

It seemed to take forever for her breathing to return to normal. Will lay sprawled, completely boneless, on top of her, and she relished the feel of his weight, pressing her down. She stroked his nape, playing with the hair that curled above his cravat, and with a spurt of amusement she realized that they were both still fully clothed.

Will finally pushed himself upright with a satisfied groan. He tucked his shirt back into his breeches, buttoning his falls with the ease of long practice, then took her damp dress from the back of the chaise and used it to wipe the evidence of his climax from her skirts.

A smile curved his lips as he glanced up at her, and he reached out and flicked her flushed cheek with his fingertip.

“I love it when you blush, Lucia. It makes me think of all the things I can do to make you even pinker.”

Lucy let out a shaky exhale and pressed her hand to her bodice where her heart still hammered against her breastbone. “I’m not sure that’s possible.”

His low chuckle liquefied her insides. “Oh, challenge accepted.” His eyes held hers, and his expression sobered as he lowered himself to one knee beside the chaise. He reached out and took her hand.

“You, Lucy Montgomery, have been the bane of my life—and my greatest desire—from the first moment I ever set eyes on you.”

Lucy opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a silencing hand.

“I know that’s hard to believe, considering my past behavior, and I’m no good at making pretty speeches. I’m a soldier, not a poet. But there’s a bit from Hamlet that says it far better than I ever could; *Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love.*”

“Polonius says that,” Lucy said softly. “In act two.”

“I know how much you love Shakespeare,” he said. “But it can’t possibly be as much as I love you. Please say you’ll marry me.”

Lucy sat up and straightened her skirts. “Yes, I’ll marry you, you scoundrel.”

His smile warmed her from the inside out. “Because you love me too?”

She rolled her eyes at his persistence. “Yes, my Lord Phantom. I love you too. With or without your mask.”

CHAPTER 10



The Phantom of Drury Lane's last public appearance occurred during the final performance of Hamlet.

People were already gossiping about the fact that the chandelier above box number four had been lit—in clear contravention of his orders—and many were hoping he'd make a dramatic protest, when his tall, masked figure stepped to the front of the box.

A ripple of speculation fluttered through the crowd. A few people slipped out of the auditorium and headed for the stairs to the upper boxes, hoping to claim the hundred pounds reward, but the majority simply craned their necks and waited with bated breath to see what, if anything, the Phantom would do.

Even the actors on the stage paused mid-fight scene, and squinted upwards.

Those seated in the closest rows saw the Phantom's lips curve into a smile beneath his mask, and there was a collective intake of breath as he stretched his arm behind him, toward the back of the box, as if summoning someone.

An audible gasp echoed around the theater as a *female* figure stepped forward and took the Phantom's hand.

The mystery lady wore white, the perfect foil for his darkness, a shimmering, ethereal dress that looked like it could have belonged to the tragic French Queen Marie Antoinette. A matching white mask covered the top half of her face, obscuring her features from the rapt and speculative gazes, and her upswept hair was powdered white and threaded with pearls.

No sound emerged from the box, but the entire audience watched, spellbound, as the Phantom lowered himself to one knee and pressed a kiss to

the back of his lady's hand in a silent, but very obvious, proposal.

For one suspended moment, they were a couple out of time. A shadowed Hades proposing to a sunlit Persephone. A highwayman begging for the hand of a fairy princess.

Fans fluttered in breathless anticipation as the lady in white pressed her free hand to her chest, to cover her racing heart. Then she reached forward to caress the Phantom's clean-shaven jaw in a gesture of loving affection.

The Phantom rested his cheek in her palm, his adoration plain, and when she nodded her acceptance, he stood in one graceful movement and took her in his arms.

An enormous cheer erupted from the stalls as the Phantom swept his lady into a lusty kiss. Cries of "*Bravo!*" and "*Encore!*" accompanied a thunderous round of applause as the entire theater rose to its feet and began stamping and shouting their approval.

The Phantom released his love with every indication of reluctance, and with hands still clasped, they both turned to face the audience. The phantom gave an elegant bow. The lady made a deep curtsy.

And then, to the delight of all, they stepped back into the shadows and simply . . . disappeared.

The audience cheered even louder.

Some said they were hiding in the curtains at the back of the box. Others speculated a secret trap door, or even a complicated series of mirrors.

Whatever the truth, when the door to the box burst open mere moments later, those seeking to claim a hundred pounds were disappointed to find it empty, save for one black mask and one white mask left lying on the red velvet seats.

And so the Phantom of Drury Lane and his ghostly bride took their place amongst the many other myths and legends that swirled around London's Covent Garden. Their happy ending was deemed to be suitably satisfying, even if the Phantom's identity had never been revealed.

* * *

HIGH UP, in the vast room that stored the myriad props and costumes of the theater, a breathless Lucy Montgomery and a laughing William Arden emerged from yet another hidden passageway. Lucy brushed some cobwebs

from her skirts, while Will stepped around a fake cannon and pushed aside part of a splintered section of ship's decking that had last been used on a production of *The Tempest*.

Lucy sank onto a pretty floral armchair with a satisfied sigh.

"There. The Phantom's made his final curtain call."

"Without being caught," Will added with a grin. "You were magnificent, my love. I couldn't have done it without you. People will be talking about it for weeks." He slid into the seat opposite her, an enormous gilded throne with blue damask cushions and padded arm rests, and crooked his finger at her. "What are you doing over there? Come sit in my lap."

Lucy tried and failed to look scandalized. "Lord Ware, we're not even married!"

"We're engaged," he countered. "And there's only a week to go before I can call you my wife. I say that's close enough."

Lucy flicked a laughing glance at his lap. The bulging front of his breeches clearly showed how much he'd enjoyed kissing her in the box.

"Have I told you you're a wicked man?" she said, rising to her feet.

"On multiple occasions." His gaze heated as she stepped toward him. "Most recently when I kissed your beautiful—"

"Shhh!" She pressed her hand over his mouth to stop his scandalous words, but knew her cheeks were scarlet.

In the weeks since she'd accepted his proposal, they'd been forced to act with the utmost propriety in public, but they'd still managed to meet a few times here, at the very top of the theater. Will had shown her just how much he loved to make her blush—and also how much he loved *her*.

She couldn't wait to say her vows.

"Here, I have a present for you." Will dug into the pocket of his black jacket and handed her a small, leather-covered box.

Lucy sat on his lap and opened the hinged lid. Inside was a golden bracelet, and when she held it up in the flickering lamplight she saw letters inscribed on the inner surface, a secret message intended only for the wearer.

"Doubt thou the stars are fire," Will quoted softly, pressing a kiss to her jaw. "Doubt that the sun doth move." He kissed her again, below her ear. "Doubt truth to be a liar." A kiss on the corner of her lips. "But never doubt I love."

Lucy turned her head and pressed her lips to his. "Thank you." She pulled back and sent him a saucy smile. "Do you think Kit Hollingsworth will still

give me a hundred pounds if I tell him your name?”

Will shook his head. “He already knows it’s me. He’s one of the directors of the theater. That bet was just a way of getting more ticket sales.”

She let out a good-natured huff. “You are a scoundrel.”

“Yes, but I’m yours.”

She tilted her head. “I don’t suppose we can leave here for a good hour at least, in case someone sees us.”

“You’re right. No sense in risking discovery now.” His smile grew wicked and his gaze fastened hungrily on her lips. “What could we possibly do to pass the time until it’s safe to leave?”

Lucy wound her arms around his neck and laughed, her heart impossibly light.

“Oh, I have a few ideas.”

“Reading Shakespeare aloud?” he teased. “Comparing tales of danger and adversity?”

“Even better than that. Let me show you. . .”

THE END

Thank you for reading *The Phantom of Drury Lane*. I hope you enjoyed Lucy and Will’s adventures as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Please consider leaving a review on any (or all!) of the online retail sites:
every review is greatly appreciated!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Bateman / K.C. Bateman, is a bestselling author of Regency and Renaissance historical romances, including the Secrets & Spies series, Bow Street Bachelors series, and Ruthless Rivals series. Her books have received multiple Starred Reviews from Publishers Weekly and Library Journal, and her Renaissance romp *The Devil To Pay* was a 2019 RITA award nominee.

Her books have been translated into multiple languages, including French, Italian, Brazilian, Japanese, German, Romanian, Czech, and Croatian.

When not writing, Kate leads a double life as a fine art appraiser and on-screen antiques expert for several TV shows in the UK. She lives in England with a number-loving husband, three inexhaustible children, and a naughty toy poodle named Monty.

Kate loves to hear from readers. Contact her via her website: www.kcbateman.com and sign up for her [newsletter](#) to receive free books, regular updates on new releases, giveaways, and exclusive excerpts.



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EXCERPT FROM THE DEVIL OF
DRURY LANE BY TRACY SUMNER



EPIGRAPH



A girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then.

~Jane Austen

PROLOGUE



Where a lonely girl ponders the benefit of bosoms

*H*ampstead, England ~1810

Damien DeWitt was the most fidgety boy Mercy Ainsworth had ever encountered.

In constant motion as he tromped back and forth across his father's lawn, it was a marvel she was able to capture his image. Tilting her head, she chewed on her bottom lip, her charcoal gliding across vellum. Sunlight spilled over her subject in a gentle wash, setting the auburn strands in his mahogany hair aglow and tossing shadows across his face, much to her artistic delight.

She frowned, her pencil stilling on the page. Due to his restlessness, the curve of his startlingly rugged jaw was off, the pleasing line of muscle beneath broadcloth not what it should be. To her understanding, most models sat for portraiture.

Of course, they knew they were being drawn.

And...they were often naked.

Lost in a flurry of musings, Mercy balanced her sketchpad on her lap and peeked around the hedge, realizing she'd erred in judgment. The lad who'd returned to Hampstead last evening from his first year at Oxford wasn't the gangly, guarded boy she'd idolized since she first set eyes on him.

He'd matured in all kinds of intriguing ways—while she was still very

much a girl.

She glided her hand down her insignificant bodice, encountering creases, ink stains, and two rows of Chantilly lace, but not so much as a gentle bump of bosom. Her Aunt Matilda, who'd been banished to their Hampstead estate after a misadventure on an illuminated walk at Vauxhall, said the changes to Mercy's body would come with prayer and patience. She added that she hadn't matured until her nineteenth year, coincidentally, around the time of her exile.

Leaving Mercy to assume bosoms brought strife as well as happiness.

In any case, Matilda was one of the fortunate creatures who were stunning despite life's miseries. Gorgeous after falling into the fountain last summer while fleeing a boozy baron. Gorgeous when arriving to breakfast bleary-eyed from raucous festivities the evening prior. Gorgeous while being shamed by her older brother, the Earl of Whitmore, over some silly blunder.

Shame the earl liked to heap on his children's shoulders.

Particularly his eldest daughter's.

In fact, in recent conversations, Mercy's father fretted mightily over the similarities between his incorrigible sister and his hapless offspring. When Mercy had never caused a man to trip over a rug's ragged edge or miss a stair due to blinding beauty—and she never would. Most people stopped looking when they reached the wild ginger tumble atop her head and didn't take the time to investigate further.

Alas, she was unique in a world that revered consistency and refinement.

When refinement wasn't a word anyone had *ever* chosen to describe the Earl of Whitmore's wayward daughter.

Mercy was unremarkable except for her ability to draw, a gift that would settle as idly as rubbish to the bottom of a gutter once she married. The pursuit was simply tolerated now because her family considered art a child's pleasure—and her a child.

Resting back on her heels, Mercy watched the Duke of Herschel's youngest son cross to the archery field, a still-quivering bow clutched in his hand. When Damien reached the straw target, he crouched low before it, his trousers pulling taut over his thighs and the rounded curve of his bottom. She knew it wasn't appropriate to stare, certainly not at *this*, but she couldn't help herself.

After all, it was an artist's predilection to record movement and physique. Although, the accompanying flutter in her stomach was not an artist's

response but a woman's.

Muted feelings lying in wait for her to mature.

The evening prior, from the dense pine thicket between their estates, she'd spied a scullery maid—one of those lucky, beautiful beings—whispering to Damien outside the servant's door. Her lips at his ear; her hand lingering on his shoulder.

Mercy palmed her chest, jealousy a beast seeking release. *Want* in such raw form was a new sensation.

The crunch of footfalls along the gravel path had her stumbling to her feet. She flipped the sketchpad's cover over her portrait as her companion wriggled through a break in the shrubs. Miss Clark was breathless when she reached Mercy, her cheeks flushed, her expression vexed. The spinster sister of an impoverished baron, she was the seventh pitiable soul employed to keep watch over a girl the *ton* had begun to call an unrepentant termagant.

"I begin to see why this position pays so well," Miss Clark huffed, plucking straw from her skirt and frowning at a torn hem. "Your escape from tea was brilliantly executed and my previous employer worked in surveillance for the Crown. Therefore, I've seen numerous brilliantly executed exits."

Alarm pierced Mercy's skin as her breath caught in her throat. "Does he know where I am? I told the servants I had a megrim and would be retiring to my bedchamber." Her father had given her a chance—the final, as he termed it—to behave or face being sent to London for the remainder of the year. If this companion quit in a fury as the last six had, Mercy was doomed to spend months in dreary confinement in her father's sprawling Mayfair terrace.

The loneliest place on earth, to Mercy's estimation.

Miss Clark stilled, her gaze making a detailed examination of her charge and recording things Mercy tried valiantly—every day, without success—to hide. It was quite unnerving. Gesturing to the sketchpad, her companion's brow rose in speculation. "What's that you have there?"

Mercy clutched her drawings close to her nonexistent bosom. In the end, pride was stronger than punitive threat. Exhaling sharply, heart beating double-time, she extended the folio.

Miss Clark flipped pages before returning to the most recent sketch, her gloved fingertip gliding like sunlight over Damien DeWitt's features. "You're quite talented, Lady Mercy. This is no idle effort."

"It won't be allowed," Mercy whispered, clenching her fingers in her skirt

and doing further damage to the already-crumpled silk, “in any way beyond what it has been. I’ve repeatedly asked for an art tutor and been denied. I’m told the daughter of an earl hasn’t a reason to perfect a talent aside from how to host a proper tea. And if he knew what I was drawing, *who* I was drawing, I’d be locked in my bedchamber for days. My father isn’t forgiving of any foibles but his own.”

Miss Clark tapped the vellum page, right atop the outline of Damien’s slim shoulder. Sighing, she closed the sketchpad and extended it to Mercy. “I wish I could dispute your assertion, but I cannot. I’ve been hindered my entire life, ground down to adhering to society’s belief of me. You’re right to fear reprisal, as your father is known as the sternest delegate in the House of Lords, not a man to trifle with.” Miss Clark dusted a stalk of grass from her sleeve. “However, there are ways to pursue your dreams. Clandestine ways. If you’re willing to play the game as females have had to for centuries.”

“Game?” Mercy whispered over a rumble of thunder sounding in the distance, the wind whipping a contrary strand of hair against her cheek. “What game?”

“The game of life. Follow the rules required of a gently-bred miss of impeccable breeding. Stay inside the lines they’ve drawn for you. Feign a limited capacity for rebellion, for passion, for *life*. Everyone knows the quiet feline is left in peace to explore.”

Mercy was thunderstruck. With a storm brewing at her back and a larger one brewing in her mind, the ground beneath her feet shifted in a way that seemed significant.

“If I may provide a salient morsal of advice, Lady Mercy, once your father ceases anticipating trouble, he’ll quit looking for it. Leaving you to discover your world, in a stunted manner, yes, but better than no discovery at all.”

Mercy glanced over her shoulder as Damien’s arrow struck the target dead-center, the feather tip quivering with the impact. He lowered the bow and flexed his shoulders, sending a vibration through her that didn’t calm until it hit her toes. Her fingertips tingled, begging to draw the expression of rapture on his face. Somehow, she knew the flutter of her heart spelled disaster.

Miss Clark tucked her arm through Mercy’s and turned her away from temptation. “You understand that your father would never accept a third son. Not when the Duke of Herschel has a sordid reputation, his title being sullied

by two generations of disgrace. To make matters worse, Herschel's offspring, the twins in any case, are proving to be incorrigible without hope of bringing the DeWitt family where they should be in standing. While the youngest, the one you appear taken with, merely has a reputation for being odd, his nose always stuck in a book." She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "I fear incorrigible charm is preferable to studious disregard."

Temper sparking, she jerked her arm free. "He's not odd, he's..."

Mercy halted, pushing a tight breath past her lips. Honestly, since he'd never spoken to her, she didn't know *what* Damien was aside from beautiful. Her estimation that he was brilliant was simply a guess. At a musical last summer, he'd held the veranda door as she sailed through it in an effort to escape Lady Merchant's horrid pianoforte stylings. Then there was the time she'd entered the village mercantile as he exited. He'd had a cut slicing across his upper lip, as if he'd been scuffling with his 'incorrigible' brothers, and the scent of woodsmoke had clung to his clothing. This bit, she distinctly recalled, the aroma a firm piece of the memory.

For all that she found Damien DeWitt fascinating, she had absolutely no reason to do so.

Miss Clark recaptured her arm and moved them at a swift pace down the gravel footpath. "Don't make the mistake I did, voicing my thoughts to anyone willing to listen without a handsome dowry to erase my misdeeds. Or the error in judgment of your beloved aunt, her desires on blatant display for society to witness. This world is unforgiving of independent women, and you'll be better off the moment you realize it and act accordingly. Construct a suitable façade and hide behind it, Lady Mercy. If it's solidly built, in private, you may then do as you wish. Render a thousand sketches for your delight if it pleases you. Find your pleasures, find your soul."

Mercy stumbled along, aware she was being given mature counsel for the first time in her life. Counsel that sounded sensible, should she be able to follow it. "When I marry, how will I hide my true self from *him*?"

Miss Clark laughed, a trace of bitterness bending the sound. "Find a man you can outwit, my dear. Dullards are the easiest to control, and heaven knows, society is full of them."

* * *

“WHITMORE’S strange little duckling is following you again. I just saw her being dragged home by the melancholy soul paid to chaperone her. There isn’t enough blunt in Christendom to make that position enjoyable.”

Damien tugged the arrow from the target’s bright blue center, loathing himself for thinking the color wasn’t far from the shade of the duckling’s eyes. He’d noticed last year when she’d nearly run him down fleeing a packed salon. Although, when he’d arrived to find Lady Merchant slaughtering Beethoven’s fifth, he’d understood Lady Mercy’s behavior. Sighing, he gestured to his brother, Cort, with his bow. “She’s not strange, she’s...”

Damien paused, unsure *what* the earl’s willful daughter was, as he’d never spoken so much as a word to the chit. He’d only found her underfoot on numerous occasions, her dazzling cerulean gaze fixed on him.

His brother trailed him to the balding circle on the lawn they used for archery practice. He glanced to the darkening clouds, noting a storm would soon chase him into a house he wanted no part of with his father inside it. “She’s tracked you like a hound for going on two years now. I worried at first, but now you’re old enough to handle the situation yourself.” Cort snatched up an arrow and began tapping it against his thigh. “Half the time she looks like she climbed from a rag bin, the other half, like she’s plotting someone’s demise.”

“That’s absurd,” Damien whispered, although his young neighbor *did* look fearsome at times, her gaze penetrating, almost as if she could see right through him. “She’s little more than a child.”

“She’s older than you think. Sorry to say, but you’ll find, with more experience, that this brand of female absorption can be problematic. I prefer chits who couldn’t give a fig about me, in the end.”

Damien fit the arrow’s nock to the bowstring and closed one eye to properly sight. Mercy Ainsworth’s fixation had been going on for three years, at least, but he wasn’t about to correct Cort and find himself at the barrel-end of an inquisition. His brothers, twins separated by a scant three minutes and only eighteen months *his* elder, had taken the protective role to the extreme. Although love was love, and since they’d not received a trace of the emotion from their parents, they’d decided early on to freely share it with each other.

“Although her hair...” Cort exhaled, dragging the arrow’s tip across his chin. “Her hair could someday be her glory. *If* she grows into it. Not every woman can equal having tresses that hue, but a feisty one could. A hellion

who can hold her own. Only, back to my earlier assessment, women with spunk are the ones to avoid.”

Damien disagreed. It wasn't Mercy's hair but her too-generous mouth that captivated, a truth he'd die before acknowledging. He rocked back on his heels, restlessness beginning to overtake him. Unlike his siblings, he wasn't comfortable with people. Long conversations brought apprehension, tight twists to his stomach that lingered for hours. Too, the charming twins were gaining reputations for carousing that Damien could never match. So much so, that the *ton* had started calling them the Troublesome Trio, when the youngest DeWitt had done nothing to deserve the inclusion.

Sensing his brother's distress, Cort thrust the arrow in his direction. “Do you want me to have a groom saddle your horse? A ride on Pegasus will calm you.”

Damien glanced to the book he was reading. *The Life of Samuel Johnson* lay sprawled where he'd left it atop his beaten leather rucksack. He surrounded himself with books because words soothed his mind. Sometimes, even exchanges with his family were a challenge. Therefore, he chose a topic that presented an effective strike to the jaw. If they spent long talking about this, Cort would stalk to the manor and the stocked sideboard in their father's study. “If only Mercy were more like Alexandra Mountbatten. A veritable diamond among sandstone, that one.”

Cort swore and tossed the arrow into the copse of azaleas at his side. “Low blow, Dame. I'm over my infatuation. Alex is merely a family friend of long-standing, a girl I once knew. Isn't there a ballad about that?” He kicked an oak branch from his path, strode two steps forward, then one back. The frown he shot Damien was positively feral. “A hundred times or more, I've told you and Knox that it's over. *Done*. One kiss, years ago, an awkward attempt that was soundly rebuffed. Now I'm finished, the stars struck from my eyes, although I pride myself on giving it a go with the girl when I was merely a gangly lad. On to greener pastures, easier campaigns and such.”

“Greener pastures, indeed,” Damien murmured, not believing a word. Except the part about women and Cortland DeWitt being easy pairings. Such were the dreams of men who could actually *talk* to women.

Cort wrestled with his cravat, making a mess of his valet's pristine effort. “Alex is dancing attendance at the Marriage Mart and will soon be wed, while I'm out and about, enjoying the choices being offered the depraved, three-minutes-too-late second son of a duke. I'm squiring Widow Belle-

Hawkins to the opera next week, in fact, and everyone knows how that will go.”

Damien hummed, beginning to enjoy the conversation, despite his discomfort. His brother was mad for Alexandra Mountbatten and everyone but Alexandra Mountbatten knew it. “Brilliant. Because she’s too old for you, too tall for you. And, she only cares for horses.”

Cort halted so suddenly, he kicked up an earthen clump with the toe of his Hessian. “Five years isn’t so much. And I shot up half a foot last summer, if you’d care to notice!”

A notion came to Damien, one that kept him up nights. “You always said you’d seek out a commission if she married. You were joking, weren’t you? What son of a duke enters the military, am I right?”

“Of course, I was joking.” But he scrubbed his hand across his jaw, his gaze dancing away in a manner that sent Damien’s belly pitching to his knees. His brothers meant everything to him, and since he’d likely not have his own family due to his eccentricities, they always would.

Cort dug in his coat pocket and came out with a scrap of paper. He fiddled with the crumpled edge before reluctantly extending it to Damien. “I found this by the hedge. It’s yours, so I suppose you should have it.”

“Mine?”

Cort stretched his shoulders and released a pent-up breath. “It’s you, I should say.”

Damien’s hand shook as he brought the sketch close to his face. It was a wonder he could hit the archery target with such poor vision. His spectacles were in his bedchamber, hidden beneath a handkerchief in the top drawer of his *escritoire*. The sight of them resting on his nose had always made his father angry, as if Damien could help that his vision wasn’t perfect. It was simply another in a long line of traits his father hated about him.

The drawing was delicately rendered, a rough, seemingly impulsive study. Moments ago, the bow clutched in his fist, his face turned to the heavens. She’d captured him appearing reflective *and* powerful when nothing could be further from the truth. “This is who I wish I were,” he whispered.

Cort tugged his hand through his hair, leaving the overlong strands in disarray. “It’s exactly how I see you. It’s what you can’t see that’s the problem.”

Damien folded the sketch and tucked it carefully in his trouser pocket. He winced as his wrist gave a painful twinge, realizing too late that Cort had

seen the reaction.

“If he touches you again, I’ll kill him,” Cort vowed, his voice as harsh as Damien had ever heard it.

Damien laughed, hoping to shatter the bleakness overtaking them. “That will wreck our already-sullied reputation—the Duke of Herschel dying by his son’s hand. I can see the headlines in the scandal sheets.”

“Never again, Dame, do you understand me? The first time, that split on your lip, I let it go. This time, I can’t. I won’t. Father can bully me, he can even bully Knox. We’re finally bigger than he is, but he cannot bully you. I’ll leave it be when you’ve had the chance to grow into a man who can best him.” He held up his hand, his fingers closing in an angry fist. “You’re already there in mind. But it can’t all come down to what’s in bloody *books*.”

Damien wiped his fist across his upper lip, the scar pulsing when it was months old. Now, the pain was only in his mind. The time he’d seen Mercy Ainsworth rushing from the mercantile, he’d come from a monstrous encounter with his father. His inability to sit through a musicale, a dinner, or a literary reading had finally taken its toll. He didn’t know what was wrong with him, and his father didn’t care. And he hated to tell his brother, but he’d probably never be physically able enough to best anyone.

“Go back, Cort. I’ll be in soon.” Damien glanced to the horizon and the threads of crimson and gold lighting the sky. He would go to the stables and ride to the lake and back in a fury the second Cort left him. That usually helped. “Mrs. Camden will be vexed if none of us show for dinner. Father made it through an entire bottle of brandy, so he won’t be in attendance.”

Damien watched Cort trudge through the side garden, across the veranda, and into the house, his brother’s shoulders weighed down by concern. His own heart heavy, Damien snaked the sketch from his pocket and gazed at the vision an utterly guileless young woman had of him.

Could he ever be this fearless?

He swallowed past a surge of emotion, palming his stomach to hold back the sensation. It was illogical, but someone outside his family seeing what was deep inside him gave him hope.

And courage.

THANK YOU

* * *

Thanks for checking out *The Devil of Drury Lane*. To find out more about it and the Drury Lane series visit here:

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